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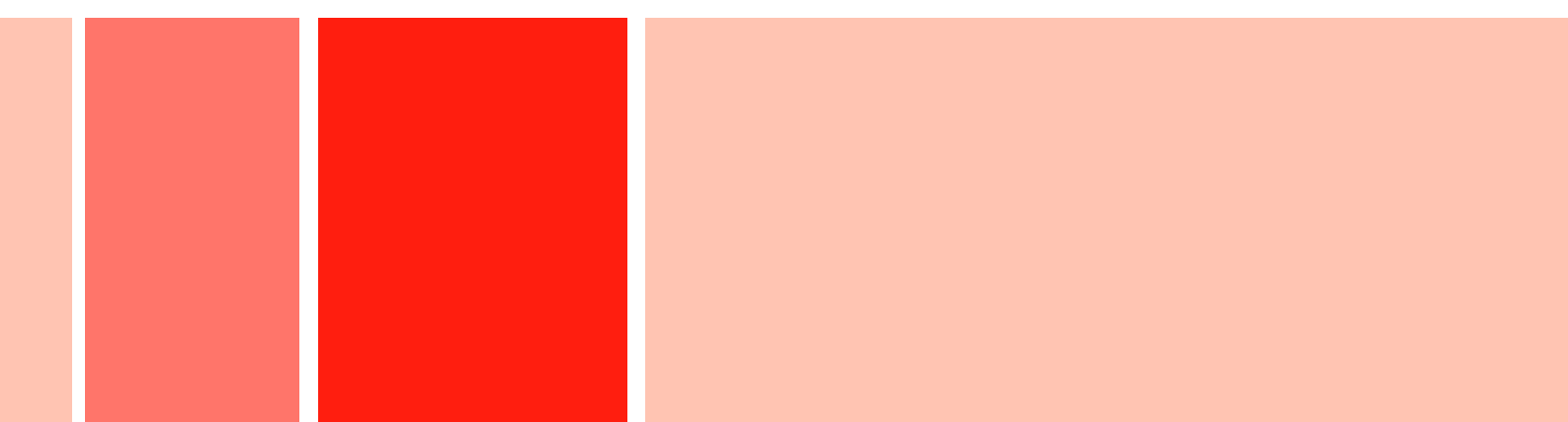
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Formative evaluation of the youth engagement and progression framework: Final report executive summary



FORMATIVE EVALUATION OF THE YOUTH ENGAGEMENT
AND PROGRESSION FRAMEWORK: FINAL REPORT
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

ICF International



Views expressed in this report are those of the researcher and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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Executive summary

The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework

The Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF) aims to reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET). The Framework has six components, proven to be effective at increasing youth engagement and progression when implemented together as part of a strategy. These are: early identification, better brokerage and coordination of support; stronger tracking and transition of young people; ensuring provision meets the needs of young people; a focus on employability skills and opportunities for employment among young people; and greater accountability. Local authorities (LAs) have been charged with the role of leading implementation of the Framework, working closely with Careers Wales, youth services, schools, training providers to those aged 16 and over and other partners.

Purpose of the study

The evaluation aimed to assess progress made to implement the Framework and the effectiveness of implementation processes with a view to considering whether the non-statutory guidance is sufficient to achieve the Welsh Government's ambitions and targets and identifying learning to improve guidance and implementation.

In parallel, a draft impact evaluation framework was developed to inform the approach and timing of an impact evaluation of the YEPF.

Method

After an initial scoping stage to develop an evaluation framework the formative evaluation included:

- mapping progress in each LA and across Wales to understand the rationale, management and implementation of local authority plans; progress made so far; and what evidence is being used to monitor progress and outcomes
- understanding what actions and systems have underpinned progress made to enable greater understanding of how local authorities and partners are working together to deliver the YEPF, what is working well, and what have been the challenges.

The study draws on the following research tasks:

- a review of data and documents about the YEPF. This included: internal programme management documentation, local authority progress reports and action plans; management information data; and published documents such as the YEPF implementation plan, timeline and accompanying guidance document
- eight scoping interviews with Welsh Government programme staff and key partners to develop an understanding of how the YEPF was designed and developed
- analysis of official statistics on achievement, employment and young people who are NEET in each local authority area to understand trends, differences and progress
- interviews of 162 local authority area implementation staff, with an average of seven interviews per LA. This included: 74 LA stakeholders (senior responsible officers, strategic managers, operational managers); 19 representatives of post-16 providers; eight representatives of schools; 24 representatives of Careers Wales; four representatives of Jobcentre Plus (JCP); and eight representatives of the voluntary and community sector. Towards the end of the study all but one of the Engagement and Progression Coordinators (EPCs) employed by LAs was re-interviewed to provide an update on progress
- interviews with 20 stakeholders with a close interest in the programme because of their involvement in its development, oversight of delivery and on the ground delivery with a range of LAs
- case study research in eight LAs focusing on a specific strand of the YEPF implementation where strong progress had been made and in 3-4 LAs focusing on a specific cross cutting theme (meeting Welsh language needs, managing change in difficult financial circumstances). These included 99 interviews of stakeholders in LAs, providers, Careers Wales and other organisations and the engagement of 49 young people who were beneficiaries (in six case studies where these could be identified)
- a stakeholder survey of participants in the implementation of YEPF to gauge perceptions of involvement and improvement in arrangements and systems since the launch of the YEPF. This had a 34% response rate

- discussion with participants in the YEPF regional meetings during December 2014 about processes to put in place elements of the YEPF successfully.

To consider the scope of an impact evaluation of the YEPF, the different approaches were assessed, an evaluation framework developed and data sources to measure outcomes and impacts were reviewed in consultation with staff in the Welsh Government, Careers Wales and local authority leads.

Key findings

The research found that all LAs have made progress with implementing the YEPF since October 2013. Many interviewees praised the YEPF as the best guidance/strategy related to young people produced by the Welsh Government. Most interviewees believe that the YEPF has made a difference to collaboration between all partners as well as the engagement of the key organisations' leaders. Below are findings in relation to specific areas of implementation¹.

- Generally, LAs have taken steps to develop effective strategic governance arrangements for the YEPF. All LAs had appointed a Senior Accountable Officer (SAO) for the YEPF. Most have strategic steering groups that include a range of relevant internal and external partners led by SAOs. A few LAs had still to finalise strategic steering arrangements and either did not have a full range of partners represented or had not (at the time of the research in Feb 2015) established a group. A few were not meeting regularly or frequently.
- Although it is difficult to fully assess the effectiveness of steering arrangements, there is evidence that more established strategic groups are functioning well: attendance is good; there are examples of active leadership from SAOs; partners are working well to oversee implementation and make progress; and there is improved sharing of data and information. This is supported by the majority of respondees to the stakeholder survey.
- A key barrier to establishing and maintaining robust strategic governance arrangements is ongoing re-organisation of LA services as a consequence of reductions in funding.

Operational arrangements

¹ This was the situation at time of research in February 2015 – Local Authorities have continued to make progress on a number of strands since this time.

- All LAs had developed action plans for implementing the YEPF and shared them with the Welsh Government. Many of the plans did not include specific information on outputs and products, milestones, and resources required for implementation. Nor do LAs use a formal project management methodology to assist with monitoring implementation. Together this makes strategic oversight difficult.
- All LAs had appointed an EPC to coordinate delivery of the action plan. Most stakeholders believe they have made a significant difference. Many LAs have embedded the functions of the EPC in two or more roles in recognition of the wide ranging responsibilities of an EPC. In some, EPCs are stretched to perform operational as well as strategic roles.
- In some LAs, arrangements to take forward and develop most elements of the YEPF are clear with partnership arrangements established to arrive at practical solutions. In others, arrangements are less well developed. Very few LAs appear to have arrangements for development which cover all elements which should be moving forward.
- Nearly half of LAs had Information Sharing Protocols (ISPs) in place which has been helped by having the YEPF in place. All the others were continuing to develop one. Some of these have placement arrangements with Careers Wales, which allows five tier data to be shared with a named contact without the ISP. Partners in LAs with ISPs and placement agreements were very positive about being able to share information and considered that this supported improved early identification and tracking.

Early identification

- Most LAs either had a pre-existing early identification system in place for young people at school (under 16) which required development, or developed and tested a system since the launch of the YEPF.
- Although early identification has been a focus for most LAs, this has run behind schedule in many LAs. At February 2015, 20 LAs have developed plans; two have not.
- Seventeen of the 20 LAs have begun to implement their systems. Several are extending their systems to cover children in Years 9 and 10.

- LAs that have developed a new system appear to have adopted a robust development process, which includes consultation and feedback from a range of partners, including schools. Partners value the new system and perceive it to be helpful. Improvements since October 2013 have been reported by stakeholders.
- The key challenge in relation to pre-16 early identification systems is to ensure all schools use the system consistently and provide the information required. Technical issues, such as a lack of a single management information platform for schools and the LA, had contributed to delays in a few LAs.
- In general, processes for identifying young people who are at risk of disengaging were less well-developed for the 16-18 age group than the pre-16s but significant progress had been made since the middle of 2014.
- Thirteen LAs had developed plans for those aged 16-18 and 10 of these are implementing them; the remainder still had no plans at February 2015.
- Receiving systematic notification from all post-16 providers about young people disengaging from a course or formally withdrawing was a challenge for many LAs and Careers Wales staff. Careers Wales had effectively used annual partnership agreement review meetings as a mechanism for improving processes.

Brokerage

- Around two thirds of LAs had developed plans and arrangements for lead working. For under 16s, 12 LAs had implemented these and three had agreed plans for new/strengthened lead working. For 16-18s, 13 LAs had implemented their plans and 3 had agreed plans. In three of the other LAs, there were already relatively sound existing arrangements in place for young people pre-16 which was to continue. In the remainder no progress had been made.
- For young people under 16, some LAs are adopting school-based panels as the forum for allocating a lead worker and reviewing progress while others have area or LA-wide forums. In the case of 16-18 year olds, many LAs are using LA or sub-LA level multiagency practitioner groups. In general, LAs had not fully developed plans for case

management and in the main training for lead workers had not taken place.

- There are a range of challenges for implementing lead working, including: delays in establishing ISPs, which prevents effective brokerage; difficulties in conveying the message that lead working is already taking place and is not a new approach; the hiatus in replacing ESF resources for lead working during periods when budgets were being reduced; challenges in establishing and communicating a clear process for early identification and brokerage; and difficulties in getting all partners to participate in operational groups to facilitate brokerage. The LAs which had implemented arrangements for lead working had overcome most of these.

Tracking

- In general, LAs that had a data-led early identification system in place for young people at school pre-16 had established processes for follow up and review on a termly basis at least. At least 14 LAs had this in place.
- There were examples of efforts at a local level to strengthen tracking at transition. These included: using practitioner groups to improve sharing of information between pre- and post-16 providers; allocating tutors within colleges to act as the link with particular schools; using a pre-16 lead worker to continue providing support during the first term in post-16 provision.
- There were also examples of LAs strengthening their identification of Tier 1 young people, such as using detached youth workers to visit households to find out about a young person's status. LA level multiagency practitioner groups were also being used to identify young people in Tier 1.
- Generally, there were fewer post-16 ISPs in place and so LAs and partners had found tracking the 16-18 age group more challenging. In general LAs and partners were very positive about receiving monthly five tier data from Careers Wales, even where this is only available in an aggregate, anonymised format. This was seen as a major improvement by stakeholders.
- There continued to be concerns that some schools/colleges/work based learning (WBL) providers were not providing timely and consistent

information to enable tracking. The colleges had not developed a common reporting system.

- In LAs where there were ISPs in place there were examples of monthly tracking of those aged 16-18 by multiagency practitioner groups, which appeared to be working well to prevent disengagement and provide additional support where required.
- Few LAs had taken any action to improve the tracking of and support for young people aged over 19 and their transition to other support from JCP.

Provision

- All LAs had made progress with mapping provision against the five tier model in line with guidance from the Welsh Government. In most cases the EPC took the lead in coordinating this activity and liaising with partners. In all LAs, a draft provision map had been produced which stakeholders believed to be relatively comprehensive.
- Although several LAs and partners were positive about the knowledge they had gained from the exercise, in some LAs there appeared to have been some confusion about the process and purpose. Many LAs experienced challenges in obtaining accurate and timely information from all providers.
- There were very few examples of LAs that had carried out the provision mapping exercise alongside an analysis of labour market information. As a consequence there were few examples of a systematic analysis of provision compared to the needs of young people and employers.
- Several LAs reported they had identified gaps in provision through the provision mapping exercise. A common need identified across many LAs was a lack of Tier 2 provision, in some cases coupled with duplication of Tier 3 provision.
- There were examples of YEPF strategic boards responding to provision maps and operational groups' work to find provision and seeking to fill gaps. In most LAs, though, there did not appear to be any clear plans in place for how gaps in provision identified through the mapping will be addressed and how the maps will be updated.
- In relation to the Common Application Process (CAP), the main barrier to implementation is securing the commitment of schools. LA staff,

partners and schools reported that many schools do not perceive there to be value in the online application to meet the Youth Guarantee.

Employability

- This strand of the YEPF had not generally been a focus for LAs so there were few new actions which had been taken since October 2013 as a result of the YEPF. Most LAs and their partners agreed that as at February 2015 this component of the YEPF was under-developed.
- Most LAs had included Jobs Growth Wales, Work Skills and other employability provision in their provision map and intended to make sure that all lead workers were aware of progression opportunities available through these programmes.
- Many LAs had limited their YEPF action plans to objectives to increase the numbers of work placement opportunities, apprenticeships and other work based learning opportunities offered by public sector employers. This is a somewhat restricted scope of activity. In some LAs, scoping discussions had taken place to develop a wider range of activities and to use the provision mapping to contribute to (European Social Fund) ESF project plans.
- Most LAs were not seeking to ensure young people in employment without training were tracked and supported to take up education and training.
- Although generally no new employability projects had been developed under the YEPF, LAs and partners provided examples of existing initiatives that provide young people with knowledge about careers and work experience opportunities, which they will maintain or seek to extend.

Accountability

- In line with the national implementation plan, all LAs had participated in regular meetings with the Welsh Government to discuss progress in implementing their YEPF action plan. There had also been frequent and regular communication between meetings.
- All LAs had started to receive monthly data from Careers Wales on the numbers of young people aged 16-18 in each of the tiers of the five tier model. This data is analysed and submitted to strategic steering groups

in an increasing number of LAs to facilitate monitoring of progress in increasing the proportion of 16-18 year olds in tiers 4 and 5.

- Few LAs had set any local targets for reducing numbers of NEETs. This was generally because the data systems were not in place to set benchmarks and targets for those aged 16-18.

Participation of young people in development and delivery of the YEPF

- Most LAs had not yet consulted with young people on the YEPF. They considered that implementation needs to progress further before a meaningful consultation can take place.

Support provided by the Welsh Government

- In general LAs and partners had found the communications, networking opportunities and support provided by the Welsh Government's YEPF programme team to be timely and useful. The only concern was over the guidance on provision mapping.
- The grant and its extension to 2015/16 had been welcomed and had enabled LAs to implement the YEPF, including funding an EPC.

Measuring impact

- From an assessment of the possible approaches to undertaking an evaluation with a counterfactual, a quasi-experimental approach would not be appropriate because it would not be possible to establish a comparator group within Wales or elsewhere.
- It is possible to analyse trends where indicator data is available before the YEPF was launched and continues to be collected during the programme (over five years) and to measure distance travelled (a before and after approach) where indicators are available as a baseline and through the programme period and beyond.
- For the indicators required to evaluate the YEPF to measure its success (for outputs as well as outcomes and impacts), many can be measured using secondary data managed by the Welsh Government and other national bodies (including Careers Wales, the Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA), Department of work and Pensions (DWP), and the United Kingdom Commission for Employment and

Skills (UKCES)). The Careers Wales client information database (IO database) would have to be drawn off at specified intervals as it is a live database.

- For some it would require: data being collected by LAs in their YEPF action plans which in some cases would need to be verified by evaluators through qualitative research; data linking (such as between the IO database and Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs (HMRC) employment data using national insurance numbers; or the IO database and data on school pupils and those attending post-16 providers); supplementary primary research surveying young people and stakeholders.
- If steps are taken during the rest of 2015 and the first part of 2016 to fill gaps, this would strengthen an impact evaluation which could be timed to take place from late 2016 to mid-2017 to capture the expected medium and longer term outcomes of the YEPF.

Conclusions

Based on this evidence, it is clear that actions in the YEPF were and are being taken forward by those LAs which focus on reducing the number and proportion of young people who are NEET at age 16 as a foundation for reducing the numbers at older ages. This is through early identification, brokerage and tracking and beginning to address how they can reduce the number of young people becoming NEET at age 17 and 18 through provision, guidance on choices, early identification and brokerage, and tracking. They are not yet clearly addressing how they will drive up employability and work ready skills in schools and post 16 providers to provide a firm foundation for young people when they complete education and training so that they can reduce those who are NEET aged 19-24.

It is clear too that since the YEPF was launched LAs have generally made progress and this is observed by stakeholders. For many LAs this has brought about a step change. Although many of the milestones were not reached in the timescales set, just over half of the LAs had established early identification, brokerage and tracking systems for pre 16s and 16-18s while most others have some of these. It is of concern that a small number of LAs had not made such progress and had failed to have strategic steering arrangements and ISPs in place. Not having ISPs, functioning strategic and operational groups, school and college cooperation and engagement, and

school and post 16 provider data systems are clearly related to the failures in LAs to establish early identification and tracking.

While in the main the support and guidance provided by the Welsh Government had enabled progress, some activities led by the Welsh Government had not. These include:

- the development of the online common application form and the CAP
- the development of the destination survey to capture destinations of 17 and 18 year olds in colleges and WBL providers
- the speed of developing ESF projects for the 2014-20 programme period.

Since many of the barriers to progress appear to be related to the extent that LAs and their partners had prioritised and taken forward activities that would implement the YEPF, additional pressure may be more effective than turning the YEPF into a statutory requirement when changes to the accountability framework for schools and colleges (the use of destination outcomes) may make some difference to motivations. At a later point when there is less government focus on the programme and no grant funding for EPCs, for example, statutory guidance might secure the progress made.

Recommendations

LA management of the YEPF

The programme team should:

- closely monitor progress with strategic governance arrangements in those LAs that do not yet have these in place. If necessary, the programme leads should discuss with SAOs any barriers and provide support to overcome these
- ensure that as part of the bi-annual review meetings with LAs, one to one meetings are held with SAOs. This should ensure that the YEPF remains a priority for senior managers, they are engaged in providing strategic leadership, and taking action to progress implementation
- bring forward reviews in the LAs where progress on early identification, brokerage and tracking is well behind schedule, advise SAOs and EPCs that action plans must cover the development and implementation of all components of the YEPF over two-three years, be refreshed, be in a form which can enable strategic monitoring, and

contain outcomes and targets which would ensure higher level scrutiny and accountability of the plan by the LA and its partners.

LA implementation of the YEPF

The programme team should:

- continue to work closely with staff in the WASPI department to ensure that ISPs are approved as quickly as possible. If any common errors or problems are identified in draft ISPs, these should be shared with LAs that are in the process of drafting ISPs so they can avoid the same mistakes and the process can be expedited
- identify relevant training and support for LAs on project management methodologies if this is unavailable to them. The output of this should be improved action plans that identify a critical path, clear milestones and resources required for delivery. This should help LAs monitor their own progress and manage risks
- develop guidance on the employability component of the framework which would enable LAs and partners to develop more coherent responses to the Framework requirements
- continue to work closely and collaboratively with national partners such as Colegau Cymru, the National Training Federation for Wales (NTfW) and the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS). These partners should continue to encourage their members and the organisations they represent to participate fully in implementation of the YEPF. As far as possible, implementation of the YEPF should be a priority item at local and regional meetings
- during 2015/16 establish how LAs propose to take forward and support any outstanding implementation activities (including the staffing resources for the YEPF) to ensure the Government's targets will be met and to assess whether a statutory guidance would reduce the risk of failure.

Implementation of the six components

The programme team should try as far as possible to provide tailored support to LAs in relation to each of the six components. LAs' progress and needs vary. Rather than more general guidance and support a more targeted approach is likely to be more helpful and effective at this stage. This could be

provided through more frequent link officer meetings and selective monitoring but also by offering to broker support/guidance from other LAs.

The programme team should:

(a) Early identification

- Ensure that LAs without central, standardised pre-16 and post 16 early identification systems focus on this as a priority.
- Ensure that LAs alongside Career Wales are working towards bringing all schools, colleges and WBL providers into line in providing information to monitor all those aged 16-18.

(b) Brokerage and tracking

- Ensure that LAs without ISPs have these in place by the end of June 2015.
- Use regional working groups to focus on drawing out and sharing lessons from brokerage and the creation and use of lead officers.
- Encourage LAs through schools and other post 16 providers to provide transition support at age 16.
- Identify how the Welsh Government and Careers Wales can better support the transition at age 19 and whether JCP can support those rising 19.

(c) Provision

- Develop the best practice guidance on how to most effectively analyse, update and use the information collected. This should, for example, provide guidance on assessing provision against evidence of young people's needs; analysing provision in the context of local labour market needs; and taking actions to fill gaps and remove duplication.
- Continue its efforts to engage schools in the YEPF and in particular to secure commitment to the use of the online application process that underpins the CAP to meet the Youth Guarantee. For example, there should be further discussions with and presentations to school heads. Recent changes to school accountability measures at Key Stage 4 designed to 'rebalance the undue focus that has emerged on the C grade at GCSE' are a potential lever to secure commitment as young people pre-16 in tier 4 are a potential target group for both policy

initiatives. These links should be made in any discussions with head teachers.

(d) Employability

- Use the regional working groups as a forum to share good practice in relation to improving employability and work ready skills in schools and post-16 providers and meeting the needs of young people in employment without training. This could be from Wales and also other UK nations. LAs should be supported to identify opportunities and challenges to implement similar approaches in their own contexts.
- The bulletin (and the regional working group presentations) based on this report can be used to develop messages for LAs about missing ingredients in their plans and accelerating progress.

Preparations for an impact assessment

The programme team and colleagues in the Welsh Government should:

- Take steps to improve the data captured by LAs in YEPF action plans and reported for monitoring.
- Establish the cuts of data from the Careers Wales IO database.
- Consider the data linking exercises which could be carried out.
- Plan for a final impact evaluation which will include some primary research and qualitative research to verify the progress made by LAs between late 2016 and mid-2017.