



Making an Impact: Measuring and encouraging the progress of individuals in voluntary sector youth projects

Summary findings

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Introduction

This is a summary of research carried out by Dr Kerry Young of Harrington Young to explore systems for measuring the progress of young people involved in youth projects in the North East and Cumbria. The research was commissioned and funded by Northern Rock Foundation. At the centre of the research was the need to ensure that young people are at the heart of the process of celebrating their achievements.

Northern Rock Foundation aims to tackle disadvantage and improve the quality of life in the North East and Cumbria. The Foundation gives grants to people who are vulnerable, disadvantaged, homeless, living in poverty or are victims of crime or discrimination.

Changing Lives* is one of five grant programmes managed by the Foundation. The largest number of awards funded through the programme has been to support work with disadvantaged young people. Projects take place in a range of settings, sometimes on the streets, sometimes in a centre, but always with the emphasis on a one-to-one basis. The kind of work includes mentoring, befriending, crisis support, personal development programmes and advice projects.

The initial phase of Dr Young's research involved a questionnaire survey, project visits and telephone conversations with projects funded under Changing Lives. The findings were put together in an interim report which analysed current systems for recording outcomes, the benefits and challenges of trying to devise a clear system of measurement and the key principles for any recording of progress. The second phase of work suggested three models for recording

and measuring young people's progress, which were then tested in a range of detached and centre-based projects. The research was supported by a Steering Group of representatives from youth work agencies across the North of England.

Key findings

Phase two resulted in three tested approaches. These were developed through visits and telephone conversations and included:

- The need to agree with young people the outcomes they want to achieve
- The importance of the young person's self-assessment and the need to ensure that the process allowed for reflection
- The challenge of limited time and the importance of avoiding bureaucracy
- The crucial importance of the importance of training and support for staff.

It was also noted that a "one size fits all" system would be inadequate and that flexibility was vital to allow young people and workers to record a range of outcomes.

There was some question about the extent to which voluntary sector youth projects are engaging with the issue of measuring the progress of individual young people. Of the 44 youth projects receiving Foundation grants, only 18 responded. Although questionnaire and interview respondents reported a wide range of activity it was not always the case that their narrative descriptions of their practice matched the principles to which they subscribe. Too often the systems in place fail to focus on progress as opposed to simply charting achievements, and the systems are not consistently reviewed to chart progress and progression.

Conclusions

There seems to be a question about the extent to which voluntary sector groups are engaging with the issue of measuring the progress of individual young people. Organisations need to understand what recording outcomes and measuring progress is all about – i.e. that this is a central part of the youth work process. It is not about chasing numbers, nor is it just an administrative task. It is the answer to the question *“What is youth work and what are we trying to achieve for and with these young people?”*.

How young people feel about the process and the learning is crucial. They need to understand its purpose and relevance and what it is they are learning. Practitioners need support to develop greater creativity and confidence in ways of recording and reporting outcomes. Many practitioners feel under-confident; others may not be motivated to professionalise youth work. However, they will not be able to demonstrate the rigour of their work without the evaluation and young people will not be supported to understand for themselves what they are learning and the benefits of the process. There needs to be an approach that offers structure without reducing the process to an administrative task or stifling practitioners’ creativity. At all stages, young people must be at the centre of their own process.

The models

There are already a number of resources that support goal setting and the recording of outcomes. The research suggests three systems:

- Radar/Spider Chart: these can be easily produced either on paper or on Microsoft Word
- Personal Development Plan: already used by many projects, but could be developed further
- Outcomes-focused Profile: individual questionnaires.

The models, available on Northern Rock Foundation’s website, are offered as examples of best practice. All are flexible and allow for the young person and the worker to monitor, record and reflect on activities and achievements.

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