

**Critical perspectives on
evaluating youth work**

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Plan for this session:

- 1) Rethinking impact, evaluation and accountability in youth work:
 - Our study
 - Sharing perspectives from young people and youth workers
- 2) Introducing the practitioner resource, young people's film and policy briefing
- 3) Discussion, questions and policy priorities



Our study:

Rethinking impact, evaluation and accountability in youth work

A three-year study (2018-21) funded by ESRC, with Louise Doherty, aiming to:

- Investigate if and how the youth impact agenda is shaping practice.
- Understand the perspectives and experiences of young people, practitioners, managers, funders, and policy makers on:
 - The value of youth work
 - How youth work is evaluated
- Consider and share approaches to evaluation and accountability that are appropriate to youth work practice.



Our focus is open youth work

Spaces for informal education: learning through conversation, activity and relationship.

Open for young people to get involved *on a voluntary basis*: rather than being referred, targeted or compelled to take part.

Open and youth-centred in terms of timescale, content / activity, and intended outcomes.



Research methods

87
interviews
and focus
groups

- Total number of *Interviews & Focus Groups*
- Some participants took part in more than one

143
participants

- **58** young people
- **59** youth workers, managers and administrators
- **8** youth work settings / organisations
- **26** policy makers, influencers, and informants

**73 sessions
of
participant
observation**

- **63** in youth work settings
- **10** in policy settings





What counts as impact?

The lasagne story

“I think it’s just difficult to show like exactly what growth in each person looks like. I mean, the enjoyable things about youth work are like the small things. So, I made lasagne last week with the junior youth club we made it earlier in the day... and then we ate it later on in the house meeting. Three young people were like ‘Nah, I don’t like that. I don’t like cheese... I don’t eat this. I don’t eat this’... but three of them tried it who wouldn’t have normally, because the younger ones had made it. And those small things are big... The thing was, how do I record that?

... I know that trying lasagne to other people isn’t big. I thought, it is big for these young people. Like, it is big and ... I guess your knowledge of the young people is like how you know whether they’re changing or growing, but that’s really hard to write down sometimes, or really hard to reflect to funders.”

(Nicole , lead youth worker, Opal)



What youth workers said

Could feel meaningless

...young people don't want to fill out paper, they are like, 'why are we doing this?'

(Mel, youth worker, Melham)

Could feel burdensome

Yeah, so [council database] is like a swear word in the youth work world. ... you're gonna put them on this ridiculous database that takes fucking ages, and use a lot of your capacity which could be working with young people...

(Dawn, youth worker, Seaside)



Challenges for young people

That's what school is for. The thing here is outside, you come to play pool or whatever, whatever. You don't come here to fill forms, you know? It's like – I'm not going there if they're gonna make me fill forms.

(Jasmine, young person, Fairlight Youth Centre)

... some days you don't really want to think about that question, and it can make you think too far into it, and then you can be left thinking about it for the rest of the day ... sometimes the things that it says on those questionnaires can actually give you ideas, instead of helping you.

(Luna, young person, Seaside)

An abstract, colorful mountain range or forest of peaks in shades of purple, pink, blue, and teal, set against a dark background. The peaks are jagged and layered, creating a sense of depth and texture.

Challenges for young people (continued)

It's invasive... I mean I get that question a lot, do you have a disability? ... and maybe you do but you don't wanna like disclose that, you know?... Questions can be asked that are a bit much. But then they should give you an option to be like you don't have to answer this if you don't want to. ...

Someone asked Ira if this was gonna give Journeys more money... and he said probably, and they were like right, give me it... Because they were like, this youth group means so much to me, I have to like do it, you know.

(Sabian, young person, Journeys)



Positive experiences of evaluation as reflection: young people's views

Dawn was up there and she was like ... 'what did you get out of this, and what did you get out of that, and how can we improve it for next year?' And blah de blah, blah blah. And it was great. And I feel like me, just in general, I get interviewed quite a lot at Seaside. Which I love, cos it's great.

(Delilah, young person, Seaside)

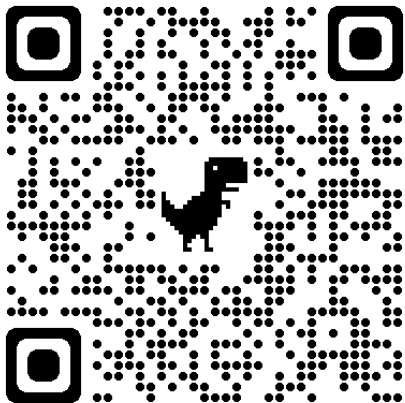
it's either rating from one to ten, and then if it's like comments or how it's helped you recently, and it's just nice to explain how it's helped. But even without questions a few times I've wrote how it's helped and I've even wrote like two pages. And then they've give it to the funding to show how much it's affected me ... I'm really proud of it.

(Chloe, young person, Dove St)

How policy has shaped youth work evaluation in England (and beyond)

- **Austerity and cuts-** stark effects of over a decade of cuts particularly affect low income, working class, ethnically minoritized and rural youth services
- **The ‘youth impact agenda’-** a broad agreement amongst influential individuals and organisations that youth services must measure their impact, preferably by using quantitative techniques and validated psychology tools.
- Decision making based on **‘social value’** or **‘social return on investment’** (de St Croix, McGimpsey & Owen 2018)

(de St Croix & Doherty, [2022](#) – see QR code)





Key challenges

Evaluation and impact measurement were experienced as:

- Complex, time-consuming - especially in small organisations
- Boring, intrusive and triggering
- Wasn't always clear what the point was, how it would be used, who it was for.

Discussion points:

- How does this discussion resonate with your experience and your context?
- Do you have anything to add? Any questions?

Next, I will share some resources for practice and policy.



Introducing our practitioner resource





1. Working with voices from the research

In this section, we share quotes from young people who took part in our study and offer suggestions for how youth workers might use them in relation to evaluation and wider practice.

3. Evaluation in practice

In this section, we share a selection of evaluation methods that were seen by both youth workers and young people in our research as effective and appropriate, along with questions for reflection.

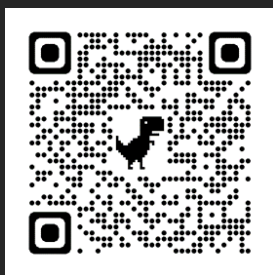


2. Using the film: The Value of Youth Work

We worked with young people to create a short film, which is freely available online to view and share. In this section, we provide questions to support youth workers to use the film in youth work and practice development.

Young people's film project

- A participatory short film project on the 'value of youth work'
- 22 young people, 8 youth workers took part, 3 organisations
- Online planning workshops
- In-person filming at each location
- Online editing



Short film: The Value of Youth Work

- [Link to film](#)



What did you like
about this film?

Is there anything important about
young people's views on youth
work (good or bad) that is missing
from the film, or you think could
be discussed?

What does 'value' mean to you?

Watching this film, what do you
think is the value of youth work?

Has the film given you any
ideas or inspiration for your own
youth club / project?

What makes a good youth worker?

What makes a good youth club?



Evaluation methods recommended by youth workers and young people

- Conversations and interviews
- Creative media methods
- Quick feedback
- Short questionnaires
- Staff debriefs and reflection
- Storytelling and case studies

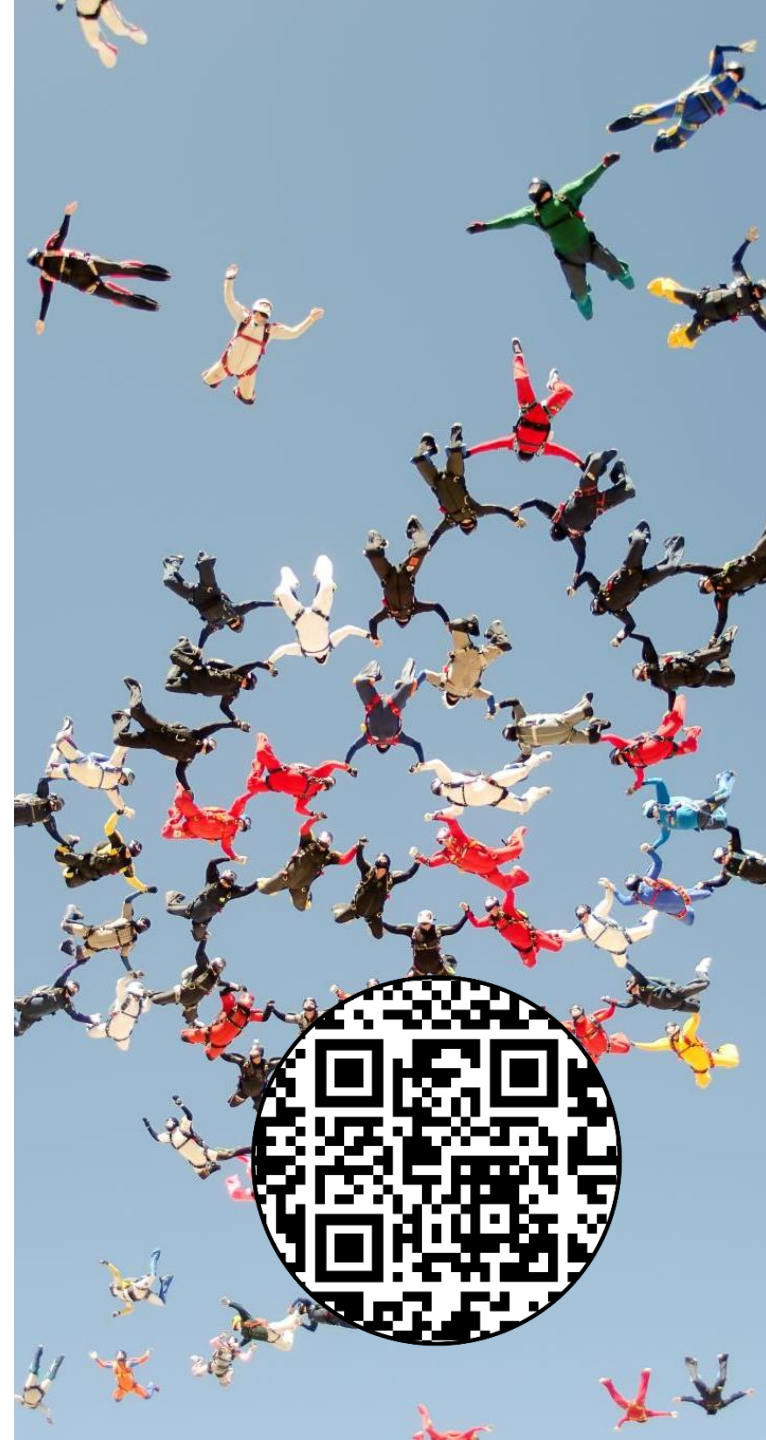
Example reflection questions (stories):

- How are stories or case studies effectively anonymised?
- Have young people given their consent?
- How can your stories avoid 'saviour narratives' and show complexity and young people's agency?
- Is there a role for ambivalent stories as well as 'success stories'?



Policy briefing

1. Youth work is highly valued by young people, particularly those in disadvantaged communities.
2. Youth work is effective in addressing complex issues – yet it must always start from young people's interests and concerns
3. Evaluation methods must be flexible, adaptable, and suitable.
4. Young people and youth workers should be central to the design, testing, implementation, and review of new methods of evaluation.

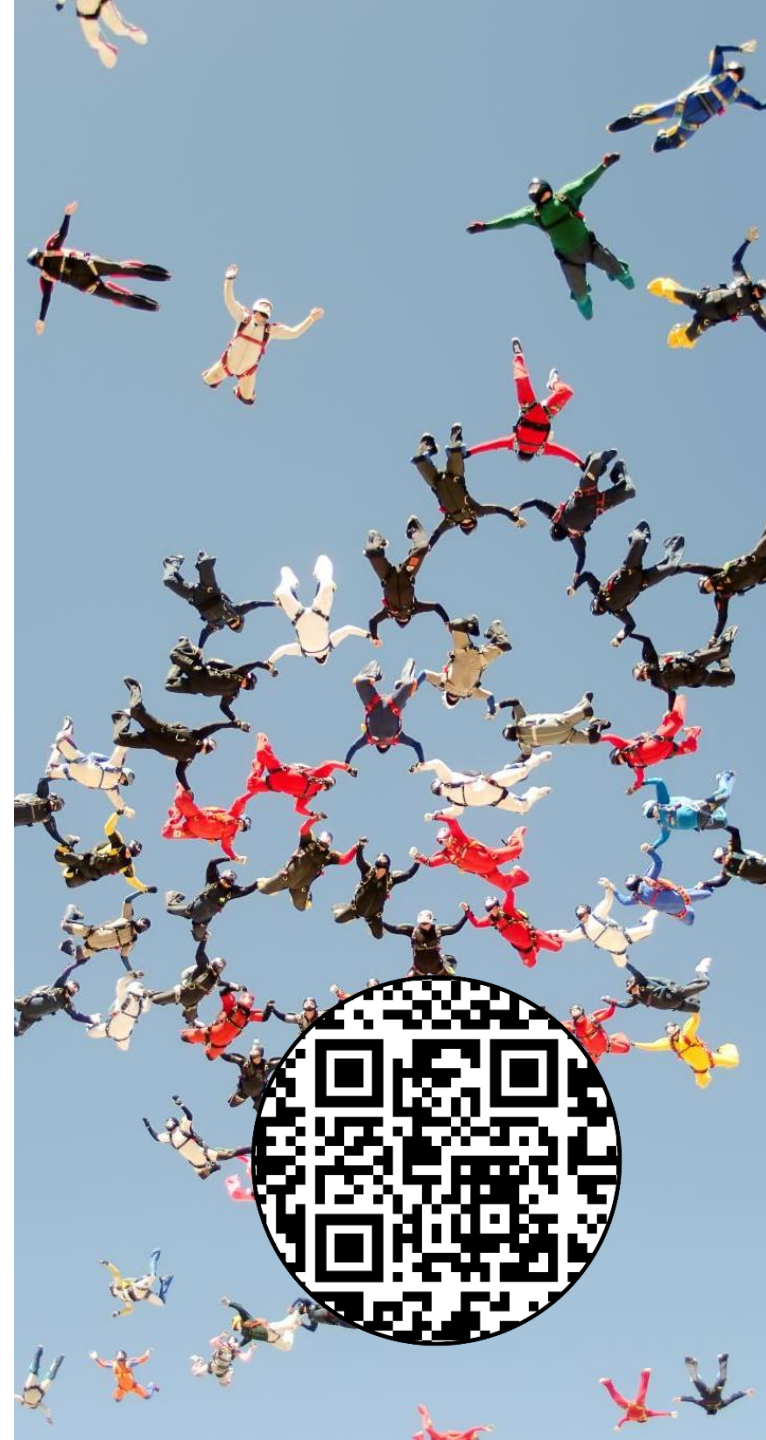


Policy briefing (continued)

5. Youth work should not be burdened with responsibility for outcomes over which it has no direct control.

6. Long-term, sustainable investment in open youth work is the most important factor in enabling high quality, accessible provision to thrive.

7. Skilled, committed youth workers are youth work's most important resource: they need secure employment, training, support, and opportunities for professional development.



Towards youth-centred, practice-informed, anti-oppressive evaluation

- Paying critical attention to the political and social context of youth work, evaluation and impact measurement.
- Understanding the wider contexts in which young people - and practitioners - live their lives.
- Collectively advocating for change.



Any questions or responses?

What would you recommend for policy and/or practice?



Thank you!

Keep in touch:

Find out more about our research **Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work:** rethinkingimpact.com.

Join our occasional mailing list [here](#) for news on events and publications.

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Images used in presentation-

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