YOUTH ENDOWMENT FUND

LEARNING AND ADAPTING TO SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC: HOW A CORE COMPONENTS APPROACH CAN HELP

Insights Brief #2
COVID-19 Grant Round
Learning Partner

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About the Youth Endowment Fund COVID-19 grant round

In July 2020, the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) launched the £6.4m COVID-19 Learning Project for organisations based in England and Wales. The grant had two aims: first, to provide targeted support to young people at risk of being involved in violence; and second, to learn fast about the best ways to reach vulnerable young people during a period of social distancing.

In total, **129 organisations** were awarded funding from this special funding round to support the delivery of services and activities, including online and virtual programmes, targeted work in schools and detached youth work (youth work which takes place without the use of a building or activity, but instead focuses on meeting young people in the spaces where they choose to spend their time).

INTRODUCTION TO THIS INSIGHTS BRIEF

A COMMITMENT TO EVIDENCE AND LEARNING

Curating and building robust evidence about the impact of different approaches to reducing youth violence is central to the YEF's mission. But the rapidly evolving context of the pandemic means that organisations have had to adapt quickly. This means there may be a need for a different method of learning other than traditional impact evaluation. Organisations require an approach that pulls together the best of what's already known and creates opportunities for grantees to share and learn from each other as the situation unfolds. As such, we established a Learning Partner role for the COVID-19 Learning Project that is attached to the Fund.

Led by the **Dartington Service Design Lab**, **Centre for Youth Impact**, **Research in Practice** and **University of Plymouth**, the Learning Partner was established to work closely with the YEF and grantees over the course of a year to generate and share learning grounded in evidence. This learning will focus on how to engage young people at risk of being involved in violence, how the pandemic is affecting the context in which violence manifests, and the strengths of different forms of support, while also being responsive to learning needs as they develop. Learning will be shared in Insights Briefs, such as this.

To find out more about our work and how you can get involved, email us at **hello@youthendowmentfund.org.uk**

ABOUT THIS INSIGHTS BRIEF

We've produced this Insights Brief to help organisations working with children and young people, particularly those living in difficult circumstances and who might be at risk of becoming involved in crime and violence. It's the second in a series of reports we're producing as part of our COVID-19 Learning Project.

It follows our first Insights Brief, which offered practical guidance on how **using the right tools**, **working in partnership** and **flexibility** can help you to make sure young people stay engaged with the trusted adults in their lives.

This brief goes into more detail around the last point – **how to be flexible.** It outlines an approach we're calling **core components**[i].

We hope it will help you to:

- **Describe** the parts (or components) of your programme in a way that supports writing a theory of change.
- **Decide** if you need all of the parts of your programme, or if some can be adapted (this is particularly useful when we're all living with a lot of uncertainty).
- **Develop** a stronger understanding of what the evidence says about different parts of your programme so you can make improvements.
- **Evaluate** your programme and its constituent parts so that you can share your learning about what works with others.

We also hope it will encourage other funders, policymakers, researchers and evaluators to think about how they can help their partners to use a core components approach.

[i]The term 'core components' can be used to mean different things, and is sometimes also used interchangeably with other terms, most notably 'common elements'. Here it refers to a broad approach to breaking programmes into their constituent parts and using this to help with (i) articulating what a programme comprises, (ii) understanding how a programme can best be adapted, (iii) making a programme more evidence-informed, and (iv) evaluating programmes.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This Insights Brief has been created to support organisations adapting their work with young people during the COVID-19 pandemic. It sets out a 'core components' approach to work with young people, which may be particularly relevant in the rapidly changing context of the pandemic.

The core components approach is the idea that your projects can be broken up into the 'core components' that make up the service or approach that you're delivering to young people. Those components might be:

- Who your service is aimed at (e.g. is it for young people who are at high risk of being excluded, or for all young people living in a certain area?).
- Who delivers your service (is it trained youth workers or counsellors?).
- The place(s) you deliver it in (like a school, youth club or on the street).
- How often you deliver it (e.g. once a week).
- The amount of time you'd expect a young person to be engaged (that might be for 12 sessions, or a number of months).
- The skills you hope the young people will develop as part of their participation (like social and emotional skills or problem-solving).
- The way you support children and young people (such as through goal setting, feedback or rewards).

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Four important questions that taking a core components approach can help youth organisations think through are:

1. How can I meaningfully describe my provision for young people?
2. Which components can I adapt when flexibility is required, and which should remain unchanged?
3. What evidence is there about different aspects of my provision, and how can that evidence inform my work and possible improvements?
4. How well are different parts of my provision working, and what can I learn from others doing similar work to support young people at risk of violence?

Engaging with the evidence on core components can inform practice through:

- The design of more effective offers for young people that are sensitive to their needs and context.
- Recognition of opportunities for improving specific elements of an offer for young people.
- Support for practitioners to use components of other projects that have been shown to work. For example, it might help them build successful strategies for developing relationships into their interactions with young people.

The YEF COVID-19 grant round offers a unique opportunity to explore the variety of ways organisations are working with young people during a time of great upheaval, and how youth organisations adapt their offers to respond to changing contexts and young people's emerging needs.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

For this Insights Brief, the Learning Partner built a core components framework and then coded the 129 successful grantee applications against it. This generated insight into the similarities and variation of projects across the YEF COVID-19 round. We also used the framework to group projects together according to their similarities (a cluster analysis). This produced three clusters of programme type.

We found that:

- **Grantees were proposing social and emotional learning, mentoring or deterrence approaches to reduce youth violence.**
- **Half of the projects were going to deliver online, with most of the remaining projects operating in schools and through street-based youth work.**

We see great potential in the core components approach for helping grantees to be flexible, adaptable and confident that the most important components remain intact. This will help to ensure that young people have consistent high-quality experiences even in a context as turbulent as the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Learning Partner will continue to work with grantees to apply a core components approach to their work in the following ways:

- Writing a theory of change that clearly describes the core components of their work, and in greater detail than was possible to achieve in this Brief.
- Reflecting on how they have adapted their programme and what the impact of specific changes to components have been.
- Engaging with research evidence on core components to support learning and improvement.
- Creating spaces for peer-to-peer learning and practice sharing, allowing grantees to explore the value of different components.

INTRODUCTION TO CORE COMPONENTS

A core components approach means thinking about programmes in terms of their constituent parts and using this to help with the following:

1. Describing what a programme is composed of.
2. Adapting a programme to best meet users' needs in a changing context.
3. Improving programmes by making them more evidence-informed.
4. Evaluating programmes.

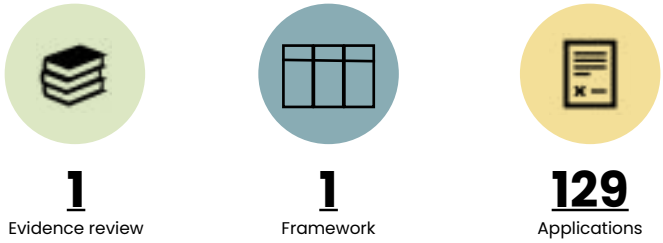
INTRODUCTION TO CORE COMPONENTS

In this Insights Brief, we describe the core components approach, identify its strengths and limitations, show how it can be applied in practice, and illustrate how projects funded by the YEF in the COVID-19 grant round can be separated out into their constituent components.

We do not identify discrete, evidence-informed practice components, either in the analysis of YEF COVID-19 grantees or from the research literature. This is owing to the diversity of projects funded and the breadth of the literature. We do, however, signpost readers to some useful and easily accessible resources.

The Brief is informed by the following:

- A rapid evidence review of evidence-informed core components and their application in practice.[ii]
- Development of a core components framework for the YEF COVID-19 Fund.
- Analysis of all 129 successful YEF COVID-19 project grant applications against this framework.



[ii] This is being prepared for a peer-reviewed publication.

WHY CORE COMPONENTS?

The immediate context for this work is the COVID-19 pandemic, which demands flexible and collaborative ways of working. This was borne out of our first Insights Brief, which looked at how YEF COVID-19 grantees can best engage with young people during the pandemic. The evidence and insights from grantees emphasised the importance of:

- Flexibility, personalisation and combining different approaches to engage and retain young people, while learning and adapting as required.
- Building on existing relationships with young people, partners and communities.

While the youth sector celebrates flexibility as a feature of high-quality work with young people, this can seem at odds with a particular model of evidence-informed practice, namely delivering programmes that have demonstrated effectiveness in achieving certain aims for young people. This model often emphasises implementing activities as designed, with minimal adaptation, because doing so has been shown to deliver positive results. Many such programmes were funded in the YEF first grant round in 2019.

Evidence-based programmes have numerous merits. They have been tested rigorously and found to improve targeted outcomes. They are well codified, meaning that there is clear guidance on what practitioners need to do to achieve a positive impact for young people. They often come with extensive implementation support packages. Methods for evaluating them are also well established.

However, practitioners sometimes find such programmes to be overly prescriptive. Some problems also require more nimble responses than a structured programme may appear to provide. It is very hard, for example, to deliver a 12-week programme as designed when lockdown and social distancing rules are changing so fast.

How might delivery organisations (and commissioners) ensure that practice is flexible and adaptive but also evidence-informed? A core components approach offers one route to achieving this.

UNDERSTANDING CORE COMPONENTS

A core components approach rests on the idea that programmes can be broken down into their constituent parts.

The focus might be on things like who the programme or provision is aimed at, how long it lasts, the frequency of contact, where it takes place, who delivers it and the broad approach or programme philosophy.

Or there may be a deeper dive into what is actually delivered and how. For example, a programme might include content on relationship-building, skill development or problem-solving, which is communicated using role-play or home visiting, with training to support practitioners. Going even further, it is possible to spell out the different techniques used to support service users with making changes in their lives, such as goal setting, feedback and rewards.

Most programmes can be broken down in one or more of these ways. Doing so has several advantages.

1. DESCRIBING WHAT IS OFFERED

The first advantage of a core components approach is that that it can help with articulating the nature of the offer to young people. In turn, this contributes to developing a strong theory of change – an explanation of why the activities should contribute to short and long-term outcomes. As part of this work, it is useful to distinguish between aspects of the offer that are core, or non-negotiable, and those that are flexible and can more obviously be adapted. This would ideally be informed by a mixture of theory, experience and evidence.

UNDERSTANDING CORE COMPONENTS

EXAMPLE

Picture a youth organisation developing a new 20-week mentoring programme for young people at risk of violence. The programme and activities within sessions can be broken down into several constituent parts. These include: goal-setting, emotion coaching, practical support, modelling and reviews of progress against set goals. Each session lasts one hour.

Some components of this programme are **core and non-negotiable**. The setting has to be one where the young person feels physically and emotionally safe. Young people must also set a goal, or a set of goals, that they can work with their mentor to achieve over the 20-week period.

Some components of the programme are **flexible**. Young people can meet with their mentors weekly or fortnightly depending on the intensity of support they need to achieve their goals. The offer of practical support, emotion coaching, and modelling within the programme do not follow a fixed delivery path; instead skilled mentors are able to recognise when these components would be most meaningful and deliberately vary the programme. This personalisation could be in response to how the young person presents at a given session, what support they need to achieve their goals, their other needs and demands of the external environment.

Having clearly described the component parts of their programme, the youth organisation has written a **theory of change**.

They use this to:

- Plan for programme delivery, making it clear which components are core (as in essential) and which ones are flexible.
- Identify the training needs and ongoing support that mentors will need.
- Form the basis of regular reflective practice where they check in on the extent to which core and flexible components are delivered.
- Plan an evaluation to understand the quality of the programme and the extent to which it supported young people to achieve positive outcomes.

Having clearly described their offer, the youth organisation can use this to talk to funders, who will clearly know what they intend to do and the extent to which the programme aligns with a funder's aims. They also present a very clear offer to young people and their parents or carers, who can then enter into the mentoring knowing exactly what to expect.

UNDERSTANDING CORE COMPONENTS

2. KNOWING WHAT AND HOW TO ADAPT

A second, and related, benefit of a core components approach is that it can help with adapting the design or delivery of programmes. This may be necessary to personalise support so that it better meets the needs of individual young people, or to respond to changes in the context.

Doing this is easier if a distinction is made between the core and flexible components and the parameters of that flexibility. One situation that might call for such adaptation are COVID-19 lockdown restrictions or individuals' related anxieties about face-to-face work. This would likely require sessions to be delivered remotely or over the phone whenever possible. Even as delivery settings and formats change, the core, non-negotiable components of a programme should remain present, with flexible components adapted around them.

EXAMPLE

The mentoring programme described on page 12 has mostly had to move online and/or over the phone. Legally, face-to-face one-to-one work is permitted during the lockdown. However, to manage young people's and mentors' anxieties about travel and to reduce the risk of infection, the youth organisation decided that moving to remote work was the best option. It had identified young people working with the same mentor throughout as being core to the programme, so it was important to mitigate the risk of mentors falling ill with COVID-19 and disrupting that relationship.

If mentors are able to meet young people without using public transport and both feel safe to do so, they can do 'walk and talks', but the organisation requires them to complete a risk assessment to ensure that they are meeting in a safe space.

A core component of the mentoring sessions is that young people feel physically and emotionally safe. To enable this with the remote offer, the mentors explained to young people's parents or carers how to make their homes a safe, non-judgemental space for the young person to take part in a session. This has largely required privacy, which requires additional planning for the family (for instance, if the young person shares their bedroom).

Early on, the mentors reviewed the goals that young people set at the start of the programme. They considered whether they were still relevant during the lockdown and the extent to which young people could make progress on them. With this transition, practical support - such as accessing technology and meeting basic needs - had to take priority over other aspects of mentoring.

UNDERSTANDING CORE COMPONENTS

3. MAKING PRACTICE MORE EVIDENCE-INFORMED

The third strength of a core components approach is that it can help to make practice more evidence-informed. Recent years have seen a growth in efforts by researchers to identify the features or components of programmes that are associated with positive effects. Once identified, these can be used in several ways.

1

One is to **design better – more effective and efficient – programmes.** Sometimes these have a modular feel: skilled workers can offer specified activities, routines and strategies in a more flexible manner, depending on young people's need and the context.

2

Another application is to **improve existing practice by adjusting what is offered to better fit the evidence**, for example by targeting it more towards the young people who stand to benefit most, or incorporating effective practice components.[1]

3

In a further application, training and guidance can be used **to help skilled practitioners see how and when they can use effective elements of practice in an agile way** when interacting with young people. In other words, they have a toolbox of evidence-informed practices that can be tailored to need and context.[2,3]

UNDERSTANDING CORE COMPONENTS

EXAMPLE

Project workers in the youth organisation that delivers the mentoring looked at some of the research literature about what makes mentoring effective. They found a study that analysed 70 studies of youth mentoring conducted over a 40-year period.[4]

This showed that larger effects were seen in programmes where mentors had a background in the helping professions. The study authors suggested that this could be because they have a stronger sense of efficacy. This finding points to the benefits of recruiting mentors with helping experiences or roles. It also underscores the importance of providing less experienced mentors with adequate training before the matching process.

Managers in the youth organisation changed the volunteer recruitment process accordingly. They made a more deliberate effort to identify volunteers with helping experience, for example by highlighting its importance in advertising materials. They also developed new training materials for volunteers without such experience.

The youth organisation also found a report describing a series of elements of effective practice for mentoring. This was based on a review of over 400 peer-reviewed journal articles and research reports, and the real-life experience of over 200 practitioners and mentoring organisations.[5]

Based on this, the revised recruitment packs for volunteers were edited to provide clearer information about the requirements, rewards and challenges of mentoring. This was to counter mentors having unfulfilled expectations and thereby prevent premature close of mentoring relationships.

UNDERSTANDING CORE COMPONENTS

4. EVALUATING PROGRAMMES

The fourth benefit of a core components approach is that it can help with evaluation. This might involve consciously focusing on a few components and exploring how well they are implemented, what contribution they are perceived to make to project aims, or how acceptable they are to users.

It is also possible to experiment with adding or subtracting components, or changing those that exist, and seeing what effect this has. Further, the fact that many programmes and types of provision share components makes it possible to measure the value of a given component or set of components across projects or sites. For example, how effective is a particular strategy for engaging young people, or a technique to help young people with goal-setting?

Lastly, comparing programmes with similar aims and approaches but different types or constellations of components can help with learning about which ones are more effective.

EXAMPLE

Managers in the youth organisation described before were conscious of the need to measure how well the changes they introduced worked in practice. Rather than evaluate the entire mentoring programme, they focused on changes to core components.

They monitored the effect of the shorter but more regular remote sessions on mentors' ability to deliver key content. Mentors' self-completion records and supervision sessions showed that the mentors continued to engage with the organisation's reflective practice process.

They delivered things like emotion coaching and modelling consistently, adapting content intentionally. Brief feedback surveys and interviews with young people and their carers produced positive reports about the support from the mentors during lockdown.

Recruitment records showed that the proportion of new volunteers with a helping background increased by a third. Brief interviews with new recruits showed that promotional videos featuring existing mentors from the helping professions were particularly influential. Monitoring data showed that the rate of premature endings to mentoring relationships also fell.

Meanwhile, a collaboration with another youth organisation delivering mentoring allowed the co-production and shared evaluation of the new volunteer training. Post-training feedback questionnaires showed that the content was helpful, but volunteers would learn better if they had more opportunity to practice (e.g. through role-play). The two organisations responded to this differently, allowing for comparison between sites and learning about the pros and cons of different approaches.

GENERATING INSIGHT USING A CORE COMPONENTS APPROACH

TAKING FIRST STEPS

The first step on the road to applying a core components approach is to think about how programmes can be broken into their constituent parts. We have done this here for the projects funded by the YEF's COVID-19 grant round. We developed a core components framework and applied it to projects based on how grantees described them in applications for this funding.

The exercise was necessarily limited by the information contained in grantee applications. It therefore focuses on key features of projects rather than on the specific strategies and techniques that they apply. Future work led by the Learning Partner during this grant round should explore the latter in more depth. By definition, we are also not claiming that the features identified are effective, or associated with effectiveness. This work does, however, provide a gateway to research that identifies effective practice components, as we explain later.

In the meantime, this process has shown how projects can be described in terms of key building blocks. It has also helped to identify similarities and differences in how grantees intended to support young people during the pandemic. Through the funding period, the Learning Partner will support grantees to apply learning from this Insights Brief as they develop a theory of change for their project and describe precisely how they've adapted their projects as the pandemic has evolved.

WHAT WE DID

To generate this insight, we created a framework to tag different elements to. The goal was to describe the range of different practice elements being delivered by grantees – the approaches to engagement, the specific types of activities and their intensity. We were able to identify commonly occurring components across the YEF-funded projects and sort them into clusters in such a way that projects in the same group are more similar to each other than those in other clusters. This is a statistical process called a cluster analysis. This analysis showed some clear trends in how youth organisations intend to support young people at risk of violence during the pandemic.

You can read more about how we created the framework in **Annex 1.** But in short, the framework drew upon existing core components literature, a meta-analysis of youth offending prevention[6], and a typology for youth provision in the UK that was developed through the Youth Investment Fund (YIF) Learning Project[7]. A simplified version of this framework consists of three sections (related to engagement of young people, types and settings of activities, and their intensity and duration) and each with a number of specific elements. All 129 successful YEF COVID-19 Fund applications were coded against the framework for analysis, to see which elements were planned for delivery, and how frequently so. **Annex 1** describes how much we were able to successfully code from the information we had available (it ranged from 7% to 96%).

This analysis generated insights into the activities that were funded through the YEF COVID-19 grant round. However, it is important to recognise that what grantees set out in their applications were intentions. We've heard from grantees that the reality of the rapidly evolving COVID-19 context has demanded that they deviate from their planned delivery a lot. The first Insights Brief described, for example, how often organisations need to shift focus to first addressing more basic needs (such as material support and practical help) before moving on to things related to young people's social and emotional learning. Or how they had to switch between online and in-person engagement, or work in much more collaborative ways with local partners.

WHAT WE DID

Even if the analysis of the YEF-funded projects is somewhat distant from what is actually being delivered through the fund, there is still insight and value to gain from it. First, we'll share what we learnt about the YEF-funded projects by analysing applications against our core components framework. Then we'll discuss how it builds a foundation from which grantees and the Learning Partner can use the core components approach to:

- Describe what projects are and how they are being delivered.
- Adapt purposefully around what matters most.
- Apply evidence relevant to these projects.
- Evaluate projects and build on learning.

COMMON CLUSTERS OF ACTIVITY

The cluster analysis allowed us to see what different types of activities were most commonly planned, in what combinations (see **Annex 2** for details). This analysis looked at the primary approach (what is the driving philosophy or methods used?), setting (where do activities take place?), and mode (are activities delivered through group, one-to-one or self-guided work?) for each project. The analysis revealed three common clusters:

The first and largest cluster included 59 projects. This cluster was composed of **mentoring activities** for young people meeting specific thresholds or referral criteria (such as identified by their school as at-risk of exclusion, or involvement with youth offending services having had experience of violence), and delivered online on a one-to-one basis over 7-12 months.

The second largest cluster included 37 projects. These involved activities designed to promote young people's **social and emotional learning**, typically for young people who met a particular threshold or set of referral criteria. These activities were usually planned to be delivered online, over a period of seven months to a year, often on a one-to-one basis.

The third and smallest cluster included 31 projects. This cluster includes **street-based engagement** with groups of young people, designed to build relationships and divert and protect young people from violence. Rather than reaching young people through more formalised referral processes, these projects offer activities in areas where young people are known to spend their time and/or known areas of anti-social behaviour.

COMMON CLUSTERS OF ACTIVITY

There is still variation within each cluster but projects within each cluster have more in common with each other than they do the projects in other clusters.[iii]

While the key features of the activities in Cluster 1 are one-to-one mentoring in online/remote settings. Within Cluster 1, 10% of projects have deterrence as their primary approach, 15% take place within school, 5% are street-based, and 24% work with peer groups.

Of the 37 projects in Cluster 2 - 'social and emotional learning delivered in online/remote settings through one-to-one work' - 43% work with peer groups, 19% take place in school settings, and 11% are street-based.

Finally, of the 31 projects in Cluster 3 - 'deterrence approaches, in street-based settings working with peer groups' - we see 39% of projects working with young people on a one-to-one basis and 39% working within schools.

Specific activities distinguish projects from each other – such as arts or sport for development. Moreover, within each primary approach is a range of techniques and practices for working with young people. The analysis for this Brief could not go into that level of detail with the information available in grantees' funding applications. Underpinning the approaches however, are shared driving philosophies allowing insight into how youth organisations hypothesise that youth violence can be reduced or prevented specifically in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic. Clearly articulating these intentions and rationale provide a foundation for learning and evaluation and should be made explicit.

[iii] We often found that projects were delivered across multiple settings and modes. For this analysis, we only included the primary setting and mode for each project – those which were given the most emphasis in applications.

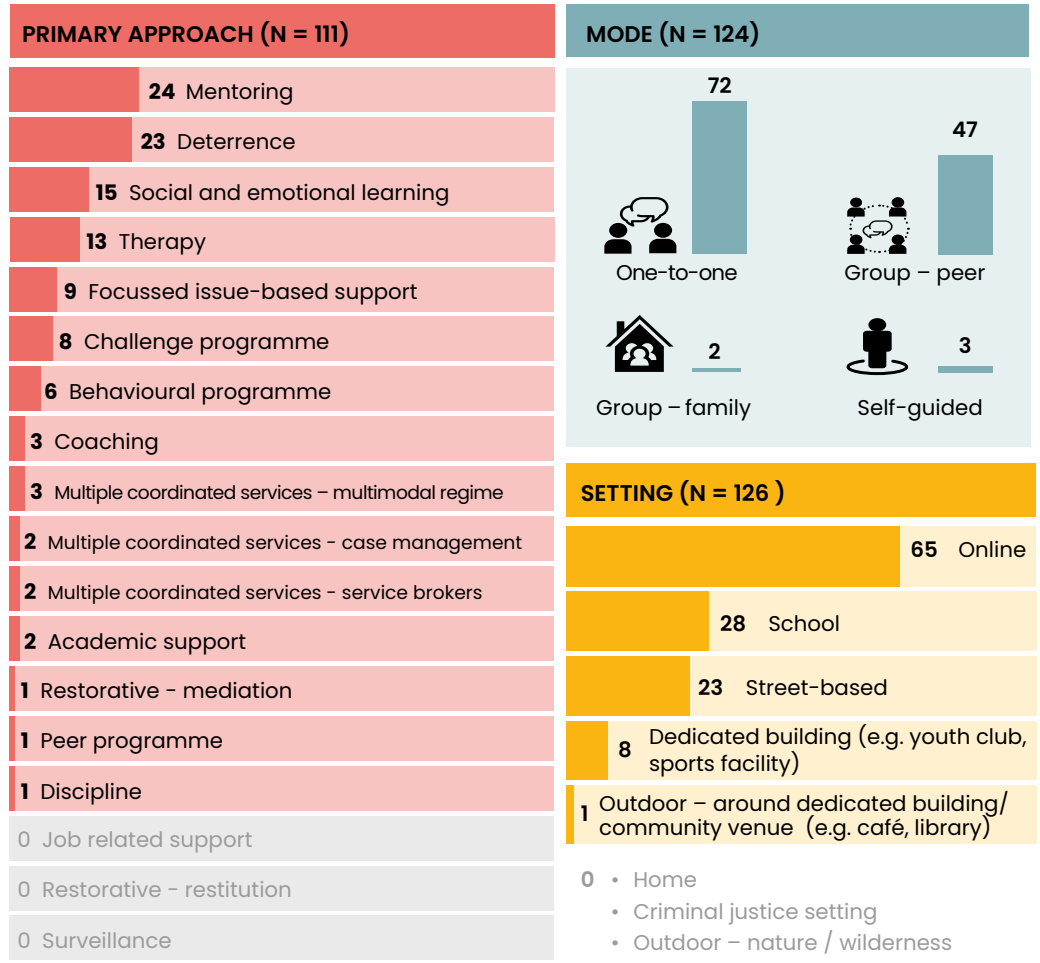
RANGE OF ACTIVITY WITHIN THE YEF-FUNDED PROJECTS

Stepping outside of the cluster analysis, we looked at the variation of core components across the YEF-funded projects. In the following pages, data relating to each section of the core components framework is summarised by a diagram, with the size of each circle/rectangle corresponding to the frequency of each planned element (the larger the circle/square, the greater the frequency). Full tables with further details are provided in **Annex 2**.

Approximately half of the projects had online delivery as their primary setting and worked with young people on a one-to-one basis. Many projects set out plans to deliver activities in multiple settings (such as centre-based and online) through multiple modes (such as one-to-one and group work). Many of these variations were dependent on social distancing restrictions, and whether group work would be safe and practical. There were also additional activities being delivered in addition to or as a vehicle for the primary approach. These included youth work, sport for development and arts – among others!

Figure 1 highlights the variation within the funded projects, showing the full range of settings, modes and primary approaches of funded project activities.

FIGURE 1: ACTIVITY, SETTING, MODE AND PRIMARY APPROACH



RECRUITMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE

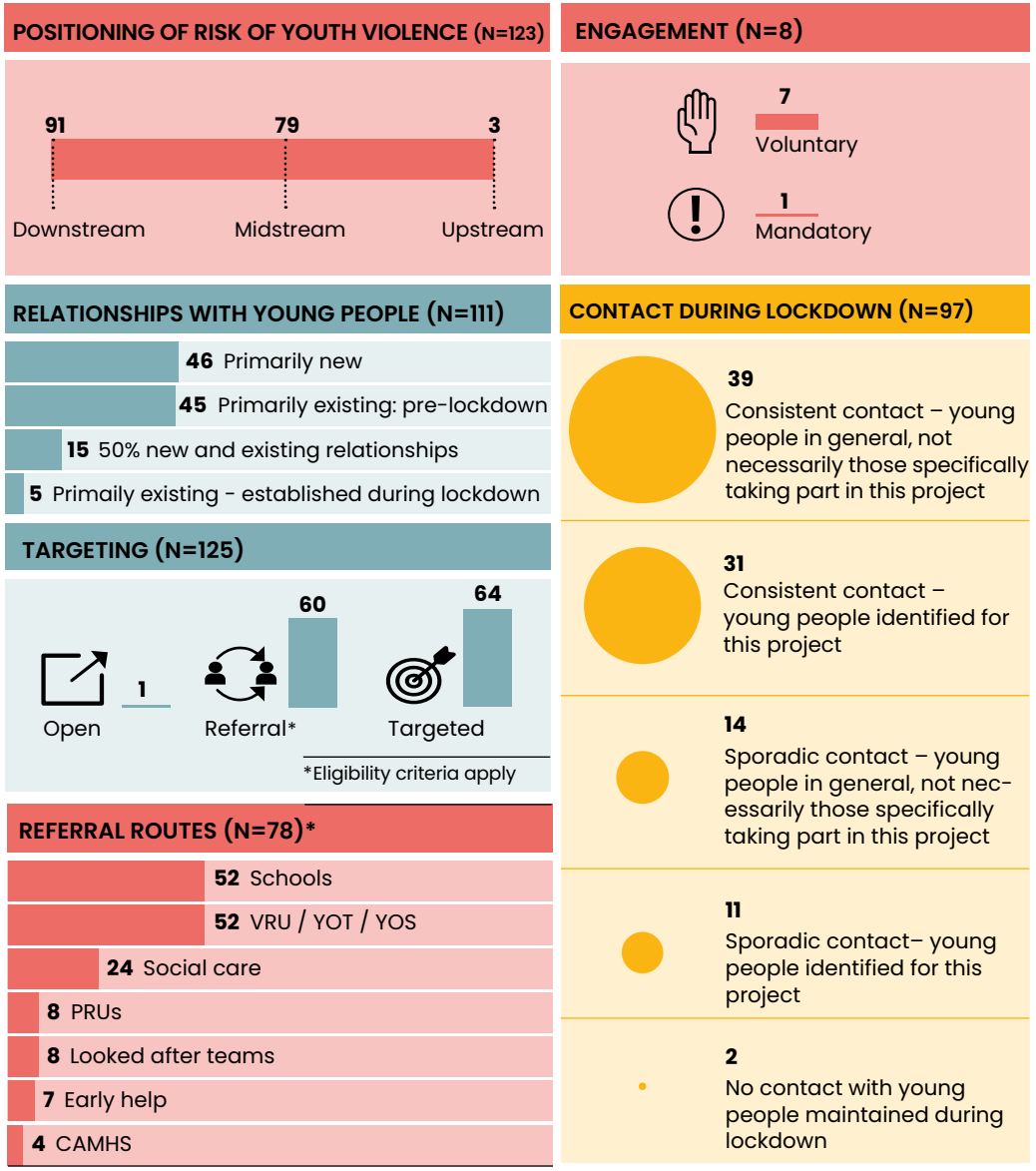
Figure 2 summarises the main process elements related to the engagement and recruitment of young people. As previously discussed, it was not possible to code all components within all applications. The N= in the diagrams reflects the number of applications in which we were able to code a particular component.

Most of the projects were aiming to engage young people at risk of violence through personal traits or circumstance (midstream) and those who have already experienced youth violence (downstream).

There was nearly an even split between projects working with new young people and those with pre-existing relationships. Of the 45 projects that were intending to work primarily with young people with whom they had pre-existing relationships, 36 applications described ways in which they had maintained some level of contact with young people during the first national lockdown in Spring 2020.

Organisations and practitioners can apply a core components approach to idenitfy which techniques showed most promise for building and maintaining relationships with young people in previous lockdowns. The first Insights Brief delves into this topic and shares insight directly from the YEF grantees.

FIGURE 2: RECRUITMENT OF YOUNG PEOPLE



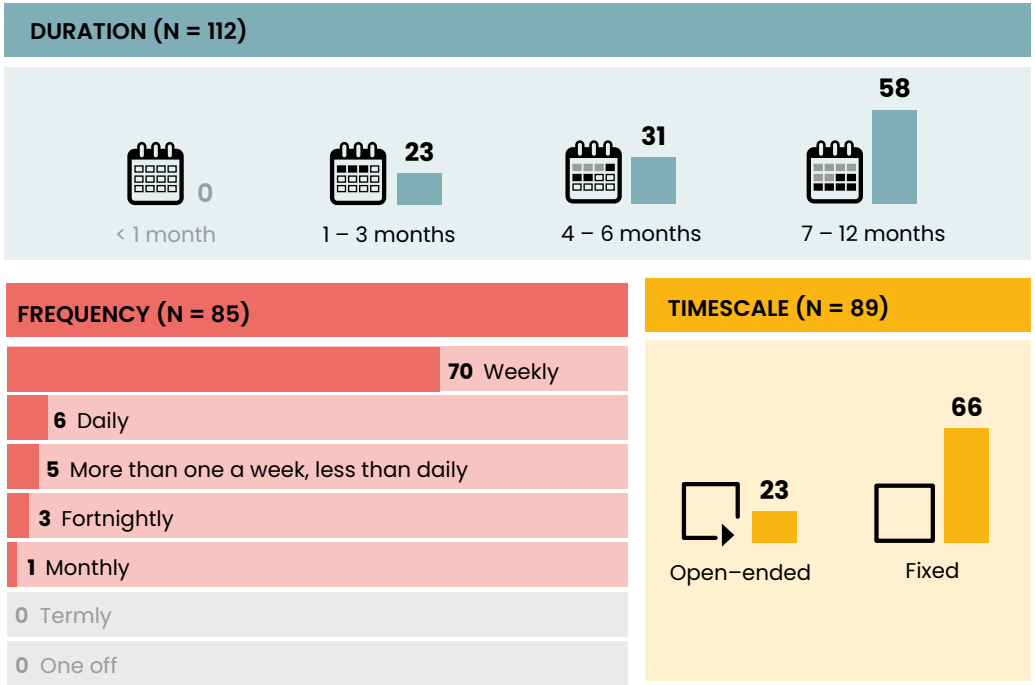
*Many organistions listed multiple referral routes, hence the larger total number of routes

INTENSITY AND DURATION OF ACTIVITIES

Figure 3 summarises how frequently activities were planned to be delivered and over what period of time.

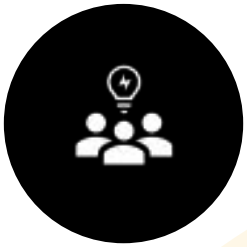
Over half of the projects planned for weekly engagements over time periods varying from one month to one year. Within the applications, there was a recognition that the intensity of support may vary depending on young people's needs. It will be important for organisations to consider if and how they had to adapt the intensity and duration of their projects in order to maintain relationships with young people and best support them.

FIGURE 3: INTENSITY AND DURATION OF ACTIVITIES



Together, these three diagrams provide a summary of what was funded through the YEF COVID-19 grant round. It is important to remember that these diagrams show frequently occurring elements within the YEF-funded projects. These are not necessarily evidence-based practices and we are certainly not endorsing any component over another, particularly in isolation.

Further application of the core components approach and the careful evaluation of both its implementation and the components themselves is needed. This will help with identifying which should be considered core components for designing consistent high-quality experiences for young people. The opportunities to apply this learning extends beyond the pandemic.



USING CORE COMPONENTS IN THE YEF COVID-19 GRANT ROUND

As we said earlier, a core components approach rests on the idea that programmes can be broken down – conceptually and empirically – into their constituent parts. The analysis in the last section makes a start on applying this idea to the projects funded in the YEF COVID-19 grant round.

But so what? How can a core components approach help youth organisations and those charged with commissioning and evaluating the services they provide? We think there are at least four contributions, which we outline in the following pages. As the Learning Partner, we will work with the YEF and COVID-19 grantees throughout this project to build on the initial insights presented in this Brief.

DESCRIBING WHAT IS OFFERED

First, this Brief provides a framework for grantees to articulate what is offered to young people – something that can be challenging to do. This is essential for writing a theory of change (a focus of Learning Partner workshops for grantees to support project delivery, learning and evaluation).

A theory of change sets out the rationale and intentions driving provision. This is a useful way to clearly communicate your offer – to delivery teams, funders and young people. It also supports meaningful evaluation, which can usefully test whether young people benefit from activities in the ways expected (and why or why not). Existing evidence can help inform the design of a theory of change, and evaluation and continuous improvement can support its refinement as confidence increases about what activities can and can't be achieved.

Activity descriptions in a theory of change should include who the activities are for, how frequently they are delivered and over what period of time, the settings where they take place and their mode of delivery.

You can use the concepts and terminology set out in the core components framework for this fund to describe your activities with precision and consistency with others in the sector. Doing so will ensure a common understanding of what programmes are composed of.

We know that during the COVID-19 pandemic, organisations are working flexibly and collaboratively. A theory of change can be used to clearly communicate your offer to other youth sector organisations to identify opportunities for collaboration that build on each organisation's assets and expertise.

Using shared definitions for practice also enables practitioners to share strategies and techniques for working with young people with peers who work in different contexts. This can enhance the quality of experience for young people. For example, techniques that attend to young people's social and emotional learning, such as naming emotions, showing empathy, and planning and decision making can be woven into many one-to-one and group activities with young people.

ADAPTING WITHIN A CHANGING CONTEXT

Second, describing the components of your work in a theory of change can help you to think through which components can be adapted when flexibility is required, and which should remain intact.

Specifically, the process of thinking about programmes in terms of their constituent parts and dimensions shows the range of different things that can potentially be changed. Taking this a step further, when programme components are considered in relation to a theory of change, it becomes clearer which ones are theoretically more important, and therefore which should be preserved and which can safely be adapted.

During the pandemic this will help you to offer young people consistent high-quality relationships and experiences that stay true to the intentions in your theory of change.

Add to the mix evidence on the effectiveness of components (see next point), and decisions about what to amend, subtract or add are more likely to have a positive impact on outcomes.

APPLYING EVIDENCE TO PRACTICE

Third, a core components approach provides new ways of accessing and applying evidence to improve provision for young people.

Most research evidence on 'what works' to improve young people's lives is based on evaluations of programmes. It includes single studies of discrete programmes, and syntheses of the results of such studies. From this literature, we learn about the extent to which a given programme or type of programme is effective. We learn less about what makes them effective. What is it about their content or delivery that contributes to the positive effects?

While this literature helps with deciding what programme or type of programme to implement, it is less helpful for knowing how to implement them well, or how to improve similar programmes that you are already delivering.

Fortunately, a growing number of research studies try to tease out the components of effective practice. Some aim to isolate the active ingredients within single programmes. Others crunch together data from multiple studies of similar programmes to find the strategies or features of interventions associated with effectiveness. Engaging with and making sense of this emerging evidence requires first being able to reflect on your own programme and its constituent parts.

For example, the evidence might show that programmes designed to achieve a given outcome tend to be more effective if they last a certain length or are delivered by a particular set of people. Or that specific behaviour change techniques are common among programmes shown to be effective in achieving a given outcome. Insights like these provide an opportunity for better aligning your existing provision with the evidence. It may be difficult to deliver evidence-based programmes in the current context but you can look to integrate effective practice components into support for young people. Doing so has the potential to improve relationships with them and support their outcomes.

! Some caution is needed because knowledge about what counts as effective 'core' components is still quite limited. There has also been little attempt yet to purposefully deliver services based on the principles of core components, and to evaluate whether this effective (including in youth work and violence prevention). In both cases more research is needed – to identify effective core components in youth violence prevention, and, having identified them, to test their application in practice. This presents an ideal opportunity for the youth sector to help build the evidence base.

EVALUATING PROVISION DURING COVID-19

Fourth, a core components approach can help with evaluating programmes, generating insight into not only whether a programme was effective, but precisely how and why.

For example, you can focus on how well certain core components of your programme are delivered, or the effect on young people's experiences of the changes you have made to content and delivery.

This will help with deciding which ways of working during the pandemic you want to continue and which ones you will stop. We expect to continue to see online and remote work with young people to be integrated into face-to-face offers, so it is important to understand specifically what high quality looks and feels like, and for whom it is most effective. That way, blended offers moving forward can make best use of the core components in face-to-face and remote work.

By adopting shared definitions of core components of practice and recognising them in settings and programmes outside of your own, you can also work with other youth organisations to gain insight into how and why components are effective and in what context.

CLOSING REFLECTIONS

While we are working in unprecedented circumstances, there is still a role for pre-pandemic evidence. We have advocated taking a core components approach to engaging with and applying that evidence.

Of course, care is needed not to pit evidence-based core components against more programmatic forms of practice. It is not one or the other. Indeed, much of the evidence about core components comes from detailed analysis or synthesis of studies of evidence-based programmes. There will also be contexts in which structured programmes are most appropriate.

But as we have shown, a core components approach has the potential to help with more consciously integrating evidence-based practices into provision for young people. It can also help with developing theories of change, adapting provision and, critically, evaluation.

While organisations are adapting and testing new ways of working, we think that learning and evaluation should be focused in a way that enables organisations to intentionally adapt their activities, clearly identifying what changes have been made and the difference they make.

Alongside this, the sector needs to learn together about adaptation – it is inefficient and counter-productive for individual youth organisations to face similar decisions alone, and not have the forums to share their learning collectively.

The sector should also be considering what ways of working they would like to continue when the pandemic is over – what precisely has worked well, how, with whom, and in what settings? How can this insight be applied moving forward?

As the Learning Partner for the YEF COVID-19 Learning Project, we will continue to make evidence accessible as learning emerges, through further Insights Briefs, blogs and other channels over the coming year. Stay tuned!

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Many people have contributed and shared their learning and experience in the production of this Insights Brief, and we are deeply grateful to them all. This report was written by the YEF COVID-19 Learning Partner colleagues Mary McKaskill, Nick Axford, Tim Hobbs, Bethia McNeil, Leanne Freeman, and Rachel Lily[iv]. Any errors or omissions are our own.

We are grateful for the insights and contributions from our Learning Partner colleagues at the University of Plymouth, Dartington Service Design Lab and Research in Practice, as well as colleagues at the Youth Endowment Fund. Lorna Burns, Sarah Rybczynska-Bunt, Tom Thompson, John Tredinnick-Rowe and Nick Axford[v] at the University of Plymouth undertook a very rapid review of the existing research evidence (which will be published in due course).

We are particularly indebted to the 129 YEF COVID-19 grantees. We acknowledge how challenging it was to set out concrete plans when the fund was announced in Spring 2020. Even so, in their applications, grantees described their intended projects at a level of detail that made the analysis for this brief possible, building a foundation from which we can all continue to learn from.

Suggested citation:

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[iV] A special thanks to Stanislava Stoilova, Pixabay and Flaticon users Freepik, KiranShastry, Becris, Nhor Phai, Surang, Those Icons, Iconixar, Prettycons and Pixel Perfect for additional visual support.

[V] The time of Nick Axford, Lorna Burns and John Tredinnick-Rowe is supported by the NIHR Applied Research Collaboration South West Peninsula (PenARC). The views expressed are those of the authors and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR, or the Department of Health and Social Care.

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ANNEX 1: How the core components framework was created

The core components framework shared in this Brief draws on existing core component frameworks, such as the TiDIER Checklist[8], meta-analysis of youth offending prevention referred to in the previous section[9] and a typology for youth provision in the UK that was developed through the Youth Investment Fund (YIF) Learning Project[7]. Some components included in the framework are specific to the COVID-19 pandemic. The framework included 17 component categories under four headings: recruitment; dimensions of activity; frequency and duration; and adaptation. There are other components that that sit outside this framework, particularly those relating to practices linked to young people's experiences within a project. These were not included in this framework as it was not possible to derive this information from the COVID-19 Fund applications.

All 129 successful YEF COVID-19 Fund applications were coded against the framework for analysis. Questions in the application form were designed to encourage grantees to articulate the component parts of their work, but not all components in the framework were directly asked of in the applications.

The following table shows the crossover that was between the YEF COVID-19 Learning Round Application form and the domains in the core component framework.

Table 1: Sources of evidence and insight

YEF COVID-19 LEARNING ROUND APPLICATION QUESTION	Core components
Directly working with young people at risk of crime	Recruitment
Participant characteristics	Recruitment
Young people already known to org	Recruitment
How orgs will reach young people not known	Recruitment
Knowledge of young people's needs	Recruitment
Maintaining contact with young people during lockdown	Recruitment
Services to young people	Activity Dimensions
Primary delivery method	Activity Dimensions
Prioritising needs of young people	Activity Dimensions
Activities intended for young people's participation	Activity Dimensions
Social distancing changing needs of young people	Activity Dimensions
Needs of young people addressed during social distancing	Activity Dimensions
How long will you deliver activities?	Activity Dimensions
Experience delivering activities	Activity Dimensions, Adaptation
How will activities be delivered	Activity dimensions, Dosage, Adaptation
How long will you deliver activities?	Dosage
COVID-19 impact on service need	Adaptation
How do you know your project will help?	Evidence
Evidence of project deterring crime	Evidence

ANNEX 1: How the core components framework was created

It was not possible to code all components set out in the framework in every application. The following table shows the which components were articulated in applications such that they could be coded, and those that weren't.

Table 2: Applications coded to framework

Core components	**No. of projects coded**
Setting	126 (98%)
Targeting	125 (97%)
Mode	124 (96%)
Positioning (youth violence prevention)	123 (95%)
Duration	112 (87%)
Relationship with young people	111 (86%)
Primary approach	111 (86%)
Intention	108 (84%)
COVID-19 responsive	107 (83%)
Contact during lockdown	97 (75%)
Variability	94 (73%)
Timescale	89 (69%)
Additional descriptors of programe activity	87 (67%)
Frequency	85 (66%)
Referral routes	78 (60%)
Engagement (mandatory/voluntary)	8 (7%)

ANNEX 2: Cluster analysis

A cluster analysis was carried out of the coded YEF-funded projects to provide an overview of the YEF Covid-19 Fund project types. Cluster analysis is a statistical method for grouping things together based on selected variables. The items within the clusters, while not identical, are more similar to each other than to those in other clusters.

This table provides further detail into the clusters presented in the body of this Brief breaking down the variation within the three cluster groups.

	N	Targeting		Total	Setting			Total	Mode			Total	Duration				Total	Primary Approach				Total
CLUSTER		Target %	Referral %		Street-based %	School %	Online %		1:1 %	Peer %	Uncoded %		1-3 months%	4-6 months%	7-12 months%	Uncoded %		Deterrance %	Mentoring %	SEL %	Uncoded %	
WHOLE	**129**	50	47	**97**	18	22	50	**90**	56	36	4	**96**	18	24	45	13	**100**	18	19	12	14	**62**
1	59	44	51	93	5	15	71	92	71	24	2	97	20	29	41	10	100	10	41	0	5	56
2	37	41	57	97	11	19	60	89	49	43	5	97	22	22	38	19	100	0	0	41	0	41
3	31	74	26	100	52	39	0	90	39	55	3	97	10	16	65	10	100	52	0	0	45	97

SUGGESTED READING AND REFERENCES

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