Mapping the landscape:
Impact and learning practice support for organisations working with young people in the UK

An independent report by Sara Fernandez and Jake Leeper of Oxford Impact Consultancy

Commissioned by Paul Hamlyn Foundation

Acknowledgements

The authors and Paul Hamlyn Foundation would like to thank those who took part in the study for their time and valuable contributions. In order to protect the confidentiality of support providers and youth organisations who generously gave their time and insight through interviews, this publicly available report has removed references to specific organisations, while retaining all detail and insight arising from the different conversations.

We hope that by sharing this report, this piece of work can be used to promote collective reflection in the sector, provide insight for funders and encourage collaboration amongst support providers.

If you have any questions about the report, please contact Kirsty Gillan-Thomas at Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

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About this research project

This independent research project was commissioned by Paul Hamlyn Foundation (PHF) in order to better understand the landscape of impact and learning practice support for youth organisations. The project was completed by Sara Fernandez and Jake Leeper of Oxford Impact Consultancy, with fieldwork undertaken during winter 2017/18.

The aim of the research was to understand the landscape of learning and impact practice support that is available to organisations working with young people across the UK and provide recommendations about what PHF, or others, could do to make accessing the most appropriate support easier for these organisations.

The research considered the following questions:

- What products, services and resources are available to organisations working with young people in the UK to support them in developing their learning and impact practice?
- What are the conditions required for these supports to be most effective and to what extent are organisations able to assess which product/ service is appropriate for them?
- Are there any key learning needs that are not currently being met by this provision, focusing on evidence, learning and impact practice? Are there any obvious gaps in provision, e.g. for particular geographies or sizes of organisation?
- What are the main issues that organisations face in accurately assessing their learning and support needs around impact practice and in accessing the most appropriate support? What tools (e.g. diagnostics) or other approaches are available to help organisations understand those needs or to find support that might be most suitable?
- What could PHF or others do to make it easier for organisations working with young people to access the most appropriate learning or impact practice support for them?

A note on terminology – throughout this report we use the term 'support providers' to refer to those individuals and organisations providing learning and impact practice support. We use the term 'youth organisation' to refer to organisations working with young people who may also be the clients or potential clients of the support providers. We use the term 'youth practitioners' to refer to those working in youth organisations whether in a paid or voluntary role. While we recognise that the term 'youth sector' is somewhat contested, we use this term to broadly encompass those we have previously identified as 'youth organisations'.

Research approach

We undertook 14 interviews with support providers to explore their practice, understand the services they offer and to draw out information on their views and experiences of the needs and characteristics of the youth organisations they work with.

In order to test the findings of the support provider interviews, we also carried out interviews with six youth organisations of different sizes and stages in their impact journey. The purpose of these interviews was twofold: firstly, to cross-reference the views of support providers with the experiences of youth organisations; secondly, to highlight particular ways in which impact and learning support could be most effective. While we took an appreciative enquiry approach to understand best practice, these interviews also provided an opportunity for youth organisations to express their frustrations and identify opportunities for improvement (see Section 3).

Geographical scope

This research project had great difficulty in mapping the landscape of impact and learning support outside of England, which we believe in turn reflects the fragmented provision of support in these regions. In Scotland and Northern Ireland there appears to be limited support targeted specifically at the needs of the youth sector, with organisations instead relying on accessing general voluntary sector support. Within Wales the historic role of the government and the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS) means that a community who works on, or is interested in, impact and learning does exist. However, the specificity of this community has meant it is isolated from the impact and learning sector in England. Given the difficulty in reaching organisations outside of England, we would stress that these findings remain tentative.

Section 1:
Map of provision of impact and learning practice support for organisations working with young people

1.1 Mapping methodology

This research project set out to map the areas of impact and learning practice support for youth organisations according to three different characteristics:

1. The type of support offered, e.g. mentoring, training.
2. The intended outcomes for the support provided, e.g. scaling up, service (re)design, general learning, service improvement.
3. The specific area of impact that support focuses on, e.g. data collection, data analysis, theory of change, evidence of need.

Following the interviews with support providers, we considered two options to structure the mapping of the landscape of impact and learning practice support in the youth sector:

A. Classification of support providers according to the different types of support, e.g. training courses, mentoring, tools.

B. Mapping the landscape of support providers in relation to the impact and learning improvement that they seek to achieve for youth organisations.

We encountered a diversity of approaches from support providers, based on these organisations' particular beliefs about the needs of the youth sector. These beliefs, their motivations and worldviews were the most important factors differentiating the objectives of their work, the nature of organisations they worked with, and ultimately, the type of support they provided. For this reason, the bulk of the analysis is based on Option B. We also undertook the classification of support providers according to the type of support, as described in Option A, but this is less illuminating; it is provided for reference (see Section 1.5).

By following Option B, we are able to provide a more nuanced insight into the support provision available for youth organisations. This entails reviewing not only the type of support different providers offer, but also the nature of the youth sector 'market' that they are seeking to support. In order to be able to follow this approach, we have made a number of assumptions, which are detailed below (see Section 1.2).

1.2 Our assumptions about impact and learning practice in the youth sector to enable mapping of support

Firstly, it is necessary to identify the outcomes that youth organisations hope to achieve through engaging in impact and learning practice. This report assumes two main motivations for youth organisations:

1. **Increasing their reach** to be able to support more young people through their work. This implies an increase in size of their operations, whether moving to new locations, or growing in the locations where they are already present.
2. **Increasing their effectiveness.** By 'effectiveness' we refer to the relationship between organisational input and the outcomes achieved by their work. Therefore, in the context of this report, more effective youth organisations are considered to be those that deliver interventions which are more likely to result in the outcomes they seek for their work with young people, or increase the distance travelled for young people. Diagnosing 'effectiveness' is however an extremely difficult process in the youth sector, a point which we will further explore later in the report.

Secondly, we wish to clarify that 'reach' and 'effectiveness' are highly contextual, and therefore should not be used to make isolated, value judgements about the performance of a youth organisation. It is possible for an organisation to reach a small number of young people and still provide a valuable service in the context in which it operates. Similarly, effectiveness relates to the rate at which inputs are turned into successful outcomes, and it is natural for an organisation at the beginning of its impact journey to still be learning about the types of activities that can most effectively create change. This is particularly relevant for any innovative provision, where practitioners cannot rely on a body of knowledge about what works.

Therefore, it is important to remember that while these concepts provide key dimensions of the mapping framework, they are value-laden and necessarily are a simplification of reality. The wider context and delivery of youth organisations would always need to be considered when applying this in practice.

1.3 Proposed mapping framework

In order to understand both the level of impact and learning practice within youth organisations, and the support targeted at improving these levels, we have segmented the youth organisations into four different groups (see Figure 1). It is important to note that for the purpose of the mapping framework, the main unit of analysis is the youth organisation, as opposed to the individual projects or programmes of an organisation.

Across and within these groups, the reach and effectiveness of youth organisations vary. Improvements can be seen both by organisations moving to an improved position within a quadrant, or shifting to a new quadrant entirely.

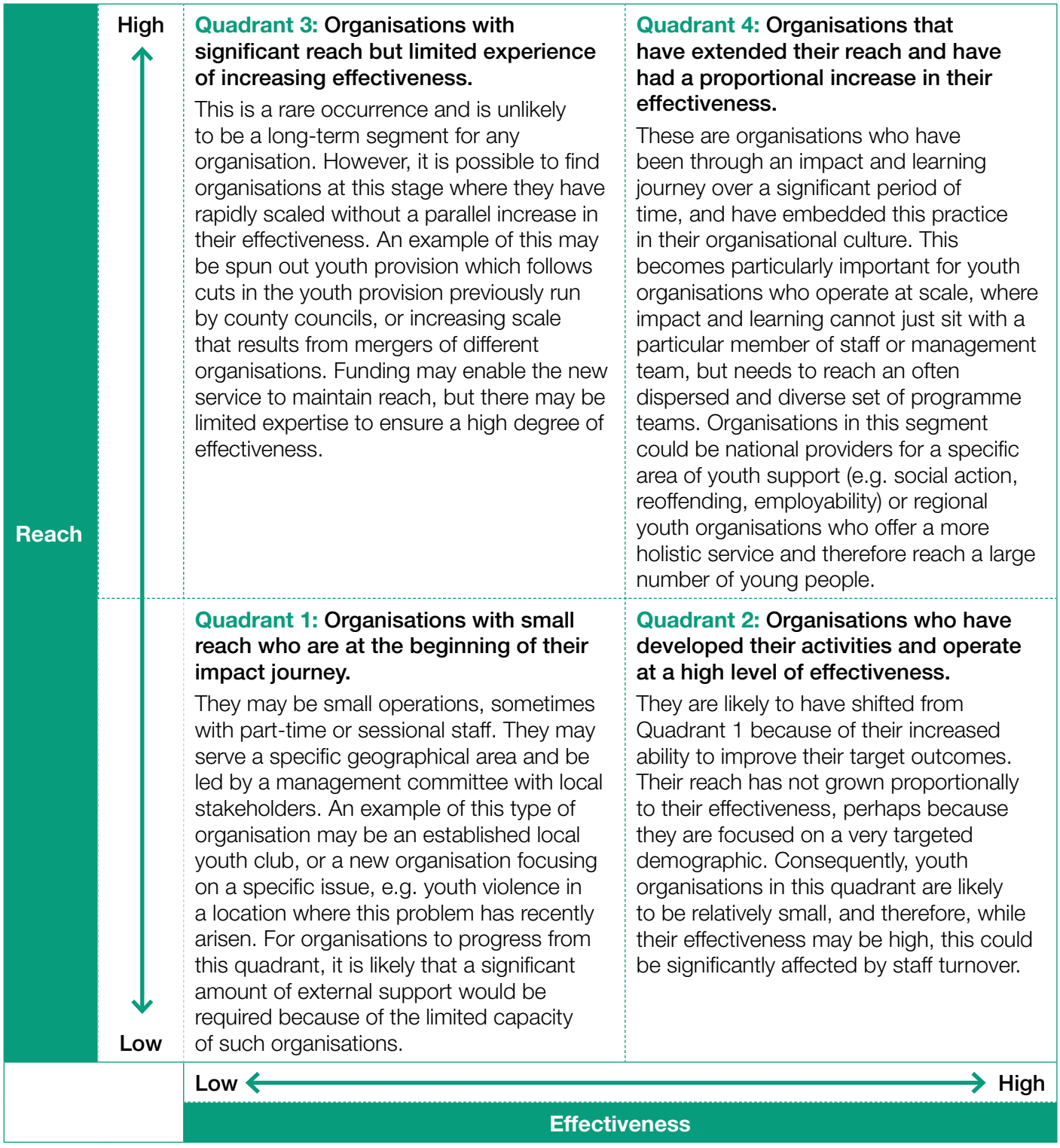
Before proceeding to the analysis of this framework, it is important to note four things. Firstly, while a shift up the scale of reach would mean that organisations are now reaching more young people, this does not necessarily indicate an improvement in the impact measurement and learning of an organisation. For example, an organisation's reach may increase as a result of changes in their context or strategy through an increase in their funding or changes in the nature of youth needs in their particular location.

Secondly, some youth organisations may proactively choose to operate in one specific quadrant without ambitions to move to a different segment. For example, the organisation may operate in a small area and does not want or need to extend its reach to a larger number of young people.

Thirdly, we do not believe that Quadrant 3 is a viable long-term position. Some large organisations may be able to stay in this quadrant through 'perceived effectiveness'. However, this is not a position of equilibrium and over time an organisation may move to Quadrant 1 or Quadrant 4. All other quadrants (1, 2 and 4) could be a sound strategic choice for a youth organisation to operate in over a sustained period of time.

Finally, without a greater shared evidence-base and understanding of quality within the youth sector, 'effectiveness' is likely to remain highly normative. Consequently, we are aware that this term would likely be debated; however, the resolution to this debate sits beyond the scope of this project. While a shared understanding of 'effectiveness' may not be possible, the knowledge of youth organisations and impact and learning support providers means that organisations are still able to trace improvements in their own relative levels of effectiveness.

Figure 1. Youth sector matrix



1.4 Classification of impact and learning practice support providers according to the four segments of the youth sector matrix

Figure 2 summarises the number of different providers, identified in this study, operating in different segments of the youth sector impact and learning practice 'market'. This does not mean that support providers only work with organisations in a specific quadrant, but their offer is often most suited to a particular segment. Support is designed with the aim of improving an organisation's position within a quadrant, or shifting them to a new quadrant. For example, support providers operating in Quadrant 3 are attempting to improve the effectiveness of organisations that reach a large number of young people, with the aim that they will move closer to, or ideally into, Quadrant 4.

Two of the support providers interviewed, who worked regionally in Northern Ireland and Wales, were not classified against a particular quadrant as they were not offering a targeted impact and learning service, but instead focused predominantly on the general development of the youth sector, including areas such as compliance, budgeting or staff training.

Figure 2. Classification of impact and learning support providers against the matrix

Quadrant 3	Quadrant 4
Two support providers interviewed	Two support providers interviewed
Quadrant 1	**Quadrant 2**
Six support providers interviewed	Two support providers interviewed

Working across quadrants. Some support providers offer consultancy services and share best practice that is applicable to youth organisations across all quadrants, rather than particularly targeting one type of organisation. This includes a specific work stream of one of the providers that we interviewed, as well as general consultancy services offered by most of the providers who took part in the research project.

The summary insight derived from interviews across providers in the different quadrants is set out below:

Quadrant 1:

High levels of supply of support provided, all of them offering a similar service (see Section 2.1 for detailed analysis).

Quadrant 2:

Support providers report limited demand from youth organisations in this area, and there are few providers with a targeted offer in this space. Where support is taken up, providers often face difficulties from poor data collection and in some instances unsound impact foundations, which restricts the potential for creating a self-improving cycle of impact and learning (see Section 2.2 for analysis).

Quadrant 3:

As previously highlighted this is not a position of equilibrium, so support in this area is designed to move organisations into Quadrant 4. The support offered at this stage is quite time intensive and predominantly cohort-based. Youth organisations in this quadrant have significant reach, which means they tend to also have the staffing capacity to meaningfully engage with a more intensive process. Given the greater scale, this more intensive approach is necessary to be able to implement any change or improvements across larger youth organisations.

Quadrant 4:

Providers in this area work with organisations that are already demonstrating good impact practices, and support them to improve their performance and scale their activities. The priority here is learning, and providers focus on cultural change to embed a proactive approach in staff teams, ensuring that any improvements are evidence-based. The support offered suits organisations that may have come from Quadrant 3 or Quadrant 2, but the ultimate objective is to ensure there is good impact at scale, where excellent impact measurement processes and an advanced organisational learning culture are in place.

1.5 General classification of types of support offered by providers

As described in the mapping methodology, we set out to classify providers according to three different areas: types of support available, intended outcomes for the work of support providers and areas of focus.

In carrying out interviews with providers we were able to determine the types of support offered and classify them across training, mentoring, accreditation and general consultancy (see Figure 3). However, the other two elements (intended outcomes, areas of focus) were more fluid for support providers and it was not possible to categorise different providers in one particular area, as they worked to tailor their offer to youth organisations' priorities and objectives – whether it was about scaling up, building team confidence around impact measurement or learning about what works.

This approach follows mapping Option A, as described in Section 1.1, and is provided for reference.

Note that two of the interviewed support providers are not represented in Figure 3. These were the support providers in Northern Ireland and Wales who were not found to be offering targeted impact and learning practice support.

Figure 3. Classification of types of support offered by providers interviewed

	Training	Mentoring	Accreditation standards	General consultancy	Access requirements
Provider 1				●	Paid for service
Provider 2	●			●	Open access, free
Provider 3		●			Application, free
Provider 4	●	●		●	Paid for service
Provider 5	●	●			Application
Provider 6	●	●			Funder Plus support
Provider 7	●	●	●		Membership
Provider 8	●			●	Paid for service
Provider 9				●	Application, free
Provider 10	●		●	●	Paid for service
Provider 11	●			●	Funder Plus support
Provider 12	●		●		Membership

Section 2: Map analysis and observations

The map and classification presented in Section 1 provide some insight into the landscape of impact and learning support in the youth sector. Key findings are summarised in this section.

2.1 There are a large number of support providers delivering basic impact measurement training

Many providers offer training in basic impact measurement processes. Some are youth specific, others are more general to the voluntary sector, but most of them cover similar content: theory of change, planning for evaluation, and basic impact measurement content.

In response to a lack of confidence in impact and learning practice within the youth sector, support providers have developed a considerable number of workshops and events designed to introduce staff to debates and approaches to impact measurement, and to basic skills training. When discussing the advantages and disadvantages of this training for providers, it was clear that this sort of session is a helpful introduction to staff who are not familiar with basic principles.

However, there are three main challenges that have been identified with this type of provision through interviews with support providers. Firstly, one-off interventions do not typically focus on culture change, but instead focus on improving the skills of individual youth practitioners, whether staff members or volunteers. As a result, implementation of any learning is likely to be limited to specific aspects of an organisation's impact needs as seen through the lens of the training participant or support provider. This type of support provision does not necessarily lead to improvements in an organisation's approach to learning. Secondly, providers have highlighted that there are small differences across basic training with regards to the terminology and methodology used. This can be confusing for youth practitioners, particularly when youth organisations use different support providers at different stages of their journeys. Finally, the high level of provision does not necessarily make the support accessible. For example, support can be contained to specific geographic areas, in particular to London, or may be expensive and resource intensive.

In addition to practitioners wanting to access introductory training, another reason for the high amount of provision in this area may be support providers' practices. We found that it was common for support providers to go back a few steps, for instance re-doing a theory of change, before progressing to other aspects such as pre and post evaluation of outcomes. There are several possible reasons why this may be happening – perhaps the initial stages are not particularly strong or embedded with youth practitioners, or it is set up slightly differently to the support organisation's specific approach, which means they must revisit it in order to follow their particular methodology.

2.2 There is limited demand for more advanced support that would follow on from basic impact measurement support

Once organisations receive basic training and support in impact measurement, as described in the previous section, there is scope to progress into Quadrant 2 and continue to develop their approach to impact and learning.

Some providers offer this type of follow-on support, targeted at organisations who have already implemented some basic impact foundations. For instance, they have already implemented a theory of change in their work, and established some clarity regarding the main outcomes they seek to bring about. However, there currently is limited demand for this follow-on support from youth organisations.

The offer at this stage is focused on supporting organisations to collect better data regarding pre and post measures, and to better use that learning to measure outcomes and reflect on the quality of their programmes.

The feedback from providers of support is that youth organisations often lack the capacity to reach higher levels of impact measurement. This is further explored in Section 2.4. Additionally, there are limited incentives for youth organisations to focus on setting outcomes and measuring those consistently and rigorously. Instead, youth organisations are often reactive to requests from funders for particular outcomes. Support providers highlight that it takes time to develop practices on data collection and outcomes measurement that suit specific youth activities, but youth organisations are constrained by funding cycles and competing priorities when it comes to collecting different metrics for different funders.

2.3 The support provided is London-centric, with larger support providers offering some bespoke services in the regions

The majority of support providers are based within London and consequently youth organisations often have to travel to access impact support, which typically leads them to utilise one-off or modular training approaches to support. Where providers do offer services outside of London, this is often the result of a consultancy-based relationship, which is mainly only available in the bespoke, more expensive forms of support.

2.4 Support providers have a shared understanding of the barriers to impact and learning practice in the youth sector

Providers had a common outlook regarding the barriers that youth organisations experience when engaging with impact and learning support. This could be categorised into two broad areas:

1) **Lack of capacity in the area of impact measurement.** This is related to the typically smaller size of organisations in the youth sector, where small staff teams have limited capacity to devote to this area. This can lead to basic engagement in impact measurement, focusing predominantly on one-off interventions.

2) **Complex relationship between funding requirements and impact measurement.** Youth organisations tend to be reactive in their approach to impact measurement, and are often responding to funders' requirements, rather than setting up their own impact framework proactively. This results in a situation in which approaches to impact change in organisations according to changes in funding agreements. This is a vicious cycle, which can result in youth organisations being disincentivised from developing their own approaches because different funders will require different approaches. For organisations who are at the beginning of their impact measurement journey, rigid requirements may work well, for example by helping them to focus on one specific approach and thus build some capacity and expertise. However, for organisations that are already on a particular impact measurement journey, the need to fit in with specific reporting requirements or approaches, which are not appropriate for them at a particular point in time, can be frustrating.

There is some emerging work from impact support providers aimed at proactively tackling these barriers, in order to facilitate better engagement with impact and learning practices. These approaches focus on building peer-support connections that facilitate engagement with impact and learning amongst youth organisations, encouraging a focus on impact that is internal to the team and intrinsic to the youth organisations' activities. This can reduce the reliance on expensive or time-intensive interventions and focuses on helping organisations embed learning as part of their delivery, demystifying the process of impact measurement so that it is accessible to all youth organisations.

In order to address the complex situation of some funders creating the wrong short-term impact incentives amongst youth organisations, it is important for organisations to be able to take the lead on setting their own agendas on impact and reporting. This is part of the Code of Good Impact Practice developed by Inspiring Impact, which advocates that impact agendas should not be

led by funders. Given the starting point of many organisations in the sector, this requires funders to take a proactive approach to help grantees set their own impact agendas. This is exemplified by some support providers' collaborations with funders, particularly those funders who set up long-term relationships with grantees.

At its most sophisticated, the role of funder and impact support is fully integrated in 'grants plus' type arrangements. We interviewed two providers who offered this type of support, and there is evidence of support being offered to youth organisations across different quadrants. In this integrated approach, it is important for the youth organisations to be able to implement an impact approach that truly reflects its unique operations and values, rather than simply imposing a funder's approach.

2.5 Support providers have different ways of managing the relationship between impact measurement and learning in their approaches

As part of our interviews with providers, we sought to understand the way that impact practice and learning interact in their approach to supporting the youth sector. For most providers, learning is seen as what comes as a result of engaging in impact measurement. There are no specific interventions that are focused on learning as a stand-alone or separate approach from impact practice. Our hypothesis is that the sector is willing to invest in impact measurement as a technical skill, but learning tends to not be a separate consideration for practitioners.

In Quadrant 4 we find youth organisations who have embedded learning in their practice, something that seems essential to achieve excellent impact at scale. We interviewed three support providers who encourage a focus on learning, and fully integrate it with impact support. These support providers speak about learning and impact being part of the same process, and they have a strong focus on staff development and cultural change within the organisation, in order to prioritise performance and effectiveness.

2.6 Providers focus predominantly on technical knowledge and support

The provision available across all quadrants, but particularly in Quadrant 1, is focused on technical support regarding theory of change and evaluation planning. This relates to the perception by youth organisations that impact measurement is primarily a technical challenge, not a cultural or strategic one.

This challenge also relates to the types of staff who access support. Most support in Quadrant 1 is aimed at generalist staff members who are building up expertise in impact measurement. Some of these interventions equip members of staff to tackle impact measurement in isolation and as a specialist intervention, often as a response to funder requirements, or motivated by the fact that this support may help them access more funding.

Technical support for impact measurement does not create building blocks for a culture of learning, which is a more sustainable approach for organisations working to improve their effectiveness and scale. Culture change requires coaching and strong leadership to implement a particular approach, but few of the providers are focused on this aspect (see Section 2.7 for details).

2.7 The focus on learning is more apparent in long-term interventions delivered through a relational approach

Support providers interviewed for this report differed in the extent to which their offers could be considered a one-off engagement or a more long-term support intervention offered to youth organisations.

The majority of providers who offer long-term support run programmes lasting 9 to 18 months. There is one outlier who works towards a much more long-term relationship (over 6 to 8 years), although their offer for their cohort in Year 1 is comparable to other providers in terms of the curriculum content that is covered.

All providers agreed that the process of improving an organisation's impact and learning practices is a long-term matter. Those providers offering long-term solutions are able to give more support through mentoring and coaching relationships, which in turn can help embed a sustainable learning approach within an organisation. This is the key differentiating factor of long-term approaches.

Additionally, these long-term support offers tend to be cohort-based, an approach providers identified as receiving particularly good feedback from practitioners, as they are able to learn from their peers.

2.8 Impact and learning practice is a long-term journey, but the support available is difficult to navigate

This research project illustrates both the similarities in the support available to the youth sector from providers, as well as the diversity of approaches to deliver similar outcomes with regards to improvements in impact practices. This diversity of approaches has implications for youth organisations trying to navigate the support available, and we explore this further in Sections 3 and 4.

Some providers are proactively tackling these issues. For instance, one of the providers supports youth organisations to better understand the support available and identify what may best help them to take the next steps in their impact journey. There are also examples of providers building connections to facilitate the journey for youth organisations across their own programmes. Finally, there are also examples of different providers working in collaboration for different support schemes offered to youth organisations.

Section 3: Experiences of youth organisations: 'what works' in impact and learning practice support

This section of the report draws on interviews with six youth-focused organisations to highlight 'what works' and identify ongoing barriers to improving impact and learning. It does not seek to represent the views of the wider sector as a whole, but draws out themes that may apply beyond the specific concerns of the organisations interviewed.

The different organisations were selected to provide some representation across different quadrants, different geographical coverage, size and different types of youth provision, including open access, targeted and mixed.

3.1 What works

Being given a chance to prioritise why

With the multiple pressures faced by organisations, it can be hard to dedicate time to think and reflect on why an aspect of work is important, rather than to simply do the maximum amount of work that is possible. In many ways the space created by impact support to think deeply about an organisation's purpose and work is as valuable as the analysis generated by the processes that this support creates.

Relationships, not tools

Whether because they are small teams, or dedicated members of staff within larger teams, a relational approach to improving impact is vital as it provides a "critical friend" who can prompt and guide, or, as one interviewee described it "lead and listen". While often this may begin from a consultancy contract, once organisations build confidence in impact measurement, discussing challenges with peers, or through networks, becomes highly valuable. A relational approach is also crucial in providing guidance through support offerings that are often complex and written from a research perspective, not from the perspective of staff who are delivering the work on the ground.

Creating an understanding of growth that goes beyond absolute numbers

Whether through the size of a budget or the number of young people reached, organisations have often come to understand and measure success in terms of absolute numbers. By encouraging organisations to think about outcomes, impact measurement can enable organisations to be confident in arguing for the change they make in new ways.

When support is not tied to just one staff member

Support that brings staff, trustees, volunteers and beneficiaries together often leads to unexpected benefits. In particular, it can provide an effective way to ensure that trustee boards' focus on strategy and governance does not become detached from an organisation's work on the ground. It also ensures that learning is embedded in an organisation and minimises the risk of losing progress due to staff turnover. Finally, where youth organisations have larger staff teams, support can help to ensure that the experiences of those who work on "the frontline" are connected to organisational strategy.

When impact measurement is not an end

While training sessions are often a crucial piece of the impact puzzle, the best impact support links analysis to organisational culture and strategy. As the four quadrants in the mapping section of this report show, there is no perfect destination for all organisations to aspire to. Thus building a wider culture of learning, rather than suggesting organisations can reach the perfect impact measurement destination, is crucial. This culture is vital in enabling both old and new staff members to view impact measurement as a key element in achieving their organisational purpose, as opposed to an unnecessary external burden. This means that support providers need to understand that youth organisations will go on a journey when making changes, and that this journey may last beyond the specific period of support.

3.2 Frustrations

Too top down

There is a strong feeling that support providers often create their offerings in isolation, beginning from theory and then expecting organisations to move towards a theoretical goal. As a consequence, support can often be based on research methods that do not appreciate the reality on the ground, full of unnecessary jargon, and, at its worse, condescending by failing to recognise the sector's history. Instead, there needs to be a greater recognition of good practice where it exists in the sector. There are some isolated examples of a more sector-led approach facilitated by two different support providers interviewed as part of this research project.

The quest for the 'perfect' platform

The availability of platforms to capture organisational data continues to grow and subsequently reinforces the feeling for youth organisations that there must be a 'perfect' platform out there, which can address their specific needs. This leads organisations to spend significant amounts of time and money on trying to find a technological solution, which can become obsolete as their measurement needs change over time, or their impact practices evolve. The increasing number of platforms, all of which advertise similar but different services, also often leaves youth organisations overwhelmed.

Lack of clarity from funders

Organisations often feel unclear on why funders chose particular elements of their work to report on. Without an understanding of the underlying purpose, this helps to contribute towards a 'tick box' culture where organisations simply fill out data because they have to, rather than it becoming a useful element of their work. This relates to the incentive for impact measurement challenges identified in Section 2.4 above.

Data could be used for more

A second frustration with funders comes from the one directional nature of the relationship. With funders collecting large amounts of data, there is a frustration that this data is not made more widely available so that it could be used to improve the sector as a whole. There also appears to be potential for the government, whether national, regional or local, to do more in this area so that organisations can more easily compare their work against benchmarks.

Timebound resources

Funding for organisations to access impact support is often attached to short timeframes, which encourages a culture of trying to find quick fixes to problems. As a result, organisations often struggle to make the jump from measurement to learning, and take a very short-term approach to impact practices, rather than being able to understand the overarching journey and be clear about what their next step would be, independent of funding requirements.

Cost vs. value

Given the tremendous pressure on organisational budgets, a significant frustration came from organisations who felt that it is very difficult to compare the cost to the value of support. Organisational leaders, who are trying to decide how best they should spend their limited resource in the area of impact measurement, have limited information on which to base their decisions about what support to access. There is thus a need for providers of support to clearly state in advance who their support is targeted to and what they can expect to gain, as well as some of the challenges that organisations might face when accessing this support.

Who is the client?

Most providers are put into contact with youth organisations through a funder, as part of an evaluation that is attached to a grant. This can lead to an imbalance in which the learning objectives and methodology are determined by the funder, rather than the youth organisation. It is important to encourage ways in which youth organisations can be treated as the primary client of impact and learning support.

Section 4: Approach to diagnostics

This section reviews the ways in which organisations diagnose their needs with regards to impact and learning practice. There are two broad categories: those organisations that undertake a diagnostic process independently of support providers, and those who diagnose using processes and tools supplied by support providers as part of their services. We consider both of these approaches, the processes followed and the tools available.

4.1 Organisation-led approach to diagnostics

Based on the interviews with youth organisations and support providers, we can classify different impetus for youth organisations to diagnose their impact and learning support needs. Typically there are three different prompts:

1. **Informal comparison to a peer**, leading to the organisation believing that they could benefit from undertaking a similar process. This may be led by trustees or staff.
2. **Interested staff members who wish to explore the benefits of impact and learning support**, because of either a general desire to improve the effectiveness of their organisation, or because of an anticipation that they are likely to be requested to demonstrate their impact in the future.
3. **In response to funders asking them to report on outputs and outcomes.**

Regardless of the source of motivation for diagnosing their needs, self-diagnosis is a frustrating and confusing experience for many youth organisations.[1] Whether seeking to explore where to begin, what resources to review, or which approaches to adopt, self-diagnosis often leads organisations to become frustrated and consequently to view impact measurement as an unnecessary or too complicated burden. Alternatively, a desire to make progress can lead organisations to put systems in place which they often find to be inadequate when their work or the requirements of a funder change, again leading to frustration.

Through this research we did not identify any youth sector specific diagnostic tool that is freely available to practitioners.

4.2 Provider-led approach to diagnostics

Support providers clearly felt that a considerable amount of the value that they provide to youth organisations comes from their ability to guide organisations through the diagnosis process. Through a mixture of in-house frameworks and in-depth conversations, providers help organisations to navigate the complex field of impact measurement and highlight the specific benefits of engaging with impact and learning for individual organisations.

With few exceptions, this leads to a 'back to basics' approach. This is because the ad hoc way in which organisations have built their impact measurement systems often means that they are not connected to the overall organisational strategy, or that the processes used to collect and analyse data do not meet the organisation's needs. While time consuming, youth organisations recognise that providers of support are able to help them overcome the frustrations that have developed as a result of self-diagnosis, which often remains a necessary, if challenging, first step.

1 This bears out the experience of PHF grantees that was part of the impetus for this commission.

Evaluating the quality of diagnosis support is not an objective process. As Section 1 of this report highlighted, the majority of support providers operate within Quadrant 1, where there is the largest demand. Youth organisations accessing this support typically have a small reach and are at the beginning of their impact journey. A great deal of provider support is targeted at this 'market', but the extent to which this high level of provision is leading to an improvement in impact practice is unclear. For example, it is very difficult for youth organisations to identify which particular approach to implementing a theory of change and associated outcomes framework is right for their organisation. As a result, as they come into contact with different providers of support, organisations often find they have to redo work they have previously completed, leading to inefficient repetition of efforts.

However, while it may not be possible to identify one 'best' approach amongst support providers, it is clear that as a whole the question of diagnosis support is a current area of work for most of the different providers. A broad range of diagnostic tools are used, from guided questionnaires to detailed frameworks. All of these methods are developed in line with providers' practices and are likely to continue to evolve as support services change over time, as part of the iterative process of sector-wide improvement.

Section 5: Recommendations

This report presents a snapshot of the provision of impact and learning practice support across the youth sector. Emerging from this analysis, we present some recommendations, which would benefit from being discussed with youth organisations, support providers and funders, following a consideration of the issues highlighted by the report.

1. Reimagine support available for Quadrant 1 organisations

- The majority of the learning and impact support efforts focus on this quadrant. Overall, the support in this space can kick-start a journey for a youth organisation, but it can add limited value over time, as it does not necessarily change the culture or embed learning as an approach.
- Additional support at this stage would involve a focus on learning and how to embed impact across the organisation, focusing on cultural as well as technical aspects.
- At this stage, youth organisations would benefit from a clearer view of the entire journey for impact measurement, and clarity as to what moving beyond Quadrant 1 would look like for them. This would also help organisations to better navigate the entire support sector (see Point 2).

2. Support youth organisations to better navigate the support sector

- Impact practices can be a source of frustration to youth organisations, given the diversity of approaches and the lack of clarity with regards to the provision of support available.
- Support providers work to be responsive to the priorities and objectives of youth organisations, but this does not help provide a clear pathway or framework for engagement in impact practice as a whole.
- This results in a permanently moving system in which youth organisations are not completely aware of the impact support they want or need, and support providers deliver against their unclear needs.
- Youth organisations would benefit from a better insight into the potential journey of impact practice in their organisation, enabling them to take a long-term approach. It would be helpful to build on emerging efforts from those support providers who are trying to create a shared understanding and approach to impact practice as an overarching field.

3. Support youth organisations to focus on learning culture

- Funder incentives often result in technical impact efforts, which are not always productive for organisations. Technical support may feel tangible in the short-term, but it does not always deliver long-term value.
- Youth organisations would benefit from a greater focus on learning, embedded in their organisational culture and in day-to-day delivery.
- This can be achieved through a relational approach (with support providers and/or funders), encouraging peer support, and where possible offering youth organisations learning support through a “critical friend”.

A lifecycle approach supported by funders

The recommendation areas above are all focused on the impact and learning support system itself. Additionally, the report touches on the challenges that funder incentives can cause for impact and learning practice amongst youth organisations. Any recommendations specifically related to the funder space sit somewhat beyond the scope of the report, since we have not proactively explored funder behaviours. However, funder-related suggestions that pertain to the three key recommendations explored above include:

- For funders to align their impact and learning requirements with a sector-wide approach to support provision that recognises the current stage and journeys of youth organisations in developing their learning and impact practice. Providing this clarity would also help youth organisations to take a proactive approach to impact activities, and therefore improve their ability to navigate the impact and support sector.
- Individual funders could consider the model as part of their strategy for supporting youth organisations, to see whether these line up with any particular quadrants and develop their approach accordingly. Funders could also consider developing their own 'lifecycle' approach, to support organisations in understanding and undertaking their own journey, whether that is to stay in one quadrant or move to a different one.

Finally, we hope that the mapping framework we have proposed provides a useful tool in analysing the 'market' of learning and impact practice support for youth organisations. We welcome comments and critique of the framework and are interested to see how it chimes with the views and experience of youth organisations, support providers and funders. Ultimately, we hope that this will provide an opportunity to start a discussion about these issues and the recommendations.

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