

YouthPrint Evaluation

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Executive Summary

Background

This independent evaluation was undertaken from April 2024 to October 2025, by a research team from Durham University and Manchester Metropolitan University, to determine the impact and effectiveness of the first stage of implementation of the YouthPrint model across County Durham. YouthPrint is a National Lottery funded youth work infrastructure project in County Durham. The county is home to approximately 115,000 children and young people, and is one of England's largest, covering many geographically isolated communities, including old mining villages and towns.

The origins of the project lie in an organic support network developing between organisations working with young people during the periods of the COVID-19 pandemic government lockdowns. The North East Youth Alliance (NEYA – made up of NE Youth and Youth Focus NE) offered to help support and develop the network, acting as an independent facilitator, and bringing more capacity to the existing arrangements. The National Lottery Reaching Communities fund agreed to fund a two-year project (worth just over £190,000 in total) to support the implementation of a formal infrastructure model to support youth work provision in the county.

Methodology

The evaluation is grounded in participatory action research principles, working with practitioners to understand their perspectives and experiences, and utilising multiple qualitative methods to capture the voices of stakeholders working within the youth work sector. A staged approach underpinned the evaluation:

- **Phase One:** examining the broader context of youth policy and provision across England and baseline information captured relating to YouthPrint.
- **Phase Two:** Community placements with Anchor Organisations, which saw six final year undergraduate students placed with anchor organisations to support their work and to observe and reflect on the implementation and impact of YouthPrint.
- **Phase Three:** Appreciative Inquiry Group Sessions were used to capture a full range of responses with organisations involved in YouthPrint and their perspectives on the model.

YouthPrint Model in Practice

Anchor organisations generally recognised the benefits of being brought together to discuss issues of common concern and to begin to think strategically about the future of youth work provision in the county. Across the three phases the main benefits included; improved networking and stronger (and, in some cases, rebuilt) partnerships; the role of anchor organisations in facilitating stronger local links and joint working practices; enhanced training provision and increased learning and development opportunities for staff and volunteers; greater knowledge of and sharing of resources across different projects and organisations; and, linked to all of the above, benefits to young people's involvement in both the development of the model and wider youth work activities.

Challenges of the Model

Challenges of YouthPrint also emerged during the evaluation. Many of these challenges seem related to partnership working and co-ordination roles more generally, especially in a period when resources for voluntary sector organisations are scarce. Potential issues identified included: differences of opinion around the role of NE Youth as either a leadership role or offering more support and co-ordination for empowered ways of working; the diversity of the anchor organisations, the communities they covered and the types of provision they offered; varied awareness of the YouthPrint model within local organisations (including some anchor organisations); transport costs and issues due to the physical geography of the county and the isolated nature of many villages and communities; and the need to do more around workforce development and young people's involvement, despite the progress noted above.

Recommendations

Recommendations identified revolve around four key themes:

- 1. Develop more strategic work:** Following an initial focus on relationship building and implementation, more strategic work could be developed, including with local and regional government bodies, non-youthwork organisations and relevant funders.
- 2. Funding and resources:** Developing and supporting a more cooperative and collective approach to funding applications could help allay concerns over the allocation of resources within YouthPrint and increase the funding available to smaller, non-anchor organisations.
- 3. Communications:** A more explicit, permanent 'brand' for YouthPrint could support wider strategic work, and also help external partners – and potential funders – to understand how the model may align with and support their own work.
- 4. Young people:** Clarification and consistency should be provided on the expected role for young people within the YouthPrint model, both locally and at the countywide level.

Introduction

The YouthPrint model has been created to develop a community-led approach for youth work provision across County Durham, in order to meet the demand of young people's needs, secure sustainable funding for the youth work sector and foster social cohesion in local communities. This is against a backdrop of a national context whereby the youth work sector has suffered from a period of sustained austerity, which led to the closure of many services and facilities for young people. National youth work organisations have raised concerns about the difficult situation facing young people in the UK (NYA 2024). Many national and local organisations have faced financial pressures and a resurgence of growing need for consistency, quality and accessibility in youth services across the UK (UK Youth 2024).

More locally, across County Durham, youth and community organisations face many challenges including; insecure funding; service closures; staffing challenges; and increased barriers for young people accessing services. These barriers include poor employment opportunities, mental health and loneliness. This all has a detrimental impact on the personal development of young people residing in County Durham as well as the sustainability of service provision within communities.

The development of YouthPrint was established by NE Youth, in order to address these barriers alongside a growing need for youth workers to connect and offer valuable support during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Once the pandemic was over, the benefits of developing a support network evolved into the YouthPrint model. This is a novel approach to (re)building youth work infrastructure across the region, as previous literature on community anchors have not considered the specificity of youth and community organisations (Henderson et al. 2021). The model connects five key areas within the county: Durham City, East Durham, North Durham, Mid Durham, and The Dales. A crucial part of the model design is the role of anchor organisations within the five areas .

Within the proposed YouthPrint model, anchor organisations have a range of responsibilities, including; managing and delivering operational support and youth programmes tailored to their respective communities, along with engaging with young people to address local challenges. The importance of anchor organisations has been stated for the development of the YouthPrint model and been designated with a variety of roles and tasks, including building partnership working, funding opportunities, workforce development and championing youth voice.

YouthPrint Evaluation

This independent evaluation was undertaken from April 2024 to October 2025, to determine the impact and effectiveness of the first stage of implementation of the YouthPrint model across County Durham. The research team from Durham University and Manchester Metropolitan University have undertaken an evaluation grounded in participatory action research principles (Pain et al. 2012), utilising multiple qualitative methods to capture the experiences and perspectives of stakeholders working within the youth work sector. The aims of the evaluation included:

- Examine the current state of the model infrastructure
- Investigate how well the model has been implemented and how capacity building activities can serve youth provision across the county.
- Explore youth voice activities in relation to the YouthPrint model
- Evaluate what works well and what needs to be improved.

This report outlines the work undertaken throughout the evaluation and synthesises findings from the engagement with those stakeholders.

Acknowledgements

The evaluation team appreciate and acknowledge the support of a number of individuals and groups who have helped with the evaluation. Lily Nolan, then a Politics student at Durham University, conducted literature and policy reviews which supported the development of the briefing notes produced in Phase 1 of the research. Six Community Placement students from Durham University - Jamie Border, Sofia Gomez Pena, Niyaaz Kazi, Ellie Mathers, Isabelle Moreland and Rebecca Stock - supported the work of anchor organisations and observed the impact and implementation of YouthPrint. Their insights into the daily life of the youth work projects were invaluable. Jon Niblo and Rachael Avery from NE Youth provided us with background and contextual information whenever we required it and were always available to answer our questions and discuss ideas with us. Finally, we would like to thank all the participants who contributed to the evaluation and took part in the various activities. The evaluation would not have been possible without them.

Background

YouthPrint is a National Lottery funded youth work infrastructure project in County Durham. The county is home to approximately 115,000 children and young people, with a strong tradition of work with young people. By way of example, the Durham Association of Boys and Girls Clubs has been established for over 90 years and includes 85 community-based clubs, many with a strong emphasis on sport and physical activity. The county itself is one of England's largest, and covers many geographically isolated communities, including old mining villages and towns.

The origins of the project lie in an organic support network developing between organisations working with young people during the periods of the COVID-19 pandemic government lockdowns. A local voluntary youth sports organisation organised online sessions for people working with young people to come together, share information and resources, and support each other when face-to-face interactions were strictly limited and beyond the ability of most organisations. As restrictions eased and life began to return to 'normal', the demand for the countywide support arrangements for the youth work sector to remain in place was evident.

The North East Youth Alliance (NEYA – made up of NE Youth and Youth Focus NE) offered to help support and develop the network, acting as an independent facilitator, and bringing more capacity to the existing arrangements. The Alliance supports and is involved with similar local networks and collaborative projects in different local authority areas across the North East.

Funding for YouthPrint

The National Lottery Reaching Communities fund agreed to fund a two-year project (worth just over £190,000 in total) to support the implementation of a formal infrastructure model to support youth work provision in the county.

The funding supported the appointment and employment of a project co-ordinator and associated management and administration costs, and provided financial support to 'anchor organisations' to free up senior staff time (equivalent of one day per week) to support and develop the model. Seven anchor organisations were identified in five areas covering the whole county, and which broadly speaking, mapped onto previous area-based youthwork arrangements:

- North Durham – Pelton Youth Project
- Durham City – Durham Area Youth
- Mid Durham – Auckland Youth and Community Centre
- East Durham – Groundwork, and Creative Youth Opportunities
- The Dales – Teesdale Community Resources (TCR) Hub and Jack Drum Arts

The funding also covered evaluation costs, resulting in this report and associated publications, that sits alongside other monitoring and measuring tools focused on the strategic implementation of YouthPrint.

The proposal to the National Lottery set out ‘five clear aims’:

1. Lead on the development of a youth-led strategy
 2. Generate an infrastructure and capacity building support for the sector
 3. Advocate and champion workforce development
 4. Drive youth policy development
 5. Be the catalytic agent for youth voice across countywide, regional and national forums.
- (p3)

Development of the Project

With the support of the project co-ordinator and NE Youth, anchor organisations would work to develop and sustain local networks in their areas, as well as coming together as a countywide group. In addition to these developments, a YouthPrint Durham Reference Group, consisting of the five YouthPrint Coordinators, the Strategic Coordinator, and local stakeholders and a YouthPrint Durham Youth Voice Group, comprising of 20 young people from each YouthPrint area were also planned (p4).

The focus of the initial two-year project was on the implementation of the YouthPrint model, encompassing both strategic leadership across the county and operational support for individual areas and anchor organisations. Communications channels and formats, including digital platforms, newsletters and meetings were planned to support the networks and their various activities. Proposed countywide developments included a focus on workforce development and capacity building amongst the youth work sector and support for programme development at a local level that would address local needs.

YouthPrint set out to bring benefits to young people, through improved provision, increased opportunities and clearer pathways for personal development. These benefits would, in turn, benefit the wider communities within the county. Volunteers and staff working with young people would also directly benefit from improved training provision and professional development opportunities. Overall, youth sector capacity was expected to increase with more, and better co-ordinated activities and projects.

Methodology

Aim and Objectives

- Examine the current state of the model infrastructure
- Investigate how well the model has been implemented and how capacity building activities can serve youth organisations across the county.
- Explore youth voice activities in relation to the YouthPrint model
- Evaluate what works well and what needs to be improved.

Following discussions with members of the NEYA, the evaluation team suggested a three-phase approach to the evaluation, to meet the aims and objectives.

Phase one: Rapid review and interviews with anchors

The first phase of the evaluation included a rapid review of existing literature relating to young people and youth work in the UK at the current time. This phase, which took place across the summer of 2024, included a student intern working with the core evaluation team to search for and collate information relating to discussions around young people and the 2024 General Election. Analysis of political party's manifestos was undertaken, scrutinising them for their policy agendas for young people. Local work was also undertaken with a regional policy review conducted, focusing on the office of the new Mayor for the North East and the North East Combined Authority. Finally, a review of literature relating to community anchor organisations was also undertaken. Three briefing notes were produced relating to these three topics and were circulated to YouthPrint organisations.

The second stage of the first phase included interviews with anchor organisations and key YouthPrint individuals to gather information on the initial 'test and learn' phase of the model. Seven in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted to collect different perspectives and opinions of the role of anchor organisations and the initial development of the model. An interim report was produced for YouthPrint and circulated early in 2025.

Phase two: Community placements with anchor organisations

The aim of this phase was to expand the capacity and reach of the evaluation by providing extra resources and capacity for the anchor organisations. In phase two, six final year undergraduate students undertaking a community placement module each completed 50 hours participatory observations of youth work sites working within the YouthPrint umbrella. A total of six sites were observed, with students undertaking a youthwork role. Students completed reflective fieldnotes and were then invited to participate in a focus group or interview to further reflect on their observations and experiences.

Phase three: Reflective sessions with wider organisations

The aim of this phase was to capture a full range of responses through an appreciative inquiry (AI) approach (Lewis 2025). This involved reflective sessions with youth workers and relevant staff from organisations involved in YouthPrint. In total, there were 5 sessions delivered in each area, which involved 24 people (30 including those attending who were leads from the anchor organisations). The aim of the focus groups was to understand people's knowledge and understanding of YouthPrint, what their views and experiences are related to the YouthPrint model and what their perspectives are for developing needs of the youth work sector, and the role of young people. Each session was recorded, and transcripts were analysed thematically.

Table 1. phase three participants

	Organisations	Youth work / relevant staff	Total people including anchor organisation staff
Durham City	5	5	5
Durham North	6	8	10
Durham East	2	2	2
Durham South	3	6	7
Durham West	2	3	4
Total	18	24	28

Ethics

This project received ethical approval from the Department of Sociology at Durham University, with separate approvals requested and granted across the three phases of work. The initial phase was approved March 2024 (ref: SOC-2024-02-22T11:13:59-fjtk59); the second phase was approved January 2025 (ref: 4005); the final phase was approved March 2025 (ref: 6175).

Synthesis of Findings

All data from each phase of the project was synthesised thematically to determine specific findings which provides insight into youth work professionals' thoughts on the Youth Print model, how they have been involved and how successful they think YouthPrint has been, to what extent it has empowered the sector and considerations for next steps for YouthPrint.

Youthwork in context

The State of Youth in the UK 2025

Young people in the UK face a complex mix of social, economic, and emotional challenges that are shaping their life chances and wellbeing. Declining school to work transitions, alongside increasingly insecure employment is a key issue, with the number of young people currently Not in Education, Employment or Training (NEET) stubbornly high at almost one million, the highest figure in over a decade (Youth Futures Foundation, 2025). Economic inactivity (unemployed and not looking for work) has significantly increased, with the main reason for this being ill health and mental health the key condition. The education-to-work transition has become more fragmented, with precarious, low-paid jobs and regional inequalities in opportunity. The ongoing effects of the COVID-19 pandemic have deepened these problems, disrupting education, limiting access to training offers and exacerbating inequalities. Combined with rising living costs and cuts to youth services, young people's transitions to adulthood, particularly for marginalised groups, have become particularly precarious and perilous.

Declining mental health is one of the most urgent issues impacting on young people. Recent research for the Youth Futures Foundation found a genuine substantial rise in mental health symptoms among young people from around 2010–2012, particularly in low mood and anxiety and a three-fold increase in the number of young people in contact with primary care for a mental health issue (Pierce et al., 2025). This is a *real increase* and not merely a result of increased symptom recognition, greater awareness, overdiagnosis, or reduced resilience. Financial insecurity, particularly precarious employment and affordability pressures, along with declining sleep quality, social media and smartphone use, and a substantial reduction in youth services (73% since 2010) are the key drivers of the youth mental health crisis. Perhaps unsurprisingly, young people are reporting increased social isolation, insecurity and uncertainty about the future. Today's young people are navigating significant pressures and intersecting crises on multiple fronts – economic precarity, worsening mental health and increased social disconnection, exacerbated by persistent structural barriers and deepening inequalities. Pressures on young people in the North East are particularly difficult. The region has persistently higher levels of economic inactivity, lower employment rates and ranks poorly on the Youth Opportunity Index when considering education, apprenticeship and training opportunities and access to quality jobs (Learning and Work Institute, 2025). Young people in the North East are also more likely to experience mental health conditions and loneliness compared to their peers across the rest of England (IPPR, 2025).

Challenges for Youth Work and the Youth Sector in 2025

The youth work sector in the UK is experiencing a pivotal moment – recognition of the decimation of the sector during austerity, alongside the concurrent need for youth work to support young people during a period of worsening youth outcomes across most measures, and the promise of a new government Youth Strategy. As might be expected following a period of

sustained austerity, which resulted in the closure of many services and facilities for young people, national youth work organisations raised concerns about the difficult situation facing young people in the UK at the current time. The National Youth Agency (NYA) identified a clear demand among young people for more engaging, fun activities in their communities, with a notable deficiency in available options, and an absence of a youth-informed approach to service delivery (NYA, 2024). Many national and local youth organisations face financial pressures, as evidenced by, for example, the closure of the British Youth Council and concerns about income and expenditure were highlighted in the national youth sector census. There were also concerns about a need for consistent quality and accessibility in youth services across the UK, which varies significantly between regions and communities, often depending on local political priorities and spending challenges. The national picture has also shifted with the closure of the National Citizen Service and unanswered questions about a universal youth offer.

National Youth Agency (NYA) sector snapshots and workforce surveys show voluntary organisations carrying increasing workloads, especially around mental-health need, while reporting precarious finances, reduced provision, reliance on short-term grants and commissioned contracts, and pay/retention pressures in the workforce (NYA, 2025). Local Authority youth services have been decimated, with roughly two-thirds of council-funded centres lost since 2010. This has resulted in many LAs prioritising targeted interventions over universal provision. Only around a quarter of youth-sector workers are employed within local authority youth services, underlining the VCS's central delivery role. Workforce capacity is a recurring concern, with a significant loss of experienced youth workers since 2010 and ongoing recruitment difficulties, combined with pay pressures, insecure contracts and high demand for complex casework (mental health support, safeguarding, diversion from crime). This has led to increased burnout and reduced capacity for sustained relationship-based youth work, further risking universal open-access provision.

Changing Youth Policy Landscape

For the first time since 2010, there is a concerted focus on young people and the youth sector in political debates with developments of youth policy. However, funding, workforce and structural challenges remain and have yet to be responded to by the government. A new National Youth Strategy is currently being co-developed with young people and the youth sector, positioned as a vehicle to better coordinate services across local, regional and national levels; to involve young people in service design and delivery; and with key missions, including widening opportunity and reducing pressure on other public services. Incubated in the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), the development of Young Futures Hubs have been promised alongside the new strategy (UK Youth, 2025). Meanwhile, following the Chancellor's announcement of a Youth Guarantee of education and employment opportunities for all young people aged 18-21, the Department for Work and Pensions have announced the development of Youth Hubs to be located in 8 Youth Guarantee Trailblazer areas (YFF, 2025). It remains unclear how these two agendas and proposals connect. Significant further reforms in youth employment are also in development, including through the Employment Rights Bill, the Get Britain Working review and changes to apprenticeships and vocational skills pathways.

The YouthPrint Model in Practice

All data from each phase of the project was synthesised thematically to determine specific findings which provides insight into youth work professionals' thoughts on the Youth Print model, how they have been involved and how successful they think YouthPrint has been, to what extent it has empowered the sector and considerations for next steps for YouthPrint.

Benefits of the model

Anchor organisations generally recognised the benefits of being brought together to discuss issues of common concern and to begin to think strategically about the future of youth work provision in the county. Across the three phases the main benefits included; networking and partnerships, the role of anchor organisations, training provision, sharing resources and young people's involvement in both the development of the model and wider youth work activities.

Networking and Partnerships

During phase one, the anchor organisations also recognised that the YouthPrint model acted as a catalyst to develop, or strengthen or, in some cases, rebuild, relationships and networks at a local level, and that this outcome was very helpful. During phase three, there was also a general sense from wider youth work professionals across the five areas, that YouthPrint had been beneficial for the youth work sector by creating a network of support, even though there were still some concerns around smaller youth groups attending due to their limited capacity to attend meetings. At the same time, there were conversations about smaller organisations or clubs potentially benefiting from YouthPrint due to not meeting funding thresholds but being able to join larger funding applications. However, these network relationships required work, and time, to establish and/or maintain.

Networks of organisations varied across the five areas and relationships were very dependent on the anchor(s). The strength of the network within the anchor area was based on the relationships developed by the anchor lead individuals, some of whom who were spending time nurturing relationships through YouthPrint meetings and wider engagement.

Some areas also connected with organisations that are not primarily youth work but who have funding and resources to support young people in their community. Initially, there was concern around these organisations joining core meetings in some areas, due to them not having a specific focus on young people or youth work. However, over time, the benefits of working with a wider group of partners, such as housing associations, museums, NHS staff and sports organisations, appears to have been embraced across the county. These wider networks were discussed as mutually beneficial through sharing information about local community facilities for young people, and sharing resources. Some of these organisations are looking at providing

funding to support young people in the local community too. In two of the areas during the sessions in phase 3, there were discussions of potential opportunities in the future to write a joint funding application for projects for specific youth issues.

Role of Anchor organisations

During the phase three workshops with various professionals, there was positive feedback about the individual anchors, especially relating to the way they have brought everyone together, which links to the previous section on networking and the vital role of anchors to develop partnerships. Anchor organisations were generally positive about their role and appreciated the resource that helped them to back fill the time spent on YouthPrint activities. The identification and selection of anchor organisations appeared to have been handled sensitively.

Two areas had more than one anchor organisation working collaboratively to develop the YouthPrint model. Feedback from phase three sessions on the whole stated that the co-anchor design was positive, as it demonstrated a collaborative approach to working rather than a more hierarchal structure.

Training provision

During phase 1, enhanced training provision and increased opportunities delivered from the anchor organisations for volunteers and staff were cited as positive and meaningful example from anchor organisations of where YouthPrint had made a direct contribution to youth work in County Durham. They believed this helped to facilitate buy-in from anchor organisations and other organisations they worked with at a local level. Collaboration among organisations was a significant point of discussion in YouthPrint meetings. Many expressed an interest in participating in each other's events, advertising services, or forming partnerships (CF1). This was also confirmed in phase 3, as there were multiple professionals who agreed that they benefitted from training, especially around mental health and safeguarding, and were interested in further training opportunities, particularly around youth work and safeguarding.

During phase 3, there was several discussions around wanting to have the opportunity for youth workers to undergo training for specialist skills / activities to support sessions for young people instead of having to outsource. They saw YouthPrint as a potential funding source for that.

Sharing resources

During phase three it was noted that a YouthPrint directory style map was being created as an online tool to connect youth work organisations across the county. Thoughts were shared on how YouthPrint areas could extend to help with sharing resources i.e. sports equipment, venue hire, minibuses. A suggestion shared by some organisations was the need for an online space where people can ask for help across YouthPrint for resources. Similarly, youth organisations in the phase 3 sessions expressed a need for sharing skills and expertise across the County to support leading activities with young people, for example if a youth worker is skilled in graffiti could they travel to another centre to lead a session to avoid outsourcing. They saw YouthPrint

as a mechanism for that.

All areas mentioned transport to an extent. Some discussed wanting to get a minibus or funding for hire, others discussed inter-related problems of public transport affecting young people's access to the youth clubs (phase 3). There is concern by some around connecting with other areas across County Durham due to transport costs and some organisations would like to see this being an issue raised with local councillors and the local authority. These issues had spurred local action as well, and one area is undertaking youth-led research to understand the lived experience of young people living in rural areas and the impact on their employment and education.

Young People's involvement

Community placement students believed that relationships are the main driving force for young people attending youth group activities, even if they initially claim otherwise, as it provides attention and a sense of belonging (Phase 2).

Youth organisations noted that young people enjoyed participating in consultations, which is central to the YouthPrint model. However, there were barriers to young people engaging in sensitive discussions with adults, like sex education, due to fear of judgment (Phase 2). Involving young people in creative activities was successful, even when they did not understand what they were involved in.

Youthprint has brought partner organisations together and many think this has created positive outcomes for young people because they are having social experiences away from school. This is obviously very import, especially for those that have negative experiences at school due to bullying etc. By having the youth voice sessions as well as local organisations doing some joint activities, it has been helpful for them to develop friendships away from school which benefits their mental health.

Challenges of the model

The diversity of the anchor organisations, the communities they covered and the provision they offered raised challenges to a countywide model which is seeking to work strategically as well as respond to local needs. Similarly, the development of the model so far has encountered some perceived challenges from youth work organisations across the county. This broadly includes; leadership and hierarchical relations between organisations

Leadership and Communication

Some anchor organisations expressed a desire for more leadership from NE Youth, whilst others recognised the benefits of a more facilitatory, 'empowering' role (phase1). Anchor organisations working in different ways, at different paces, and with different capacities could be viewed as both an example of the flexibility and autonomy provided by the YouthPrint model, and/or as a challenge to a desire for a 'consistent' approach.

These tensions could and perhaps should be viewed as healthy and inevitable in an attempt to develop and implement a new infrastructure model at a time of increased competition for resources, political fragmentation, and uncertainty about the future. They also speak to wider literature about community anchor organisations and the development of different roles and functions of anchors in different communities, depending on geography, demography, history and culture.

The anchor organisations themselves also have a clear role to play in supporting and developing both the local and countywide work, and the onus should not be on NE Youth to 'lead the way' all of the time.

Awareness of the Youth Print Model

There was a mixed amount of knowledge about Youthprint's purpose and role among youth workers, with the amount of knowledge dependent upon the individual organisation and it was clear that information did not always 'trickle down' to frontline staff working with young people. Some workers in anchor organisations appeared to be unfamiliar with YouthPrint, suggesting that clearer communication about Youthprint's aims, particularly from senior managers, could increase its effectiveness and improve understanding of its objectives.

Diversity of organisations

Diversity across the anchor organisations perhaps contributed to these differences. Some anchors were explicitly youthwork organisations, whilst others had a broader community or theme-based focus (such as arts and culture, or the environment) and so the role and type of working with young people differed across organisations. The needs of children and young people attending different youth groups were therefore often significantly different. This meant

that different groups in different locations required very different approaches and practises which has the potential to limit opportunities to share best practice or at least make it more challenging to facilitate.

The size and scope of some anchor organisations, and their 'standing' in the local area meant that, for various reasons, there remained some elements of competition in local areas, despite the explicit intention being to foster greater co-operation and collaboration.

Transport

The geography of the county predictably caused challenges for sharing good practice and for the involvement of young people in centralised initiatives or activities outside of their immediate area. Funding for transport provision was an issue prior to YouthPrint and this remained the case due to the relatively small amount of funding available to support direct work with young people. When funding was available, time, staff capacity and other challenges meant that it was still difficult to bring young people from across the county together.

Whilst, as noted above, the YouthPrint model encouraged local work with organisations that did not directly work with young people or for whom youthwork was not a core focus, such arrangements seemed less obvious at the countywide level. A local authority re-structure around place-based working which saw Area Action Partnerships disbanded and belatedly replaced with Community Networks did not help this process and the change of administration in April 2025 will also have had an impact on this work. Nonetheless, more political and strategic engagement with partners at a countywide level is an area where progress could be made.

Workforce development

The anchor organisations had an awareness that there was a need to find some solutions to development of the youth workforce. During phase 2, it was viewed how there was a general call for more young volunteers to foster relatability and engagement, though some organizations struggle to recruit them and acknowledge the need for volunteers to gain something from the experience. This was somewhat echoed through conversations with youth work organisations (phase 3), but in relation to workforce development, as some professionals felt that they could not recruit young people as the sector as an industry is not secure and stable for pursuing a career in youth work. There were some examples where money had been invested into training for young people but then there were no employment opportunities afterwards which then questioned the feasibility of young people's involvement, developing their skills and capabilities and harnessing future youth workers for the sector across County Durham.

At the same time, current youth work professionals felt that their level 1 and 2 youth work training was insufficient for their own progression in the sector. There was some discussion about a specific barrier that access to a level 3 in youth and community work degree at Sunderland University has requirements of working a 30hour contract for a minimum of 3 years, for funded opportunities, which is highly unlikely for anyone in the sector.

Staff from other organisations such as sports clubs could offer their role as youth worker to lead on a specific sport / activity which would help solve problem of staffing – links to networks with ‘non-youth work’ organisations. There was also a consideration around creating a ‘bank’ of youth workers who are willing to travel across the County for work as a solution to address the challenge of a shortage of youth workers in the area, although the geography of the county and the transport issues mentioned earlier suggest this may not be entirely workable.

Finally, current professionals considered what their role might be, at the sessions there was a concern about responsibilities for writing funding bids for collaborative work across YouthPrint, with a perceived challenge of balancing this with front-line youth work, and securing the role of their own organisations.

Young People’s involvement

Approaches to the inclusion of young people in local and countywide YouthPrint arrangements also differed markedly. Countywide conferences have been held, and young people have driven the branding and logo design but arrangements for local involvement were diverse. Some organisations and areas had already involved young people in their local work, others had clear plans to do so, whilst others appeared to have not given this issue a lot of thought. Again, the flexibility offered in this area and particular local issues in different areas will partly explain this difference, but the involvement of young people, or opportunities to be involved, may be one area where consistency (of opportunity at least) across the county might be desirable.

There was some feedback that young people were not aware of what YouthPrint was and discussions took place around whether young people need to know what it is, and what type of involvement they should have in the strategic aspect of the YouthPrint model. Some youth work organisations expressed that the feedback sessions with young people were potentially tokenistic since young people were not able to contribute to the development of the YouthPrint strategy.

Recommendations

The work undertaken during the first two years of YouthPrint has understandably focused on setting up the project, supporting anchor organisations to understand and fulfil their local roles, and develop new ways of working across the county. This implementation phase has been largely successful, with new developments and opportunities for young people occurring as a result of the project. Shared concerns and issues around workforce development and capacity building amongst the youth work sector have been raised and are beginning to be addressed through partnership work. There is, however, more that needed to develop the YouthPrint model. The next stage of the project comes at a crucial point, given the renewed political interest in young people and youthwork provision, and the forthcoming national youth strategy, as discussed earlier. The YouthPrint model could afford County Durham a strong strategic voice in current and forthcoming policy agendas relating to young people. In looking at the next steps of the project, we concentrate our focus on recommendations across **four key areas**:

1. Develop more strategic work

We would expect to see more strategic work taking place in the next phase(s) of YouthPrint. The development of a youth-led strategy is urgently needed. Engagement with the local authority has been hampered by their own review of area-based working, and the recent change of political leadership within the council, but one might expect that stronger, more strategic relationships would be cultivated as the project develops. This should be at both the countywide and local levels, given the role of anchor organisations as conduits for public sector providers in local areas.

Engagement with partners who work with, or whose work involves, young people is also sporadic. As mentioned earlier, some areas saw the involvement of non-youthwork organisations as a potential distraction to their core work, whereas others recognised the value that could come from working with them. Countywide relationships could be fostered with key partners, perhaps via the

YouthPrint Durham Reference Group mentioned in the original application.

Clearer – and longer term - areas of work could also be identified, perhaps with anchor organisations taking the lead on different strands. It may also be pertinent to discuss and examine longer-term arrangements for the management and co-ordination of YouthPrint, and how these might be resourced.

2. Funding & Resources

Linked to the point above, a more strategic approach to pursuing funding and resources, across the board, could be adopted. There appeared to be different approaches to collective funding applications across different areas, although these may have been the result of reacting to opportunities rather than more strategic decisions. Either way, more cooperation and collective involvement in funding applications could help allay concerns over the allocation of resources within YouthPrint and increase funding

available to – and involvement of – smaller, non-anchor organisations.

A more co-ordinated approach to funding and attracting resources could and should take place at both local and county wide levels, perhaps forming part of the work or remit of a YouthPrint Durham Reference Group. This issue could also be considered in terms of workforce development and training, and opportunities for the sector to be more proactive and strategic in creating a more sustainable workforce should be explored.

3. Communications

The development of YouthPrint communications should be considered. At present, the online presence for YouthPrint, consists of a Facebook page. There have been initial plans for developing a website, with further funding sources needed for this. A more explicit, permanent ‘brand’ for YouthPrint might help with wider strategic work, as well as smoothing out some of the more local differences in approach and contributing to a shared understanding of how YouthPrint works and its aims. If organisations – anchors and non-anchors – can understand how they contribute to the wider purpose and focus of YouthPrint, there may be less concern about area-based differences.

A clearer and more easily identifiable purpose for YouthPrint would also help external partners – and potential funders – to understand how the model may align with and support their own work. Developments that could be considered could include a dedicated webpage and associated resources, social media profiles (such as Instagram, LinkedIn), annual report, and so on. This countywide approach would

undoubtedly have benefits within local areas as well, and may help to address some of the confusion that exists around YouthPrint at this level.

Internal forms of communication could also be better developed, with a shared and secure online space or platform for sharing information within and across anchor organisations. Discussions around this have taken place, and the diversity of platforms and software that different organisations use has made it difficult, but progress on this topic would be helpful for everyone.

4. Young People & Co-Production

Finally, clarification is needed on the expected role for young people within the YouthPrint model. Despite two rounds of consultation with young people to support an initial draft of the County Durham youth strategy, a specific youth-led strategy for County Durham has not been published. Meanwhile, area-led involvement in young people has been inconsistent. The ambition to be a catalytic agent for youth voice across countywide, regional and national forums does not appear to have been met. This should not necessarily be seen as a criticism, given the ambitious aims of the initial project, but a re-assessment and clarification of the role of young people in YouthPrint might be helpful going forward, with considerations of what level of co-production and youth voice is relevant, empowering and provides social value.

This should not be the sole responsibility of NEYA or the YouthPrint co-ordinator to decide or implement. Such a decision for co-production and youth voice would be best co-designed by the anchor organisations and local youth work organisations working directly with young people.

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