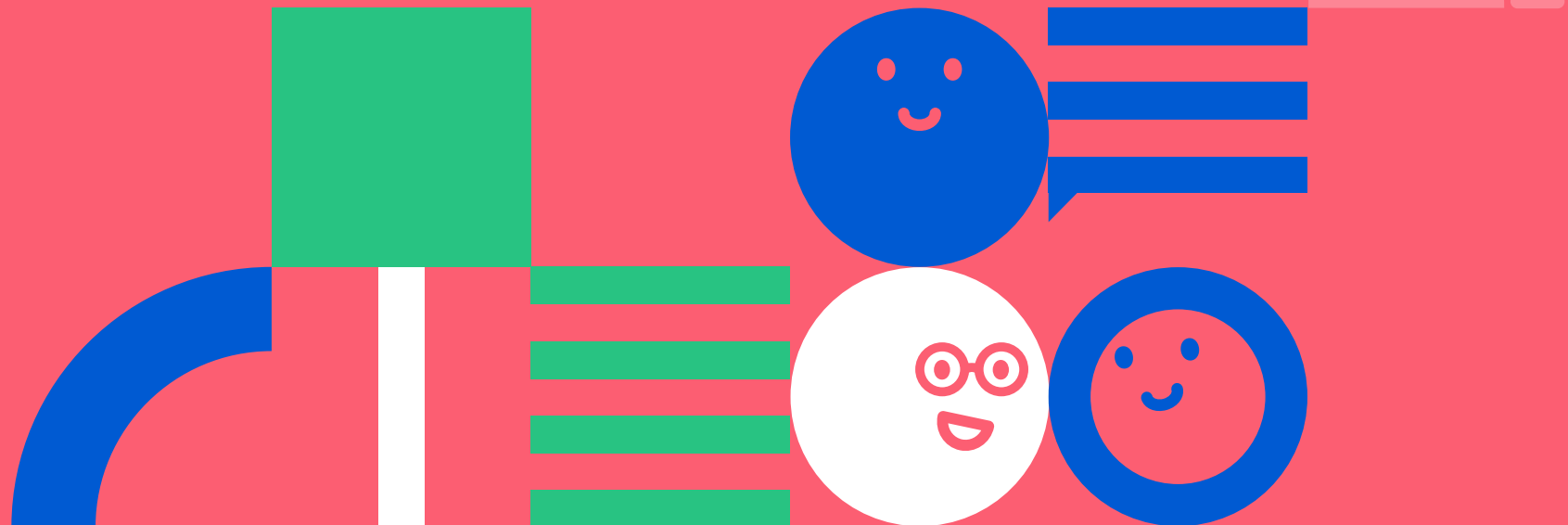


Valuing youth work

Research-informed practical resources for youth workers: Reflecting on the value and evaluation of youth work



Valuing youth work

Our three-year study, 'Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work' found that youth workers and organisations are keen to evaluate their work. Yet, it can be challenging to carry out evaluation in ways that support informal education and anti-oppressive practice, both of which are central to youth work. Our research found that youth workers and youth organisations navigate these issues most successfully when there is the flexibility to take creative, reflective, and youth-centred approaches to evaluation.

This resource raises questions for reflection to support youth workers and organisations to develop youth-centred, participatory, anti-oppressive evaluation practices.

While it is primarily for youth workers and youth work managers, practitioners working in related settings may also find it useful.

How to use this resource

It is not our aim to promote one approach to evaluation over another. Rather, we hope the resource (or parts of it) will be used flexibly in any way youth workers find helpful.

This resource is organised in three sections.

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.

1. Working with voices from the research

The following quotes are from young people who took part in interviews and focus groups within our research. We believe the quotes can be used with groups of young people and/or youth workers - whether for reflection on the value of youth work, or as part of an evaluation.

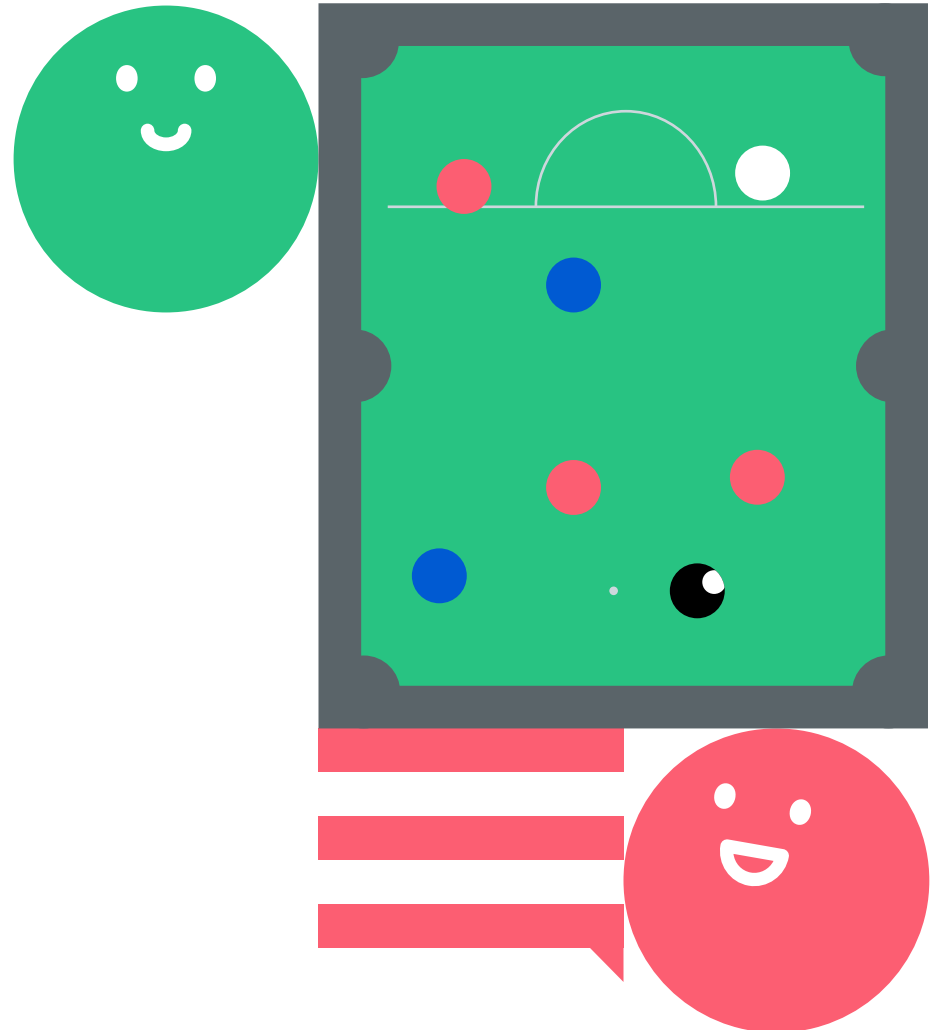
Isaac was one of many young people who valued the safety and stability offered by the spaces of belonging encountered in youth clubs.

“Most of my school life I was bullied and sort of beaten up constantly... (youth club) was the first place where people didn’t do that... And it also was the place where I managed to form solid friendships, as well... it’s a great place to find where you belong. In a sense like a home away from home.”

Isaac

Possible ways to use this quote:

- To open a discussion around the value of the youth club or project and finding new social groups outside of school.
- To start an evaluative discussion on making the youth club or project more welcoming, open, friendly and inclusive to new and/or existing members.
- As inspiration for a group session on what ‘home’ means/is and/or what ‘belonging’ means/is.



Reflecting on their experiences of being asked to take part in evaluation, Jasmine and Chloe had different perspectives.

“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

“It’s either rating from one to 10, 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

Possible ways to use this quote:

- To ask young people if and how they want to be involved in evaluation.
- To engage youth workers and young people in a discussion on what kinds of evaluation they have taken part in, and what they think works well or less well in youth work.
- For a discussion on whether, and how, youth work is different from school.
- For a group session on why young people come to the club or project – what’s important to them to keep the same and what they would like to change.
- To ask young people to think about their skills and identify evaluation activities that might support their development or that they might enjoy or feel proud of.

Some young people, like Luna, were critical of standardised questionnaires (on issues such as wellbeing or mental health), finding some questions intrusive, triggering, or difficult to think about.

“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

Possible ways to use this quote:

- As a prompt for designing evaluation / questionnaires that are not triggering or intrusive.
- For a review of existing questionnaires or forms used in the organisation.

2. Using the film: The Value of Youth Work

As part of our study, 22 young people, supported by 8 youth workers across 3 youth work organisations, created the short film [‘The Value of Youth Work’](#)¹. Mouth That Roars, a film company specialising in youth participatory film, facilitated the process.

The film shares young people’s views on the value of their youth clubs and their relationships with youth work. We hope youth workers and young people might find it useful – or you might want to make your own version.

Discussion questions

The following questions can be used flexibly as a starting point for a discussion with young people, youth workers, trainees / peer youth workers, and/or community members after watching the film. They include questions generated by youth workers who have already used the film in their setting.

We suggest you select the questions that resonate with your practice. You can also print and cut out each question to use them as discussion cards.

¹<https://vimeo.com/597256970>



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?





What might stop young people going to a youth club or speaking to a youth worker?

How are the settings in the film different from each other or from your club / project?

If you made a film about your youth club / project, what would you include? What would you not want to include? Why?

If there was one thing you could change about your club / project, what would it be?



Do you think a short film can show people what's good about youth work?

Apart from films, how else could you tell people about the value of youth work?

Who should watch films made by young people about youth work, and why?



3. Evaluation in practice

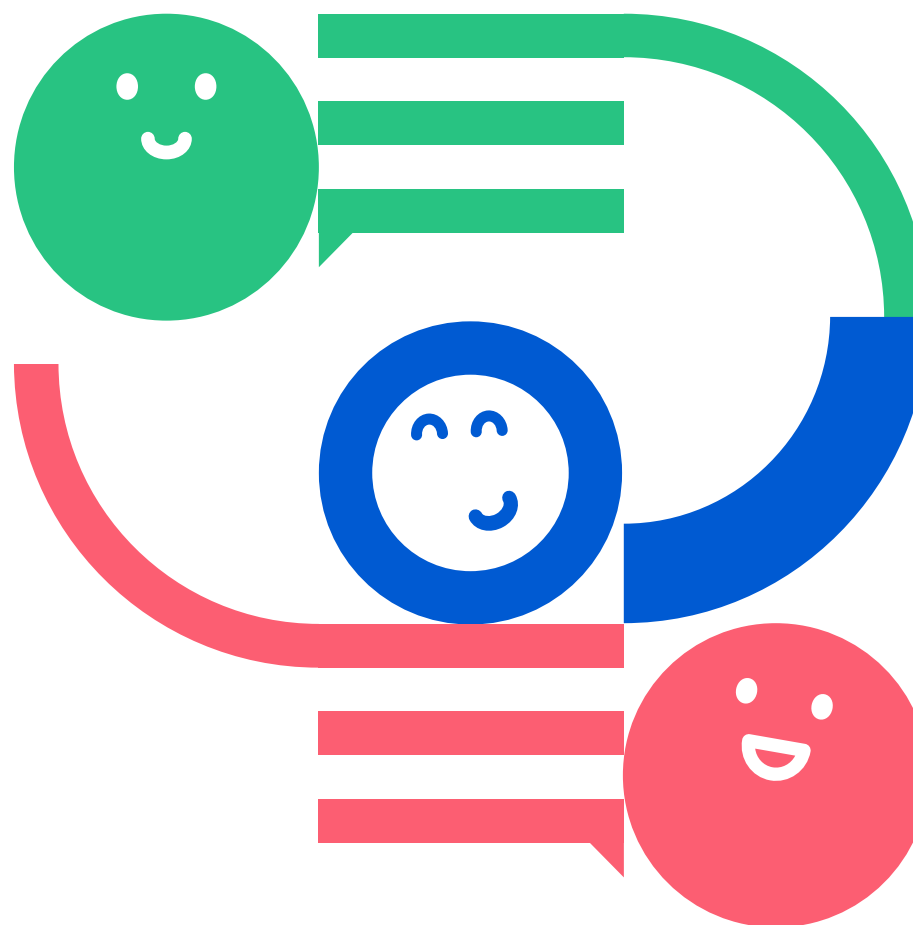
Youth work responds to young people's needs and desires in the contexts of their lives and the wider society in which they live. This means that the evaluation of youth work needs to be flexible and diverse. The aims of evaluation include:

- Practice development.
- Accountability to young people.
- Providing information to funders on youth work practice and its impact.
- Communicating the value of youth work to decision-makers and the wider community.

Evaluation needs to be dynamic and youth-centred, responding to issues as they arise and to the informal nature of youth work. For this reason, a 'one-size-fits-all' approach to evaluation is not appropriate to youth work, and we do not advocate one preferred approach.

Toolkits and 'how to' guides relating to evaluation methods already exist, and this is not what we aim to do here. Instead, this is a tool for reflection – whether on your own or with colleagues and/or young people.

Here you will find a selection of methods that emerged from our research as working well in youth work settings, from the point of view of youth workers and young people. We offer some suggested questions for consideration when using these methods, and finish with recommendations around what to think about when planning evaluation.



Conversations and interviews

Dialogue and conversation are central to youth work practice yet are often not considered or 'counted' as evaluation. Evaluative group or individual conversations can be informal and spontaneous, with key points noted down as part of session recordings. They can also be deliberately planned as part of an evaluation strategy, perhaps framed as [interviews or focus groups](#)².

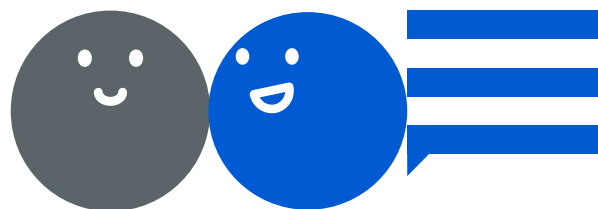
Some questions to consider:

- If you write up spontaneous conversations with young people as part of your evaluative or reflective practice, what is your process and how might young people be involved?
- Are conversations intended to generate an action or outcome and do young people know this beforehand?
- If you intend to use a conversation as part of an evaluation, how do you ensure that young people provide informed consent?
- If young people want to be involved in capturing dialogue and conversations for evaluation, how can you make this an enjoyable part of the session?

² <https://londonyouth.org/from-anecdote-to-evidence-qualitative-research-skills-in-youth-work>

³ <https://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/assessment/assessing-community-needs-and-resources/photovoice/main>

- Could conversations – in the form of interviews or focus groups – work well to demonstrate the value of your practice to funders?
- Have you planned questions or topics to frame the conversation or focus group, and if so, how can you ensure they are open and clear?
- Would it be useful to audio record focus groups (with young people's consent)?
- How might you work with young people and/or colleagues to identify key themes and quotes from conversations and interviews?
- How can you ensure young people will remain anonymous and that confidentiality is discussed?
- How can you ensure emotional safety, and that young people are not asked, for example, to recount traumatic experiences that they may not be happy to share in that context, or that may be triggering for others in the group?
- Could young people be trained and supported to interview their peers (or youth workers)?



Creative media methods

A wide variety of media are used in youth work to capture young people's thoughts on their lives and surroundings, and can be valuable for evaluating youth work. These methods can include video, audio, photography, diaries, vox pops, snapshots, [photo-voice](#)³, and more.

Some questions to consider:

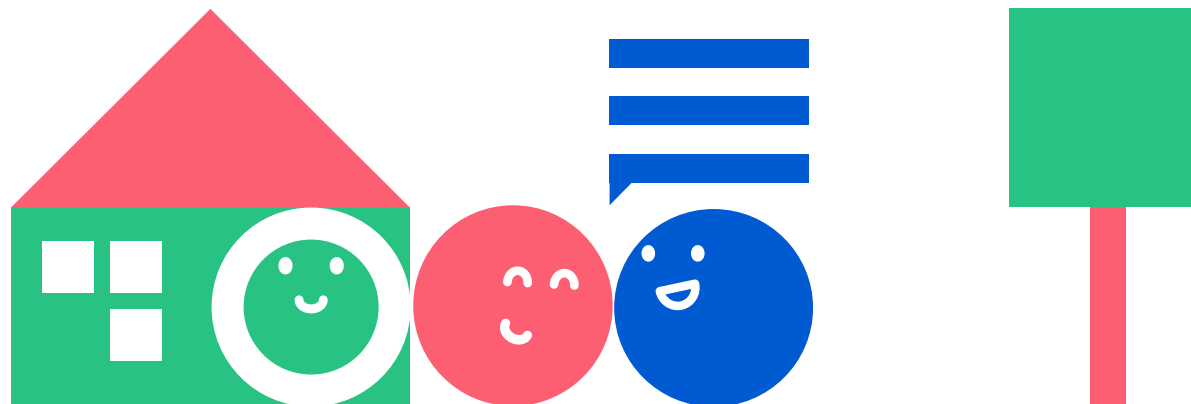
- If using media, such as photography or video, do young people know where and how it will be used, and who will see it?
- Are young people aware their image and/or voice might be used in an evaluation?
- Can young people withdraw their permission, and, if so, do you remind them how to do this?
- If including identifying images or voices is inappropriate, what creative, non-identifying alternatives might be used? (Eg abstract images, cropped images of hands / backs / shoes, animation, alternative voices.)
- How can you avoid stereotypical or negative images of young people, particularly those from marginalised groups?
- Would it be useful to organise workshops to support young people and/or youth workers in using creative media methods to express evaluative thoughts or feelings?

Storytelling and case studies

Recounting stories about the impact of youth work can be a reflective process for thinking about issues and for evaluation. While case studies are widely used, these tend to be more convincing and ethical if they involve young people and/or practitioners in telling their stories. In-depth process-oriented storytelling approaches include [Transformative Evaluation](#)⁴, in which young people are asked to identify the 'Most Significant Change' arising from participation in youth work, and In Defence of Youth Work's [storytelling workshops](#)⁵.

Some questions to consider:

- How can stories or case studies be effectively anonymised?
- Have young people given their consent?
- Stories and case studies can sometimes perpetuate stereotypes of both young people and youth work – how can you avoid 'saviour narratives' and show complexity and young people's agency?
- Is there a role for ambivalent stories, or stories where things went wrong, as well as 'success stories'?
- If organising storytelling workshops, what is the role of a facilitator? Are some voices heard more than others? What will your role be?



Quick feedback

Simple, quick methods can be used to capture young people's thoughts on issues, either collectively as part of a session, or anonymously. These methods include flipchart sheets pinned up around a room with evaluation questions, post-its and coloured pens; and anonymous suggestion boxes.

Some questions to consider:

- Have young people been involved in designing questions, or checking them for clarity and sensitivity?
- What happens with the materials after the session?
- How will you support and encourage young people to take part without pressuring them?

- Are feedback mechanisms proportionate, or do they eat too much into young people's time to 'just be' in the youth club?
- How will you make sure young people know the suggestion box is really anonymous, and that contributions are reviewed regularly?
- Where will you place the suggestion box? Is it somewhere young people will feel able to interact with privately or is it in an open space? Have young people been involved in thinking about this with you?
- How will you make sure young people know that their feedback and suggestions are discussed, taken seriously, and acted upon?

⁴ <https://www.marjon.ac.uk/media/old-2015-website-images/research/YW-Training-Manual-Erasmus-English.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14681366.2020.1855231>

Short questionnaires

Questionnaires are used across many settings in a variety of ways. Our research found that longer and standardised questionnaires were less popular with youth workers and young people, but simpler questionnaires were more likely to work well. These often had only two or three 'tick box' questions and space for additional comments.

Some questions to consider:

- Have young people and youth workers been involved in the design and content of questionnaires?
- Have you piloted the questionnaire to check that questions are easy to understand?
- Could questions be experienced as triggering, stereotypical or labelling?
- Are questionnaires too long, or distributed too often? Do young people seem tired of being asked to complete them?
- Do young people have a choice over whether to complete questionnaires, and is it a real choice?
- Are the same young people often approached to take part? If so, are they happy with this, and are alternative perspectives missing?
- How will you hear from less confident young people or those who may have less positive experiences?

- How can questionnaires be made more accessible to those with barriers around reading and writing?
- Could questionnaires be answered on a mobile phone, tablet or computer, and if so, how can young people with less access to or confidence with technology be included?



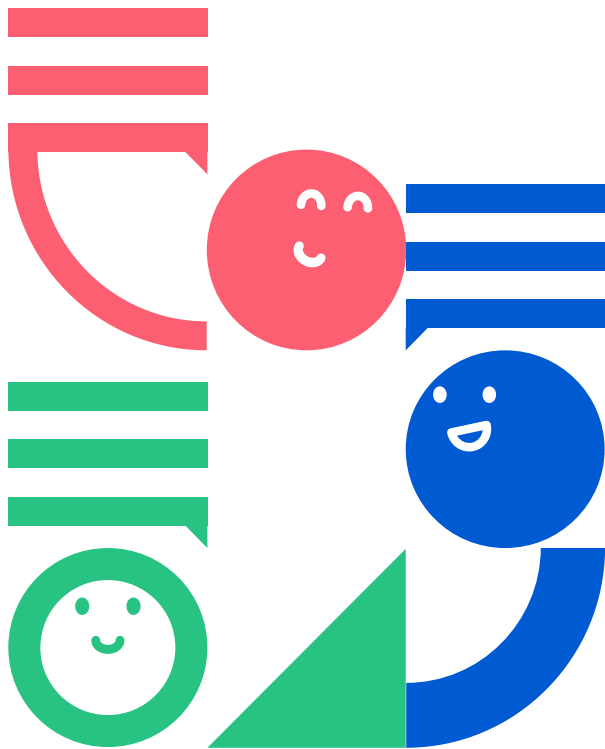
Staff debriefs and reflection

Staff debriefs and regular reflection sessions have been fundamental to youth work practice for many decades. They have the potential to centre reflective, evaluative practice. However, time and space is not always created for youth workers to reflect on their work.

Some questions to consider:

- What does reflective practice mean to you?
- Is there enough time for youth workers to reflect together on sessions / projects in your setting? If not, why not?
- Are structured discussions among youth workers valued and encouraged?
- Is debrief and/or reflection time paid for and valued, including for part-time workers?
- Do staff take turns to facilitate / lead the debrief or reflection session? Is everyone heard and included?
- Are staff encouraged to bring new ideas and approaches to debriefs, avoiding becoming stuck in prescribed norms either set inside or imposed from outside the organisation?
- Are staff reflection forms and formats user-friendly?

- If formal records are required, is the purpose clear? Who reads them? Do staff receive feedback? Are they experienced as unnecessary bureaucracy or as top-down surveillance?
- Are debriefs and reflections genuinely reflective? Are staff encouraged to think, learn, and reflect, or do they mainly report what happened?



Selecting your methods of evaluation

We suggest that all of those planning evaluation – including practitioners, managers, funders, or policy-makers – might reflect on the following questions when considering evaluation methods:

Does evaluation suit the setting?

We advocate for involving young people and youth workers in developing open, flexible, and dynamic approaches to evaluation that are non-prescriptive and sensitive to the needs of youth work as a practice of informal education.

Does evaluation reinforce or challenge unequal power relations?

This means actively avoiding mechanisms that are intrusive, surveillant, or otherwise reinforce inequalities and oppression. Instead, we recommend developing evaluation that supports youth work as an anti-oppressive space for young people to gather and spend time in their peer groups, celebrating and developing their cultures.

Does evaluation capture and value both the everyday and the remarkable elements of practice?


Evaluation cannot possibly capture everything, and it is important to match a fluid process with a dynamic range of approaches. The practices shared in this resource can capture life-changing moments as well as the important intrinsic value for young people of having a space outside of school and home where they can be together and receive support from youth workers.

The study

The activities in this resource are evidenced by a three-year study, 'Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work' which included:

The accounts of **143 young people, youth workers and policy influencers** who took part in in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Participant observation of **73 youth work sessions** in 8 organisations across 5 regions of England.

 A film made by **22 young people**

2 practitioner conferences, 4 roundtables, 20 external presentations and workshops, and consultation with 25 youth organisations.

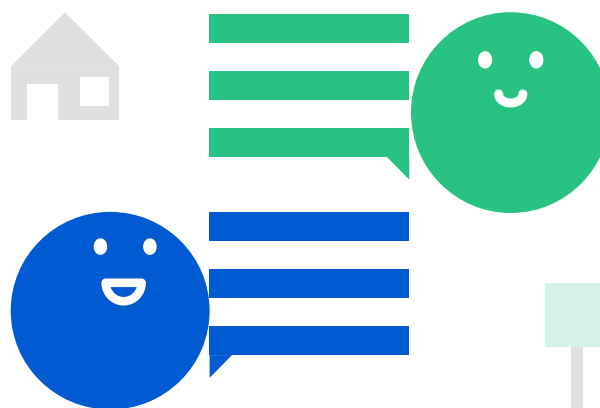
All quotes are from the study and have been anonymised.

⁶ <https://vimeo.com/597256970>

⁷ <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/valuing-and-evaluating-youth-work/>

What is open youth work?

Our study focused on open youth work. 'Open youth work' is a practice of informal education where young people learn through conversation, activities, and relationships with peers and youth workers. It is open-ended in terms of who participates, how, why, when, and for how long, and is provided free or at very low cost. It includes youth clubs, detached (street-based) youth work, online group work, and work with groups of young people with shared identities, experiences, or interests.

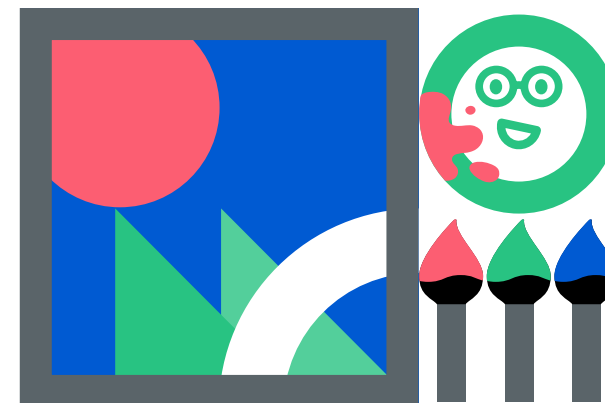


Sincere thanks to all of our participating organisations, youth workers and young people as well as to our Advisory Group.

⁸ <https://rethinkingimpact.com/>

⁹ <https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/855316/>

¹⁰ <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/rethinking-impact-evaluation-and-accountability-in-youth-work>



Key resources

Watch "[The value of youth work](#)"⁶, our 10-minute film made by young people.

Read our [short, peer reviewed article](#)⁷ that proposes three principles for evaluation policy and practice.

View further peer-reviewed articles and research outputs on our [website](#)⁸. Our dataset is available at the [UK Data Service](#)⁹.

This resource is accompanied by a [policy briefing](#)¹⁰, which provides decision-makers with 7 evidence-based messages on youth work and evaluation.

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