Workshop Briefing Report

Evaluation, Impact and Outcomes: What does it mean for us?

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WISERD

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CWVYS

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Yr agwedd meintiol:
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Executive Summary

- In view of long-standing aims and recent comments by the Minister for the Welsh Language and Lifelong Learning regarding the need to strengthen evidence-based youth work, workshops organised jointly by WISERD and CWVYS sought to re-start a Welsh national discussion regarding evaluation, impact and outcomes in youth work in Wales.
- Trends experienced in youth work in Wales reflect other areas of public policy, including an emphasis on evidence-based policy and a greater reliance on quantitative indicators to measure impact.
- A range of documents associated with youth work in Wales recognise the importance of strengthening the evidence regarding the impact of youth work. However, some initiatives were not rolled out with repercussions for the coherence of approaches to impact and evaluation within the youth work sector.
- Current practice in evaluation and youth work impact assessment in Wales reflect a positive approach to the purpose of evaluation. Whilst there are examples of good practice and an increasing awareness of the importance of improving how to evaluate, there is diversity in the practices used within the sector and uncertainty regarding whether the methods being utilised and the extent to which organisations currently evaluate the outcomes and impact of their work are adequate. The workshops identified a number of challenges and obstacles to impact and evaluation work.
- The report outlines the Theory of Change framework and the Most Significant Change method presented at the workshop as potential tools to strengthen evaluation processes.
- The report concludes by outlining key questions that can guide a way forward in developing a 'Wales approach' to evaluation and impact. Doing so is associated in particular with developing mechanisms and schemes to support organisations to strengthen how they demonstrate the impact of the sector in Wales; learning from current good practice; expanding discussions with funders; and the potential role of sectoral representative bodies in establishing a consensus around good practice and practical arrangements to strengthen the validity and quality of organisations' data and evaluation processes; and how the HE sector in Wales can support this work.

01. Introduction

1.1 This document reports on the deliberations of workshops jointly organised by the Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD), ESRC-funded Civil Society Research Centre and the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS). The aim of the two workshops held in Cardiff and Llandudno was to re-start a Welsh national discussion about the evaluation, impact and outcomes of youth work in Wales. They sought to respond to what was perceived as fog and confusion facing youth work organisations regarding evaluation and outcomes, including the varying requirements from different funders as to how to go about evaluating and demonstrating the impact of youth work.

The workshops built upon collaboration between WISERD and CWVYS, which has developed as part of a comparative project within the research centre on the identities of young people in Scotland and Wales.[1] Bethia McNeil from the Centre for Youth Impact also led a workshop session on evaluation and impact measurement in the youth sector. (Please see programme in the appendix).

1.2 This document summarises the main elements of the discussions that took place during the two workshops, including points raised during group work sessions by attendees. The presentations themselves have also been shared with the workshop attendees. All materials are available on the CWVYS website (under 'Our Work', 'Measuring Impact' menu list).

[1]Project details: WISERD ESRC Civil Society Research Centre, work package 2.3 Education, Language and Identity, https://wiserd.ac.uk/research/research-projects/education-language-identity.

02. Context: Trends in evaluation and impact work and the policy context to outcomes and impact in the youth work sector

2.1 The emphasis on evaluation, impact and outcomes in the youth work sector reflects broader trends in public policy. The increased emphasis on evidence-based policy has resulted in a range of different approaches, including a greater reliance on quantitative indicators to measure impact. Also growing in significance is integrating evaluation into the development of policies according to a practice of testing, learning and adapting. Integrating evaluation into the delivery of programmes in such a way is said to facilitate learning at an organisational scale.

More broadly, there is a growing recognition that public policy interventions often fail for various reasons. As a result, there is a need for organisations to be more open about the valuable learning process that can occur when interventions don't work. Moreover, the continuing cuts in public spending has escalated the need to justify spending across policy areas and for all organisations to be able to demonstrate impact, particularly to funders.

2.2 In line with these broader trends, a range of documents associated with youth work in Wales recognise the importance of strengthening the evidence base about the impact of youth work. The sector itself established assessing outcomes and impact as something that was central to the work of youth organisations (Youth Work in Wales Review Group, 2013) and the Welsh Government's National Youth Work Strategy 2014-18 referred to a need strengthen the evidence base of the impact of youth work and called for more action to 'systematically and robustly evidence the contribution of youth work' (Welsh Government, 2014: 14). 'Demonstrating Success'[2] preceded the strategy and was produced as a framework to support assessing the 'distance travelled' by young people receiving support and services, particularly in terms of soft and generic skills development, which have always been recognised as being more difficult to measure.

The 2014-18 Strategy proposed developing and implementing a National Outcomes Framework for youth work in Wales to be aligned with other Welsh Government frameworks. This was consulted upon but not finalised, and contributed to the gap and lack of coherence on impact and evaluation within the sector in Wales.

2.3 The Centre for Youth Impact discussed a similar broader context of a perception that practitioners in the youth work sector had not been adequately measuring the impact of their work. In response, the vast majority of organisations in the sector had developed their practices and were utilising a range of tools to gather data. However, an implicit idea that more evaluation equals better evaluation had proven to be problematic. There was a need to increase the quality of the data collected and to improve its measurement in order to improve the quality of services. To a certain extent, this could lead to a situation in which the amount of evaluation of outcomes and especially impact could be reduced. Organisations need to be clear on the differences between different terms (e.g. impact and outcomes) and try to develop a better understanding of what good evaluation looks like.

[2]See http://dysgu.llyw.cymru/docs/learningwales/publications/150629-ds-handbook-en.pdf

03. Current practices and challenges of evaluation and impact work in the youth sector in Wales

3.1 Why is the evaluation and assessment of youth work impact important?

The internal drivers as to why evaluation and impact are important were clear in discussions, including:

- Personal and organisational learning: a desire to improve what individuals and the organisations they worked for were doing, thus promoting the ethos of a learning organisation;
- Young persons-centred provision: listening to the views of young people so that provision is meaningful to them;
- A way of clarifying that as an individual / organisation they are making a difference and having an impact;
- Consistency: that young people engaging with a project across a large geographical area are having an experience that is consistent;
- Identifying activities / interventions that don't work in order to make changes, if appropriate;
- Advocacy and communication: assists others external to the organisation to understand what is being done, the relevance and importance of the work.

In contrast to the importance of internal drivers to understanding impact, there is a tendency to focus on and presume that the external drivers (funders etc.) are more important. The representatives of the organisations were commended for adopting a more enlightened approach to the purpose of evaluation.

3.2 How are organisations evaluating and assessing the impact of their work?

The discussion illustrated the diversity in practice across the sector with regards to how and the extent to which organisations currently evaluate the outcomes and impact of their work. Overall, there was an increasing awareness of the importance of and a desire to improve and strengthen how organisations go about evaluating the impact of their work. Examples of current practice included:

- Some usage of 'Demonstrating Success', which drew upon best practice and was designed to be adapted to a variety of settings such as measuring the 'distance travelled' of young people, was growing. The 'Outcomes Star' was increasingly being used by local authorities and voluntary sector youth work organisations and was considered as very helpful as it can be applied in a variety of settings and includes young people's own assessment, thus heightening their own self-awareness;
- One organisation had adapted the general self-efficacy scale (McNeil et al, 2012) to make it more accessible to be utilised with all their projects. This sought to draw on academic rigour and it could be translated into more quantitative data, currently essential for funders;

03.

- The Quality Mark for Youth Work in Wales was considered as valuable as it was not overtly prescriptive and responded to the internal practices of organisations. However, it was considered to reflect a strong values-base of youth work and could be updated;
- Some organisations had partnered with higher education institutions to support them in evaluating their work and to utilise methods such as control groups, for instance with young people in schools;
- Some ideas of theory of change were being adopted within the sector, informed by partner bodies in England (anecdotal evidence suggests that theory of change are more prevalent in the youth sector in England);
- Moves towards a greater test, learn and adapt model were to be welcomed;
- Some organisations produced case studies of young people alongside more quantitative indicators, and there was a desire to include a greater qualitative dimension to evaluation;
- Social return on investment – was understood by employers but was not considered as helpful for the youth work sector.

3.3 What are the challenges and obstacles to impact and evaluation work?

What are we measuring?: At the most general level, developing a meaningful sense of the impact that an organisation has on a young person is often difficult owing to the challenges of ascribing a link between an activity in a youth work context and the progress of a young person. Beyond this, there were concerns that organisations may be collecting too many types of different data, leading to risks of over measuring. Concerns were also raised that not necessarily the right measures were always being made. There has been a strong shift to focusing on quantitative data and hard outcomes, particularly in relation to education and training and employment measurements. Are these always the most appropriate measurements? Could there be a greater emphasis on measuring levels of happiness and contentment? In addition, proving negatives is also a challenge in measurement, e.g. not in prison. There were also issues concerning the scale over which data was collected, with more rigorous data capture over large geographical scales, but evaluation at other scales e.g. local level being less developed in some organisations.

Role of funders: Organisations in receipt of a range of different funding streams have to engage with diverse reporting requirements concerning evaluation and outcomes assessment (some of them being very onerous), tools and indicators, resulting in collecting different types of data for different purposes. This can be compounded by a lack of clear communication from funders regarding the exact requirements of the evaluation work by organisations. Overall, there is a risk in an over emphasis on volume rather than quality of data and evaluation, particularly hard outcomes (mainly quantitative) and accreditation.

03.

Whose outcomes?: The range of outcomes that are important to organisations are broad. In addition to those of the funders, it is important that young persons themselves input into interpretations regarding their own outcomes and where they want to reach. Additionally, outcomes should be in line with the organisations' own aims. On this basis, are the modes of evaluation appropriate to the young person? Who defines the distance travelled?

Positive and negative outcomes?: Given the links between evaluation and future funding, this risks focusing on demonstrating the success and most positive effects of an organisation's work. More balanced reflections of strengths and weaknesses would be more constructive as a way of assessing whether an organisation is delivering its service in the most appropriate way. Reflecting this, some funders are more willing to fund risky projects because of their learning potential.

Capacity challenges: These are manifold and affect the ability of organisations to work more systematically on impact and evaluation. Capacity seems to be more challenging in smaller organisations. It includes having the appropriate skillset for data analysis that can often be dependent on one individual and thus susceptible to staff turnover issues; a lack of administrative staff to support this type of activity and/or taking staff away from the service delivery dimension and lessening the impact of the organisation's work whilst the volume of young people requiring support is increasing. There are also implications for the role of volunteer workers in collecting data.

Variation: Whilst some organisations had a more coherent and overarching framework for evaluation, within others, different members of staff utilised different models to evaluate their work.

Adapting: Organisations tend to adapt evaluative and impact frameworks to their own organisation, thus creating challenges for consistency and potentially raising questions regarding the robustness of the frameworks utilised.

Data Privacy: There was a lack of clarity regarding the implications of the new data requirements relating to GDPR for the sector's work. Could personal data be used to demonstrate outcomes and impact?

Collaboration challenges: Whilst there are clear merits to sharing best practice or data around evaluation and impact within the sector, this is impeded by organisations competing for the same funding.

04. Theory of Change

4.1 This idea entails developing an assessment of the effect of a programme or an intervention. It provides a framework for identifying and mapping activities and processes (outputs), how these processes etc lead to intermediate outcomes, and their association with the impact or ultimate goals of the intervention/organisation. It can be considered as a clear, concise and robust framework in order to explain and justify the relationship between specific activities and their ultimate goal, and is viewed as being central to effective evaluation.

4.2 Different models of theory of change were presented at the workshop, including a NESTA model and a revised Theory of Change model being developed by the Centre for Youth Impact. The latter (adapted from the New Philanthropy Capital (NPC) model) establishes an 'accountability line': the outcomes are within the sphere of influence of the sector whereas the impact is the hands of others, and 'providers' are not accountable. On this basis, the gathering of impact data should be exceptional and conducted by another organisation.

4.3 Workshop attendees who were already familiar with the theory of change commented on how it can be accessible and enable thinking backwards from the intended impact of the work, to design the evaluation and monitoring framework from the outset in a way that is aligned with the activities being undertaken. Though created for use in the planning stage, it can retrospectively assess existing activity. There were also suggestions that funders consider that usage of theory of change frameworks leads to better bids as it provides a better understanding of what an organisation proposes to do. It was also suggested that organisations in Wales had perhaps been less successful in funding applications to date, as a result of not engaging fully with theory of change models.

05. The Most Significant Change method

5.1 The Most Significant Change (MSC) method was presented as a method that can build on current practice within the sector, that could be integrated into existing qualitative data assessments, particularly case studies, and provide more rigour. It focuses on collecting significant change stories, leading to a systematic selection of these stories within the organisation in a way that can engage all levels of the organisation in assessing its impact.

5.2 The practice is based on asking the young person a question regarding the most significant change for them within a specific time period. It provides a means to enable the young person to evaluate what they would prioritise as the most significant change to them. Such stories inform the evaluation of intermediate outcomes and impact and can be collected in different ways: by the youth worker, asking a young person, through group discussion by the young people. Individuals at a higher level within the organisation subsequently examine and discuss the stories. The process of deciding upon the most significant change of all is explained and justified to other levels within the organisation. This process of feedback verifies and strengthens the accountability of the choices made. The method can also be quantified, e.g. by quantifying the types of significant changes that appear in the various stories that have been collected.

5.3 Amongst its strengths is that it draws upon data that can be collected by many people and can build the capacity of staff and volunteers. From an initial qualitative basis, quantitative elements can be added. It presents a good way of measuring programmes with numerous outcomes and can identify unexpected outcomes. It can be amended to reflect the size of the organisation and can allow organisations to focus on different aspects of their activity or on different geographical settings. Furthermore, it is already being used in the youth sector (e.g. south-west of England and the Manchester area) and it is not unfamiliar to the Welsh Government as they are utilising it as a means of evaluating internal programmes.

5.4 What was the initial feedback of workshop participants on MSC?

- It was a simple tool that could be useful in adapting current use of case studies, as a mechanism to give feedback to workers, incorporated into assessing distance travelled, and in areas where there are difficulties in evaluating the work, including softer, generic skills.
- Funders are increasingly appreciating stories.
- To some it was too ambiguous, not adequately numerate for funders, and at risk of being too subjective and not rigorous enough in its decision-making process, leading to presenting the most positive stories to funders with less attention to the difficulties and negatives.
- There were risks to its use in contexts where young people might be making no progress and it could have a detrimental impact upon them.

06. Key questions arising from the workshop associated with developing a 'Wales approach' to evaluation and impact

Aims

6.1 Can Wales design and adopt impact measurements that are more attuned to improving provision?

6.2 What types of mechanisms and schemes would support organisations to develop their measurement and evaluation practices, to demonstrate and strengthen their robustness? e.g. buddy and mentor schemes.

Learning from current good practice

6.3 What is good practice in the youth work sector in Wales on data, outcomes and evaluation? Can government, funders and youth work sector bodies reach a common understanding of good practice? How can current best practice amongst organisations be disseminated most effectively?

6.4 What are the effective and successful measurement tools and practices currently being used in different delivery contexts and settings in Wales? Can existing tools for evaluation developed in Wales, e.g. Demonstrating Success be re-evaluated?

Expanding discussions, further research and guidance

6.5 What would be the most valuable dialogues to take place with funders, including raising awareness of the range of impact measurements that are being required and their implications?

6.6 Given lack of capacity and consistency issues facing some organisations within the sector to deal with data analysis, would some organisations benefit from further guidance e.g. Theory of Change, Most Significant Change methods, sample sizes, frequency, are we over evaluating, how to simplify processes?

6.7 Can sectoral representative bodies lead the way in developing a consensus around good practice in Wales and establishing practical arrangements to support and advise organisations in strengthening the validity and quality of their data and evaluation?

6.8 Can the HE sector in Wales support youth work organisations in their evaluation and outcomes assessment practices, e.g. ADRC support with assessing the long term impact of youth work in Wales, including in complex areas?

References

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Welsh Government (2014) National Youth Work Strategy for Wales 2014-18,

https://gov.wales/docs/dcells/publications/140417-national-youth-work-strategy-en.pdf

Youth Work Wales Review Group (2013) Youth Work in Wales: Principles and Purposes,

http://www.cwvys.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/06/Youth-Work-in-Wales-Principles-and-Purposes-March-2014.pdf

Appendix: Workshop Programme

Evaluation, Impact and Outcomes: What does it mean for us?

Joint workshops organised by The Wales Institute for Social and Economic Research, Data and Methods (WISERD) ESRC-funded Civil Society Research Centre and the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS).

Monday 21 May 2018, 9.30 - 3.45, Urdd Centre, Cardiff Bay

Wednesday 23 May 2018, 9.30 - 3.45, Imperial Hotel, Llandudno

Programme

9.30 - 10.00	Coffee and Registration
10.00 - 10.10	Welcome Paul Glaze
10.10 - 12.10	Session 1 - Better Evaluation? Prof. Rhys Jones, Aberystwyth University
12.20 - 1.15	Lunch
1.15 - 3.15	Session 2 - Are we nearly there yet? Impact Measurement in the Youth Sector Bethia McNeil, Director Centre for Youth Impact
3.15 - 3.45	Session 3 - Concluding discussion on next steps