



## **Built-in, not bolt-on: engaging young people in evaluation**

Madeleine Swords

### **Foreword**

I would like to thank all those who agreed to be interviewed as part of this project.

Suzanne Fitzpatrick	University of Glasgow
Claire Fisher	British Youth Council
Jules Mason	British Youth Council
Lindsey Bowes	Centre for Guidance Studies, Derby University
Harry Wade	National Youth Agency
Alan France	University of Sheffield
David Cutler	Carnegie Young People Initiative
Kate Morris	Birmingham University
Phil Treseder	Save the Children
Perpetua Kirby	PK Research Consultancy Ltd

Thanks must also go to Steve Browning of the New Opportunities Fund for his guidance and research assistant Camilla de la Bedoyere for her support.

Madeleine Swords

November 2002

## Executive summary

The New Opportunities Fund commissioned this study in 2002 to investigate ways in which young people might most effectively be engaged in evaluation. At present the Fund is evaluating two of its initiatives – **activities for young people** and **new opportunities for PE and sport in school** – in which engaging with the perspectives of young people, and particularly those at particular risk of disaffection and/or social exclusion, is a central concern.

This study thus aims to review current thinking and good practice in this area, in the hope of ensuring better evaluation at both programme and project level.

### Evaluation and the New Opportunities Fund

The Fund is committed to evaluating its initiatives to promote accountability, to encourage best practice and to add to the evidence base relating to the type of activities concerned. But in discussing the concept of “evaluation”, it is evident that there are two main levels of work, as follows:

**Project evaluation or self-evaluation**, which is led and managed by the projects themselves. It considers how the project has performed against its own objectives, the roles of individuals and groups involved, project design, piloting and implementation, and outcomes and impacts. Project managers use evaluation exercises to help them learn from their experiences and identify areas for improvement.

**Programme evaluation**, which is commissioned by the Fund. It reviews the progress and outcomes of the programme or initiative as a whole and its primary focus is on accountability to stakeholders, and on adding to the relevant evidence base.

### Evaluation requirements

The Fund currently gives little guidance on its requirements for self-evaluation or on how this will feed into the wider programme evaluation. This may lead to inconsistent practice at local level and indeed to perceptions of “evaluation overload”.

On the other hand, the Fund develops programmes in the light of its mission and values. While these do not refer directly to user involvement, it should be noted that one of the assessment criteria for many programmes (including **activities for young people**) considers how far the project depends on “the contribution of users and beneficiaries”. Overall, the most useful approach to ensuring the effective involvement of young people in evaluation is likely to be achieved by focusing on effective consultation with young people at all stages of the project cycle.

### Levels of involvement

At present the focus in projects that the Fund supports is to encourage young people to participate as users, rather than to become active in the planning, delivery and management of those projects. This is particularly the case where projects have a limited duration, such as those in the activities for young people initiative.

The extent to which young people are involved in evaluation of the Fund’s projects and programmes should reflect this level of participation. This could be achieved by focusing on

effective consultation with young people, rather than on pursuing the aim of involving young people in the delivery of that evaluation.

Involvement of young people can be increased by building this in to the running of a project, but efforts to increase participation through “bolt-on” evaluation activities are likely to be seen as tokenistic.

## **Different forms of involvement at different levels of evaluation**

Developing “user involvement” in projects (which might include involvement in planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation processes, as well as representation in formal structures) takes time and considerable effort from all parties. It may be more difficult to achieve in projects of short duration, such as those run under **activities for young people** in England.

Young people may see “involvement” in evaluation as tokenistic unless it offers them clear benefits- over and above those they would get from participation in the project. As a result, active involvement in evaluation at project level can be problematic and hard to achieve, let alone at the level of programme evaluation.

If young people are to be actively involved in the evaluation, it is essential to ensure that they are engaged at earlier stages – at the planning of the **project** evaluation if not indeed at the initial planning of the project. This would allow young people to act as partners in that evaluation. Again, this is more problematic at the level of **programme** evaluation, but external evaluators can try at least to ensure that young people’s perspectives are taken into account at an early stage of the evaluation.

Young people can play a number of roles in the evaluation process:

- **Research directors.** This is likely to involve active participation in steering groups and regular consultation on the direction of the evaluation. Young people are likely to require more training and support to fulfil this role, and will have to commit more time. The benefits of such involvement for young people are likely to be far more apparent at the level of project evaluation.
- **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 involves the commitment of resources, time and training. Despite concerns about reliability, involving participants as peer researchers may help to elicit more accurate and honest responses.
- **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 general and specific approaches to ensuring that young people’s perspectives and attitudes are gathered and reported as faithfully as possible.

## Active consultation

The most effective and engaging approaches to researching the views of young people will reflect good practice in all forms of **consultation**, and particularly in actively involving research subjects. It is essential to ensure that:

- a **range of consultation methods** is employed to help capture a wide range of viewpoints;
- all evaluation **documentation** is piloted with young people (or undergoes critical reading by young people);
- **researchers are skilled** in working with young people, and show them respect and sensitivity whilst maintaining control of the evaluation process;
- consultation arrangements **make it easy** for young people to participate;
- young people (and intermediaries) receive appropriate 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;
- young people receive meaningful **feedback** on the impact of their involvement soon after their participation; and
- young people do not perceive participation in consultation as an **additional burden**.

Factors that limit the involvement of young people in consultation include circumstances where:

1. young people's views are sought after the issues for evaluation have been agreed;
2. a focus on measuring progress and quantitative methods leads to few opportunities for exploratory research with young people;
3. **consultation arrangements** do not take into consideration young people's characteristics, circumstances and preferred styles of communication; and/or
4. initial **communication** between researchers and young people (and intermediaries), and poor feedback leads to false expectations, feelings of demotivation and cynicism.

## Recommendations

1. Guidance should clarify requirements for self-evaluation within projects and the relationship between this and national arrangements for programme evaluation. Guidance should also highlight the value of involving young people in evaluation and refer to guidance on best practice. The Fund should consider publishing or providing links to such materials through its website.
2. The level of involvement of young people in the evaluation process should be informed by the aims of the project and how young people participate in the projects. Where involvement is limited, evaluation arrangements should recognise this, and make it easy for young people to contribute to consultations.

3. Young people should be consulted prior to establishing the parameters the national programme evaluation in order to maximise perceived relevance. A separate exploratory phase should be identified within the research specification to achieve this.
4. Evaluation studies should employ 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.
5. The way in which consultation activities are carried out can have a greater impact on the involvement of young people than the methods chosen. The Fund should ensure that those researchers who conduct evaluations on its behalf are committed to involving young people and have the skills and training to make this happen.
6. Research is needed to investigate how initial briefings and feedback provided to young people (and those who work with them) can be made more effective, especially in the context of participation in short-life projects.
7. Whilst this issue clearly falls beyond the boundary of this project, 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.

# I Introduction

The New Opportunities Fund provides lottery funding for health, education and environment projects across the UK that will help create lasting improvements to the quality of life, particularly in disadvantaged communities. The Fund is committed to evaluating the effectiveness of its initiatives and in learning from evaluations to improve future programmes and in disseminating good practice.

The Fund is currently commissioning evaluations of two initiatives – **activities for young people** and **new opportunities for PE and sport in schools** – are particularly concerned with engaging young people and improving opportunities and choices for them.<sup>1</sup>

As a support to the main evaluation of these initiatives, this project initially aimed to provide the Fund with specific input about ways of engaging with young people, in particular those disaffected from mainstream services, or with low educational attainment. However, over the course of the project, discussion within the Fund about the role of project self-evaluation and its relationship with programme evaluation meant that outputs from this work might have a range of uses for a range of audiences. As a result, this report covers both a range of higher-level consideration of relevant issues and more detailed discussion of particular approaches.

The current report is based on two phases of work. The first was a literature review undertaken in July and August 2002. This forms the basis of section 2 of this report. This was followed by a set of interviews undertaken in October 2002 with ten researchers and practitioners at the forefront of initiatives to increase the active involvement of young people in decision-making, research and consultation.<sup>2</sup>

These semi-structured interviews considered:

- those activities and consultation techniques that researchers had found helpful in involving young people in research and evaluation and those that were less helpful
- factors that promote the effective involvement of young people in such activities and those that hinder this involvement, and
- further issues that arise from engaging young people in evaluation.

Where appropriate, those interviewed were also asked to identify examples of good practice that could be used to inform others and to comment on experiences of developing questionnaires and topic guides for young people, including disaffected young people.

Full written records of these interviews were analysed by the consultant. A discussion of the key issues raised in these interviews appears in section three of this report.

---

<sup>1</sup> In broad terms, the Activities for young people initiative aims to help young people at risk of losing touch with education or with careers guidance to make informed decisions about their future. The main aims of the New Opportunities for PE and Sport in schools programme include helping to increase the levels of physical activity among young people and local communities and to develop the relationship between families and schools and between schools and their communities – as a resource supporting the development of citizenship and lifelong learning and as an agent of regeneration. As well as addressing priorities relating to education and health, the initiative aims to reduce crime and drug use.

<sup>2</sup> Further details appear in Annex e 1.

The focus of this project from the start has been practical rather than theoretical. This paper focuses more on how input from young people can be best captured within evaluations rather than on providing a full discussion of the rights of young people to have a say on matters that affect their lives.

In keeping with this focus, section four considers how the views and voices of young people can be represented within evaluation through effective consultation. This section provides practical advice regarding the design of **questionnaires and topic guides** for focus groups. Although mainly concerned with the conduct of **national programme** evaluation, much of this section is relevant to projects seeking to use questionnaires and focus groups as part of self-evaluation arrangements.

Section five focuses on how young people can become more fully involved in evaluation principally at **project level** and considers young people as researchers, consultants and partners in decision-making. It considers the value of creative approaches to consultation.

Section six summarises the recommendations of this research, based on the review of literature, interviews with practitioners and discussions with Fund staff.

## 2 Findings of desk research

The purpose of this section is to consider how the findings of the desk research further our understanding of how to engage young people in evaluation. In doing so we start by clarifying what the New Opportunities Fund means by evaluation and the requirements it places on projects for monitoring and evaluation.

We also consider the extent of young people's active involvement in projects, as this will influence their appropriate level of engagement in the Fund's programme evaluation exercise.

This section then considers how we might involve young people at different stages and levels within the evaluation exercise and how their involvement might be promoted through the use of active consultation methods. It closes with a short discussion of the contribution of case studies.

Initial considerations arising from the research findings are highlighted throughout. Whilst this research is relevant to many programmes and projects where young people are beneficiaries, it is written in the context of the Fund's Active Education initiatives and particularly the **activities for young people** initiative.

### Terminology

It is useful to distinguish between project evaluation and programme evaluation.

**Project evaluation** is led and managed by the projects themselves. It considers how each project has performed against its specific project objectives, roles of individuals and/or groups involved, project design, piloting and implementation, outcomes and impacts. Project managers use evaluation exercises to help them learn from their experiences and identify areas for improvement.

**Programme evaluation** is commissioned by the Fund. It reviews the progress and outcomes of the programme or initiative as a whole and its primary focus is on accountability to stakeholders.

This project considers how the perspective of young people might contribute to both forms of evaluation.

### Evaluation requirements

While the Fund makes clear requirements for annual reporting of monitoring information, it offers little guidance on what evaluation it expects projects to undertake. Some distinction is made between the aims of monitoring and evaluation, but there is little explanation of either the form project evaluation might take, or the relationship between project evaluation and national programme evaluation exercises.

Evidence from other national evaluations suggests that this lack of specificity is likely to lead to a wide range of different practices at local level. A lack of understanding of the different focus and functions of national and local evaluations may also contribute to fears of "evaluation overload" amongst project staff (Children's Fund Feasibility Study, 2002).

Other agencies – such as Connexions, DfES and the National Youth Agency – provide guidance on project evaluation, although this is not specific to Fund programmes.

Some government funding programmes do provide specific guidance for projects on objectives, target-setting, local monitoring and project evaluation. The Children's Fund, for example, specifies the kind of monitoring data to be collected, specifies how this will be used by national evaluators, advises on the need for local evaluations to be formative, open, independent and inclusive, and to consider confidentiality, consent and data protection issues.

This guidance also suggests that local project evaluations should consider partnership practices and user experiences. It advises that national programme evaluations undertaken by the Children's Fund will look for evidence that practice has been improved in the light of project evaluations and suggests that up to 3% of funding can be used for project evaluation purposes.<sup>3</sup>

## Initial considerations

How might the Fund clarify its requirements for monitoring, evaluation and the relationship between project and programme evaluation in its guidance to applicants?

Is the Fund's existing guidance on self-evaluation adequate? Could signposting to existing resources be improved and stress to practitioners:

- the importance of evaluation as a means of improving the performance of projects, as well as its summative value at the end of a project,
- the need to plan and budget for monitoring and evaluation arrangements from the outset so it is built in to everyday project practice rather than bolted on,
- the need to observe certain protocols during evaluation, such as gaining informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity,
- the benefits of using more than one approach,
- the importance of involving participants and users as means of improving the relevance of self-evaluation, and
- that project self evaluation may contribute to programme evaluation and that programme evaluation exercises may consider the effectiveness of project evaluation?

## Engaging young people

This project focuses on engaging young people in evaluation. But the active involvement of young people in evaluation is unlikely to succeed in isolation. Our starting point is to consider the extent to which the active involvement of young people is central to the Fund, its programmes and projects.

At a corporate level, the Fund identifies certain **key values** as informing its work:

- working strategically,
- social inclusion, equality and diversity,
- working in partnership,

---

<sup>3</sup> Children's fund; guidance on objectives, target setting, local monitoring and evaluation, November 2001

- being a good funder,
- being accountable and providing value for money,
- sustainable development, and
- learning.

While the active participation of young people is clearly not an explicit value, participation can be seen as underpinning most of these values, notably accountability, ensuring social inclusion and learning.

Numerous organisations have identified ***principles for actively involving young people***. Government departments<sup>4</sup> have agreed a set of Core Principles to guide their actions in this area and provide a standard against which performance can be judged (See Children and Young People's Unit and DfES pp 10-12 for further details):

- a visible commitment is made to involving young people, underpinned by appropriate resource to build a capacity to implement policies of participation;
- children and young people's involvement is valued;
- children and young people have an equal opportunity to get involved; and
- policies and standards for the participation of children and young people are provided, evaluated and continuously improved.

These are similar to the five key principles for active involvement of young people identified by the National Youth Agency/Connexions service, relating to accountability, diversity, valuing young people, involvement backed by adequate resources and systems for monitoring and improvement.<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup> Learning to listen; Core principles for the involvement of children and young people November 2001 Children and Young People's Unit/ DfES

<sup>5</sup> The Carnegie Young People Initiative has developed a fact sheet for practitioners which emphasises how to foster the active involvement of young people. These are considered more fully in the section on factors influencing the active involvement of young people.

## The Fund's values and active user involvement

The Fund's key values provide the foundation upon which the **aims and objectives of individual programmes** are built.<sup>6</sup> For example, the aims of the **activities for young people** initiative are outlined as follows in the evaluation specification:

"The initiative aims to promote continuity of contact between participants and education, youth and careers services in order to help those young people to make more informed and confident choices about their future.

"As a result of participation it is hoped that young people will report:

- higher subsequent levels of participation in further education training and jobs with training,
- social gains such as more responsible attitudes and increased citizenship skill, increased confidence, team working, communication and leadership skills, and
- other intended and unintended benefits, such as lower levels of offending, new interests and exposure to people from different backgrounds."

Again full user/beneficiary/participant involvement is not an explicit aim of the initiative, although applicants to the programme in England were scored on the following assessment criterion:

*The applicant can demonstrate that the quality of the grant scheme relies upon the contribution of users and beneficiaries.*

**4.1.** *How have you used the evaluation of the pilot projects to inform your application?*

*Explain how you have involved users in the planning for your grant scheme.*

**4.2** *What plans have you to involve users and beneficiaries in developing the scheme?*

- *Demonstrate your plans to involve users in the planning and implementation of monitoring and evaluation processes.*
- *Show how users and beneficiaries will be represented within the formal structures of the grant scheme.*

Despite the importance of this criterion to the initial funding decision, involvement of users is not covered explicitly in requirements for project programme of activities and annual reporting arrangements.

There appears to be an inconsistency in how important this theme is regarded at different stages of the project life cycle; there is no apparent rationale for this. It may be that "user involvement" is overlooked because it is regarded a subordinate theme, below that of the Fund's key values and programme aims and objectives.

Some organisations specify explicit **priorities for research** in addition to corporate values and programme aims. For example, the importance of the perspectives of those being researched is regarded as a research priority for the Joseph Rowntree Foundation, which states: "JRF has a

---

<sup>6</sup> The PE and Sports programme specifies that all projects will be required to meet some or all of the six key outcomes. These include "collaboration, cooperation and partnership between schools and their communities" which can be closely associated involving users and participants- though not necessarily.

commitment to exploring ways of ensuring that people central to the research or development project are involved in, and empowered by, the process, e.g. service users, young people”.

There remains a practical question regarding the potential for full user participation in projects of short duration. **Activities for young people** (in England) aims to engage school-leavers in summer activities that include outdoor adventure, arts and sport. Particular focus is placed on targeting school-leavers who are at risk of social exclusion and of losing touch with education, training and employment opportunities. Funded projects offer guidance and advice to young people about further education, training and career options.

Developing “user involvement” in projects (such as involvement in planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation processes, representation in the formal structures of the grant scheme) takes time and considerable effort from all parties.

To be worthwhile, rather than tokenistic, it must offer benefits to those young people over and above those benefits they would gain from participation in the project activities. Given the short timescale and the busy programme of activities on offer, it is questionable whether full user involvement is an achievable objective for these projects.

This issue will be addressed in further depth in later sections of this report. However it is worth noting that if full user involvement in planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation of AYP projects is unlikely, then involvement in national evaluation exercises is also likely to be limited.

## Initial considerations

- How do the Fund’s values articulate with principles of active user involvement?
- Should “active participation” be promoted as a key value of the Fund, a feature of funded projects or a theme of research and evaluation?
- How can active involvement of users be promoted in projects of a limited timescale, notably in **activities for young people**?

## Involving young people in evaluation at different stages

The purpose of involving young people in evaluation is to ensure that the views of young people are considered as part of this process. Young people can be involved in evaluation in a number of ways. It is useful to consider the potential for involvement at different stages of the project, for example:

- How can we involve young people in the planning of the evaluation?
- What role should young people play in the conduct of the evaluation?
- How might young people be involved in monitoring the evaluation exercise and reviewing its outcomes, for instance through membership of a project steering group?

Involving young people during the planning stage is vital if their involvement is to have a significant influence over the evaluation process. A recent National Youth Agency project<sup>7</sup> that recruited young people as researchers found that influence of young people on the research process was limited because they were engaged after the research questions had been selected.

This would suggest that young people should be involved from the early stages in project evaluation. It is however useful to consider whether this is necessary in relation to national programme evaluations. In the latter, the role of young people is more akin to that of a stakeholder, whereas young people can be seen as partners in the project evaluation process. However there have been instances where funding bodies have sought to investigate the perspective of young people at the feasibility stage of a national programme evaluation.<sup>8</sup>

## **Involving young people in evaluation at different levels**

At each stage of a project – be it a local research project or a national evaluation exercise – there are a range of roles that young people can play. For example in the planning stage, young people could be represented within the main project steering group, they could conduct research on the priorities for evaluation or they could be consulted by researchers on those priorities. These three levels of involvement correspond to an involvement at strategic (such as research director), operational (such as research worker) or user level (research subject).

Different roles imply a different level of commitment from young people and those who work with them. For example young people who take on the role of researchers will need training on research methods and protocols. However in projects where young people acted as researchers<sup>9</sup> and interviewed other young people, this was found to elicit more accurate and honest responses from the interviewees and was considered an effective method of research.

Young people who participate in project steering groups may be expected to make a time commitment that exceeds that the duration of projects they are involved in. There is evidence (taken from regeneration projects rather than evaluation projects)<sup>10</sup> that young people require more support and training than adult volunteers in order to participate effectively in such groups.

It is important that young people are given clear guidance on why their involvement is sought, what their involvement would entail, the expected time commitment and the support they will receive. The Carnegie Young People Initiative<sup>11</sup> has produced fact sheets that draw upon research and advise practitioners how to foster the involvement of young people in projects and factors to consider when consulting young people throughout the project lifecycle and associated evaluation.

By their very nature, **programme evaluations** tend to be more complex, dealing with more abstract considerations and operating over longer timescales than many **project evaluation**

---

7 Youth researching youth: the triumph and success peer research project by Alan France, National Youth Agency

8 Children's Fund Feasibility Study, 2002 Children and Young People's Unit/ DfES

9 Peer Research Project p 59 Youth empowerment strategy 1999 Summer University in Hackney

10 Including Young people in Urban Regeneration, 1999 Policy press, Joseph Rowntree Foundation

11 Fact sheet on consulting young people, Carnegie Young People Initiative 1999; Fact sheet on involving young people, Carnegie Young People Initiative 1999

processes. Whereas with involvement in project evaluations, the payoff to young people is more concrete and immediate (such as improvements to the project), there is little intrinsic reward to participation in programme evaluation – although extrinsic rewards can be made available. Within project evaluations, there may be more opportunities for young people to play a fuller role as project partners, whereas within programme evaluations, young people are one group within a wider community of stakeholders whose views should be considered.

## **Using active forms of consultation**

Some forms of consultation place the research subject in a more active role than others. A questionnaire, for example, tends to place the research subject in the role of passive respondent rather than active participant, with the researcher specifying what questions are asked, the wording of each question, the range of prompts available and the format for acceptable answers.

In contrast participants can play a more active role in focus group discussions. The facilitator needs to manage the discussion – supporting the group members in their exploration of the research themes – so that individual participants can express themselves more freely than through a structured interaction.

Consultation methods such as focus groups discussions, can offer a rich source of qualitative data and are more likely to foster a sense of involvement and ownership amongst participants. However they can be costly to run and time consuming to set up. They offer researchers insights into the views of young people, but rarely provide an indication of how widely held those views are.

Thus questionnaires thus remain important tools for collecting quantitative information and are also useful in getting a representational input from young people. Questionnaires can be used to gauge views of a larger number of people with relative ease and little expense. Many researchers do incorporate a pilot phase in the development of questionnaires to ensure that the language, tone and sometimes visual appearance of questionnaires is accessible to the sample population.

A critical point with questionnaires is that they do not require a substantial time commitment on the part of the research subject. For short-life projects in which young people make a limited personal investment, questionnaires can often provide the best way of getting feedback.

Both questionnaires and focus groups are widely used in evaluation projects. Other mechanisms for information gathering include:

- formal methods, such as interviews, questionnaires, computer based surveys,
- informal methods such as telephone hot lines, websites, suggestion boxes, graffiti walls, one-to-ones and use of existing written records by the organisation,
- focus groups, and
- creative approaches to consultation, such as role play, drama, video, photography, open days, residential and/or observations of group processes.

Whether one is planning an evaluation at the level of a project or a programme, it is important that the research methods selected are young people friendly and sensitive to the age of respondents, their development and other needs.<sup>12</sup>

Some methods are more suited to an exploration of qualitative themes whilst others are better for collecting quantitative data. Creative approaches are more often used in the context of project self-review and evaluation – for instance, young people might show how their feelings changed throughout the duration of a project through the medium of dance.

Some methods take considerable time and skill to design and deliver and may present further challenges during analysis and reporting. Others methods are more appropriate for use with certain research subjects (such as those with English language difficulties). For these reasons, it is regarded as good practice to use a combination of the methods for collecting information.

Care should be taken in the preparation and conduct of consultations.<sup>13</sup> Young people will respond better in discussion and focus groups if preparation and planning has been thorough (including a pilot stage, exercises that are kept simple and varied, consideration of the range of users are considered, use of feedback before finalising, and full briefing of facilitators). Sessions should be delivered in a genuine, empathetic and non-judgemental way and data should be recorded accurately with confidentiality maintained at all times.

All young people on the Fund's programmes should have equal opportunity to contribute to the evaluation process. However some groups of young people are more difficult to reach than others and researchers will need to consider how the views of these groups can be included within the evaluation exercise.

Most research suggests it is important to identify the right intermediary who has a relationship of trust with those young people. These agencies can then introduce the researchers to the young people and in some cases help in the conduct of the evaluation e.g. by arranging translation services, administering a questionnaire or hosting a consultation activity. It is however important to bear in mind that the involvement of any intermediaries can have an impact on the independence of an evaluation.

Some young people – and some adults – enjoy the process of consultation, but for many it is seen as a chore. Consultations can be fun, especially if they involve creative methods. They can be interesting, especially if they are seen as addressing an immediate concern or experience of young people. But in many cases consultations are something to be endured with little expectation of benefit. The use of incentives is increasingly seen as a way of recognising the value of users' contributions and encouraging young people (and adults) to provide evaluation feedback.

Guidance from Connexions<sup>14</sup> on this issue specifies that evaluation exercises should be conducted in line with guidance on anti-oppressive practice, skills and qualities for active involvement, emotional literacy and promotion of equal opportunities.

---

<sup>12</sup> Evaluating young people's participation in public decision making David Cutler, Jan 2001 Carnegie Young People Initiative

<sup>13</sup> Fact sheet on consulting young people, 1999, Carnegie Young People Initiative

<sup>14</sup> The active involvement of young people in the Connexions Service; a practitioners guide 2002 DfES, Connexions, National Youth Agency

The following questions should be considered both in relation to project and programme evaluations.

### **Initial considerations**

- How are young people involved at different stages of the evaluation process, such as in establishing evaluation themes, in developing consultation tools?
- Do evaluations consider wider impact of projects such as the more intangible and difficult to measure dimensions of personal development, social cohesion, active citizenship, as well as those impacts that may be easier to measure, such as staying-on rates, educational achievement, or employment?
- Are young people involved at strategic and operational levels as well as at the level of research subjects? For instance, are young people involved in the steering group? Do young people contribute to the conduct of the research?
- Is a range of consultation methods employed?
- Do the consultative methods being used encourage the active involvement of young people?
- Is information on the evaluation presented in a way that will appeal to young people?
- Has the use of incentives been considered as a means of encouraging young people to participate in the evaluation process?
- What efforts are being made to involve hard-to-reach young people? What help is provided to involve people with learning difficulties, with English language difficulties, with physical or psychological access barriers?

### **Case studies**

Case studies are often included within evaluation studies as a means of providing a deeper insight into local practices and experiences. They are often used to highlight an example or aspect of good practice.

In recent guidance produced by National Youth Agency<sup>15</sup>, case studies are categorised as either demonstrating emerging, established or advanced good practice. This is noteworthy as these categories highlight the importance of project led evaluation and the full involvement of participants in achieving established and advanced good practice in youth work.

### **Initial considerations**

- What criteria should be used in the selection and analysis of case studies in national evaluations?
- How will the contribution of self-evaluation and user participation to local projects be addressed within the case studies?

---

<sup>15</sup> Youth work and study support; the code of practice September 2001, National Youth Agency

### 3 Key issues raised in interviews

#### Making young people heard

In the past, young people's voices were rarely heard in evaluations as these were generally set up to address the concerns of more powerful stakeholders – such as funding bodies. Today it is acknowledged that more effort is being made at a policy level to ensure evaluations recognise the value of young people's views as users of services.

Whilst evaluations generally serve an accountability function, some researchers are concerned that an obsession with measuring progress against objectives can lead to an over-reliance on quantitative research methods. Statistical analyses may comfort politicians, but if they measure dimensions that are seen as unimportant to young people, such evaluations will never be accountable to this key group.

There is then a concern amongst some researchers that more attention should be paid to employing a range of qualitative methods of consultation with young people in order to gain a deeper understanding of young people's views. Evaluation projects should ensure that sufficient time and resources are allocated to these critical activities.

#### Avoiding tokenism

To date, most evaluation projects that involve young people do so as consultation subjects rather than as research partners, consultants or managers. There are concerns that where young people have participated more fully in evaluations, this involvement can be tokenistic, often short term and less than representative.

Tokenism arises where the involvement of young people is “bolted on” to a project rather than something that arises from its central aims. A lack of clarity of purpose can lead to unrealistic expectations of the likely impact of young people's involvement.

It is questionable whether full user participation is practical in projects of short duration. The **activities for young people** programme in England aims to engage school leavers in summer activities that include outdoor adventure, arts and sport. Particular focus is placed on targeting school leavers who are at risk of social exclusion and of becoming out of touch with education, training and employment opportunities. Funded projects offer guidance and advice to young people about further education, training and career options.

Developing “user involvement” in projects (for instance, involvement in planning, delivery, monitoring and evaluation processes, representation in the formal structures of the grant scheme) takes time and considerable effort from all parties.

To be worthwhile, rather than tokenistic, it must offer benefits to those young people over and above those benefits they would gain from participation in the project activities. Given the short timescale and the busy programme of activities on offer, full user involvement may not be a practical objective for these projects: this would suggest that involvement of young people in national evaluation exercises is also likely to be limited.

## **Do evaluation themes matter to young people?**

Like adults, young people are more likely to want to participate in activities they see as interesting or relevant to them. Thus, to involve young people more fully in evaluation, there is the need to address young people's concerns in setting the evaluation themes. Researchers made a number of observations that relate to this issue. The more concrete, immediate and practical the focus of a consultation the easier it is to involve people, especially young people. Hence it is easier to involve young people in evaluations of local projects than in those of national programmes, as people are more familiar with the subject matter and are more likely to see the impact of their contribution.

Young people are not a uniform group and will hold divergent views and priorities. These often differ to those of other stakeholders. Researchers recognise the need for independent programme evaluation in which progress is measured against stated objectives, but also argue that evaluations should also include investigations of unintended and/or unplanned outcomes.

Initial phases of research can identify and explore unintended outcomes with users using qualitative research techniques, which can then be followed up through questionnaires. It is important that the widest cross section of young people is involved in setting evaluation themes as well as responding to the consultation.

## **Is the evaluation process “young people friendly”?**

Both the content and the process of evaluation will influence participation of adults and young people. The process should be fun and researchers friendly. The time commitment required should be limited and documentation attractive. Arrangements should make it easy for young people to participate and, where appropriate, incentives should be offered. If all these factors are considered more young people are likely to participate in the evaluation.

These factors are also likely to make the process more satisfying for young people and less likely to lead to a cynical response to involvement in the process. A further discussion of how the development and implementation of questionnaires and focus groups can be carried out to maximise accessibility to young people is provided in section 4.

## **Creating interest through variety**

There are many reasons for using different ways of involving young people in evaluation. Young people will demonstrate different levels of commitment to a project and may have competing demands on their time and both these factors will influence the extent to which young people want to get involved in evaluations.

For example, some young people may have a relatively low level of commitment to a project and only have time to complete a short questionnaire. A further group of young people, who have been involved in project planning and delivery, may wish to discuss their views and further evidence their commitment through participation in focus group discussions or interviews. Such young people may also be interested in fuller involvement as researchers, consultants and decision-makers (see section 5).

Some young people may prefer to express their views through the medium of the project. For example, dancers may prefer to show how their feelings and attitudes have changed as a result of their involvement in a project through performance and choreography. Such pieces of work

can create an eloquent visual representation of the impact of a project. It is also quite common for young workers to use short “fun” activities and games to help young people review progress during a wider programme of activities.

Whilst they may be difficult “to write up,” these techniques can have a transformative impact within projects and offer a channel for dialogue that would not otherwise exist.

Here the double challenge for practitioners and researchers is to not only offer young people a variety of ways of getting involved in evaluation but also developing the structures that will ensure that issues raised through different processes will be picked up and acted upon.

## **Providing briefings**

The principle of voluntary participation is central to respecting young people and the contribution they make to research and evaluation. The main purpose of briefing information is to help young people decide whether they want to participate in a project. Generally a briefing would explain the purpose of the evaluation, what young people would be asked to do, what will happen with that information, arrangements for feedback, as well as ethical issues such as consent, authority and confidentiality. If appropriate, the briefing may also explain any incentives available to participants.

Usually those that carry out the research are not responsible for the implementation of research findings. However from the young person’s perspective, this division of responsibility is not immediately apparent. This clarification of roles can be usefully highlighted in the briefing, which can help at the point of feedback.

There are often different views regarding the level of detail that should be offered to young people. Some will argue that young people need more information to make informed decisions, and others will argue that information should be kept to a minimum, as too much information will put young people off.

The use of a panel of young people as “critical readers” can help ensure that briefing materials are pitched at an appropriate level. Generally the length of the briefing should relate to the level of involvement being sought.

It is also important that the briefings do not “oversell” involvement, in an effort to recruit young people but offer a realistic explanation of the evaluation process and its likely impact.

Gatekeepers to young people will also need a briefing in advance of the involvement of young people in the evaluation process. Their views are likely to influence those of young people, so as their roles and information needs will differ, it is often worth developing a tailored briefing in order to reduce the likelihood of young people receiving misinformation about the evaluation prior to their formal briefing.

## **Providing feedback**

Providing feedback to young people is an important way of showing accountability and acknowledging the value of young people’s contributions to the evaluation.

All researchers agree that providing feedback can help counter the cynicism many young people feel about consultations. Many young people feel they have been “hung out to dry” by

researchers: that they are often consulted, but rarely listened to, that consultations are pointless as little changes.

Researchers suggest that it is difficult “to get feedback right” and that more work is needed investigate the impact of feedback on young people’s experience and involvement in evaluation.

These concerns relate to the content of feedback, its format, the level of detail, the timing and funding.

Researchers are not responsible for those decisions made and actions taken as a result of a consultation, but they are responsible for ensuring that research subjects get feedback on the project and its findings.

Feedback should be honest and realistic. Initial feedback from the researcher can summarise some key points that were learnt from the evaluation exercise. It can also flag up what will happen next and how subsequent decisions will be fed back.

The appropriate format for feedback will depend on the nature of the project and the characteristics and preferences of young people involved.

In most cases research reports address the priorities of the funding body and are written in a language that would make them inaccessible to young people. However some reports include direct quotes from young people and copies of these would be useful for feedback purposes as they would show that young people’s voices are central to the project.

Other feedback formats include:

- a summary of the research report for young people,
- feedback events,
- articles in project newsletters,
- use of project website,
- e-mailed correspondence,
- text messaging, and
- articles in wider media coverage.

As implied above, there is little evidence comparing the effectiveness of different forms of feedback in relation to different groups of young people. Anecdotal evidence suggests that attendance at feedback events is often low and that young people are not likely to read long reports.

It is likely that more young people will make a connection between feedback and the original consultation if feedback is delivered promptly. Where consultations employ electronic media, some feedback (for example, relating their responses to others) can be made available to respondents immediately.

The connection between consultation process and feedback is also more likely if both activities share a visual identity: for example if all documentation looks similar, using similar layout, graphics and sharing a common logo.

In some cases, researchers ask young people as part of the research process how they would like to be kept informed. This would appear to be good practice. However a problem facing researchers is that often research funding does not cover feedback as this happens after report is submitted and this clearly restricts the range of options open to researchers.

The scale of the evaluation will influence the formats of feedback available. For example the number of research subjects may restrict feedback available to subjects: sixty subjects may be relatively easy to track, but it may be more difficult to deliver feedback where subjects run into the thousands.

A related dimension is the distance between the individuals and the evaluators. For example in a small-scale local evaluation, a head teacher can provide immediate feedback to students who can often see the impact of the evaluation more easily. For larger projects, where the distance between the subject and the decision-makers is greater and the timescales for research longer, researchers need to look at other methods of providing feedback, such as the use of web pages to keep young people informed etc.

A further problem that influences feedback is where programmes have a transient population. This means that researchers need to identify ways of contacting people once they have left the programme – for instance it may be appropriate to collect postal details and/or to develop a media dissemination strategy. Furthermore, where programmes are run year on year, feedback relating to the previous years evaluation can be used as part of the briefing for subsequent years, explaining what happened last year and its impact on the way that the project runs.

There are obvious implications here for costs: as researchers often observed, involving young people in evaluation is expensive, taking time, training and considerable effort.

More research is needed to investigate the impact of feedback on young people's involvement.

## **Developing a consultation infrastructure**

Some researchers express concern about the additional burden that participation in evaluation consultations places on young people. Given the increasing number of consultations young people are asked to participate in, researchers express concerns about consultation overload.

Some suggest that instead of setting up consultation projects, there is a need to develop permanent long term structures – such as forums, panels and circle time – that encourage people to discuss and reflect upon their participation in wider society.

By establishing an infrastructure through which young people – and adults – are encouraged to comment on their experiences of citizenship, consultation on particular issues could become embedded within a wider cultural practice.

To make such structures work researchers would need to develop “voice-oriented practices” (for example, ways of recording and analysing spoken feedback) such that young people's views are listened to and acted upon.

Whilst this issue clearly falls beyond the boundary of this project, this joined-up solution could provide a way of consulting with young people on a range of issues, that is easier for young people and offer considerable opportunities for cost-effectiveness. More research is needed on how such structures might be established and maintained.

## 4 Effective consultation

This section provides practical advice regarding development of topic guides for focus groups and the design of questionnaires. Its main focus is with the conduct of **national programme** evaluation.

A strong recommendation arising from this research is that programme evaluation should include an **exploratory phase** during which evaluation themes are finalised. This phase provides an opportunity for young people to influence those themes addressed in the main evaluation. Whilst it is accepted that funding bodies will have certain outcomes that they wish to evaluate, involving young people in this initial stage is seen as critical to recognising the value of their involvement and countering tokenism. Focus groups can be used as part of this initial stage to help identify evaluation themes that are important to young people. They can also form part of the main evaluation and be used to explore the viewpoints of different groups of young people in relation to these themes.

As already discussed young people are a diverse group with different characteristics, priorities and views. It is therefore vital that an appropriate range of young people is **sampled** at each stage of the evaluation. The Fund's programmes often target young people who are disaffected with mainstream services or who have low educational attainment. Within these broad categories are groups of young people who are difficult to reach, such as those for whom English is an additional language, homeless young people or those who do not attend school, college or participate in youth services.

It will not be possible to represent all sub-groups within the initial exploratory phase, but it is important that researchers should seek to involve as representative a sample of young people as possible at every stage of the evaluation process. Researchers will thus need accurate information about the number and size of key groups of young people within the programme population, in order to establish appropriate sampling frameworks for each stage of the research.

In agreeing appropriate targets and sample sizes, the issue of accessing **“difficult to reach”** young people is brought to the fore. Many young people can be reached through school and colleges, and researchers will often work with intermediaries and agencies in order to reach disaffected young people. Examples of such groups include youth workers, community groups, cultural and faith groups, other charitable and voluntary organisations, and those that provide housing, social and health care for vulnerable young people.

Working with these groups can help researchers identify the right young people to talk to. The extent to which these intermediaries can work alongside researchers as part of the evaluation process will depend on the nature of the evaluation, the extent to which the intermediary is involved in the provision of that programme, and the relationship between the intermediary and the young person. In cases where researchers are dependent on the involvement of the intermediary (for instance where young people need chaperones or need language support), the researcher remains responsible for **conduct of the research**. It is up to the researcher to ensure that young people are treated with respect, that their views are valued and that principles of trust, consent, authority, anonymity and confidentiality are maintained.

## Focus groups

Focus groups are generally regarded as unbeatable for generating ideas: they are seen as more fruitful than one-to-one work, less intimidating for young people and more cost-effective. Focus groups often suit young people best as they give them a say, without taking too much time. Participants in focus groups play an active role in consultation and can express themselves more freely than through a structured interviews. Focus groups can provide a rich source of qualitative data and are more likely to foster a sense of involvement and ownership amongst participants.

On the down side, focus groups can be costly to run and time-consuming to set up. Whilst they offer researchers insights into the views of young people, they rarely provide an indication of how representative those views are.

Focus groups tend to work best when the subject matter is of direct relevance to young people, such as when reflecting on one's own experience of a project. When working with young people many researchers prefer to employ open structured topic guides, encouraging young people to reflect on their experiences. For example, participants might be asked what they liked and disliked about a project and why.

Although there are no hard and fast rules, most researchers suggest that focus groups of young people should:

- include about five participants,
- consider no more than four main questions,
- take no longer than an hour,
- provide young people with appropriate briefings,
- ensure that participation is voluntary,
- allow time to seek parental consent for children and vulnerable young adults, and
- make appropriate arrangements for feedback.

Whilst it is generally useful to know little about individual subjects prior to research so as to avoid pre-judging their contributions, it is important to consider salient characteristics of young people in the design of topic guides. For example, researchers may find it helpful to consult with youth workers or agency staff, on appropriate use of language, so as to avoid any misunderstandings during discussions. For instance, what do young people called the project? What other key terms should the researcher be aware of? Information on literacy levels of young people, though not necessarily an issue during the conduct of the focus group, should be considered in the development of briefing and feedback materials.

There are often many things one would like to discuss with young people, but it is often best to focus discussion on things of greatest relevance to young people and relate to their direct experience in order to maintain their interest. Where topic guides relate to more abstract notions and hypothetical choices, young people are generally less forthcoming and focus groups become less productive.

If participants have limited use of spoken English, groups can be arranged with an interpreter. This can affect costs as not only will interpreters need payment but also appropriate training.

Most researchers found that it was increasingly the norm for researchers to run focus groups single-handedly. However, where funds allow, it is seen as helpful if a separate note-taker is able to participate in focus groups. Some researchers suggest that it is often helpful if the facilitator has a research focus, whilst the note-taker and/or secondary facilitator has experience of working with young people.

Such arrangements can lead to more learning for both groups, contribute to capacity-building and can be seen as strengthening the legitimacy of findings. Where young people have been identified through an agency or youth group, on some occasions it may be appropriate to involve agency staff in the focus group, for example to support young people with language or emotional difficulties. However it is important that all those involved in running focus groups are adequately trained, so that arrangements do not compromise the independence of the evaluation process.

Whilst some researchers advocate tape recording all focus groups sessions, other see taping as an intrusive and intimidating process that can operate as a barrier to an open exchange between researchers and young people. In many cases key discussion points are recorded on flip sheets either by the researcher or the note taker. Recording in this way has many advantages. It offers a transparent record, enabling researchers to probe effectively and offering opportunities for participants to challenge researchers notes. However where the facilitator is also the note-taker, this may mean that some comments made by participants are missed. On a practical point, it also means that researchers need to be given time to write up the research interaction.

Focus groups of young people, though fruitful, can be difficult to manage. In some cases young people know each other and it can be hard to keep them focused. Whilst researchers recognise that young people need an opportunity to challenge and let off steam, there are occasions when a group is too boisterous to control. There are also times when researchers are required to handle difficult and ethically challenging situations, such as when a research participant makes racist comments or appears to be bullying another. Some times more mundane health and safety considerations may present a problem for researchers.

It is of prime importance that researchers have the skills and training to be able to handle such challenging situations. Researchers have a duty of care to protect research participants and they must also protect their own professional positions. When they are not able to control a session, or the focus of discussions is lost, or standards of conduct are not maintained, or there is a significant breach of health and safety practices, researchers should foreshorten the discussion, making it clear to participants what has happened and why.

Researchers suggest that focus groups should be kept small, some suggesting a maximum of five participants. In smaller groups it can be easier for facilitators to attend to the contribution of quieter participants and manage the more noisy contributions. Some researchers point to the advantages of working with intermediaries to identify potential participants, and suggest what combinations of individuals would be more likely to work than others.

Whilst all researchers stress that the decision to participate in the evaluation process must remain that of the young person, the principle of voluntary involvement, though critical, needs careful management. Appealing for volunteers is likely to attract outgoing young people rather

than their quieter friends. Here again, guidance from those working with young people can help researchers ensure that all young people are briefed in such a way that gives them all an equal opportunity to participate.

In some cases researchers need to build relationships of trust with gatekeepers in order to gain access to young people: some gatekeepers are reluctant to allow access to young people fearing that this could have a negative impact on their own relationship with them. It is important that sufficient time is allowed for researchers to build relationships with gatekeepers.

In some cases these fears are based on a lack of understanding of the evaluation, and researchers carrying out evaluation are seen as outsiders and are feared by practitioners. Often in new programmes, practitioners do not feel secure in their own roles and feel vulnerable to potential criticisms arising from evaluation process.

The **briefing** that young people (and those that work with them) receive on the purpose and scope of the evaluation exercise is thus very important. There is a range of practice regarding the scope and format of briefings. In some cases considerable efforts are made to offer young people the opportunity of making an informed decision. Researchers provide an advance briefing for those working with young people, and handouts for young people that can be discussed in advance of the focus group.

On the day of the consultation exercise, the researcher is introduced to the young people and young people are encouraged to share their initial thoughts about the exercise and ask questions before making a commitment to participate.

In other cases, the first young people hear of the consultation is when they come face to face with the researcher and are “encouraged” to get involved. A justification for this ambush-style approach is that if young people are forewarned they will not show up. Some researchers suggest that this approach is patronising to young people and can highlight a failure of communication between researchers and practitioners.

Where there is the suggestion that participation in evaluation is seen as a burden by young people and something to be avoided, that observation should feed into the evaluation. In such cases the use of incentives could be considered as a means of encouraging young people to participate in the process such that it might be improved in future years.

More research is needed on how briefings can be designed to encourage a sense of partnership between intermediaries and researchers such that young people are encouraged to participate in evaluations. Providing the opportunity for young people to ask questions before making commitment to participate in a focus group is seen as an important signal to young people that their views are respected and their contributions will be valued.

It is important that researchers are introduced to young people through trusted intermediaries, and it is also suggested that researchers need to “prove their neutrality” to young people during the initial briefing. Some suggest that this perception is vital to building a relationship of confidence and trust between the research and the research subject.

Some researchers suggest that establishing a programme of rolling focus groups involving different groups of young people enables more young people to be directly consulted and can prove more cost-effective to set up. Though not statistically representative, a rolling programme of focus group discussions can still provide a purposive sample of young people.

A full discussion of the importance of feedback is given in the previous section. The type of feedback to be provided to young people is something that researchers must plan from the outset. This will involve considering the following options (and examples):

- Content – will one report meet the needs of all groups, or should tailored summaries of key groups be considered (such as vertical slicing)?
- Format – face-to-face, print- or web-based feedback?
- Timing – one-off or a series of updates?
- Resourcing – are time and money available?

More research is needed to investigate the impact of feedback on young people's involvement.

## **Questionnaires**

Questionnaires are a highly valued research tool. Whilst focus groups can generate ideas and help researchers explore the subtleties of an issue, a well-designed questionnaire can enable researchers to quantify those views that are widespread and strongly held.

With questionnaires, control rests with the researcher who generally specifies what questions are asked, the wording, prompts and acceptable answer format. The advantage of this approach is that it asks respondents for relatively minimal effort – assuming that the number of questions is limited. The cost of developing, administering and analysing questionnaires is also relatively low. At the end of the day questionnaires can offer a quantitative evaluation of programme outcomes that is often highly prized by many stakeholders.

The use of questionnaires within an evaluation would typically follow an exploratory phase in which evaluation themes are confirmed. In many cases these themes are further investigated in parallel to the quantitative research, through qualitative work in focus groups, in-depth interviews and, sometimes, case-study development.

The value and utility of a questionnaire rests on its careful development. This will depend on a detailed understanding of the evaluation themes and the characteristics of the target population. Numerous factors need to be considered as part of this process. These include:

- What are the most important questions to ask?
- How much time will respondents spend on completing the questionnaire?
- Will open or closed questioning be used?
- What language is appropriate for use with young people?
- What design will appeal to the target group?
- What pilot arrangements are envisaged?
- How will research subjects be identified and contacted?
- What briefings will be offered?
- How will questionnaires be distributed?
- How will responses be collected?

- Will questionnaires be administered or self-completion?
- How many people will be consulted?
- What is the target response rate?
- Will incentives be used to increase response rates?
- What arrangements will be made for analysis and reporting?
- What forms of feedback will be made available?

Researchers note that they often urge clients to cut out unnecessary questions in order to maintain the focus on those of critical importance. The rationale is that too many questions are off-putting to respondents and may discourage young people from thinking about the important questions and answering these carefully.

Most researchers suggest that ten minutes is the most we can expect young people to spend completing a questionnaire and remind us that young people with lower literacy levels will take longer to complete questionnaires than other young people.

The type of question, and the type of answer it requires, will have an obvious impact on the time takes to respond. Closed questions that encourage respondents to tick one of two boxes are the quickest for people to answer. The more boxes there are to choose from, or the more ticks required, the longer the question takes to answer. Where people are asked to rank their responses, response times are increased. Open-ended questions (where a subject is asked to give a response in their own words), take more time to answer properly and are often used in pilot questionnaires as a means of generating appropriate response frameworks.

It is important to ensure that young people easily understand wording used within questionnaires. This can be a matter of using language appropriate to given literacy levels. It may also involve being sensitive to the language used by young people, without resorting to mimicry. Researchers should show respect for the language young people use, but adopting that language is likely to be seen as patronising and tokenistic.

Similarly careful consideration should be given to the design of questionnaires. A concern expressed by some is that evaluation tools (such as questionnaires) can remind young people of school-type assessments and this may put them off participating in evaluation. The issue of design is one that requires sensitive handling, as young people become, increasingly, more sophisticated users of design.

Efforts to make questionnaires look “fun” may be rejected by young people as patronising. However it is likely that young people will respond more favourably to questionnaires that look good, that is, they are well laid-out, not overly detailed and use colour. Although evidence is anecdotal, the suggestion is that young people may also be more likely to complete a questionnaire that looks professional and is well designed.

Piloting a draft questionnaire will often identify those questions that are most likely to be misunderstood, those questions that are most likely to yield interesting and insightful responses and those that do not. Piloting can help identify those questions to cut from the questionnaire, and those to rephrase and restructure.

Referring back to the issue of representative sampling, it is important that piloting arrangements involve as broad and representative a range of young people as possible, so that refinements can be based on robust insights. Before establishing pilot arrangements researcher must already have agreed how subjects will be identified and contacted. These issues were covered in the discussion relating to preparations for focus groups.

When consulting with young people, especially those who are disaffected or with low educational attainment, it is generally regarded as good practice for questionnaires to be administered, often by intermediaries such as youth workers. The role of the administrator is to support those young people who wish to take part in the completion of the questionnaire rather than to influence their views. An advantage of administered questionnaires is that it simplifies participation for young people: time is provided for young people to complete the questionnaire and the administrator will also collect in responses.

Researchers are responsible for briefing these practitioners, explaining their role and how it contributes to the evaluation process. This briefing should address the need for informed consent from young people and voluntary participation. The briefing should also encourage practitioners to provide feedback to evaluators on the issues and questions raised by young people. Finally it should outline arrangements for feedback to young people and practitioners.

Some researchers suggest that in recent projects a given questionnaire can be distributed to young people through a variety of different methods. For example, in one project researchers used the same questionnaire as part of a conference, on visits to schools and distributed by e-mail to a panel of young people.

The flexibility that questionnaires offer researchers in terms of how they can be distributed is one attraction of this research tool, but there may be risks associated with using different distribution methods within one project. Each means of distribution is likely to introduce different intervening variables, the impact of which may be difficult to track.

There are different views amongst researchers regarding the merits of e-mailing questionnaires. In some cases the skills required by the medium were beyond that of the respondents, with some respondents forgetting to return attached files and others not saving their responses and hence returning blank attachments. Other researchers, however, favour use of e-mail for brief surveys, especially if the key questions are included within the e-mail rather than in attachments.

Some researchers suggest that young people often like simple computer-based questionnaires and enjoy the experience of successfully using technology. This acts as a positive reinforcement for them. Others point to the availability of technology that enables the automatic analysis of on-line responses. Automatic analysis saves researchers time and also offers respondent the opportunity to get some form of limited immediate feedback on how their responses compare with others.

Efforts are made to formulate questions that are easily understood so as to encourage higher response rates and more meaningful responses. One of the most significant benefits of the questionnaire is that it offers young people the opportunity to express their views without making a significant investment in terms of time and effort.

However there are instances where young people are not interested in participating in a consultation but there is a real need for their views to be considered. This is particularly the

case when responses are needed from young people who do not use mainstream services. In such cases researchers (and their clients) may wish to consider the value of incentives. The incentive of participation in a prize draw or the incentive of gift vouchers can have a marked impact on response rates for postal questionnaires.

If a questionnaire has been well designed, and incorporates questions (and answering frameworks) that are understood by respondents, analysis can be straightforward, in some cases even automated. The use of automated procedures for data input and computerised statistical packages is standard procedure when dealing with large number of questionnaire returns.

## 5 Self-evaluation by projects

### Involving young people as researchers, consultants and partners in decision-making

A fuller involvement of young people in evaluation can emerge from an active participation in the planning, delivery and management of projects. This section focuses on how young people can become more fully involved in evaluation, principally at project level.

Young people can be involved in evaluation in a number of ways. For example, young people can be involved in setting the strategic direction of an evaluation through involvement in steering groups and project-level decision-making bodies. Young people can also be involved at an operational level in the conduct of research. For example, young people can develop research instruments and conduct research amongst their peers.

Given appropriate training and support young people can be involved at all stages of research. However this is not always necessary or desirable. It is important to bear in mind why are we seeking the involvement of these young people and to question whether the proposed level of involvement makes the most effective use of the young people's time.

- Could the young people involved have got more out of a different kind of involvement in the project?
- Could the project have collected evaluative feedback from a wider range of young people through other, perhaps more cost-effective means?

One alternative to use of young people as researchers is the use of young people as consultants. For example, a project evaluation might be led by an adult researcher, but employ a small group of young people trained as “critical friends” whose role is to comment on documentation and proposals developed by the researcher. Whilst the need for training (and manageability) is likely to restrict the size of this group (and hence its potential representativeness), such panels can play an important role in ensuring that evaluation materials are “young people friendly.”

### Value of creativity

Choosing the right consultation method will depend on a number of factors, including the purpose of the consultation, the time and resources available, the numbers, age and experience of young people and their role in the evaluation. Although the previous section focused on national evaluations, focus groups and questionnaires are widely used in project self-evaluation.

Within many projects, self-evaluation activities form part of everyday project reflection and review activities, helping practitioners to improve upon their delivery. In this more informal setting, **creative approaches** to consultation are often used.

Examples of creative methods include role-play, drama, video, photography, open days, residencies, and observations of group processes. Examples highlighted during this research include:

- Young people on a dance course who put on a show to demonstrate how their feelings changed throughout the duration of a project through the medium of dance.

- 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.
- “Cared for” young people are encouraged to use photographs and momentos to help them highlight important issues relating to their care in case conferences.
- 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 would you describe it, do you like it, what do you like about it, what would you like to do to it, how could you make it better?
- Developing and putting on a play about an important issue such as bullying.
- Acting out a tug of war to highlight to politicians some of the pressures young people are under and why they do not vote.
- Acting 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.

Use of such methods can provide useful opportunities for involving groups of young people who rarely contribute to evaluation, such as those with English language difficulties. Some creative methods also take considerable time and skill to design and deliver and may present further challenges during analysis and reporting.

As noted previously, it is regarded as good practice to use a combination of methods for collecting information.

Whilst these creative approaches offer the researcher – and the research subject – something a bit different, there are also often opportunities for traditional consultation activities – such as group interviews, focus groups, workshop, conferences and residentials – to be enhanced by **creative approaches to delivery**. Often the choice of method is less important than the way that method is carried out.

For example, ice-breaker activities are often used in consultation events. Although they are not a form of consultation in themselves, they provide an example of how researchers can enliven the evaluation process and make it more interesting for participants.

Guidance on consulting with young people emphasises the importance of opportunities for fun and interest, for instance, allowing opportunity for movement, keeping activities short and using different mediums for consultation (such as face-to-face, telephone, web -based, use of video and audio recording,, and using cut-and-paste activities).

In addition to employing a range of different methods, researchers also need to be positive in how they deal with young people and the task in hand. Researchers need to be creative and flexible in their responses to young people, recognising that an approach that suits one group will not suit all.

## Sources for guidance on self-evaluation

There are many organisations that provide guidance on how to consult with young people and how to involve young people in the delivery of projects (which generally includes involvement in project self-evaluation and review). These include:

- Carnegie Young People's Initiative
- Save the Children
- Funky dragon
- Joseph Rowntree Foundation
- National Youth Agency
- British Youth Council.

There are also many organisations that provide guidance on evaluation, ranging from professional associations, research bodies, practitioner groups and funding bodies. The following organisations are examples of those that provide guidance on improving arrangements for self-evaluation that are relevant to the context of this project:

- Connexions
- Children and Young People's Unit
- Department for Education and Skills
- Carnegie Young People Initiative.

The wide availability of guidance on evaluation is, however, a mixed blessing. Practitioners have neither the time nor often the inclination to wade through such a wide range of sources. It should also be remembered that young people are not the only stakeholders that local projects will need to involve in evaluation: some projects may also seek guidance on how to involve other stakeholders such as local employers.

The suggestion is that practitioners need a clear understanding of the requirements for self-evaluation and examples of good practice. It would also be helpful if guidance clarified the relationship between local self-evaluation by projects and national evaluations of programmes. It is recommended that the Fund should clarify its requirements for evaluation. It is also suggested that the Fund should work with those agencies that involve young people (and other stakeholders) in evaluation to identify appropriate guidance and make this available through the web or via signposting.

## 6 Recommendations

These recommendations are based on the review of literature, interviews with practitioners and discussions with Fund staff.

1. Guidance should clarify requirements for self-evaluation within projects and the relationship between this and national arrangements for programme evaluation. Guidance should also highlight the value of involving young people in evaluation and refer to guidance on best practice. The Fund should consider publishing or providing links to such materials through its website.
2. The level of involvement of young people in the evaluation process should be informed by the aims of the project and how young people participate in the projects. Where involvement is limited, evaluation arrangements should recognise this, and make it easy for young people to contribute to consultations.
3. Young people should be consulted prior to establishing the parameters of national programme evaluation in order to maximise perceived relevance. A separate exploratory phase should be identified within the research specification to achieve this.
4. Evaluation studies should employ 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.
5. The way in which consultation activities are carried out can have a greater impact on the involvement of young people than the methods chosen. The Fund should ensure that those researchers who conduct evaluations on its behalf are committed to involving young people and have the skills and training to make this happen.
6. Research is needed to investigate how initial briefings and feedback provided to young people (and those who work with them) can be made more effective, especially in the context of participation in short-life projects.
7. Whilst this issue clearly falls beyond the boundary of this project, 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.

## Annex: References

Carnegie Young People Initiative (2001) Factsheet on consulting young people,

Source: Alison Ritchie, *Our Lives consultation final report*, Save the Children Scotland Programme, 1999

Carnegie Young People Initiative (2002) Factsheet on involving young people, Sources: Phil Tressider, *Empowering Children and Young People*, Save the Children, 1998

*Involving Young People in Regeneration, 1999* Joseph Rowntree Foundation,

Carnegie Young People Initiative (December 2001) Young People and Public Decision Making: What do we know already, what more do we need to know? Carnegie Young People Initiative

Children and Young People's Unit (November 2001) *Children's fund; Guidance on objectives, target setting, local monitoring and evaluation*, DfES

Children and Young People's Unit (2002) *Children's Fund Feasibility Study*, DfES

Children and Young People's Unit (November 2001) Learning to listen; Core principles for the involvement of children and young people, DfES

Connexions (2001) The active involvement of young people in the Connexions Service; a practitioner's guide Connexions/ National Youth Agency/ DfES

Connexions (2001) A little book of evaluation, Connexions /DfES

Cutler, D. (2001) Evaluating young people's participation in public decision making, Carnegie Young People Initiative

Cutler, D. (2002) Taking the initiative: promoting young people's involvement in public decision making in the UK- update, Carnegie Young People Initiative

Fitzpatrick, S et al (1998) *Including Young people in Urban Regeneration*, Joseph Rowntree Foundation /Policy press

France, A. (1998) Youth researching youth: the triumph and success peer research project, National Youth Agency

Kirby, P. ( 2001) *Involving Children and Young people in Regeneration; Learning from Young voices*, Groundwork UK and Save the Children

Kirby,P. & Bryson, S. ( 2002) *Measuring the magic? Evaluating and researching young people's [articipation in public decision making Carnegie Young People Initiative*

National Youth Agency (2001) *Youth work and study support; the code of practice*, National Youth Agency

New Opportunities Fund (2002) *Activities for Young People:Guidance Notes*

New Opportunities Fund (2002) *Activities for Young People: What happen's next pack*

New Opportunities Fund (2002) *Activities for Young People: Evaluation specification*

New Opportunities Fund (2002) *PE and sport programme: Guidance Notes*

New Opportunities Fund (2002) *PE and sport programme: Evaluation specification*

Save the Children (2001) *Children and Participation. Research, monitoring and evaluation with children and young people*

Save the Children (2001) *Learning to Listen. Consulting children and young people with disabilities*