

User guide: A Theory of Change for Open Access Youth Provision

Authors: Kelly Bradshaw-Walsh, Karen Scanlon (NPC) and Bethia McNeil
May 2021

Section 1: About the user guide

1.1 Introduction

[The Youth Investment Fund \(YIF\) learning project](#)¹ provided an opportunity to work with up to 89 youth organisations to develop a shared theory of change for open access youth provision, the first version of which was developed at the beginning of the project in 2018. This was used to inform the design of a [shared approach to measurement across](#) the cohort of funded youth organisations. A shared theory of change identifies common elements of provision across different settings (e.g. communities of organisations or bodies of practice) that are working towards similar goals. When linked to shared measurement practices, this can improve understanding of collective quality and impact by building a sector-wide picture. Shared measurement can support learning across organisations and can be used to inform funding and policy decisions, as well as the development of services and provision. It also provides a cost efficient and consistent approach that organisations can use to build a larger evidence base.

Our work with YIF grant holders provided an opportunity to test the value and feasibility of a shared theory of change for a diverse group of open access youth providers. Whilst there is huge variety and creativity in the design and delivery of activities, they are typically based on common ways of working with and supporting young people. As one YIF grant holder put it:

“As a sector we tend to think of ourselves as unique... I think the theory of change showed that actually we’re all doing almost identical things in our own unique ways. That to me was a massive revelation and I think that was true of everybody that I spoke to.”

In this user guide, we present an updated version of the YIF theory of change, taking into account lessons from the YIF learning project, including application of the theory of change in practice, alongside recent research. The aim of the theory of change is to capture common features to form the basis for a shared understanding of youth provision, whilst remaining flexible to allow for the different possible pathways through which youth organisations support positive change for young people. It is aligned to [the Youth Work National Occupational Standards](#), which set out the key purpose of youth work as to ‘enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to

¹ The YIF was a joint £40m investment between the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) and The National Lottery Community Fund (NLCF) to expand delivery of open access youth services in six regions of England. As part of the investment £1m was allocated to a learning and impact project led by New Philanthropy Capital (NPC), in partnership with the Centre for Youth Impact and a wider consortium of research partners.

enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential'. It is intended for use across the youth sector with both providers and funders.

1.2 Who is it for?

The theory of change is for anyone providing open access youth services or provision for young people. Open access youth services are broadly defined and include both traditional youth club provision and more targeted and structured provision across a range of areas including sports, arts, social action, employability and health and wellbeing. The main unifying feature is that young people do not need to be referred to the provision. Access is 'open', and engagement is voluntary on behalf of the young person.

Some providers of open access youth work avoid predefining outcomes in advance, instead negotiating them through a process of engagement with young people. Nevertheless, the activities and mechanisms of change (as well as some notions of outcomes that are likely to occur) provide a helpful framework for thinking about practice.

1.3 How to use this guide

A summary of the theory of change is presented in Section 2, with further information about each of the elements provided in section 3. The theory of change can be used in the following ways:

- **As a basis for developing your own theory of change** – we understand that organisations may want to develop bespoke theories of change for their provision but there is value in recognising the shared elements, which can give you a head start. Taking this shared approach is beneficial as it:
 - Reduces the time and resource needed to develop your own theory of change and builds on existing knowledge
 - Develops a shared understanding of the core, common aspects of open access youth provision across the sector
 - Enables a shared approach to measuring core aspects of open access youth provision
 - Enables the collection of aggregate datasets, which contribute to a better understanding of, and therefore decisions about, open access youth provision

For more information about developing a theory of change see: [NPC's Theory of Change in ten steps](#).

- **As a basis for measurement and evaluation** – you can read about how we used the original YIF theory of change to produce a [shared evaluation framework](#) (including a shared approach to data collection) and a [shared outcomes framework](#) in our [Insight Papers](#). You can also access updated information about measurement and evaluation tools, which are aligned to the theory of change, in [Measuring the quality and impact of open access youth provision: Lessons and recommendations from the Youth Investment Fund learning project](#). Whilst these tools are mainly quantitative, the theory of change can also be used to structure qualitative evaluation of the quality and impact of your work. See Section 3.3 for further information about measurement.
- **As a communication tool** - the theory of change helps you to communicate what open access youth work is and the value of your provision, how it works, and the difference it is intended to make in the lives of young people. This can be helpful in communicating with various stakeholders including funders, delivery partners, other youth organisations and, of course, young people themselves.
- **As a framework for service design and quality improvement** – the theory of change can help you to focus on aspects of your provision that contribute to your intended outcomes and inform continuous learning .

For further information about how to integrate theory of change into your monitoring, evaluation and learning practices, see the Centre for Youth Impact's '[Asking Good Questions Framework](#)'.

Section 2: The Theory of Change at a glance

The updated Theory of Change is shown in Figure 1. In contrast to the original YIF theory of change, the updated version pays greater attention to the role of youth provision in the wider context of young people's lives including families, community and broader society. This is directly influenced by our learning from the YIF evaluation. In summary, the key elements of the theory of change are:

Activities (what you do) – Youth organisations offer high quality activities that are open to all young people, even though they may be 'targeted' at particular groups or communities. The range of activities includes provision that is: detached or building-based, focused on groups or individuals, targeted or universal, drop-in or at fixed attendance times, attended for a set length of time or open-ended, and unstructured or structured. 'High quality' is defined as activities that provide a safe space and a supportive, interactive and engaging environment.² More widely, youth organisations contribute to the community, which supports a positive reputation where activities are perceived as safe, inclusive, appealing and reliable. This attracts young people to provision and reduces barriers to participation. Organisations also work with families, other services, and the wider community to provide holistic support and advocacy for young people.

Mechanisms of change (how what you do leads to change) – Within youth settings, staff create an environment and develop relationships characterised by mutual trust, respect and a sense of safety and security. Young people engage on their own terms and are supported to take an active role in stimulating, fun and developmental activities. Young people share power with adults and take part in key decisions about youth provision. These experiences, alongside the opportunity to contribute to their community and experience new and different situations and viewpoints, support the growth and development of young people.

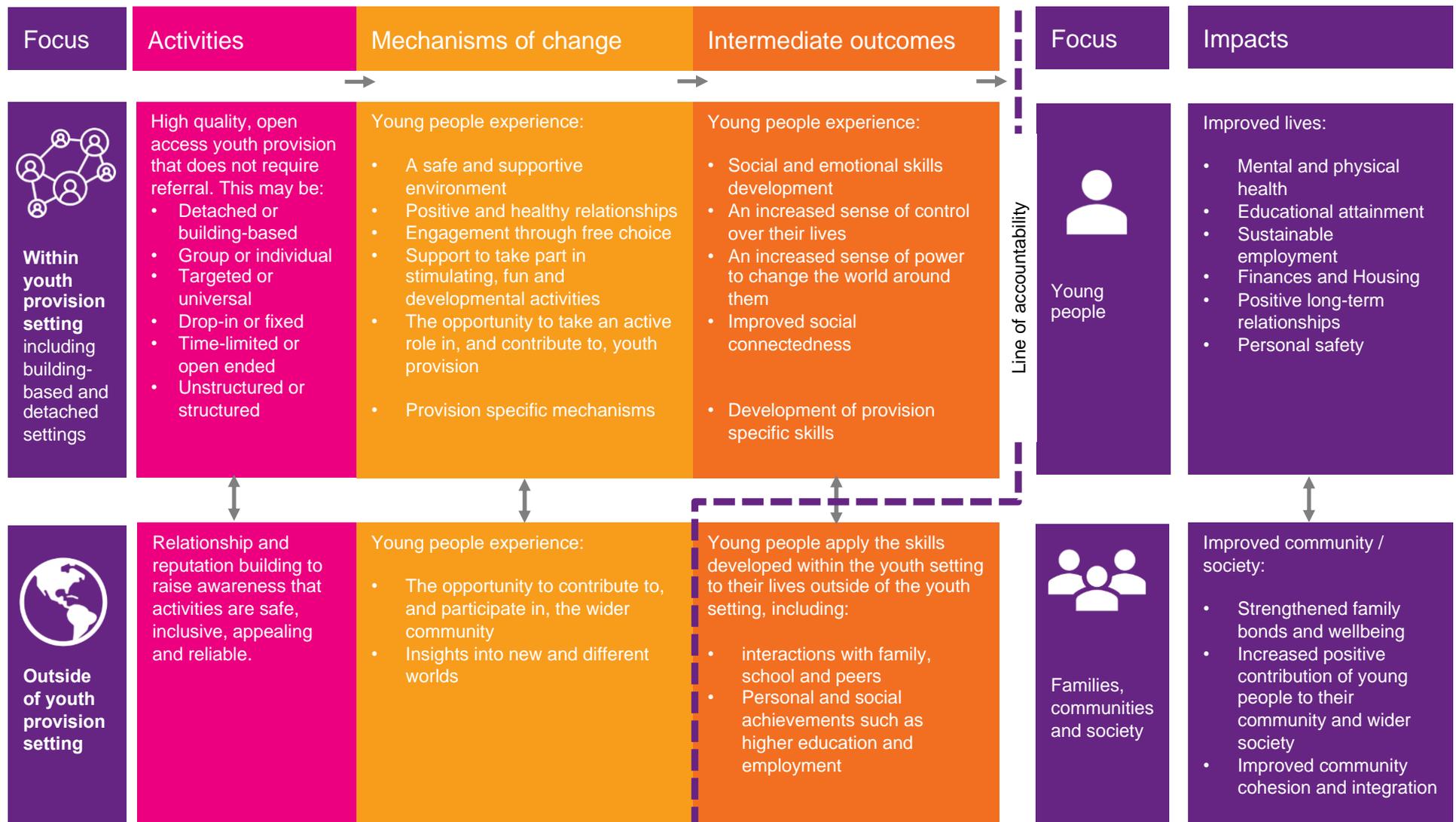
Intermediate outcomes (medium term changes) – these are areas of personal growth for young people and include the development of social and emotional skills (e.g. empathy), improved social connections with others, and an increased sense of control and influence in their own lives and the world around them. This development is supported within the safety of the youth setting and further personal growth occurs when young people are able to transfer these skills to other settings such as the family, school or work.

² This definition is based on the [Weikart Center's Pyramid of Programme Quality](#)

Impacts (longer-term changes) – The intermediate outcomes ultimately contribute to improved lives for young people both now and in the future including: good mental and physical health, educational attainment, sustainable employment, stable finances and housing, positive long-term relationships and personal safety. Furthermore, youth organisations can strengthen family bonds and support young people to engage with, and make a positive contribution to, their communities and improve community cohesion.

The line of accountability – this indicates the level of 'control' you have over aspects of the theory of change. You have greater influence over the elements of the theory of change to the left of the accountability line – this is why the quality of practice is so important. You should focus most of your learning and evaluation activities in your 'sphere of influence'. Elements to the right of the accountability line – your 'sphere of interest' – are beyond your direct influence and, although you may be contributing to them, you cannot be fully accountable for them.

Figure 1: A shared theory of change for open access youth provision



Section 3: Further information about the theory of change

3.1 Approach to developing the Theory of Change

Version one of the YIF theory of change for open access youth provision was developed through a co-design process with YIF grant holders and was published in April 2019 in [Insight Paper 1: A shared evaluation framework for open access youth provision](#). In late 2020 we reviewed the theory of change to incorporate findings from the YIF learning project, in particular the [Process Evaluation](#), which provided insights into delivery of the YIF funded provision in practice. Additionally, we incorporated insights from recent reviews and frameworks including [A Framework of Outcomes for Young People 2.0](#) and [A Narrative review of the Impact of Open Access Youth Work \(Hill, 2020\)](#). Finally, the updated theory of change was reviewed by our Advisory Group of grant holders. A summary of the updates to the original theory of change can be found in [Measuring the quality and impact of open access youth provision: Lessons and recommendations from the Youth Investment Fund learning project](#).

3.2 Step-by-step guide

This section takes you through the updated theory of change in detail.

Activities – within the youth provision setting

As outlined in Section 1, the theory of change is intended to illustrate the core elements of open access youth provision. The broad definition of provision, given in Section 1, includes a range of activities featuring the characteristics set out in Table 1. The theory of change may be transferable to other forms of youth provision, but it was not developed with this in mind.

Table 1: Activity characteristics

Activity characteristics	Description
Detached or building-based	This refers to whether the young person is coming to the space or the youth organisation is going to their space. Detached provision is going out to where young people are, whether that be out on the street, in a park or any other space young people occupy or gather. Building-based includes any provision where youth organisations organise and coordinate the space including provision within a youth centre, a community venue or any other ‘controlled’

	space such as schools, sports centres or residential centres. Building-based also includes outdoor provision where the space is organised and coordinated by the grant holder e.g. sports facilities, arts or field trips.
Group or individual	This refers to whether the young people typically take part in the activity with other young people or on an individual basis. Here, 'group' is not restricted to traditional 'group work' and includes any provision where a young person is not engaging in an activity on their own – be it in sports, arts, workshops or in general youth club provision. Individual engagement includes one-to-one as well as any other solo involvement in courses, mentoring or individual activities (where there is intentionally no or very little engagement with other young people).
Targeted or universal	Targeted provision is aimed at (or explicitly restricted to) a particular group – even if that group is large. It will often include explicit eligibility criteria. It includes provision that is targeted based on gender, ethnicity, special educational needs or more issue-specific groups such as those with poor mental or physical health, or those with caring responsibilities. The only exception to this is provision aimed at a particular age group e.g. under-15s basketball – this is still classed as universal.
Drop-in or fixed	This refers to how set the young person's engagement is. Drop in provision allows young people to drop in and out freely, whereas fixed provision involves scheduled, timed sessions where young people are expected to engage for a set amount of time.
Time-limited or open-ended	Time-limited provision has a set length of expected engagement, which could include one-off engagement or a 12-week programme. Open-ended is rolling provision with no set or expected end date.
Unstructured or structured	This relates to a specific conception of structure. Unstructured provision is where the young person navigates their own way through an activity without their journey being pre-planned by a practitioner e.g. a young person decides to try out a music suite in a youth club, or has an informal conversation with a youth worker. Structured provision has a considered sequence that has been planned by the practitioner/provider – even if the exact sequence is flexible e.g. a workshop, a youth forum with an agenda, a one-to-one advice session.

Our findings from [the YIF evaluation](#) suggest these activity characteristics frequently cluster into a series of 'types', which are set out in Table 2.

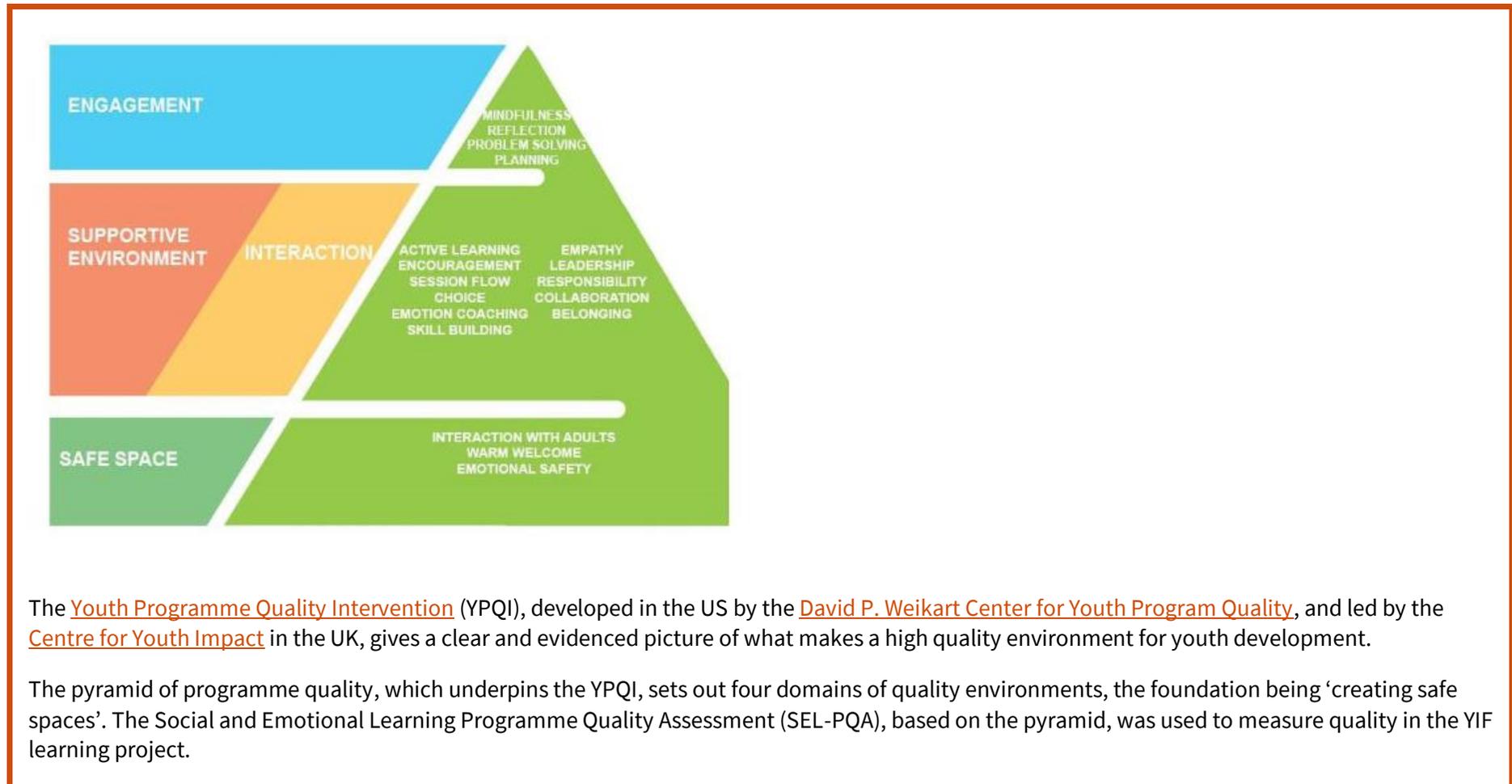
Table 2: Activity types

Activity type	Cross-reference to characteristics (Table 1)	Examples
1. Street/ outreach	Detached (dominant, over-rules other types)	Mobile unit taking sports sessions out into communities; Pop-up cooking and art sessions in community spaces
2. One to one/ mentoring	One to one; time-limited; buildings based	Sexual health counselling; Career coaching/mentoring
3. Open/ group/ drop in	Universal; group; buildings based; drop in; open-ended	Sports provision for all young people living in the locality; Adventure playground on a housing estate; Weekly youth club offering a range of activities including arts, sports and games
4. Open/ group/ programme	Universal; group; buildings based; fixed; time-limited	Programme focused on the dangers of violence and extremism, supporting young people to develop leadership skills and speak out; Writing workshops facilitated by peer mentors; Democratic participation workshops
5. Targeted/ group/ programme	Targeted; group; buildings-based; fixed; time limited	Summer holiday programme of weekly drama sessions for young carers; Employability programme for young people who are NEET and interested in the creative industries
6. Targeted/ group/ drop in	Targeted; group; buildings-based; drop in; open ended	Weekly youth club for young people with disabilities; Support hub for young LGBTQ+ people
7. One to one/ service provision	One to one; drop in; buildings based	Drop in advice on housing and finances

Quality of provision

The theory of change specifies that activities should be of high quality. Whilst this may seem obvious, until recently there has not been a clear definition of what quality means in open access youth provision, or the relationship between quality and outcomes. Here we use the [Weikart Center's pyramid of programme quality](#) to define high quality youth provision (see Figure 2). This describes staff practices that provide safe, supportive, interactive and engaging environments that contribute to the development of young people.

Figure 2: The pyramid of programme quality



The [Youth Programme Quality Intervention](#) (YPQI), developed in the US by the [David P. Weikart Center for Youth Program Quality](#), and led by the [Centre for Youth Impact](#) in the UK, gives a clear and evidenced picture of what makes a high quality environment for youth development.

The pyramid of programme quality, which underpins the YPQI, sets out four domains of quality environments, the foundation being ‘creating safe spaces’. The Social and Emotional Learning Programme Quality Assessment (SEL-PQA), based on the pyramid, was used to measure quality in the YIF learning project.

Activities- outside of the youth provision setting

Youth organisations put time and effort into establishing their provision in the community by building relationships with families, other youth services, community services (e.g. Police) and schools. This is important for open access youth provision as attendance is voluntary and young people do not need to be referred. Building positive relationships and reputation contributes to the activities being seen as safe, inclusive and appealing to young people. Youth organisations also described the importance of being a consistent presence in the community so that young people feel they can rely on the services. A [recent review of research](#) describes the importance of longevity of relationships, adding that this is achieved through recruitment of local staff and volunteers reflecting a long-standing commitment to the community. A Youth Worker participating in the [YIF process evaluation](#) described how:

“At its heart the organisation is about building relationships with young people. Relationships are also very long term, often last ten to 15 years. Longevity is what you need with young people, to know you are there week in and week out, throughout the good times and the bad times. We journey with them consistently no matter what's happening. For many we are the only consistency they have in their lives...we play a vital role in the messy chaotic worlds of young people.”

Mechanisms of change

Mechanisms of change describe how activities are expected to lead to intended outcomes, including the ways in which activities are experienced by young people that will make the activities more or less effective. Feedback from YIF grant holders suggested they found the process of identifying mechanisms of change to be one of the most useful aspects of the theory of change development process as it helped them to interrogate the pathways through which they believe their activities contribute to change in young people’s lives. This enabled a focus on quality of provision and improvements in service design and delivery. The main categories of mechanisms of change are presented in the theory of change diagram and Table 3 provides further information. Mechanisms of change are based on:

- The original YIF [co-design process for the theory of change](#)
- On-going work with YIF grant holders, in particular with our core advisory group
- The YIF [qualitative process evaluation](#)
- The Centre for Youth Impact’s [Framework of Outcomes for Young People 2.0](#)
- A recent [narrative review of the impact of open access youth provision](#)

The descriptions provided in Table 3 draw on these sources.

Table 3: Mechanisms of change in open access youth provision

Category	Specific mechanisms	Description
Within youth provision setting, young people experience:		
A safe and supportive environment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people feel safe and secure • Young people feel a sense of belonging 	Developing a safe space is a foundational aspect of youth provision. This is a supportive and non-judgemental space away from challenges young people may face in other areas of their lives.
Positive and healthy relationships	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people trust and feel trusted (both initially and more deeply over time) • Young people feel respected • Young people don't feel judged or punished • Young people feel understood 	<p>Relationships are crucial to enabling learning and development experiences and in engaging young people who may not access other services. Trust, respect, understanding and lack judgement are key to these relationships.</p> <p><u>Research</u> highlights the importance of place-based youth workers who have knowledge about the local area and understand young people and their lives. Young people often feel they have more in common with youth workers than they do, for example with teachers.</p>
Engagement through free choice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people are attending provision by their own choice • Young people feel they are free to come and go as they wish • Young people feel welcome regardless of how long or how often they have attended provision 	<u>Research suggests</u> that the open nature of youth provision contributes to impact. Young people like the 'open-door' policy and the freedom to come and go as they choose. Young people should feel welcome regardless of how often they choose to attend.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people decide how and when they will engage with activities 	
<p>Support to take part in stimulating, fun and developmental activities</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people feel positively challenged • Young people feel supported to stretch themselves • Young people feel a sense of enjoyment (including fun and a deeper satisfaction) • Young people feel a sense of purpose, achievement and contribution • Young people are supported to reflect on and explore their own values, attitudes and behaviours • Young people experience a range of positive and negative emotions in a safe context • Young people have opportunities to practice and develop healthy and functional emotion skills • Young people explore social structure and power in relation to themselves and others • Young people share their stories and listen to the stories of others • Young people practise relating to others with acceptance and understanding • Young people develop group cohesion and trust • Young people participate in successful collaboration • Young people manage challenges to creating and maintaining effective working relationships • Young people set ambitious and realistic goals • Young people develop and sustain motivation by doing activities that matter to them 	<p>Activities that support social and emotional learning provide opportunities for young people to practice and develop social and emotional skills in a safe and supportive setting.</p> <p>The Centre for Youth Impact outcomes framework (p.28) identifies a set of mechanisms (key experiences) that are linked to each of the six social and emotional learning domains set out in Table 4. The number of specific mechanism in this category is relatively long as different types of experiences are linked to the development of different SEL skills (e.g. Young people sharing their stories and listening to the stories of others is linked to the development of empathy).</p> <p>Furthermore, YIF grant holders described how activities open up opportunities for discussion about other things that are going on in young people’s lives without the feeling ‘put on the spot’.</p>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people have experiences of persevering through the ups and downs of difficult activities or challenges • Young people engage in projects that involve organising actions over time • Young people learn through cycles of strategic planning, execution, responding to emergent problems, trial and error, and reflection on outcomes • Young people reflect on how outcomes of their activities provide information that helps build and verify their skills 	
The opportunity to take an active role in, and contribute to, youth provision	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people feel they make a meaningful contribution to decisions about youth provision • Young people take on roles and responsibilities within activities • Young people encounter difficult demands • Young people draw on resources to fulfil challenging roles and internalise accomplishment 	<p>This category reflects the importance of youth voice and agency in youth provision. Research suggests that impactful provision is flexible to the changing needs and interests of young people and enables them to make a meaningful contribution to decision making. This requires a commitment to power sharing between young people and adults.</p> <p>Taking an active role in the running of provision supports the development of ‘responsibility’, one of the six domains of SEL in the framework of outcomes for young people 2.0.</p>
Provision specific mechanisms		<p>These mechanisms are specific to the type of provision provided, for example, self-expression through creativity may be a mechanism used in arts activities</p>
Outside of youth provision setting, young people experience:		
The opportunity to contribute to, and	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people feel included in, and connected with, their community 	<p>Grant holders described how by encouraging young people to mix socially, visit other people in their communities, and build new relationships, young</p>

participate in, the wider community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people feel a sense of alignment between family, youth provision, school and other services with which they interact • Young people feel represented and heard in their community • Young people feel they are making a meaningful contribution to their community 	<p>people can play more of a role in community life and integrate into their local area.</p> <p><u>A joined-up approach between services was highlighted by youth organisations as an important part of their work</u> (e.g. partnerships between youth provision, schools, social services and families) and <u>research supports</u> the value of this in the development of outcomes for young people, specifically social skills, self-efficacy and higher levels of community service.</p>
Insights into new and different worlds	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Young people have experiences that are new and different to their typical experiences • Young people engage with people who have different experiences to their own • Young people learn about their rights and responsibilities • Young people learn about the opportunities that are available to them 	<p>Combined with the SEL development described above, these experiences support young people to broaden their horizons and raise aspirations. This includes the ability to better identify and engage with opportunities that are available to them.</p>

Some of these mechanisms of change may also be considered outcomes, depending on the changes that the specific youth project is intending to support. In the YIF learning project, the original mechanisms of change were measured through a flexible set of feedback questions completed by young people. See [Measuring the quality and impact of open access youth provision: Lessons and recommendations from the Youth Investment Fund learning project](#) for a review of these questions and an updated set of questions informed by Table 3.

Intermediate outcomes

Intermediate outcomes are the *knowledge, skills and assets* that your provision develops amongst young people and communities (and for which you are held accountable), that in turn enable them to achieve impact for themselves.

The original YIF theory of change contained a long list of intermediate outcomes that was co-produced with grant holders. The majority of these outcomes represented social and emotional learning (SEL). We refined and simplified this list by mapping the outcomes against the six domains of social and emotional learning identified in the Centre for Youth Impact’s [Framework of Outcomes for Young People 2.0](#) because these domains:

- emerged directly from practice and the voices of young people about the experiences that build social and emotional learning skills and how these skills transfer beyond the setting and into the early adult life course;
- have extensive overlap with many other social and emotional learning frameworks: and
- describe, in plain language, mental and behavioural skills that are both developed during provision and transferred beyond provision.

The updated intermediate outcomes are described in Table 4.

Table 4: Intermediate outcomes of open access youth provision

Outcome	Description
Within the youth provision setting young people experience:	
1. Social and emotional skills development. This are categorised into six domains as set out in the Centre for Youth Impact’s framework of outcomes for young people .	
a. Emotion Management	Abilities to be aware of and constructively handle both positive and challenging emotions.
b. Empathy	Relating to others with acceptance, understanding, and sensitivity to their diverse perspectives and experiences.
c. Teamwork	Abilities to collaborate and coordinate action with others.
d. Responsibility	Dispositions and abilities to reliably meet commitments and fulfil obligations of challenging roles.
e. Initiative	Capacities to take action, sustain motivation, and persevere through challenge toward an identified goal.

f. Problem-solving	Abilities to plan, strategise, and implement complex tasks.
2. An increased sense of control over their lives	Often referred to as ‘agency’, this relates to a young person’s sense of control over their actions and the consequences.
3. An increased sense of power to change the world around them	A young person’s perceptions of their ability to positively contribute to the communities to which they belong and to issues that are important to them.
4. Improved social connectedness	The relationships and support network a young person feels they have. It includes having someone to turn to, people who make them feel safe and secure and not feeling lonely.
5. Development of provision specific skills	A varied range of skills that can be developed through specific activities such as employability skills, budgeting, performance skills, cooking, dance etc.
Outside of the youth provision settings young people experiences	
Transfer of SEL skills to outside of the youth provision setting	This is the transfer of skills to settings outside of youth provision. A Framework of Outcomes for Young People 2.0 identifies the process through which young people develop SEL skills within the safe and supported environment of youth provision and apply these skills in other settings. This transfer to contexts outside of youth provision contributes to improvements in the lives of young people and those around them.

Impacts

Impacts refer to the lasting or sustained change in young people’s lives or in the wider community to which your provision has contributed through improvements in the intermediate outcomes.

[Research suggests that improvements in SEL skills are linked to the following impacts](#) for young people:

- Good mental and physical health
- Educational attainment
- Sustainable employment
- Stable finances and housing
- Positive long-term relationships
- Personal safety

[Research also suggests](#) that the personal and social development of young people through youth provision can benefit families, communities and society. This includes:

- Strengthened family bonds and wellbeing
- Increased positive contribution of young people to their community and wider society
- Improved community cohesion and integration

3.3 Measurement

The Centre for Youth Impact has developed, and is currently piloting, a set of measures that are aligned to this updated theory of change. Table 5 provides a summary of these measures and you can read more on the Centre's [website](#) or get in touch with the Centre at hello@youthimpact.uk.

For information about the measures used within the YIF learning project, including an updated set of user-feedback questions, see [Measuring the quality and impact of open access youth provision: Lessons and recommendations from the Youth Investment Fund learning project](#).

Table 5: The Centre for Youth Impact’s measure of youth provision

Name	Link to theory of change	What it measures	Description
Programme Quality Assessment (PQA)	High quality setting and practice	The quality of your provision based on observable staff behaviours that support youth engagement and development	The PQA is a quality framework, based on the pyramid of programme quality, which is used for observing and scoring the quality of practice. It involves an assessment team of staff in youth organisations and/or trained external assessors observing and rating provision against a detailed list of staff behaviours that promote social and emotional learning as part of an assess-plan-improve cycle.
Youth Engagement Survey (YES)	Mechanisms of change	Young people’s engagement with your provision	The YES is a short self-report questionnaire that asks young people to rate 11 statements about the thoughts and feelings they experienced while participating in provision, as a measure of mental engagement. This is important because young people’s mental engagement with provision is expected to promote growth in social and emotional skills. The YES can be completed regularly by young people at the end of a provision session and questionnaires can be completed anonymously.
Adult Rating of Youth Behaviour (ARYB)	Intermediate SEL outcomes within youth provision	Young people’s social and emotional skills within the supportive environment of your provision	The ARYB asks staff to rate young people’s social and emotional skills based on behaviours displayed within the environment of the youth provision settings, as observed during several provision sessions. This is a good indicator of how young people are likely to ‘perform’ in settings where they are well supported. It measures skills in six domains of SEL functioning: emotion management, empathy, teamwork, responsibility, initiative and problem-solving.

Youth Report of SEL Skills (YRSS)	Intermediate SEL outcomes transferred to settings outside of youth provision	Young people’s social and emotional skills in their lives outside of your provision (e.g. with their family, in schools, and in employment)	The YRSS is a self-report questionnaire that asks young people about mental and behavioural aspects of their social and emotional skills in general (i.e., beyond the youth provision setting and into environments such as home and school). This also measures the six domains of SEL.
--	--	---	--

3.4 Assumptions and complexity

We recognise that there are a number of untested assumptions in the theory of change, which creates a degree of uncertainty and which require further investigation. There are also some simplifications of factors that are complex in the ‘real world’. Listed below are some factors that should be considered when applying the theory of change to practice.

- **Outcomes and impacts are interrelated** – although they are presented as distinct constructs for clarity, there are complex relationships within and between outcomes and impacts.
- **Contribution** – open access youth provision will only ever be part of what is happening for young people and there will be many other factors influencing their development and life chances, which makes it very unlikely that any one youth organisation will be able to fully attribute longer-term impacts to their provision. It is more appropriate to measure the contribution provision has made to changing young people’s outcomes and to understand the quality of provision, as higher quality provision is more likely to improve intermediate outcomes and therefore make a greater contribution to impact.
- **Differentiated impact** – young people enter youth provision with different needs, interests, levels of support, access to resources, and social and emotional skills. Every young person’s journey will be different.
- **Not all impacts of youth work are positive** – there are potential negative impacts of youth provision, [particularly when it involves bringing together young people who are facing multiple and complex risks in their lives.](#)
- **Funding** – many of the factors described in the theory of change are supported by consistent long-term funding which is not typically the reality for many youth organisations
- **Staff skills and capacity** – linked to funding, many of the mechanisms of change rely on a skilled and well-resourced staff team
- **Attendance and engagement** – although the theory of change recognises the importance of young people being able to choose how and when they engage in youth provision, it is likely that longer-term, regular engagement with provision is linked to improved outcomes.

- **Context** – the theory of change has been updated during the Covid-19 pandemic and some grant holders noted that achieving the mechanisms of change can be challenging when dealing with changes in the context of delivery, such as the impact of lockdown on face-to-face work. For example, supporting young people to feel safe online involves different ways of working compared to helping them to feel safe in a face-to-face setting. Whilst we recognise that this requires adaptability, the experiences of young people that lead to engagement and positive outcomes are likely to be the same, even if the activities need to be adapted to meet the needs of a changing context.

For further information please contact the Centre for Youth Impact at hello@youthimpact.uk.