



Engaging young people in evaluation and consultation



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	This summary was written by Steve Browning



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Summary

The Big Lottery Fund is delivering several initiatives that provide activities, opportunities and support for young people. As part of this, we recognise that our work and the projects that we fund should take full account of the perspectives of young people themselves, and particularly of those most at risk of social exclusion.

The study we report here investigated how young people can most effectively be engaged in evaluation and consultation. It constituted a review of literature on effective involvement, as well as a series of interviews with a range of experts in the field. Copies of the full report are available on the Fund's website www.biglotteryfund.org.uk.

This research summary is our interpretation of the report. We hope that the findings and discussion included here will be of use not only to those involved with our own initiatives, but also to anyone wanting to design projects or evaluations that seek to engage young people effectively. We are aware that many of those involved in running projects and evaluations have ideas about how best to achieve this, but that they also want to be sure that they are following best practice.

The summary focuses on various aspects of best practice for projects and project evaluations, covering:

- involving young people appropriately by considering depth and breadth of their engagement
- active consultation
- making research methods work
- creative approaches to involvement.

Finally, we consider some of the lessons for planning and running national evaluations in general, and for us in particular, before setting out a list of agencies that may be able to provide further information and assistance.

Involving young people in research

Funders and project managers generally want to ensure that they involve users – or beneficiaries – in projects that they run or support.

While most people involved recognise that evaluations should seek the views of young people who have taken part in a project, there are a number of ways that young people can be involved in such research. The box right sets out three of the main roles that young people might play in the evaluation of your project.



Box 1 Main roles

- **Research directors**
This might mean taking part in steering groups and being regularly consulted about the evaluation. This approach is likely to require commitment of training, support and time
- **Research workers**
Young people may also be trained to undertake research themselves – for example, by interviewing peers about their experiences on the project. Again, this takes resources, time and training. It may allow the evaluation to uncover more accurate and honest responses, but it will be important to ensure that the findings are reliable
- **Research subjects**
This is the most evident role, where young people are involved as users or beneficiaries of services. Researchers, nevertheless, need to consider many different approaches to ensuring that young people's perspectives and attitudes are gathered and reported as faithfully as possible.

If you are planning an evaluation of services for young people, it is worth considering which of these might be most suitable for participants. As a general rule, the right level will be determined by the extent to which you have involved participants throughout the process of setting up and running the project, as well as the evaluation.

Some projects set out from a principle of maximising the input of the young people who will benefit. This will mean ensuring that young people's views are sought at every stage of planning, delivering and managing the project. In these circumstances, young people's input into the planning and management of the evaluation is a logical extension, and it is likely to result in more valuable findings.

In many projects, though, such a high level of involvement will not have occurred, perhaps because it was never considered or because it would not have been practical. This does not mean that involving young people effectively in the evaluation is impossible, but it will raise some important matters to consider. For example, you will need to pay special attention to exploring the range of what young people see as the project's aims and benefits before finalising your arrangements. In addition, it will be crucial to explain why you are carrying out the evaluation, how you will do it and what you will do with the results. If you only seek views at the end, there is a risk that young people will see this as an afterthought with little overall importance. In addition, participants will almost certainly be more likely to get involved if they can see the benefit of doing so. These considerations apply across all types of projects, but the challenges of conducting a successful evaluation will be greater if other involvement has been limited.

Active consultation

As we have suggested, much of the logic underlying evaluation applies more generally to the way that projects and even programmes are developed and run. So good practice in evaluation closely reflects good practice in consultation.

In order to ensure that projects attract and meet the needs of young people that they target, you must take account of young people's perspectives at all stages. If not, a bolted-on evaluation may well seem tokenistic and pointless.

Effective consultation can add to a sense of ownership and even bring added outcomes of responsibility and confidence about presenting views and opinions.

A major challenge across all forms of consultation is to ensure representation of the widest possible range of young people's views. It is particularly important to explore ways of seeking the views of 'harder-to-reach' groups.

The box on the right summarises some approaches to good practice that you should consider when you consult young people, including when you involve them in evaluation.



Box 2

Approaches to good practice

- 1** Use a range of consultation methods. As well as questionnaires and focus groups, consider using websites, graffiti walls and/or suggestion boxes, as well as more creative approaches, such as those discussed later in this summary. Doing this will help capture a wide range of viewpoints.
- 2** Pilot all documentation with young people, or at the very least, ask some young people to read it critically.
- 3** Ensure that researchers are skilled in working with young people. Researchers must show them respect and sensitivity, but also maintain control of the consultation or evaluation process.
- 4** Ensure that consultation arrangements make it easy for young people to participate. For example, think about the timing and location of face-to-face consultation and make written or computer-based consultations easy to fill in.
- 5** Give young people (and intermediaries) initial briefings, explaining why they are being consulted, what they will be asked to do, what will happen to that information and what may happen as a result.
- 6** Later, give young people meaningful feedback on the impact of their involvement soon after their participation. For example, highlight what changes will be made to the project as a result of their feedback.
- 7** Make every effort to ensure that young people – and those who work with them – do not see participation in consultation as an additional burden.

Making research methods work

The range of approaches used in evaluation and consultation varies enormously. This study included particular consideration of two of the most common: focus groups and questionnaires. On the right and the next page are some of the main points that you should consider when planning your consultation or evaluation.

Focus groups are widely seen as unbeatable for generating and exploring ideas. They can give participants a real sense of contribution, but you need to be aware that they offer little guarantee of being representative. Some important approaches to running focus groups of young people appear on the right.

Box 3 Approaches to running focus groups

- Try to limit focus groups to five participants
- Identify no more than four main questions to be answered
- Give potential participants briefings about the consultation and the approach of the focus group
- Make sure that participation is voluntary and seen to be voluntary
- Seek prior parental consent for children and vulnerable young adults
- Discuss with participants how they would like to receive feedback and make sure you have arrangements in place to meet those preferences.





Questionnaires are valuable for providing evidence about how widely held particular attitudes are. A good questionnaire is not long and asks questions that respondents can answer easily. When developing a questionnaire, use focus groups or other methods to pilot them. This is an invaluable way of checking the relevance of questions and their wording. It will thus help to ensure that respondents have an appropriate range of answers to choose from.

The study identified the issues on the below – among others – to bear in mind when thinking about using a questionnaire.

- Keep the number of questions limited and focused, or potential participants will be put off
- Do not expect young people to spend more than 10 minutes completing questionnaires
- Closed questions (such as tick-box questions) are easier to answer, but the options given may hide subtle differences unless they have been carefully piloted
- Consider the use of language and literacy levels, including knowledge of English
- Consider whether some respondents might benefit from working with an intermediary to complete the questionnaire
- Young people appreciate good design, so think about the overall look and layout of the questionnaire, ensuring that ‘fun’ questionnaires do not look patronising
- E-mailing questionnaires may be simple and may seem to meet young people’s needs, but using attachments can lead to chaos. questionnaires completed directly on-line are more reliable
- Sometimes offering incentives – such as a prize draw or gift vouchers – may encourage more young people to participate
- Do not forget to brief young people at the start and to provide them with timely feedback.



Creative approaches

Active participation in the planning, delivery and management of projects is the best way of ensuring useful participation in evaluation.

As noted earlier, young people can be directly involved in evaluation in a number of roles. Whatever the level of engagement, you may well be able to encourage interest by asking young people to develop creative ways of identifying and exploring issues. Creative approaches are particularly useful when you evaluate your own project, because you are most likely to want to be able to highlight participants' individual experience in some depth. They can also allow participants to reflect on and consolidate their own learning.

Creative approaches in self-evaluation may tap into wider enthusiasms and interests of participants and so have added benefits. The possibilities are endless. The table on the left lists just some of those described in the course of this research.

Table 1
Creative approaches

- 1 Young people on a dance course put on a show to demonstrate how their feelings changed throughout the duration of a project.
- 2 Young people on a workshop are asked how happy they are with the way a session is going. If they are happy they are asked to stand next to a chair, if they are not they are asked to stand far away from it. Then the facilitator asks participants about how the session could be changed to get them closer to the chair.
- 3 'Cared for' young people are encouraged to use photographs and mementoes in case conferences to help them highlight important issues relating to their care.
- 4 Young people are asked to imagine their school was a tree (which some young people may like to draw). Facilitators then ask about the representation, such as how they would describe it, whether they like it and what they like about it, what they would like to do to it, and how they could make it better?
- 5 Young people developed and staged a play about an important issue such as bullying.
- 6 A group acted out a tug-of-war to highlight to politicians some of the pressures they were under and why they did not vote.
- 7 Another group acted out communication barriers between young people and adults by contrasting the language young people use with each other and the jargon used by adults in consultations.

Different levels of evaluation

'Evaluation' means different things to different people.

This summary document focuses particularly on methods and principles that will help you to run and evaluate your own project. This project, or self-evaluation generally, lets you consider how you are performing or have performed against your aims, and how you could change the project to improve its performance. It can also help you to demonstrate to others how successful the project has been.

On the other hand, funders, including The Big Lottery Fund, are likely to commission programme evaluations that consider how a programme of funding as a whole has performed. These evaluations might consider how far the overall aims of the programme have been met, what has affected this, and outcomes for beneficiaries or indeed the wider community. They also arise from the need to be accountable to the public and from a desire to add to the body of knowledge about what works.

Some of the more creative approaches to engaging young people, discussed above, will not work well in programme evaluation. Here the emphasis on comparing and generalising data from across a range of projects means evaluators will have to collect information in a standard way. But other aspects of good practice described in this report remain relevant. Programme evaluators should ensure that young people are directly involved as research subjects – rather than relying on input from those delivering services. They will need to pilot questionnaires and approaches in order to ensure that they capture the range of young people's concerns and experiences, and give full briefing and feedback.

How far young people's views can be incorporated directly into programme design will vary. Of course, good evaluative evidence (at all levels) will help to identify approaches that are most likely to succeed. Young people's views might be represented at project level or by more or less direct involvement in programme or evaluation steering groups. But again, the wide range of projects, areas and types of beneficiaries, often mean that it is impossible to ensure that one or a few young people can adequately represent the views of all beneficiaries. Funders may be able to work around this problem by promoting some of the principles of continuous consultation and engagement in project design, management and evaluation that this report presents.



Recommendations

The study made some general recommendations about effectively engaging young people, as well as some that are more specific to the Fund. These recommendations appear below:

General

- 1** When planning evaluation or other types of consultation, be honest about how far you have involved young people so far and plan accordingly. If engagement has been limited, make it as easy and as interesting as possible for young people to be involved.
- 2** Try to use a range of consultative methods in order to capture the diversity of young people and their views. Qualitative research can offer insights into the views of young people that would not be apparent from structured approaches, whereas well-designed questionnaires can collect representative feedback on matters of wider relevance.
- 3** How you run consultation activities can have a greater impact on the involvement of young people than the methods you choose. You must ensure that all those involved in consultation or evaluation are committed to involving young people and have the skills and training to maximise participation.
- 4** An essential principle of effective involvement is to give participants in any type of consultation (as well as all beneficiaries) good initial briefings that set out the purpose of the exercise, how it will be done and what you will do with the results. You must follow this up with timely feedback when the exercise has been completed. But there is little information so far about the best ways of doing this, and future research in this area should investigate such approaches.
- 5** Where possible, young people should be consulted before evaluation arrangements are finalised, as this will help promote relevance and reliability. It may be worth including a formal consultation stage in research specifications in order to achieve this.

Recommendations

For the Big Lottery Fund

- 1 The Fund should give clearer guidance to applicants and grant-holders about what it expects projects to do to review their own performance through self-evaluation. It should also explain how this links to the wider programme evaluation. The Fund should also emphasise the importance of involving young people in evaluation and give projects details of sources of further information, perhaps with links via websites (see opposite page for some of this information).
- 2 The Fund should consider contributing to a debate on how to reduce the burden of consultation on young people. More research is needed to investigate whether the creation of a permanent consultation infrastructure – including forums, panels and circle time – could help reduce the burden of consultation on young people by embedding consultation on particular issues (such as evaluations) within a wider cultural practice.

Further information

This summary can only outline some of the main areas discussed in the research. Full copies of the report are available on the Fund's website (www.biglotteryfund.org.uk).

Many agencies and other organisations have published guidance about developing self-evaluation for projects aiming to benefit young people. The Fund is also developing general guidance and signposting about self-evaluation on its website.

The list on the right includes a number of websites that people involved in this study have suggested provide useful information about effectively involving young people. Because the content of websites change over time, we have only given main website addresses.

The list is certainly not exhaustive – in fact, the wealth of guidance and advice available could easily overwhelm anyone starting to consider the matter. Before you embark on detailed planning of your evaluation, it is a good idea to ask your funder(s) or other agencies you are involved with whether any plans or requirements have been established for your programme or type of project.





Useful websites

- Big Lottery Fund
www.biglotteryfund.org.uk
- British Youth Council
www.byc.org.uk
- Carnegie Young People's Initiative
www.carnegie-youth.org.uk
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
www.jrf.org.uk
- Save the Children
www.savethechildren.org.uk
- National Youth Agency
www.nya.org.uk
- Every Child Matters
www.everychildmatters.gov.uk
- Department for Education and Skills
www.dfes.gov.uk
- Connexions
www.connexions.gov.uk
- Children and Young People's Unit
www.allchildrenni.gov.uk
- The Youth Council for Northern Ireland
www.youthcouncil-ni.org.uk
- Children in Scotland
www.childreninscotland.org.uk
- YouthLink Scotland
www.youthlink.co.uk
- Funky Dragon
www.funkydragon.org
- Wales Youth Agency
www.wya.org.uk

