

Common evaluation challenges

We know that, when working with young people experiencing barriers to music making, evaluation might not always feel like it sits at the top of the list of priorities. It can feel like a huge task, particularly if you or your organisation don't have much capacity or experience with evaluation. Our comprehensive evaluation resources, [Plan, Do, and Review](#), will guide you through this process, but you might have questions that aren't covered fully by those guides.

Here are some commonly encountered questions we have received from applicants and grantholders when it comes to evaluating a Youth Music project, and our suggestions on how you can overcome them.

The document is split into 4 sections:

1. Common queries about data collection
2. Common queries about data analysis/interpretation
3. Common queries about reporting to Youth Music
4. Other common evaluation queries

1. Common queries about data collection

“The young people we work with aren’t interested in evaluation. They don’t want to fill in the scales and we’re worried it will put them off coming to sessions.”

We understand that it can take time to build up a trusting relationship with the young people you’re working with, and that handing them a questionnaire from the word ‘go’ might feel alienating to them. We recommend, if you choose to collect data from the young people near the beginning of the project, that you do this after a couple of sessions rather than from the very first session, giving them a little time to get to know you and become engaged with the project.

We also recommend inducting young people into the evaluation process so that they understand why it’s important and what will be asked of them. See our [‘Do’ guidance](#) for more information on how to do this in an effective way that doesn’t put them off. This could include asking for their input on the data collection tools you choose, including involving them in designing the questionnaires or interview schedules.

If scales and questionnaires in particular are causing concern, why not try a collection method that feels more appropriate to the group of young people you’re working with? Having a conversation with them or using creative methods may work better – and there are even ways you can involve young people in collecting the data themselves that might serve as a more engaging, exciting way to give them ownership over this element of the project. See our [Data Collection Tools](#) and [Peer Research](#) resources for more ideas.

“Data collection and evaluation eats into the little delivery time we have. Young people are there to make music.”

We understand that there are multiple competing priorities in the lives of young people and that you want to spend the time you have with them on doing the things that matter most: bringing them quality music making experiences. That’s why we want to help you make your evaluation process as suitable and manageable as possible for you and the young people your project serves. It is a rigorous process, but that doesn’t mean it has to be time consuming or difficult: there are so many ways you can collect evidence to support your evaluation, and it is important that you choose methods that best suit your project and target group. See our [Data Collection Tools resource](#) which offers a rundown of the pros and cons of the different types of research you can do with young people. If you have time to do in-depth interviews with your young people outside of the sessions, that is fantastic – but if you don’t

there are plenty of lighter touch alternatives that can take place during music sessions and don't have to steal away from your delivery time.

Remember that evaluation is a core part of your project, and as such, we recommend that you build adequate staff time and resource into your project's plan and budget request. It doesn't have to be an additional unrealistic expectation of your staff to spend time collecting and analysing data without being paid properly for it: the most successful approach is to timetable evaluation into your overall project plan, and your budget request to Youth Music should reflect this. You could also consider involving an external evaluator.

“Some young people quickly tick “5 (best)” for everything on their scale without engaging with it and hand the form over to us. How do we ensure these scores are accurate?”

There are plenty of data collection tools alternative to scales that young people might find easier to engage with – see our Data Collection Tools resource for more information. However, if a scale still feels like the most appropriate tool for your evaluation, there are other ways that you can identify any cases where the scores might be inaccurate.

For instance, some grantholders have found that inserting some additional questions into your questionnaire that most people would be unlikely to score themselves 5/5 on can help to highlight any instances where the person filling in the scale might not be reading the questions or answering them entirely accurately. For example, below you can see part of the Youth Music Agency and Citizenship scale, which measures progress towards social outcomes. Questions **3, 5 and 7 in bold** have been added in, and are questions that most people would be unlikely to score themselves 5/5 for. If a young person scores themselves 5/5 for everything, including these questions, you might be able to draw assumptions around whether or not to include this person's scale in your analysis. Indeed, you could go back to them and talk to them about it to get a better understanding of whether they truly feel this way.

1. I feel listened to by the people around me.

1 2 3 4 5

2. I make decisions that are good for me.

1 2 3 4 5

3. I like everyone I meet

1 2 3 4 5

4. I feel like what I say and do will make a difference to my life.

1 2 3 4 5

5. I always tell the truth

1 2 3 4 5

6. I know where to get help from if I need it.

1 2 3 4 5

7. I always share

1 2 3 4 5

“How do we balance qualitative and quantitative data collection?”

Once again, the best approach to take when thinking about how best to evidence your outcomes is to think about what will work best for you, your project, and most importantly, your participants. The main thing Youth Music wants from your evaluation is for you to learn from it and to find the process useful. Consider whether qualitative or quantitative data – or a mixture of both – will facilitate that best for you. Think about which data collection methods your target participants will respond best to, and plan your evaluation around this.

There are undeniably some numbers and statistical information we do need to ask of you for monitoring purposes and for our own reporting to funders, such as demographic data, attendance, and progression numbers. However, when it comes to measuring progress towards your *outcomes*, there is no set amount of qualitative or quantitative data that we require.

“How can evaluation be enjoyable and meaningful for young people?”

Youth or peer-led creative forms of evaluation can improve participants’ engagement with evaluation and buy-in to its benefits. For example, participants leading on recording video diaries/observations can be a fun activity for them, and helpful to capture the moments music leaders may not notice whilst leading the session.

Supporting young people to reflect with their peers is an intersection of learning and collective self-reflection. Also, data collection led by music leaders can be reciprocal. Offering a mentoring session at the same time as collecting data is investing in the conversation space with the young person and embedding pastoral care in the process. See our [Different Evaluation Techniques resource](#) which is built from techniques grantholders tell us they use. It provides tried-and-tested ways of working with different groups, including those who perhaps don’t engage with traditional data collection methods.

2. Common queries about data analysis/interpretation

“Some of our data suggest that we are moving further away from our intended outcome rather than progressing towards it – can I still share this with you and what should I do about it?”

There are lots of reasons why your data might suggest a move away from your intended outcome rather than towards it.

Take young people’s musical skills for example: you might ask the young people to score themselves on a self-assessment questionnaire. In the past, some of our grantholders have found that the young people’s assessments of their own skills might actually *decrease* as the young people’s benchmark of musical skill *develops* – i.e., they might start the project feeling confident in their skills, but as their knowledge and understanding actually improves over time, they might realise how much more there is to learn and end up feeling as though they have not improved at the end of the project. Overall, this is a good thing, but it can feel difficult to present this to an external audience in a positive light!

If your data suggests a move away from your intended outcome from one group, we recommend sense-checking it against data from other sources, e.g., music leaders, teachers or parents. This process of using data from multiple sources to reinforce your conclusions is called triangulation.

However, if you’ve done this and you still find that all your data suggests that you are not progressing towards your intended outcome(s), there is still great value in using this data and sharing it with Youth Music. We want to know about the challenges and what didn’t work just as much as we want to know about the successes. Submitting an evaluation with a less than perfect success rate does not count as a reason for us not to consider awarding your organisation funding in the future. Youth Music are interested in how organisations learn from evaluations and adapt accordingly. Use this as an opportunity to reflect on the project, find out what could have been done differently, and learn from the experience for next time.

“The young people’s responses on their forms/in their interviews don’t match up with what the delivery staff observe in their behaviour. How do we reconcile these different viewpoints?”

The process of using data from multiple viewpoints to reinforce your conclusions is

called triangulation. But what happens when those viewpoints say different things? As with the concern in the question above, there are many explanations as to why data from different sources or viewpoints might not match up with one another.

Considering external factors or biases in the data may help you to work out which data collection tool is a more accurate gauge of what's happening in your project. For example, if data from your young people suggests no progress towards your intended outcome, but data from music leaders, parents, and accreditation suggests good progress, you might want to think about the other possible reasons for the opposing results from the young people. Did they under-rate their skills due to lack of confidence? Did something happen outside of the session to affect their mood on the day of the interview? Think about what could have influenced the conflicting information and make an informed decision about how to interpret the data. Disharmonious points of view don't hold any less value in the evaluation process: rather, they present an opportunity to discuss the different perspectives with the young people and understand a little more about their responses.

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3. Common queries about reporting to Youth Music

“The number of outcomes to report on has changed since my grant was awarded. How many outcomes do I report on in my evaluation?”

In 2020, Youth Music reduced the number of outcomes we required Fund A and Fund B grantholders to set in their application and report on in their evaluation. If you are a new grantholder, or you hold a different type of grant, this should not affect you. However, for those grantholders who made their application before this change was put in place, we understand there may be some confusion as to how many outcomes you should be working towards and reporting on.

For Fund A grantholders, the minimum number of outcomes you are required to report on is two. The maximum is three. If you set three outcomes in your application, you can either choose two to report on, or report on all three.

For Fund B grantholders, the minimum number of outcomes you are required to report on is three. The maximum is five. If you set five outcomes in your application, you can choose to report on three, four or all five outcomes.

“When you updated the reporting requirements – some sections/questions were removed. Does this mean that this information is not valuable anymore?”

Definitely not. When we remove questions or even sections, we do this with the aim to reduce the reporting requirements that you have to complete. This means that we only ask for information that we need and leave other things optional.

For example, case studies are still very valuable but you don't have to share them with Youth Music if you don't want to. Feel free to share these and other outputs on the Youth Music Network or attach them to your progress report.

“We already have quite rigorous evaluation processes in place – and wonder what else do we need to do to make sure they match up to Youth Music’s evaluation requirements? Are there any other pieces of information we should be collecting?”

The best thing is to check the reporting templates for your grant and the Evaluation Guidance – you can find both on the Youth Music Network.

We don’t prescribe any specific questions but checking the templates and guidance will help you identify the questions that you need to ask – so that you can monitor progress towards your outcomes and complete your progress reports. Whilst there are some things that we need from you presented in a certain way, we’ve tried to be more flexible in how you present other data.

If you’d like more support with your evaluation, check our Further Evaluation Resources page or just contact your Grants & Learning Officer for more support.

“We have some additional information that we’d like to share with Youth Music on top of the evaluation. What is the best way to do that?”

We have flexible reporting formats which means that you can share aspects of your evaluation beyond our reporting requirements if you wish to. You can also send this piece of information to your Grants and Learning Officer.

Alternatively, the Youth Music Network is always a good place to share what you find interesting or what may be of interest to others. This could include videos, case studies, links to documents. You could also use that space to ask questions – Youth Music Network is an online community so there is a good chance that others will be keen to help.

We recommend you check your Funding Agreement for any requirements – usually, we ask organisations to post on the Network at least once during their grant. You’re more than welcome to do it more often, just consider your own capacity to do that.

“Are photo, audio and video submissions a mandatory part of the evaluation?”

No, submitting photos, audio and/or video in your evaluation is not mandatory. We recognise there will be some situations in which the anonymity of your participants is key, and in some settings it may not even be appropriate to take photos of your project, let alone share them outside your organisation. However, if you would like to

include these and have the relevant permissions, we would love to see your photos and videos!

“How can we best make use of photo, audio and video evidence in our evaluation?”

As with any of your evaluation data, photographic evidence and other media is at its most useful when it tells us something about your project. A common mistake when submitting photos etc as evidence towards your intended outcomes is to submit it without explaining what the photo or other media represents. This type of evidence can be a fantastic way to show us what activities took place, but when using it to demonstrate progress towards an outcome, it's important to consider whether the photo shows a change or tells a story. Perhaps it shows you something you can learn from? If so, it could serve as fantastic evidence, but remember that the people reading your evaluation might need you to give a little extra context as to what's happening in the photo and why you think it demonstrates change.

4. Other common evaluation queries

“Due to working online or in small bubbles, group numbers can be smaller. Is there an expectation that our evaluation will need to be adapted?”

It is completely natural that extraordinary circumstances (like COVID-19) will have a direct impact on your work – we recommend you check our policies and speak to your Grants & Learning Officer if you have any concerns.

Whilst it's natural that you'll need to adapt your evaluation plan (e.g. if you start delivering online), Youth Music doesn't set any expectations. Just make sure that you ask questions and collect responses that are useful to you, so that you can demonstrate impact of your work.

“When planning our budget for monitoring and evaluation, is there an expected standard?”

There is no blanket 'standard' amount to spend on monitoring and evaluation, as it will need to be appropriate to you and your project and organisation's individual needs. Your evaluation budget will depend on the scale and depth of what you're planning to do.

We recommend working backwards: plan your approach, focussing on what you want to achieve and which methods will provide you with the data you need to evaluate your outcomes. Plan for staff time for data collection and analysis and then cost this process.

Finally, proportionality is key. Is this plan more than is necessary to achieve what you need to, or is it less than what you need to realistically demonstrate the impact of your project? Aim for as much as is necessary and remember that Youth Music are a full-cost recovery funder when budgeting for your evaluation.

“How can we make evaluation more inclusive?”

Inclusive practice should be embedded in all aspects of work, which includes evaluation. The usual principles apply which include flexibility, planning and involving young people and youth voice in the design of your evaluation. It's important to have an understanding of different access needs and how to support them within evaluation, both online and offline. If data collection has moved online, is it on a platform that's accessible, is the interface user-friendly and is the task at hand clear

for the young person? Also bear in mind who will be completing the evaluation. When it was done in person, would there have been a staff member assisting this young person and might you have to decide if further support needs to be in place for this young person to complete the evaluation remotely?

Safeguarding is an important aspect, as always, and this period of self-reflection and assessment may be quite sensitive. Consider whether a young person might need to be supported with a phone call or video call at the end of the session to help support them with their evaluation.

Finally, a part of inclusivity is understanding that there are different needs and being transparent about where they could be better addressed and supported. Putting young people at the centre of programme and evaluation design is crucial, and that means embedding their voice. Have them tell you the best way for them to access evaluation.

If you have any feedback or further questions, please don't hesitate to get in touch with your Grants & Learning Officer, or the Research & Evaluation team at researchandevaluation@youthmusic.org.uk

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