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EVALUATION OF THE YOUTH OPPORTUNITY FUND AND YOUTH CAPITAL FUND

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Background

The Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital Fund (YOF/YCF) were established in April 2006, as part of the proposals in the Youth Green Paper 'Youth Matters'. This ring-fenced funding of £115 million was made available for two years to Local Authorities (LAs) to work with young people to administer. The overall aim of the Funds was to improve the provision of positive activities for young people, by giving young people power to decide how this funding should be spent in their area. Young people are able to apply for finance to support the development of facilities and positive activities in their area, and these applications are assessed by other young people who make decisions on whether applications are successful through a decision-making panel.

The YOF/YCF guidance notes state that all young people aged 13-19 should be able to participate in YOF/YCF, especially young people from disadvantaged backgrounds and hard-to-reach groups. These include young people who traditionally face barriers to participation such as '*young disabled people, young care leavers, looked after young people, young offenders, young carers, young refugees, young lesbians and gay men, young black and minority ethnic people, travellers and those in rural areas*'.¹

The Department for Education and Skills (as from 28th June 2007 replaced by the Department for Children, Schools and Families) commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to conduct an evaluation of the YOF/YCF. This summary presents the main findings from the interim report of the evaluation (the final report will be available in summer 2008).

Key findings:

- **Involvement of young people** – The evidence indicated that the LAs had met the objective of the Funds, which was to give young people a voice, through consultation and control over resources. The LAs had involved young people in the design and development of the Funds processes and procedures, and the young people involved in the decision-making panels felt that their views were generally respected.
- **Activities and facilities funded** – Early indications show that a wide range and variety of projects and activities had been funded through the YOF/YCF. It was generally reported that these projects were providing young people with an opportunity that they would not otherwise have had, either because the LA or other agencies would not have thought of the ideas in the applications, or because of lack of resources.

¹ Department for Education and Skills (2006). Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital Guidance Notes, Nottingham: DfES.

- **Reaching target groups of young people** – LAs had, to some extent, involved young people from a range of backgrounds and with a variety of characteristics, including those from hard-to-reach groups. However, this was an area of development for LAs. Although some funded projects included those from young people from hard-to-reach groups, at the time of the case-study visits, applications tended to come from young people in established groups that were related to the Youth Service.
- **Outcomes to date** – The Funds were helping to strengthen or broaden LAs' existing systems for consulting young people. Involvement in the Funds had enabled LAs to gain further insights into what young people need, to identify gaps in provision, to engage with new groups of young people and to develop their confidence in combining empowering young people with finance. Young people's responsible and altruistic approach to distributing the Funds was also contributing to engendering a culture of empowerment and an ethos where young people's views were sought and valued.

Aims and research methods

The evaluation aims to explore the impact of the YOF/YCF and the first stage of the evaluation had the following objectives:

- to explore the context in which the LAs were implementing the Funds, with particular reference to the extent to which there was a history of involving young people in decision making
- to investigate the approaches adopted to implementing the Funds and the rationales underpinning these
- to examine the processes established to facilitate and support young people in their role as decision makers
- to ascertain the initial outcomes from the Funds.

In order to achieve these objectives, a programme of case-study visits to a sample of 12 LAs was

carried out in January and February 2007. During this first stage of the evaluation, 204 interviews were conducted with LA staff, young people, and staff in organisations that provided services for young people. Further details are provided at the end of the summary.

Context

The aims of the YOF/YCF aligned with the views expressed by young people in the case-study LAs that services and activities for young people in their areas could be improved. The YOF/YCF was felt to fit well with LAs' strategic aims and priorities and all but three of the 12 LAs had made use of their existing structures for consulting young people, to a greater or lesser extent, when implementing the Funds. In the LAs that had not built on their existing youth participation structures, staff had sought to create new YOF/YCF structures that they considered to be more appropriate and inclusive.

The presence of pre-existing structures to involve young people did not appear to be a determinant of the extent to which LAs adopted a youth-driven approach from the outset or had allocated Funds within the financial year. Although similar approaches to individual elements of the delivery of the YOF/YCF were adopted across the 12 LAs, overall, no prevailing model or approach that combined these elements in the same way emerged among the LAs visited. Rather, they appeared to have established structures that reflected their local contexts, priorities and strategic aims, and the time and resources available.

Involvement of young people

In general, the LAs had actively involved young people in the **design and development** of the Funds processes and procedures, including the design of promotional materials and the application processes and criteria. The young people interviewed who had been involved in this process reported that their views were generally respected and that the outcomes reflected their preferred approach. Some areas had involved consultation of the wider community of young people about the design, including through surveys

and by voting on a range of options. LA staff commented on the length of time required to consult fully with young people and, in some instances, had not consulted as much as they would have liked, as a result.

LAs were reviewing their approaches to the implementation of YOF/YCF, together with young people, and making appropriate changes such as extending decision-making panels to incorporate a wider range of young people, amending promotional materials and application forms and targeting promotion at specific groups of young people.

Young people were actively involved in the Funds through the **decision-making panels** that approved applications. LAs had adopted a range of approaches to the structure and membership of the decision-making panels that were established, with some operating just one panel and others operating both devolved area panels, and a LA-wide panel.

Panel members felt that their groups were largely representative of the local youth populations they served, and involved young people from a range of backgrounds. However, most LAs found it a challenge to encourage a wide and diverse group of young people to get involved in the panels. Interviews with LA staff indicated that the structure of the panels may develop further in future through, for example, the addition of area panels or a greater focus on hard-to-reach groups.

The prevailing view among LA staff, and supported by the views of the young people who were panel members, was that the young people made decisions independently about the applications and that these decisions were generally respected by LA staff. Panels had generally established criteria for making decisions and benefited from training and the guidance of LA staff. Panel members in all LAs were rigorous in ensuring that applications were based on the ideas and wishes of young people and rejected applications that appeared to have been written by adults. Adults sometimes supported applicants by discussing project ideas with them and providing guidance

with the more complex aspects of the application.

Activities and facilities funded

In the 12 LAs, the number of projects funded ranged from six to 123 and LA staff reported that the number of applications was increasing as the Funds became more established. Early indications from the 12 LAs visited suggest that a wide range of types of projects and activities have been funded through the YOF/YCF by January and February 2007, including projects related to the arts, sports and learning and the development or improvement of facilities where young people could go. The types of projects funded could be characterised as:

- those where a finite group of young people participate for a finite period of time (e.g. a residential trip)
- provision of facilities or equipment that can be accessed by an unspecified number of young people for an extended period of time or indefinitely (e.g. a youth shelter)
- provision of a service that can be accessed by an unspecified number of young people but in a finite period of time (e.g. a week-long course working with DJs)
- a project or activity for a finite number of young people which involves the development of skills that can be used to benefit other young people over a period of time (e.g. being a peer mentor).

At the time of the visits, in January and February 2007, some LAs had allocated all their funding to projects. However, this was not the case among all the LAs, and some had concerns that they would not be able to spend all of their allocated funding by the end of the financial year. This was particularly the case in LAs that paid funding to projects in arrears.

Reaching target groups of young people who traditionally face barriers to participation

The YOF/YCF was particularly targeted at young people from disadvantaged areas and those from specific target groups detailed in the YOF/YCF guidance. In order to make contact with specific target groups, LAs often worked with existing

contacts to raise the awareness and involvement of hard-to-reach young people. Detached youth workers also undertook YOF/YCF-related outreach work in some areas.

There were examples across the case-study areas of successful applications from young people in disadvantaged areas and from target groups, and LA staff considered that the number of applications was increasing and diversifying. However, at the time of the visits, many of the applications were said to be from established youth groups that were most commonly related to the Youth Service and, although these groups included the target groups of young people, LA staff were seeking to further increase the diversity of applications from voluntary and community sector organisations and 'harder-to-reach' young people. Approaches to achieving this included: outreach work, targeted promotion and protected sub-funds for specific target groups.

Outcomes to date

Many young people had become involved with the panels because they wanted to make young people's views heard and take ownership of the activities and resources being developed for young people in their local area. The panel members were key beneficiaries at this stage of the implementation of the Funds. Young people and LA staff reported that panel members had gained a sense of empowerment that resulted from being respected, listened to and valued by adults and from the distinctive value of the Funds in combining decision-making power for young people with resources.

The positive attitude and altruistic approach of young people who participated in the panel, and those who applied for the Funds, had impressed adults. This was said to be helping to address negative perceptions of young people and to engender a culture whereby adults were more willing to consider involving young people in decision making.

At this early stage in the Funds development, the YOF/YCF were reported to have contributed to enriching and enhancing provision for young people and had provided those who had applied

with an opportunity that they would not otherwise have been able to access, either because of the novelty of the idea or because of lack of resources. A sense of ownership, due to developing an idea and applying for funding, was said to contribute to young people's engagement in these activities.

The Funds were also said to have supported the further development of LAs' work in involving young people by strengthening, refreshing or broadening existing systems for consulting young people. Involvement in the Funds had enabled LAs to gain further insights into what young people need, to identify gaps in provision, to engage with new groups of young people and to develop their confidence in combining empowering young people with finance.

Research methods

This summary is based on findings from research visits to a sample of 12 LAs that were carried out in January and February 2007. All nine Government Office regions were represented within the sample, which was broadly representative in terms of the types of LA. While the aim of the sample was not to be representative of all characteristics, such as size of LA and levels of deprivation, the sample comprised LAs with a broad range of demographic characteristics.

Interviews were conducted with a total of 47 LA staff, including senior managers and operational managers with responsibility for the Funds and supporting staff. A total of 54 young people who were members of decision-making panels were interviewed and 70 young people who had successfully applied for Funds. In addition, interviews were conducted with 33 individuals from organisations that functioned as service providers to the young people and whose services had been commissioned as a result of a successful Funds application, and staff from successfully funded projects. The authors would like to extend their thanks to the interviewees who made time to discuss their experiences of the YOF/YCF.

Additional Information

Copies of the full report (DCSF-RR004) - priced £4.95 - are available by writing to DfES Publications, PO Box 5050, Sherwood Park, Annesley, Nottingham NG15 0DJ. Cheques should be made payable to "DfES Priced Publications".

Copies of this Research Brief (DCSF-RB004) are available free of charge from the above address (tel: 0845 60 222 60). Research Briefs and Research Reports can also be accessed at www.dcsf.gov.uk/research/

Further information about this research can be obtained from Emmanuel Mutale, 6S, DCSF, Sanctuary Buildings, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3BT.

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