

Data collection tools

Data collection tools refer to the ways you will collect data that help you measure progress towards your intended outcomes. There are many different ways in which you can collect evidence to support your evaluation, and it can be difficult to know exactly which methods will fit best with your project. This document will talk you through the strengths and weaknesses associated with a range of different data collection tools to help you choose.

It is important to use a variety of collection tools so that these strengths and weaknesses balance each other out. By combining multiple perspectives and methods, you can overcome the weaknesses of any one perspective or method, giving your evaluation greater credibility and validity. This process of using multiple viewpoints to draw conclusions is called **triangulation**. Triangulation helps to make your findings more robust.

Appropriate data collection

It's important to make sure your variety of data collection tools is appropriate to your project, and accessible and engaging to your participants:

- Be **realistic**: consider at the outset how long it will take you to collect and analyse your data before you finalise your evaluation plan and choose collection tools that fit with your capacity.
- Consider what information you're **already collecting** and how this could be used in your evaluation.
- If you can't collect data from everyone, think about using a **representative sample**. This could be by setting a particular target for the proportion of participants you consult. It is also important that your sample represents the range of experiences across your project - you should aim not to prioritise any one particular demographic or perspective. You can learn more about choosing a representative sample in our [further resource on sample sizes](#).
- You will need to consider the group **size** and **diversity of experience** of your project participants when deciding on your sample size and research method. Ensure you use an appropriate research method that is **accessible** and **engaging** for your participants. You can gauge this by talking to delivery staff and, if appropriate, the young people themselves.

Frequency of data collection

Choosing the right time to collect your evaluation data is crucial. Different things work for different groups of people but from our experience, projects choose one or a mix of the following data collection points:

- At the end of each session
- A few sessions into the project → mid-way through → end of the project
- Mid-way through → end of the project
- At the end of the project

It is important to think carefully about how and when you collect data, and build this into your session plans rather than as an add-on at the very end of a session. Be sure to account for data collection in both your staff time and your session planning. You should be clear when the data collection will take place and how long it will take. You can account for this time and resource in your Youth Music project budget.

For more information on how often to collect different kinds of data, please visit [NPC's 5 Types of Data blog](#).

Platforms for collecting data

There are various different ways you can collect the data using these methods. Some are self-explanatory, but you might like to think about your target participants and which way would be best for them, but also the capacity you have to organise, analyse, and store the information you collect.

- A lot of the suggested collection methods in this document are designed to be used **in person** – either **written** on paper or **verbally**.
- If you have access to **iPads/computers** and can use a platform like **Google Forms** or **SurveyMonkey**, this could save you inputting data into a computer manually later.
- You could also ask certain participants to complete things **outside of your session** (either online, or on paper and returning it to you), although it may be worth thinking about the likelihood of this happening and whether you and your staff have time to follow up with each individual young person.

Quantitative data refers to a number, quantity, amount or range. It includes data collection tools like evaluation scales. Quantitative collection tools can measure specific aspects of your project and its activities. Although quantitative collection tools may appear to be more objective, it is important to remember that they can also carry biases as they still rely on the subjective experiences of the people completing the scales. The larger the amount of

quantitative data you collect, the more useful it can be for creating statistics about your work.

This table includes some of the ways you could collect quantitative data to evaluate your project.

Data collection tool	Strengths	Weaknesses
Accreditations achieved	If started at the beginning of the project, an accreditation is concrete evidence of a change or improvement in skill.	Sometimes costly. Accreditation might not be appropriate or appealing for all participants.
Attendance data	Easy to collect – you are probably already collecting this anyway. Easy to compare with attendance records from different projects/time periods.	Attendance data tells us how frequently participants are coming, but doesn't give us information about why they are attending, or what they are getting out of the experience. You should consider triangulating this with more detailed evidence about changes brought about by attendance provided from different sources and perspectives.
Evaluation scales	Can be used with a number of participants to measure the same factor. Can often be interpreted quantitatively to generate percentages, statistics etc. If using validated or widely used scales, can compare with national averages or results from similar projects. Can be used at beginning/middle/end of a project to track progress. Some scales can be used at the end of a project.	Some scales may not be appropriate for target participants, you should consider how easy they will be to interpret and if any support will be needed in completion. For some, filling in forms can feel too much like additional schoolwork to be engaging. May not be fully reflective of participant's opinions: they may be saying what they believe you want to hear. Changes in scores don't always take external factors into account .

Online engagement (hits, downloads, sign-ups)	<p>Easy to collect with tools such as Google Analytics.</p> <p>Easy to compare with online analytics data from other pages or between time periods.</p>	<p>Might need a specialist technology or digital communications staff member to make sense of this information.</p> <p>Doesn't tell us anything in and of itself – would need to triangulated with some more detailed evidence to demonstrate a change brought about.</p>
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Qualitative data is descriptive, and less easily measurable. These collection tools provide a more nuanced view of progress but are more labour-intensive to collect and analyse. With large target groups, it may not always be possible to collect and analyse qualitative data for every participant, and you may need to focus on a smaller sample. You should aim to represent the range of experiences and perspectives, not just the experiences of those who are most engaged.

This table includes some of the ways you could collect qualitative data to evaluate your project.

Data collection tool	Strengths	Weaknesses
Feedback forms	<p>Gives a viewpoint about the project other than your own.</p> <p>May identify things you had not thought about.</p>	<p>May not be fully reflective of participant's opinions: they may be saying what they believe you want to hear.</p>
Informal feedback through conversations and observations	<p>Feedback gathered can often be more spontaneous or genuine 'off the cuff' remarks.</p> <p>Captures the person's thoughts at that exact moment.</p>	<p>Difficult to record spontaneously or recall exactly what was said later on.</p> <p>Can seem anecdotal and is open to bias.</p>
Notes, minutes, and emails	<p>Often provides good anecdotal evidence about a particular young person or session that might be forgotten later on or in a more formal interview/questionnaire setting.</p> <p>Useful for tracking progress over time.</p>	<p>Not always necessary/appropriate to share externally.</p> <p>Rarely relevant as standalone evidence.</p>
Reflective diaries	<p>Useful for gathering observations from the participant's perspective, including things that they might not wish to say in an interview.</p> <p>Can collect a high volume of data over a sustained period of</p>	<p>If too structured, the participant may not have the freedom to write what they really like.</p> <p>If too free, the participant may not know what to write.</p>

	<p>time with a little organisational input.</p> <p>Can be done in a range of formats (e.g. written, blog, audio, video).</p> <p>Can be a creative and engaging way to collect information.</p>	<p>Analysis can be time consuming for organisation.</p> <p>Young people may need support to complete it themselves.</p> <p>Sustaining this over time may require regular reminders.</p>
Photos, videos, and recordings	<p>Easy and quick to share if time is limited.</p> <p>A good way of showing off participants' work resulting from the project delivered.</p>	<p>Can be difficult to obtain the correct permission from parents/carers.</p> <p>For evaluation purposes, they need to show a <i>change</i> rather than just a record of what happened. Without analysis or interpretation, it is hard to use these as standalone evidence.</p>
Observations	<p>If recorded over a prolonged period of time, observations can demonstrate real change or development in groups and individuals.</p> <p>Can be free or structured by a specific framework.</p>	<p>Often requires an extra staff member to make and record observations.</p> <p>Can be difficult to keep consistent across a prolonged period of time.</p> <p>People may behave differently if they know they are being observed.</p>
Focus groups (e.g. youth boards and councils)	<p>Good for gathering a lot of different perspectives in one go.</p> <p>Participants often steer the conversation to interesting topics that interviewer may not have thought about, and can bounce ideas off one another which often leads to a more natural kind of conversation.</p>	<p>Some participants may dominate the conversation – others might shy away from saying anything.</p>
Structured interviews	<p>Allows you to design your own list of interview questions to find out exactly what you want to know.</p>	<p>Don't usually allow flexibility to move away from the set questions.</p>
Semi-structured interviews	<p>Involves more open-ended questions which generate richer data, whilst still having a list of questions to guide the interviewer.</p> <p>Allows you to design your own list of interview questions to find out exactly what you want to know.</p>	<p>Although more flexible than structured interviews, this can make it harder to ensure the conversation stays relevant.</p> <p>Answers will differ more, making them harder to compare to those of another interviewee.</p>

Creative methods (e.g. creative tasks during interviews, musical games etc)	Adaptable to exactly what you want to measure with people who might have more complex needs. Great way to incorporate music into your evaluation.	Can require a lot of thought and planning to be effective. Data generated can be harder to analyse or interpret.
Case studies	Detailed, personal, in-depth study of an individual participant and their story.	Does not represent everyone as it gives information from the perspective of just one individual. Very personal, meaning it is unlikely that every participant will be willing.

Further resources

[Youth Music: Sample sizes](#)

[Youth Music: Quantitative analysis](#)

[Youth Music: Qualitative analysis](#)

NPC: Guidance on sampling <https://www.thinknpc.org/themes/measure-and-manage-impact/impact-measurement-evaluation-and-data/3-sampling/>

NPC: Guidance on 5 types of data <https://www.thinknpc.org/blog/5-types-of-data-for-assessing-your-work-an-explainer/>

Get in touch with Youth Music

Email your Grants and Learning Officer, or contact us on:

- **Email:** grants@youthmusic.org.uk
- **Telephone:** 020 7902 1060

If you are successful in your grant application, Youth Music will provide further evaluation support and resources.

The National Foundation for Youth Music

Studios 3-5 Swan Court, 9 Tanner Street, London, SE1 3LE

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