

Summary

A central aspect of the HeadStart programme involves the meaningful engagement of children and young people, both in the planning and delivery of the programme and in understanding its impact. Engaging children and young people in evaluation and research has tangible benefits but also a number of challenges. From a review of the diverse work to engage children and young people in evaluation that has taken place in the six HeadStart Partnerships, it has been possible to identify key challenges and practices that have helped overcome them. This document summarises the learning from this review to support the future involvement of children and young people in evaluation and research.



About HeadStart

HeadStart is a five-year, £58.7 million National Lottery funded programme set up by The National Lottery Community Fund, the largest funder of community activity in the UK. It aims to explore and test new ways to improve the mental health and wellbeing of young people aged 10 to 16 and prevent serious mental health issues from developing. Six local authority led HeadStart partnerships in Blackpool, Cornwall, Hull, Kent, Newham and Wolverhampton are working with local young people, schools, families, charities, community and public services to make young people's mental health and wellbeing everybody's business.

What benefits did partnerships report of involving children and young people?

- Determining questions and research topics that are important to children and young people.
- Creative ideas and ways of working suggested by young people that adults may not consider.
- A broader perspective from which to consider the findings of evaluation and research.
- More informed decisions around service improvement with an integral contribution from children and young people.
- Benefits to the young people who participate including learning new skills, real-world work experience and social and emotional developments.
- The ethical and moral obligations for children and young people to be involved in influencing services that are designed for their benefit.
- A deeper understanding of aspects of children and young people's emotional health and mental wellbeing.

How are children and young people involved in evaluation and research by the HeadStart partnerships?

- **Reviewing learning and shaping actions** - being involved in thinking about what is being learnt, what the evaluation and research findings can tell us - and crucially, what happens next as a result of this learning.
- **Influencing or determining research questions** - telling programme staff what learning they think is important to explore.
- **Doing research themselves** - with responsibility to determine questions and methods and carry out research.
- **Providing feedback** - about the process, quality and impact of HeadStart activities to programme staff for evaluation purposes.



Learning from HeadStart

From a review of the first three years of the HeadStart programme it is possible to determine six areas to learn from when involving young people in evaluation and research:

1. Defining a purpose
2. Meaningful engagement
3. Methods and approaches
4. Staff capacity and skills
5. Working with HeadStart stakeholders
6. Sharing findings and learning with children and young people

For each of these areas, we have identified common challenges and practices used to overcome these. Case studies are used to demonstrate the Key Learning points for each area.

1. Defining a purpose

The experience of HeadStart partnerships has shown that to make engagement of young people meaningful it needs to have a clear and authentic purpose in the programme, aligned with a strategic vision. HeadStart partnerships identified challenges and recommendations for defining a purpose and vision for young people's involvement in evaluation.

Challenges:

- Lack of clarity over why the work with young people is ultimately taking place and how decisions might be informed by this work.
- Engagement with young people being associated with other work, facilitated by other people, rather than core to evaluation activity.
- The strategic ownership of the work in practice as well as in principle.

Recommendations:

- **Have a clear strategic vision shared across all stakeholders (accessible, jargon free).** This should set out how the work young people engage in will influence change, and a rationale as to why the work is taking place and its expected outcomes.
- **Define a formal place for the work in the programme delivery plans.** Clearly relate the work young people are engaging in to overarching programme research questions.
- **Decide who the audiences are for the research.** Plan for findings to be considered with key stakeholders, for example at different leadership levels and with young people themselves.

Case example #1

As part of the HeadStart programme in Blackpool, art therapy sessions were provided for young people in schools and a group of young Revolution Researchers wanted to explore the impact of this intervention on those who took part. They determined that a series of qualitative interviews with associated staff would provide valuable information so engaged in a process of exploring what questions they needed to ask to fully understand the intervention's impact. All the young researchers took part in training in qualitative research interview techniques.

After carrying out interviews with staff, the Revolution Researchers set about transcribing the recordings, which they then coded and analysed. The findings from this work were added to the work done by the Research and Evaluation Team, who completed a wider thematic analysis of the data and produced a report on the work.

This project demonstrated that involving young people in evaluation takes time and resources and involves a significant commitment from the young participants. Maintaining this commitment throughout the different stages and various aspects of the research work was a challenge that required flexibility and needed to be prioritised within the programme plan.

Key learning:

- A meaningful approach takes time and commitment from staff and needs to be incorporated into the programme plans.
- Training for young people can be a great incentive and can support them to get involved.



2. Meaningful engagement

The ability to meaningfully engage young people is pivotal to their involvement in evaluation and research work. This area presents several key challenges.

Challenges:

- Young people often did not immediately understand nor feel attracted to research and evaluation work.
- Staff might not have the capacity to spend time engaging young people or associated networks.
- Young people often struggled to maintain their involvement, with increasing levels of drop-out and poor attendance from participants over the (often longer than expected) project life.

Recommendations:

Feedback from HeadStart Partnerships suggests some recommendations to help with engagement.

- **Provide opportunities for short term involvement** as well as longer term involvement and be honest with young people about time commitments. Many young people are not able to be involved with the whole project and may rather get involved with a specific, time-bound part.
- **Allow for flexible work involving a wide range of activities and skills** including creative opportunities, discussion and debate, surveys, interviews, online communication and the chance to meet with strategic decision makers such as local MPs or commissioners.
- **Make the effort to engage a diverse range of young people** of different ages, backgrounds, experiences and characteristics to realise the benefits of this work. Doing so greatly enriches the learning and makes it accessible to more people.
- **Use incentives such as rewards, training, accreditation or work experience** and discuss with young people the benefits of their involvement. A major incentive for young people is to see that their efforts are genuinely incorporated into the programme and can lead to change.
- **Explore a range of different channels through which to engage young people** in considering evaluation and research findings including via schools, peer-to-peer networks, existing participation, youth and service user groups, and online and social media channels. Often a number of channels need to be utilised to engage a range of young people.



Case example #2

HeadStart Kent hosts a range of SpeakOut groups at which young people share their voices and influence HeadStart activities. These operate locally in schools and the community and centrally once a month at Kent Youth Voice. Through various methods - including videos, charts and quizzes - staff have been able to engage young people in consideration of findings from the HeadStart evaluation, and to explore what further investigation young people thought was important. From this, the central group requested a summary of strengths and difficulties that pupils had shared in the Wellbeing Measurement for Schools survey for each local district to consider. Building on this they will be developing a presentation for schools around the difficulties young people face and things that could help them.

Case example #3

HeadStart Hull developed an approach to solicit young people's views on mental health and wellbeing on an ongoing basis, and used this information to directly influence their evaluation work. At a wide range of young people and community events across the city, young people were asked for their views on two sets of questions and shared their anonymous responses via a box:

1. What are your worries? What things do you want support with?
2. What do you want to see more of to help young people?

Young people volunteers then worked with the HeadStart participation workers to review and theme all the responses. Many of these have resulted in tangible change, for instance the introduction of school staff mental health training. Others required wider consideration and influenced broader decision making. The findings from this work influence commissioned evaluation work and lead to campaigns that young volunteers develop and implement with partners.

Key learning:

- Consider ways to engage a diverse range of young people for the different perspectives and benefits that this brings.
- Engage young people at different levels and provide support for them to review data in a way that is accessible and not tokenistic.

3. Methods and approaches

Evaluation and research work can involve a variety of methods. In reviewing the work HeadStart partnerships have done to engage young people in evaluation, we found that commonly a qualitative approach has been favoured by young people and staff.

Qualitative work can immediately be more engaging than quantitative methods but can present particular challenges at the stage of collating and analysing data to make sense of research findings. From HeadStart experiences, some recommendations emerged around approaches to take when engaging young people in particular research methods.

Recommendations:

- **Enlist staff with a range of research skills** to bring different research approaches alive for young people. This also requires giving careful attention to the work involved post data collection and ensuring staff have skills to guide young people through this.
- **Encourage young people to consider a range of evaluation approaches** to realise their aims, including those involving the collection and analysis of quantitative data.
- **Provide relevant training for young people** to develop their skills and knowledge in various aspects of research and evaluation. Young people value the inclusion of training, more so when this is recognised or accredited in some way.

4. Staff capacity and skills

Learning from HeadStart demonstrates that there are considerable challenges around staff capacity and skills in engaging young people meaningfully in evaluation and research.

Challenges:

- Staff had to give more time, and across a wider range of work, than initially expected.
- Where staff have mixed roles and responsibilities it can be a challenge to maintain necessary focus and commitment to young people participation.
- This work requires a diverse set of staff skills to be effective – spanning engagement skills to data presentation.

Recommendations:

- **Give realistic acknowledgement** to the demands of this work during planning and at programme level.
- **Allocate dedicated resources** to engagement work which will enrich the programme.
- **Consider the range of skills required** and where these skills are to be found; HeadStart Partnerships have found it invaluable to involve a range of professionals in different aspects of this work including those in partner services, local universities, programme evaluators, participation workers and communications professionals.
- **Provide clarity on responsibility and lines of accountability** within the programme.

Case example #4

A group of Young Researchers in HeadStart Newham conducted research into young people's experiences of exam stress. This topic had emerged as one of three areas of concern for young people in previous focus groups, and was chosen by Young Researchers as that which felt most important to them.

The Young Researchers and staff evaluation team worked collaboratively to plan how they would research this topic. The group chose to focus on qualitative interviews with young people to capture their experiences of exam stress. The Young Researchers then spent time analysing information from the interviews and produced a blog to disseminate their findings.

Further Young Researcher groups have been established following this project and youth practitioners are fully involved in sessions to help them run smoothly and to better engage young people.

A key area of learning has been the development of the recruitment process so that everyone who engages - staff and young people - is aware of the commitment involved and expectations of the group.

HeadStart Newham staff tell us that the work involved is worth the effort; young people bring a different perspective to research and can learn a range of skills as well as developing self-confidence. Staff note that in terms of dissemination, people take note and are interested in the voice of young people.

Key learning:

- Provide clarity over roles, expectations and commitment required from both young people participants and staff.
- Draw on the skills of different professionals and be realistic about the demands of this work when allocating staff time.



5. Working with HeadStart stakeholders

We have learnt that while strategic oversight and ownership of work to engage young people in evaluation can give it profile, there may still be challenges in working with wider stakeholders (e.g. school leads, local decision makers and service leads, children and families). These relate to the prioritisation of the work, expectations, and the reporting of findings.

Challenges:

- Much of the HeadStart programme is focused on schools which all have different approaches and priorities for engagement work.
- Local decision-makers are diverse and work in different settings.
- Engagement work is often implemented in short, one-off pieces of work.
- Providers might be disappointed to discover that their provision has not had the expected impact and may not want such findings disseminated to other stakeholders.
- The findings from evaluation and research work can reveal messages that might not be perceived as positive, for example schools can be uncomfortable sharing perceived 'bad news' with pupils and involving them in exploring these findings.

Recommendations:

Learning from the HeadStart programme reveals some potential ways to overcome such challenges:

- **Engage local decision makers** to jointly prioritise the work young people carry out and the learning it reveals.
- **Develop commitment** from partners through an ongoing approach which focuses on increased understanding and system improvement.
- **Work with partners** to overcome fears associated with perceived 'bad news' from findings and to develop a shared approach to evaluation and research.
- **Prioritise work led by young people** so it is treated the same as adult-led research and make this an expectation of stakeholders as well.



Case example #5

The team at HeadStart Kernow decided to take a direct approach to enabling pupils to get involved in considering the findings from pupil surveys (the Wellbeing Measurement Framework) and to explore the crucial question of what happens in response to the findings.

Pupils at the 31 secondary schools and the one Alternative Provision Academy were granted £1000 to enable them to develop local projects based on the survey results. This work led to the development of a range of initiatives including LGBTQ+ awareness raising, establishing student wellbeing groups, implementing peer support, support for transition into Year 7, developing mental health ambassadors and a digital wellbeing training package developed by pupils for teachers, parents and other pupils.

Key learning

- Engaging with schools is important and incentives can enable the work to happen.
- Give young people freedom and responsibility to decide what stands out as important from the survey findings, and to decide how to respond.

6. Sharing findings and learning with children and young people

In HeadStart, a great deal of survey data has been collected from pupils about their mental health and wellbeing, and there have been significant challenges relating to providing feedback to those pupils involved about the findings. Based on HeadStart partnerships' learning, some recommendations have been identified.

Recommendations:

- **Have a clear rationale for doing evaluation work** from the outset which can be shared with young people. It can be useful to consider the data and associated findings from pupil surveys as belonging to the pupils themselves: this highlights the ethical argument for young people to be able to see and understand how their data is being used and interpreted.
- **Use an array of approaches and skills to present the findings** in accessible ways and to engage young people in what it might be telling us. It's helpful to consider in advance the skills you might need and how they can be sourced.
- **Think about young people as "experts by experience"** in considering what happens next based on an evaluation or research findings. Such work commonly throws up new or additional questions as well as prompting actions: young people bring an important perspective to inform the interpretation of findings and identification of next steps.

Take-away message

The involvement of children and young people in the HeadStart programme has been a major success with a lasting impact in the six areas involved. The experiences outlined here demonstrate some important considerations for planning evaluation work involving children and young people that we hope will support other programmes to carry out such work effectively.

About the HeadStart Learning Team

The Evidence Based Practice Unit (EBPU) at the Anna Freud Centre and University College London (UCL) is working with The National Lottery Community Fund and the HeadStart partnerships to collect and evaluate evidence about what does and does not work locally to benefit young people now and in the future. Partners working with the EBPU on this evaluation include the Child Outcomes Research Consortium (CORC) and the University of Manchester. This collaboration is called the HeadStart Learning Team.

Previous partners in the HeadStart Learning Team include the London School of Economics (LSE) and Common Room.

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