

# The development of Project Oracle

## Generating and using evidence in the real world

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“We find that many services are unable or unwilling to measure the improvements they make in outcomes for young people.”

Education Select Committee, Third Report, Services for Young People, June 2011

The above quote is very striking. If service providers are indeed “unable or unwilling” to measure the impact they have, how will we know whether the lives of young people are being positively enhanced? Or as this question is more commonly phrased in austere times, how will we know if money is being wasted on ineffective services?

The basic premise of behavioural science is “if you want somebody to do something you should start by making it easy for them to do it”.<sup>1</sup> Yet measuring the outcomes from social programmes is perceived to be plagued with difficulties. Too often the excuses for why you can’t measure are used to justify a lack of scrutiny. This is what makes Project Oracle so interesting.

Project Oracle shows that it is possible to evaluate social programmes in line with academically rigorous standards of evidence. It also shows that this doesn’t demand complex system change but system adjustment. The project works with available components, forging connections between academia – and its readily available research talent – with the provider base. That’s the ‘making it easy’ bit. But then how do you ensure organisations are willing? In the case of Project Oracle it is not obligatory for those receiving Greater London Authority (GLA) funding to take part. Instead they voluntarily sign up in recognition that evaluation can be useful for improving practice as well as attracting additional funding and support. In essence, Project Oracle is attempting to change the mindset of providers, together with the wider community of decision makers and funders, in order to signal the importance of good evidence and to stimulate the demand for it.

This brief paper seeks to generate debate on the issue of why, in many cases, the youth sector cannot or will not demonstrate robust evidence of its outcomes.<sup>2</sup> Where the sector can provide some evidence, these studies and evaluations, though professionally conducted,

### What is Project Oracle?

A London-based endeavour to bring evaluations of youth programmes – many of which are delivered by small or charitable organisations – in line with academically rigorous and internationally recognised standards of evidence, improving consistency and quality in our understanding of what does and doesn’t work. Project Oracle is now moving into a new phase...

are rarely conclusive. This paper, however, doesn't focus on attributing blame, but instead explores the dynamics of why things are the way they are. It then goes on to establish the 'inability or unwillingness' as a collective action problem involving a number of actors. Finally, through first-hand experience and research arising from work on Project Oracle, the paper explores the make or break motivations in the generation of good project evidence. It ultimately sets out examples of where the cited constraints on social impact reporting appear to be overturned through innovative collaborations.

## 1. The need for change

Until recently, very little exploration has been given to the reasons why the youth sector is either 'unable or unwilling' to measure outcomes consistently. The question of why only a limited number of youth programmes are able to account for their success or failure at all, let alone in a consistent and frequent manner, is of course one that lies at the heart of what Project Oracle is trying to achieve, by understanding the starting position of given projects and finding routes for them to improve their evidence base over time. It may be too much to claim that the project will be an unqualified success, but it will certainly have taken us a long way in picturing a London in which more transactions in youth services are made through rational decision making, fuelled by the availability of usable evidence.

### A renewed focus on outcomes

Along with other commissioners of voluntary services, the Coalition Government has found itself conflicted in its most recent exchanges with voluntary sector providers of youth services. At a time where the money available is shrinking, governance structures all the way from central government and the Treasury down to local authority cabinet meetings are responding with greater levels of scrutiny. The emphasis on payment by results and other procurement mechanisms, which aim to divert scarce resources to programmes that will generate the biggest effects, may seem both logical and necessary. Yet if this is to work, the system will demand more and better evidence of outcomes – evidence which will not be there unless interventions are put in place to deliver it.

### Interventions to stimulate and link the supply and demand for evidence

It is recognised that a lack of evidence in decision making may not be because of failure in the supply of evidence. Instead evidence may be inaccessible, untimely, or it simply doesn't fill a central part of the decision making process. In other words the demand for evidence is not always institutionalised in decision making.

Alongside Project Oracle, there are some interesting programmes that are attempting to remedy this. Some of these models are institutions that attempt to synthesise and communicate research, often in a top-down and centralist manner. The most well known is perhaps the National Institute for Health and Clinical Excellence (NICE).<sup>3</sup> Another example is the Washington State Institute for Public Policy (WSIPP).<sup>4</sup> The Washington State Legislature created WSIPP in 1983 to carry out practical, non-partisan research on issues of state importance, which currently includes housing, public health, education and crime. The basis of deciding 'what works' is their four-step programme, which involves modelling different policy options to provide estimates, including the benefits that accrue to service users, the state and the tax payer. These findings feed into the creation of *Which?*-style consumer reports to aid State Legislature decision making, although it should be noted that WSIPP has no power to enforce Washington State to commission or use the recommended options that arise.<sup>5</sup>

Other attempts can be more programmatic. One example is the French Experimentation Fund for Youth, created by the French Ministry of Youth Affairs in 2008 to support the 'mainstreaming' of experimental – especially randomised – methodologies into the policymaking process.<sup>6</sup> The French Experimentation Fund for Youth was developed in conjunction with the Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL) which is based at MIT. J-PAL has an interesting model for attempting to ensure that policy is driven by research and

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The Greater London Authority (GLA) is working with partners to fund the expansion and development of Project Oracle, to encompass more projects delivering youth services and work with more funders of them. It will involve a 'matchmaking' service between social researchers and youth projects in London to enable them to effectively move up the standards of evidence, generating useable information for a variety of decision makers, and benefitting future policy and practice.

evidence. They do this through a network of 58 academics across 30 countries undertaking rigorous evaluation, and then taking it further by blending it with policy outreach and capacity building mechanisms.<sup>7</sup>

## 2. The community and voluntary sector context

In the absence of regulation and consistency in expectations in voluntary sector markets, social impact measurement ends up being a process by which social entrepreneurs seek to influence others and create opportunities for themselves.<sup>8</sup> Measurement with a view to articulating social value or impact can become a currency between organisations. However, in the absence of standards and consistency in knowledge and expectation, such a currency will only serve to support *status quo* relationships rather than opening up markets. Markets in which smaller and lesser-known providers can become recognised objectively for verifiable evidence of 'good work'.

Other commentators have written about the voluntary sector's ever-present concern with 'impression management'.<sup>9</sup> Community groups are often principally motivated by grant-making and commissioning agencies' search for investments. Recent research has also found marketing pursuits and internal learning were important motivations.<sup>10</sup>

While the interests of funders and commissioners were important in sparking the motivation and urgency among the voluntary sector, only when provided with support in kind and even funding as part of a government pilot or private initiative, were organisations able to shift towards becoming evidence-based and focused on measurement. The involvement of chief executives and other senior leaders helped facilitate this transition.<sup>11</sup>

The catalytic role of organisations such as Pro Bono Economics,<sup>12</sup> Pilotlight<sup>13</sup> and Business in the Community<sup>14</sup> demonstrates that the injection of time, skills and expertise from different sectors can create a step change within voluntary sector organisations. Moreover, distributing this patronage and support through competition (i.e. making organisations apply for it) increases the perceived value of the support and it therefore takes on greater internal currency.

Two pressing concerns remain, as identified by recent research – that there is still 'considerable diversity within the third sector with regard to its take up and approaches' to social impact measurement,<sup>15</sup> which is compounded by confusion and competition between different expectations and approaches among funders and public sector commissioners. Project Oracle seeks to face up to these challenges by proposing a standard for evaluation that can be applied to encourage consistency, together with a package of support that can catalyse organisations in their journey towards evidence generation and service improvement.

## 3. Project Oracle research

In December 2010, the GLA commissioned Community Links to run a number of workshops as part of a consultation for developing the Project Oracle guidebook. They also carried out a survey, which ultimately reached 157 respondents, most, though not all, of whom were youth sector providers.<sup>16</sup>

The survey generated interesting reflections on an organisations ability to evaluate. For example lack of time (72 per cent), funding (64 per cent) and expertise (49 per cent) were identified as the primary constraints to having good evaluation. Coupled with inconsistent (or 'un-standardised') expectations from a diversity of funders, organisations are unable to prioritise evaluation strategically and to execute it robustly. Thus many organisations cannot get over the initial hurdle of evaluation without some form of stimulus for doing so – an issue

identified in the previous section. Moreover, without clarity and consistency from funding and commissioning organisations on what is expected, even groups committed to 'impression management' fail to become good generators of evidence.

Yet, perhaps surprisingly, the analysis showed that the size of a given organisation did not have any significant effect on its ability to evaluate. Up to 70 per cent of 'small projects' did not have an evaluation plan, while the proportion was 64 per cent and 62 per cent for 'medium' and 'large' projects respectively.<sup>17</sup> This aligns to findings in other studies, which have shown organisational skill and will to be key determinants of what value an organisation places on evaluation.<sup>18</sup>

#### **4. Where it works well, from experience**

A small number of organisations involved in Oracle break the mould of these general findings. What they have in common, among other things, are a strong executive leadership, partnership with one or more research institutions, as well as a focus on evidence not only for the benefit of marketing or fundraising,<sup>19</sup> but also for service planning and improvement and staff development.

Unsurprisingly perhaps, all of these organisations are also considerably advanced in terms of their project evidence. One of them hosts a number of temporary placements from clinical psychology students who not only get practical experience but are also able to add to the evidence base through the creation of case files and other data. Indeed one of the evaluations of this charity's programme is a longitudinal analysis of case files over a period of one year. A similar model currently operates in an A&E department of a London hospital, where a charity employing outreach youth workers supports young people who arrive as victims of serious (often weapon-enabled) assault, while a team of clinical staff and social researchers monitors their progress over time, in the hope that these youngsters do not make a return visit.

Two other organisations have benefited from direct partnerships with academics at the start of their doctoral careers. This has resulted in new quasi-experimental design evaluations, which in spite of their limitations demonstrate the huge promise behind some innovative community-based programmes. Since their initial collaboration, both organisations have become more confident and self-reliant in gathering and using data sets in formative evaluation and programme design. One of these organisations is now part of an innovative field trial examining the use of fatherhood services, which hypothesises that three major predictors of the likely outcomes of a fatherhood service on father-child relations are whether the service is used, how often it is used, and most importantly, whether it is useful to the fathers in the first place.

This small set of examples shows that forged collaborations between academic and community sectors can bring enormous value. Where interests can be aligned – for the charity, 'impression management' as well as service improvement, and for the academics access to a playground of research opportunities – productive change can happen. Not only do both parties emerge better off, but third parties such as funders and policymakers can reap the by-products which come in the form of new evidence and learning.

In its next phase of work, Project Oracle will seek to catalyse such collaborations on an unprecedented scale, while evaluating if the expected benefits can be realised and sustained.<sup>20</sup> What we know, or at least suspect, from research and experience so far, is that by removing the initial barriers of cost, time and expertise, lowering the burden of exchange between academia and the youth sector and aligning interests, we can successfully facilitate relationships that will cost less in the long run, and deliver new and hitherto untapped benefits.

This is how we will know if our experiment has been a success. Should it succeed we want it to be business as usual for London.

## About the authors

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Mat is a Programme Manager in the Youth Team at the Greater London Authority, where he has worked on Mayoral policies and programmes since August 2010. Among other responsibilities, he is tasked with the delivery of Project Oracle, a programme that is looking at understanding and sharing which interventions aimed at supporting young Londoners are truly effective. Mat has a background in evaluation and project management having worked in a large public sector consultancy and in finance. He holds degrees from the University of Oxford and the London School of Economics.

### Ruth Puttick

Ruth is a Development Manager in the Policy and Research team at NESTA. She has worked on a range of research projects across the creative industries, investment and growth, and public and social innovation. Since December 2010 she has focused upon public and social innovation, and in particular on the development of the Alliance for Useful Evidence. Prior to NESTA, Ruth worked in a variety of research settings, including as a consultant, for the Exmoor National Park Authority, and on a sea turtle research programme in Panama.

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## Endnotes

1. Cabinet Office (2011) 'Applying Behavioural Insights to Reduce Fraud, Error and Debt.' pp. 8. Behavioural Insights Team. London: Cabinet Office.
2. It should be noted that many of the issues outlined in this paper are not isolated or restricted to the youth sector. A lack of evidence is too often a commonality across many other areas of public policy.
3. For further details see: [www.nice.org.uk](http://www.nice.org.uk)
4. For further details see: [www.wsipp.wa.gov](http://www.wsipp.wa.gov)
5. For more information see Aos, S. (2009) 'Return on (Taxpayer)Investment: Evidence-Based Prevention and Intervention – Initial Report to the Legislature on Study Design.' Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy, Document No. 09- 12- 1202.
6. For further details about the French Experimentation Fund for Youth see: <http://www.parisschoolofeconomics.eu/en/research/chairs-research-agreements/research-agreements-pse/>
7. For more information about how J-PAL ensure policy is driven by rigorous evidence see Dhaliwal, I. and Tulloch, C. (2011) 'From Research to Policy: Using evidence to inform development policy.' In Puttick, R. (ed.) 'Using Evidence to Improve Social Policy and Practice.' London: NESTA.
8. Lyon, F. and Arvidson, M. (2012) 'Social impact measurement as an entrepreneurial process.' TSRC Briefing Paper 66. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre.
9. See for example, Teasdale S. (2010) Explaining the multifaceted nature of social enterprise: impression management as (social) entrepreneurial behaviour. 'Voluntary Sector Review', 1(3) 271-292.
10. Lyon, F. and Arvidson, M. (2012) 'Social impact measurement as an entrepreneurial process.' TSRC Briefing Paper 66. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Pro Bono Economics matches volunteer economists with charities wishing to address questions around measurement, results and impact. See: <http://www.probonoeconomics.com/>
13. Pilotlight manages teams of senior business people to coach charities through the process of building measurably more sustainable and efficient organisations. See: <http://www.pilotlight.org.uk>
14. BITC is a charity which works with its business and corporate membership to help to transform communities by tackling key social and environmental issues and in doing so, attempting to transform business itself. See: [www.bitc.org.uk](http://www.bitc.org.uk)
15. Lyon, F. and Arvidson, M. (2012) 'Social impact measurement as an entrepreneurial process.' TSRC Briefing Paper 66. Birmingham: Third Sector Research Centre.
16. See: Community Links (2010) 'Project Oracle Consultation Process Final Report.' Prepared for the Greater London Authority, December 2010.
17. Large projects had a staff base of ten plus people; medium projects four to ten, with small having fewer than four employees.
18. See for example, Hall, M., Phillips, S., Meillat, C. and Pickering, D. (2003) 'Assessing Performance: Evaluation Practices & Perspectives in Canada's Voluntary Sector.' Toronto: Canadian Centre for Philanthropy.
19. A number of studies examining voluntary sector motives for evaluation reveal that a major driver in the original reason why organisations evaluate is the demand from funders and commissioners. See: Hall, Phillips, Meillat and Pickering (2003), which discovered 'Required by funders' was the second largest motivation after 'Decision of Staff or Board for Internal Reasons'. Interestingly, the same study found that quasi-experimental or experimental design evaluations were the least common with 'Staff Meetings' being the most common type of evaluation that is carried out.
20. The data generated by this evaluation will be extremely valuable. The focus of much of the evidence debate is upon generating impact data on specific programmes and policies, rather than evaluating the success of the institutions or other mechanisms that exist to generate research and/or connect it with decision makers.

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