



# The Future for Outcomes: The Calculator in Practice





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## Executive Summary

Making the case for youth work requires quantitative evidence of impact, including long term cost savings. Between 2011 and late 2012, the Young Foundation was funded by the National Youth Agency to develop a tool which could provide information about those cost savings – we call it “the calculator”. This paper reports on phase three of the work, which has developed and trialled two versions of the calculator, both of which calculate a cost saving, but are based on different inputs. Calculator A uses so-called hard outcomes such as employment, involvement with the criminal justice system, and levels of drug/alcohol abuse. Calculator B uses improvements in a young person’s social and emotional capabilities such as confidence, resilience, and managing feelings as inputs.

This short paper summarises the learning from development of the calculator and piloting with two local authorities: Norfolk County Council and Staffordshire County Council. The key points are:

- It is fundamentally important to recognise that quantitative measures will not capture every aspect of youth work, and that more qualitative evidence will continue to be an essential part of evaluating effectiveness.
- The youth sector is at a relatively early stage in its journey towards producing

evidence of impact and the kind of data required to use the calculator in the way originally intended is not currently collected by councils. Our work concentrated on helping practitioners get to the stage where they could gather helpful evidence in the right way, and understand how to share this with providers and colleagues.

- Clearly defining the outcomes you desire for young people will strengthen your ability to gather meaningful evidence.
- Much of the work with councils centred on identifying appropriate measures for the intended outcomes and clarifying the processes to be used to measure them – the associated metrics.
- There are some issues of methodology to consider. For example, some measures of social and emotional capability may need to be taken over a 6-12month period to accurately capture any improvement; this may be longer than the planned intervention with the young person.

This paper can be read in conjunction with *The Future for Outcomes: a practical guide to measuring outcomes for young people*<sup>1</sup> which describes the findings of projects running concurrently that explore wider issues around outcome based provision and evaluation.

## Introduction

Youth work has long collected and shared qualitative evidence about the difference it makes to the lives of young people. This evidence can be very powerful, but the sector has historically struggled to draw together quantitative evidence around value and impact. An important part of making the case for youth work is showing that it can deliver cost savings to the public purse. Articulating value clearly is critical when resources are stretched. It can help build a case for investing in the most effective services which secure the best long-term outcomes for young people. It can also help youth work evidence its role and impact. This short paper reports on a programme of work undertaken by The Young Foundation, funded by the National Youth Agency, to inform investment into youth work. The aim was to design a simple 'calculator' which can help those on the frontline articulate the value of youth work more effectively through providing information about cost savings.

Over three phases, the project has developed two versions of the calculator, both of which calculate a cost saving, but are based on different inputs. Calculator A uses so-called 'hard outcomes'<sup>2</sup> such as employment, involvement with the criminal justice system, and levels of drug/alcohol abuse. Calculator B uses improvements in a young person's social and emotional capabilities such as confidence, resilience, and managing feelings as inputs.

This short paper summarises the learning from phase three of the project, which focused on development of the calculator and piloting with two local authorities: Norfolk County Council and Staffordshire County Council.

This paper sits alongside *The Future for Outcomes: a practical guide to measuring outcomes for young people*, recently published by the NYA.

## The calculator in context

The calculator is a tool that aims to make it easier to demonstrate where youth work creates savings for the public purse; given relevant outcome data the calculator will show the savings that could be expected to emerge from the work.

The calculator comes in two varieties (A and B), each of which take different input data; it can be used at the level of an individual intervention (project or programme), or at a regional level.

**Calculator A** works with the key hard outcomes associated with youth work and other informal/non-formal approaches: it takes outcome data on employment, anti-social/criminal behaviour, teenage pregnancies, mental health support, drug/alcohol abuse, and entry to care, and calculates a saving from any improvement in these areas.

**Calculator B** works with information about individual young people; it takes information about improvement in their social and emotional capabilities and using data on the links between these and important life outcomes<sup>3</sup>, extrapolates a saving to the public purse.

A key challenge for youth services is that potential savings are spread among a variety of agencies and may not primarily accrue to the council department funding the work; for example, youth work programmes that support young people to return to employment, education or training may also provide savings for the Department of Work and Pensions; similarly, work with young people involved with drug and alcohol misuse may accrue savings for the Department of Health. Clearly, this has always been the case but putting a figure to the savings is likely to generate a range of discussion at local level about the contribution of youth work to a range of other agendas.

Importantly, organisations and authorities also have a range of fixed costs and economies of scale to take into account; the overall saving can be corrected for the extent to which savings can be translated into freely usable hard cash. For example, diverting a young person from custody will not close the unit of a Young Offenders Institution. Since this “cashability” depends on particular circumstances of time and place, this is at best an approximation.

## ‘Good data’: evidence and causation

Attributing savings to youth work means showing that good youth work causes improvements in the lives of young people. This means, as far as possible, ruling out other possible causes for any improvements. This is the objective of building up an evidence base. The normal way to do this is to use a fair comparison. The comparison may be with outcomes for the same young people before they took part in the intervention, or with another group of similar young people who are not receiving the intervention. If the only significant difference between the two groups is the intervention, then we can say the intervention is very likely to have caused the difference. For example, with measures of social and emotional capability, testing using an externally validated score<sup>4</sup> both before and after the intervention would normally imply that the intervention has caused an improvement.

However, if looking at teenage pregnancy, before and after measures are obviously inappropriate. It would be necessary to find a similar group of young people, and compare rates in the two groups. However, the validity of the claim (i.e. the impact you attribute to the intervention) does depend on how fair the comparison is. Are the two groups similar in all the important ways, except that one is receiving the intervention and one is not? Some of the factors to consider here would be age, financial background, family structure, and educational attainment. In a youth work context a perfect comparison is unlikely to be achievable. However a sensible

comparison can often be found and is ‘good enough’.

When we move up from the level of the individual project to considering outcomes for a district or region, the selection of a comparator becomes more challenging. Local authority cuts and remodelling of services for young people in recent years means that information about statistical neighbours requires more careful consideration. Ideally one would find an area which was similar in important ways, but which was not receiving much in the way of youth work provision. Historically this would have been difficult, but since there are now, unfortunately, areas of the country where there is very little funding for youth work, this comparison does become possible. However this does not guarantee that such a comparison can be found.

In addition to these general issues around good data, Calculator B has some other requirements. It requires input of information about young people’s social and emotional capabilities which:

1. is collected using a validated scoring tool, and
2. can be compared to a population average spread of scores.

Validated tools are based on extensive trialling and research which, over time, provides a sound evidence base that can substantiate claims about ‘average results’ and produce similar scores for individuals in similar situations – a ‘population average’. This means that if person A scores themselves a 5 out of 10, we know this indicates roughly the same as a 5 out of 10 for person B. Without this, it is hard to add up scores for groups of individuals in a way that is meaningful.

Calculator B makes a link between a score in measures of social and emotional capabilities and an outcome for a young person by assessing against a spread of scores for a population of similar young people. For example, a move from a score of 2 out of 10 to a score of 5 out of 10 for a young person is made meaningful by saying that this moves that individual from the bottom 10 per cent of the population to the middle 10

per cent. Research can then provide links to the probability of later positive outcomes.

## Piloting the calculator

We piloted the calculator with two local authorities, Norfolk and Staffordshire County Councils. This work built on phases one and two of the project. Phase three ran from July to November 2012:

- In each local authority area we began with an initial roundtable; gathering senior staff to discuss and identify the needs of the council in relation to measuring outcomes for young people.
- We designed and delivered a workshop for senior managers, practitioners and voluntary sector providers in each authority area, providing an opportunity to discuss evaluation, appropriate measurement tools and issues around measurement in general as well as introducing the calculator.
- We worked with senior staff in each area to understand the lessons learned from these sessions, and consider how this might feed into the policy development process. We provided bespoke advice on measurement methodologies and techniques.
- We worked with the councils to source appropriate data and understand where the gaps were, and entered this data into the calculator.
- A presentation pack which summarises the material delivered in the workshops will be available shortly.

## Lessons from Practice

Our work has revealed that the issue for the sector in effectively using the calculator is not manipulating the spreadsheet itself, but is very much about gathering the

information that goes into it. Both Norfolk and Staffordshire have thoughtful and intelligent approaches to evidence gathering but, in common with the vast majority of youth work focused activity, they are at a fairly early stage in producing outcome data. Information about outputs is more regularly collected, although in many authorities across the country this does not extend much beyond what were the four best value indicators<sup>5</sup>. There is a widely acknowledged need to improve the quality of measurement in the sector, and a range of initiatives are working towards this goal. This piece of work has produced very valuable learning about how to support the sector to move forward on its evidence gathering and effective measurement journey.

When thinking about approaches to measurement, it is important to understand the key terms.

**Outcomes** refer to the differences that you will be measuring.

**Metric** refers to the standard that you will use for measuring the outcome.

**Methodology** is the approach to measuring fairly.

To produce good evidence in general it is necessary to have three things:

- well-defined outcomes
- metrics that provide an accurate standard for measuring that outcome, and
- a methodology which produces robust data.

We will consider the learning from this project under each of these headings. In addition, there are specific requirements for using the calculator which we will identify along the way.

## Outcomes

Both Norfolk and Staffordshire have balanced and sensible lists of outcomes they wish to see young people achieve. However some terms, although understood amongst practitioners, are not well defined. What would 'improved community cohesion' and 'positive parenting' look like, for example? While most practitioners agreed that they understood what their local outcomes were referring to, the stakeholders we worked with through this project did express a desire for more guidance and definition to support effective monitoring and evaluation.

The linked publication from the NYA, *The Future for Outcomes: a practical guide to measuring outcomes for young people*, will support the process of choosing appropriate outcomes and identifying where they fit in your evaluation framework.

## Metrics

Councils generally do not have a complete list of the metrics that could be used to evidence their chosen outcomes and much of our work with managers and practitioners on the pilots concentrated on this issue.

Some outcomes are relatively straightforward to attach measures to. For example, anti-social behaviour can be tracked by incidents reported to the police; accredited training outcomes are already routinely tracked and attendance and participation measures are generally well gathered. However, some outcomes are clearly more challenging than others to measure and the following issues emerged as being of particular importance:

**Social and emotional capabilities** are key across the sector and central to the outcomes both pilot authorities prioritise. In general, the measures being used do not

provide information that is suitable to input into the calculator. Many of the tools used sector-wide are about communication rather than measurement: they may include a 'scale' but they are designed primarily to promote discussion and structured conversations with young people to help them discuss and reflect on their progress. The measures are often unvalidated, or lacking any comparative, population level data that could give a scale to the readings. For example, though two individuals may each separately score themselves 4 out of 10 on a confidence scale, this may well mean something entirely different to each one. This can result in widely differing 'scores' and makes the results unreliable in measurement terms. It is important to acknowledge and record this progress with young people but if we are serious about measuring that progress then more robust tools are required.

Voluntary sector practitioners in Norfolk were using some validated tools. And, whilst colleagues were not entirely satisfied with their use in practice, they acknowledged that they provided them with useful data. This prompted an interesting discussion with commissioners where providers identified a range of supplementary and narrative evidence of young people's development that they were keen to share. There was agreement to review monitoring and reporting processes to take account of this valuable evidence.

Following the pilot, Staffordshire has identified four validated tools that will be tested in the field – Rosenberg's Self Esteem Scale; the Triangle Consulting Youth Star; the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire and The Resilience Scale. They are also pursuing work with young people and staff around effective assessment of team-work skills.

**Leisure time activities/sport.** Measurement relating to participation in positive activities is likely to include a range of 'leisure time' and sporting activity. This brings up issues around definition and attendance; while attendance at some facilities and activities could be tracked, it would also be necessary to understand what proportions

of the relevant populations were being reached, and to include more informal forms of exercise such as dancing or skateboarding. Specific surveys of groups of young people might be necessary here.

**Community engagement/community cohesion.** These terms are challenging to define and a variety of proxy measures were proposed including, for community engagement, voting, volunteering, and participation in community activities. With more complex concepts, no one measure is likely to be sufficient. A basket of proxies<sup>6</sup> may not be completely comprehensive, but the question to pose is “is it good enough for our purposes?”

## Methodology

As previously discussed, finding appropriate comparisons is critical to establishing causation. Fair comparisons will normally be one of three kinds:

1. **Before and after** – Measuring something for an individual or group before and after an intervention.
2. **Geographic** – Measuring relative to a similar area.
3. **Control** – Measuring relative to a similar group of individuals who do not receive the intervention. This group may have to be specially constructed.

The following table provides examples against each kind of comparison and identifies considerations in terms of potential bias and other issues:

Methodology	Example	Potential bias and issues
Before and after	Take a baseline capability score with an individual, and then follow up after an intervention. (Timescale is important here – see section on ‘the dip’ below).	If the intervention is long-term, measurement could be capturing a maturing individual, where changes would have happened anyway.  If the intervention is at a point of crisis, measurement could be capturing a ‘reversion to the mean’, where the situation would be expected to improve on its own.
Geographic	Compare anti-social behaviour outcomes for a demographically similar area.  Or compare outcomes at a school receiving a special intervention with a similar nearby school which is not.	How similar? This may be difficult to find.  Care is needed to ensure you have the right list of factors.
Control/special comparison group	Young mums in deprived area compared to a similar group elsewhere.	Few biases, but additional work is needed to source similar group.

For specialist, targeted projects it is likely that the comparator has to be sought on an individual project basis. This may not be as difficult as it at first sounds, for example, one of our pilots identified that work being undertaken with young people with special educational needs in two county schools could readily be compared to data from other special schools who have not received the same interventions.

We talk about **sources of bias** above and there are four major sources that we should consider when deciding if our comparison is fair. We should have an explanation of our thinking in relation to each of these:

- **Selection** – Why have we chosen this area or group of individuals? Are we sure that they are not significantly different from the group being measured? (for example age, gender, socioeconomic and educational background would all be relevant here).
- **Maturation** – Young people mature over time, and certain outcomes may improve for them as a matter of course. Why do we think the 'issue' wouldn't have just improved as the young person matured?
- **Statistical regression** (also known as reversion to the mean) – There is a tendency for individuals with exceptionally poor outcomes to improve over time simply due to the ending of a run of poor luck and human adaptability. For example, if a service is offered to individuals at a point of crisis, some improvement could be expected without any intervention.
- **Drop outs** – It is rare for every individual who starts an intervention to complete it. Sometimes those for whom the intervention works well will continue, but those for whom it works badly will leave. Only measuring results for those who complete the intervention will exaggerate the average result.

At the regional level there was good data on a range of hard outcomes for groups of young people who are central to youth work practice, although it remains a challenge to fully attribute improvements to youth work. What was possible at this stage was analysis of the potential for improvement and associated savings by looking at how hard

outcomes might improve given the performance of statistical neighbours. This analysis is undertaken using calculator A and a worked example is included as appendix 1.

The impact of **open access** work remains practically hard to measure for a number of reasons:

- Young people may engage for highly variable lengths of time and intensity. This makes finding an appropriate comparison group difficult.
- Self-selection – those who drop out or attend for brief periods may be those who most need help, whereas those who attend regularly may experience improvements due to internal or family influence.
- These settings are designed to attract large numbers of young people and use of validated measurement tools often requires in depth conversations with groups and individuals that are practically difficult to do.

It is necessary to consider whether it is desirable to use detailed outcome measures in open access settings. In our view activity and satisfaction measures are minimum requirements, with potential for sampling related to particular individuals or smaller project groups from within the overall numbers, if appropriate.

**The phenomenon of 'the dip'** has to be taken into account for measures of social and emotional capability; length of follow up is a critical issue. Practitioners will attest to the fact that young people's progress in relation to social and emotional capabilities is not upwardly linear. What appears to happen after a few months is that increasingly honest self-reflection and developing self-awareness often cause measures of social and emotional capabilities to decline during the early stages of interaction with a young person. Scores gradually pick up again, usually exceeding the baseline score and continue to rise as work carries on. This means that accurate measurement may well require a longer follow-up, possibly beyond the period of interaction with the young person. Practitioners felt that 6-12 months was a reasonable range. Research published by Fairbridge provides interesting analysis of this phenomenon.<sup>7</sup>

The data we have available from the pilots does not have sufficient follow-up, and as such is not showing any improvement when input into calculator B; however we have included this as an example in appendix two for information.

Included below is a table that brings together information about metrics and methodology and provides examples against types of outcome:

Outcome	Metrics	Typical methodology
Social & emotional capabilities	Validated measure (questionnaire)	Before and after scores for individuals. May require longer follow up to take into account 'the dip' due to developing self awareness
Individual achievements	Qualification Accreditation Participation Employment	Year on year improvement in target groups Narrative explanation of reliability of proxy measures Narrative explanation of potential sources of bias
Benefits to society	Reduction in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• anti-social behaviour incidents</li> <li>• entrants to criminal justice system</li> <li>• rate of teenage conception and pregnancy</li> <li>• benefit costs</li> </ul>	Comparison with any national standards Comparison with statistical neighbours Narrative explanation of reliability of proxy measures Narrative explanation of potential sources of bias
Interpersonal relationships	Rates of volunteering Survey of community cohesion	Year on year local improvement Currently this area lacks accepted measures, and narrative and anecdotal accounts will be important proxy measures

## Conclusion

While the informal and non-formal youth sector is at a relatively early stage in the gathering of data, there is a real desire to improve and the understanding needed to do this is well within the grasp of practitioners. Maintaining the momentum and focus on outcomes and measurement, together with use of the calculator will enable the sector to develop its ability to produce high quality quantitative evidence. This will work towards a fuller picture, sitting alongside the qualitative evidence which has long been collected in work with young people.

Of particular use in accelerating that progress would be:

**Shortlist of measures of social and emotional capability.** As discussed above, there are considerable advantages to normed and scaled measures. There is a wide variety of instruments available, and there would be significant value in trialling a wider range of these tools, with potential for detailed guidance on which of these are useful in the sector.

**Improve comparison for individual achievements.** Although we can compare outcomes for counties and districts, it is hard to compare outcomes for very specific groups (e.g. teenage mums), some of whom are the young people central to current priorities. Repositories of more sophisticated comparison data would be very useful (e.g. outcomes for individuals marked against some index of deprivation).

**Continued skilling up.** Much of this activity at the heart of this project remains relatively new to those working in the youth sector; the ideas and concepts will require ongoing explanation, experimentation and support for implementation.

**Active research on interpersonal relationship measures.** Good metrics for interpersonal relationships are relatively few and far between, and this area would benefit greatly from further work.

## Limitations and Caveats

It is important to note a number of assumptions and limitations in the calculator.

Calculator B uses research data to make a link between social and emotional capabilities and outcomes. This data is from the US, and is based on the work of Prof James Heckman. While Heckman is highly distinguished as an academic, we are dependent on one man's analysis.

We also assume (as Heckman does) that all general measures of social and emotional capabilities can be treated roughly equivalently. Similarly, there is an assumption that social and emotional capabilities can be meaningfully summarised as a single score, in the same way that intelligence can be summarised using an IQ score.

While we have made our best efforts to ensure that cost data is as accurate as possible, we are relying on secondary sources, and some of these are not as up to date as we might wish. We have adjusted for inflation.

It is not always possible to extract the full saving associated with a given outcome, especially in the short term. Fixed costs and economies of scale mean that only a proportion will be extracted; for example the extraction of costs may require posts to be made redundant, facilities to be closed etc. This may not be desirable or possible, and so the full benefit cannot be assumed to be realised. Corrections are applied for this, but they are effectively 'rules of thumb' and should be altered in conversations with local commissioners.

## Appendix 1: Example Calculator A

Area		Instructions
Year	2012	Enter data in all and only cells with a blue background. For guidance on data standards, see guidance.

Key outcome indicators	EMPLOYMENT	ANTI-SCOLIAL/CRIMINAL BEHAVIOUR			HEALTH			OTHER
	Number/% unemployment	Number/% custodial sentences	Anti-social behaviour orders	Youth community order	Number/% of teenage pregnancies	Number/% receiving CAMHS support	Level of drug/ alcohol abuse	Number of looked after children
Number in County	1683	31	1	240	1519	550	219	616
Estimated impact of intervention (% improvement on negative outcome)	14%	8%	2%	12%	14%	10%	9%	4%
Cost (£/individual)	£4,780	£30,083	£3,737	£3,596	£24,142	£3,710	£10,856	£26,452
<b>Headline savings</b>	<b>£1,136,222</b>	<b>£74,605</b>	<b>£75</b>	<b>£103,553</b>	<b>£5,134,131</b>	<b>£204,043</b>	<b>£213,980</b>	<b>£651,770</b>
Main agency where savings are realised	DWP	MoJ	Local authority	Local authority	Health	Health	Health	Local authority
Cashability of savings	80% <b>£900,977</b>	30% <b>£22,382</b>	50% <b>£37</b>	50% <b>£51,777</b>	50% <b>£2,567,065</b>	50% <b>£102,021</b>	50% <b>£106,990</b>	50% <b>£325,885</b>
								<b>£4,077,134</b>
							Health	£2,776,076
							MoJ	£22,382
							Local Auth.	£377,699
							DWP	£900,977

Data is as up to date as possible, but in some cases there is a considerable lag in the data becoming available.

When the correct data becomes available, the data will show performance by youth services improving these key outcomes.

Presently this row contains targets benchmarked against good performance by statistical neighbours.

Not all savings will be "cashable" – they will not all translate into freely usable cash due to fixed costs, economies of scale, etc. These figures correct for that.

## Appendix 2: Example Calculator B

<b>Intervention</b>  <b>Cost</b>  <b>Cohort</b>	Name	Targetted Project			
	Description	An example			Calculator B requires data on social and emotional capabilities which is collected using a validated scoring tool, and which can be compared to a population average spread of scores.  For example of validated measures see <a href="http://www.youngfoundation.org">http://www.youngfoundation.org</a>
	Year	2012			
	Number of young people	73			
	Average age	15			
	Gender split (% female)	50%			
<b>Social and emotional capabilities</b>	Basic level decile (pre-intervention)	4			
	End level decile (post-intervention)	4			
	Gross Saving	£			

## Notes

- 1 Published by the National Youth Agency in January 2013, funded by the Local Government Association, this publication brings together three strands of outcomes based pilot work.
- 2 Hard outcomes: "are the clearly definable and quantifiable results that show the progress a participant has made towards achieving desirable outcomes by participating in a project (eg. obtaining a qualification, getting a job etc). Hard outcomes are usually straightforward both to identify and to measure." (Lloyd and O'Sullivan, 2003, cited in *The Future for Outcomes a practical guide to measuring outcomes for young people*, published by the NYA).
- 3 See Catalyst (2012) *A Framework of Outcomes for Young People*.
- 4 A range of validated measurement tools are identified in the Catalyst Framework of Outcomes for Young People.
- 5 Up until 2008 local authorities were required to report on contact, participation, recorded outcomes and accredited outcomes for which there were national targets.
- 6 Proxy measures are used when a direct measure is not available; they provide information about what you are seeking to measure. You may need more than one proxy measure (as part of a 'basket') to provide adequate information.
- 7 Knight. B., *Back from the Brink*. Fairbridge. June 2010.





## About the National Youth Agency

The National Youth Agency works in partnership with a wide range of public, private and voluntary sector organisations to support and improve services for young people. Our particular focus is on youth work and we believe strongly that by investing in young people's personal and social development, young people are better able to live more active and fulfilling lives.

Working with young people, we advocate for more youth-friendly services and policies. We have four themes:

- Developing quality standards in work with young people
- Supporting services for young people
- Developing the youth workforce
- Promoting positive public perceptions of young people.

We deliver our work through training and consultancy, campaigning, publishing and online communications. Through our activities we want to ensure that young people have a strong voice and positive influence in our society.

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