

the evaluation of the NYA tailored support offer to local authorities

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Executive summary

Background

The youth sector in England is continuing to face extensive challenges due to ongoing economic and social changes. *Positive for Youth* (HM Government, 2011) sets out the government's vision for the future of youth services, which places a greater focus on efficient local commissioning as a key to maximising the impact of limited public funding. Significantly, the local authority (LA) is responsible for deciding which services to fund or deliver and to what level.

LAs require support to overcome these challenging circumstances to ensure they use their expertise, and increasingly limited resources, to best effect. In this context, the Local Government Association (LGA) provides funding to the National Youth Agency (NYA) to supply a youth support offer to LAs. The tailored support offer gives a limited number of LAs the opportunity to apply for personalised consultancy advice, training and peer support. The offer allows LAs to apply for up to ten days of free support from an NYA associate who works as a consultant with the LA. The National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) was commissioned to undertake an evaluation of the first year of the NYA tailored support offer.

Key findings

The majority of the 19 LAs received eight days' support. In most LAs the Director of Children's Services (DCS), their deputy and/or other strategic-level staff were involved in the initial decision to engage with the support.

Most areas received support with restructuring services which was often coupled with secondary areas of support such as commissioning or outcomes measurements. The application of the eight days of support differed between the LAs due to the tailoring of the support. The types of activities undertaken ranged from workshops, interviews or focus groups with partners, desk research and inspecting youth service activities. The final outputs from the support

included quality assurance frameworks, options appraisal documents, tools to measure outcomes and concept papers.

LAs had a clear idea of their expectations for the support, were almost unanimously positive about the experience of receiving support and felt their expectations were met. The vast majority of LAs expected, and benefited from, the associate's relevant expertise and impartial stance. The associates often challenged the LAs to think more deeply and broadly about their youth offer, its reach and its impact.

LAs valued having a respected, external party to consult stakeholders, validate development work and, in turn, positively influence and engage staff and politicians. A number of LAs reported an increase in staff morale, due to reassurance from the associate on the LA's direction of travel and training on new quality assurance procedures.

The majority of LAs experienced some kind of barrier whilst receiving the support and generally these were internal barriers such as a lack of time, capacity and resource to engage with the consultancy. External barriers related to the amount of time used for scoping or getting the associate up to speed with the local context and the time spent by the associate travelling to the LA, which all impacted on the amount of support time the LAs received.

Suggestions for development of the offer included follow-up support to review progress and gain some external scrutiny, additional travel time for associates to maximise their contact with the LA and flexibility in the delivery of support to accommodate circumstances for individual LAs.

Conclusions

Overall, LAs value the support provided to them through the NYA tailored support offer and are largely positive about the support received. In particular, they felt they benefited from the external expertise and

critical friend role undertaken by the associate which are central to the success of the support. The matching of the associate to the LA is a crucial element of the programme as the resultant relationship has been seen to be very important to the success of the support.

It is clear to see that LAs were going through a period of change and were at very different stages of their journey when they received support from the associate. Circumstances within individual LAs can change at any given time, and associates recognised this and were flexible in their approach. However, this flexibility was not always reflected in the timescales offered to LAs for completing the work. Given that LAs were at different stages in their journey, some LAs would have welcomed ongoing support and felt that the support ended abruptly. Overall, it is evident that several positive developments have been made within the LAs involved in the tailored support offer. In light of such

developments, it would be valuable to consider ways in which the lessons learnt and experiences could be shared amongst other LAs.

Methodology

The evaluation was undertaken in three phases between December 2011 and August 2012 with each phase building on the previous phase. The first phase included baseline telephone interviews with the person responsible for the tailored support offer in each of the LAs receiving support, desk research of scoping reports and an interview with the NYA programme manager. Phase 2 included semi-structured telephone interviews with strategic and operational staff in 11 case-study areas. Phase 3 included follow-up telephone interviews with 16 of the 19 LA representatives.

1 Background and context

1.1 Policy context

The youth sector in England is continuing to face extensive challenges due to ongoing economic and social changes. The House of Commons Education Committee's report *Services for young people* (2011) stated that by March 2012, at least £100 million was being cut from local authority (LA) youth budgets in England. This tighter funding from central government means that local leaders and commissioners of youth services face difficult decisions on the future role and shape of their youth service.

The reduction in funding has already resulted in some LAs changing their youth services offer. For example, some LAs have ceased to maintain youth services as discrete entities, some had closed local youth centres and some had transferred the leadership or ownership of their youth centres to local community groups (HM Government, 2011). Despite the cuts in funding, there remains a statutory duty on LAs to secure the provision of sufficient leisure-time activities, including youth work for young people's wellbeing.

The cross-departmental paper *Positive for Youth* (HM Government, 2011) sets out the government's vision for the future of youth services. The government proposes that an approach based on local partnerships will provide young people with the opportunities and support they require. This approach means that LAs draw on local community resources and partnerships to deliver the appropriate support to young people instead of scaling back provision due to the funding cuts. Significantly, the LA is responsible for deciding which services to fund or deliver and to what level.

The new approach places a greater focus on efficient and effective local commissioning (whether internal or external) as a key to maximising the impact of the limited public spending. Similarly, LAs will need to think more about providing evidence of the impact of their youth services, including improving good outcomes for young people.

The extensive cuts and changes to the youth sector have meant that LAs are faced with new challenges, demands and expectations of what the youth service should look like. As such, LAs require support to overcome these challenging circumstances to ensure they use their expertise, and increasingly limited resources, to best effect in the youth sector.

In this context, the Local Government Association (LGA) provides funding to the National Youth Agency (NYA) through a top slice of the Revenue Support Grant to provide a youth support offer to LAs. This offer to LAs, called the Routes to Success programme aims to offer a comprehensive package of advice, tools, products and services to help LAs in these challenging times. The programme includes a number of aspects, some of which are available to all LAs and others which LAs can choose to apply for. The tailored support offer, described below, is one part of the Routes to Success programme that LAs can apply for.

1.2 The NYA tailored support offer

The tailored support offer gives a limited number of LAs the opportunity to apply for personalised consultancy advice, training and peer support. The offer allows LAs to apply for up to ten days of free support from an NYA associate who works as a consultant with the LA. In 2011 there were three application points throughout the year. The first stage of application took place in June 2011, and the successful LAs began receiving support from autumn 2011. In total, 20 LAs applied for, and were successful at one of the three stages of application (although not necessarily at the stage they initially applied) and of these, 19 received eight or more days of support, with one receiving four days (this is discussed further in section 2.2).

The support offer is focused on, but not limited to, the following topics:

- supporting the redesign of young people's services
- enabling effective commissioning
- improving quality and cost-effectiveness
- workforce development.

In the first year of the support offer, the majority of LAs requested support with redesigning youth services. In the majority of cases, this was combined with other areas of support including commissioning and improving quality and cost-effectiveness, such as looking at the development of performance and outcomes information and refocusing service delivery.

The support offer works by pairing a LA with an appropriate NYA associate. The associate then works with the LA to deliver the tailored support. The role of the associate and the mechanisms of the programme are discussed in more detail in Chapter 2.

1.3 The evaluation of the tailored support offer

The LGA commissioned the National Foundation for Educational Research (NFER) to undertake an evaluation of the tailored support offer in its first year of operation.

Aims and objectives

The key aim of the evaluation was to undertake a formative and summative evaluation of the LGA-commissioned NYA programme of tailored support to LAs. The evaluation aims were to identify in particular:

- reasons for LA involvement
- benefits of involvement and challenges faced
- impact, both short and long term, of the support

- the extent to which the programme of support was meeting the needs of the LA, at both a strategic and operational level
- how LAs were measuring success
- longer-term developments of the programme and any recommendations for change over time.

Methodology

In order to meet the objectives of this evaluation, the methodology was designed in three phases. Each phase built on the previous phase to provide both a formative and summative evaluation as the programme of support progresses.

- **Phase 1 (December 2011 – January 2012):** involved baseline telephone interviews with the person responsible for the tailored support offer in each of the LAs receiving support (referred to throughout this report as the LA lead officer). Generally this person was a service lead such as Head of Youth Service. In total 19 interviews with LAs were completed. A face-to-face interview with the NYA programme manager and observation of a programme team meeting was undertaken. In addition, the scoping reports for each of the 19 LAs currently receiving support were analysed.
- **Phase 2 (February 2012 – May 2012):** comprised semi-structured telephone interviews with stakeholders involved in the programme in 11 case-study areas to build on the findings from phase one and provide a more in-depth understanding of the tailored support offer in a range of LAs. This resulted in the production of a case-study report (Southcott *et al.* 2012).
- **Phase 3 (June 2012 – August 2012):** follow-up interviews with LA representatives in each of the LAs were conducted to identify perceived impact of the tailored support offer and gain suggestions for improvements and recommendations for taking the programme forward.

This final report draws on the data collected from each phase of the evaluation.

1.4 Structure of the report

Findings are presented under the following chapter headings:

- the support offer
- barriers and challenges
- development of the tailored support offer
- benefits and impact of the support offer
- conclusions and recommendations.

2 The support offer

This chapter briefly describes the management, organisation and delivery of the tailored support offer. It focuses on the management of the programme of support, including the delivery and the types of support received.

2.1 The management of the support offer

The tailored support offer is managed by the Routes to Success programme manager at the NYA. As part of her role, the programme manager assigns the LA with an appropriate NYA associate based on the needs of the LA at the point of application.

Once an LA has been assigned an associate, it is the responsibility of the associate to contact the LA. The support is tailored to the needs of each LA but always starts with the following processes:

- An initial **scoping meeting** held between strategic staff at the LA and the NYA associate to discuss requirements.
- The development of a **scoping document by the NYA associate** based on the outcomes of the scoping meeting. The scoping document details the timescales for delivery and how the support days are to be allocated to the different activities.
- A **memorandum of understanding** is sent to the LA to sign.

At the point of the scoping meeting, the associate tries to encourage the involvement of a senior member of staff such as the Director, or Assistant Director, of Children's Services (DCS or AD). In the majority of cases, the NYA has been successful in securing this initial involvement from the DCS or AD, but in a few instances this did not happen. Similarly, the NYA suggest that the DCS or AD signs the memorandum of understanding, to encourage buy-in from strategic members of staff within the LA.

2.2 Support offer to LAs

Applying for the support

LA lead officers most commonly heard about the NYA tailored support offer via email communication directly from the NYA, which one LA officer felt was 'simple and direct'. A small number of LAs learnt about the tailored support offer through an external publication or through colleagues. In one particular instance, the LA proactively sought support based on existing awareness of the NYA and their work around quality assurance.

The decision to apply for support generally came at a strategic level and involved discussions between the LA lead officer, often a service lead within the LA, and other staff such as the DCS, Head of Youth Services or the Deputy Director of Education.

The main reason LAs applied for support was as a result of recent challenges – namely the current economic climate which had affected their service budgets and impacted on the way they work. Nonetheless, in a small number of cases, challenges were perceived as more longstanding. For example, one LA applied due to perceived underperformance as a result of providing a lot of targeted work with less of a focus on universal provision.

Organisation and delivery of support

The majority of LAs received eight days' support in total. The exceptions were two LAs that were also engaged in the peer-to-peer support programme (another element of the Routes to Success programme). These areas received ten days' support in total. A further LA, which had previously been involved in the Routes to Success pilot, had received around four days' support as they agreed that this would be adequate. As this LA was receiving a different type and level of support, they were not included in this evaluation.

As noted above, the NYA encourages strategic members of the LA to become involved in the tailored support offer. In most LAs a strategic member of staff was involved in the decision to apply for the support. In around a quarter of LAs they had also been involved in the scoping process but were not directly involved beyond that. Ongoing involvement by strategic staff was highlighted by around a third of lead officers, for instance, in refining the work plan for the days of tailored support, reviewing draft plans and documents, or participating in staff workshops or development days.

Types of support received

The majority of areas received support with **restructuring services**, however, this was often coupled with secondary areas of support such as commissioning or outcomes measurements. These were often areas that the LA were already working through themselves and, therefore, the support was used to facilitate or further advance the work being undertaken.

In practice, while the broad areas of support were similar across the LAs, the application of the eight days of support differed due to the personalisation of the support to the specific needs of the LA. Additionally, the range of activities being undertaken varied between LAs to reflect this tailoring of approach. However, as an indicator, the types of activities undertaken or facilitated by NYA associates included (in order of most to least common):

- desk research, e.g. mapping expenditure
 - inspecting youth service activities
 - signposting to networking events.
- There was consensus over the methods of communication between the LAs and their associates. The majority of LAs mention having regular planning and review meetings between the associate and the lead officer and/or other management-level staff. They also reported having ongoing email and telephone correspondence.
- The final outputs from the eight days of support varied depending on the specific needs of the LAs but often they resulted in a written document. This may have been written solely by the associate, such as providing the LA with a set of recommendations, or the support may have been to help the LA to develop their own document, such as in the case of a tool to measure outcomes. The following list gives an indication of the range of outputs that resulted from the support:
- an options appraisal document
 - terms of reference for a steering group
 - written reports on, for example, current practice in recording outcomes
 - tools to measure outcomes
 - service map
 - concept paper
 - a set of recommendations for moving the service forward.
- This list highlights the variation in the outputs that the associate contributed to or developed through their support, depending on the needs of the LA.
- workshops involving management or operational staff such as staff development days, interviews or focus groups with strategic or operational staff
 - workshops involving partners in the statutory and voluntary sector
 - interviews or focus groups with partners in the statutory and voluntary sector
 - collating/presenting feedback from stakeholder events

3 Benefits and impact of the support offer

This chapter examines the expectations that LAs had for the support offer, the benefits they identified from working with their associate and the NYA, and the perceived impact of the work to date. It also summarises interviewees' perceptions of anticipated developments and impact in the future.

3.1 LA expectations

LA interviewees described their expectations for the tailored support, and subsequently whether their needs and expectations had been met.

Lead officers commonly mentioned that their expectations of the support included the opportunity to **draw on the expertise of the associate and the NYA**, and learn from their experiences with other LAs in a similar situation, to develop their ideas and plans. In particular, lead officers anticipated that associates would offer guidance on: the targeted youth work agenda and *Positive for Youth*; a high quality provision and quality assurance (QA) through outcomes measurement; and a variety of delivery models including external commissioning and innovative models. Many lead officers positively anticipated that the associate would **challenge their thinking** in a 'critical friend' capacity. They valued highly the independent stance of the associate, and hoped this would help to provide **external validation of decisions or processes**. For example, one lead officer explained that they hoped the associate would, '... provide independent, neutral, respected scrutiny and support with our plans'. Lead officers mentioned this external validation both in relation to **persuading more senior staff and elected members** of the value of their service's work and robustness of their plans, and also to **engaging operational staff** in their transformation process.

Some lead officers expected that the support would also provide:

- support to achieve a common understanding of service aims
- help with articulating the service's remit or vision
- support to staff to move into new ways of working and team structures
- 'extra capacity' in driving their transformation process.

Lead officers at six LAs had worked with the associate or NYA before, and viewed this previous experience positively. One had contacted the NYA proactively to get support on quality assurance as he knew that the NYA was experienced in this area. In another case, the lead officer had formed a good impression of the NYA through its publications and, therefore, felt their support would be valuable:

We had used publications by the Agency before and we thought they were clearly the market leader on helping LAs to redesign or restructure their youth service – so we thought it would be valuable.

Reflecting on the support they had received, the majority of lead officers felt that these **expectations were met**. Interviewees had almost completely positive views on the application process, their working relationship with their associate, and their associate's relevant expertise. The lead officers described the support offer and the associates as flexible and responsive: for instance, some lead officers reflected that the NYA was sympathetic to their LA's need to 'put the brakes on' when other work became more pressing. One commented that the support was much more flexible than his prior experience of bought-in consultancy. Associates were also described as professional and accessible (regarding communication by email or telephone).

It was an extremely positive experience. They were very flexible, responsive, offered expertise. It was a partnership we negotiated together.

3.2 Benefits to the LAs

The LAs have reported a range of benefits gained through receiving their tailored support. A key benefit has been the associate's role as a '**critical friend**' who has encouraged strategic staff to consider issues and possible solutions more thoroughly. Another important outcome has been as a result of the NYA associates' well-informed perspective on the national youth services agenda, which has added gravitas to the transformational work being undertaken and helped to engage important stakeholders. The LAs described themselves as being in a state of almost constant flux, and, therefore, valued the time set aside for focused reflection on key issues. These and other benefits are described in more detail below.

Almost all lead officers, along with a small number of operational staff, reflected that the associate had **constructively challenged their thinking, pre-conceptions and decisions**. Lead officers recognised the importance of thinking about youth services and its impact in a more holistic way and to 'think outside the LA box' as the current pressures of budget cuts, redundancies and change can provoke teams to become insular. Lead officers felt that being made to reflect on what they were doing and why they were doing it was not easy but was worthwhile. They also appreciated having a 'fresh pair of eyes' on working drafts. One lead officer commented:

As a result of very informed and professional challenge from the consultant ... we've been able to hone our thinking down in terms of systems and processes.

Many lead officers, as well as operational staff in some LAs, mentioned benefiting from their **associate's knowledge of good practice from other LAs**, for example, in transforming services or developing outcomes measures.

The support around the quality framework has been really helpful. The document reflects national best practice which is important. The service needs to be delivering and modelling best practice, particularly as we are going to be working more and more with the third sector.

Lead officers also commented that the associates' **regional and national perspective** helped reassure staff that changes being undertaken in their LA (to more targeted working, for instance) were not unusual. In some cases this gave the staff confidence that their LA had made more progress than others in their transformation process.

Some of our staff face really hard decisions; do they want to stay working in the service? ... The associate helped us see the need to demonstrate the impact of youth work; it isn't just us but this is happening across the country.

A small number of lead officers stated that the independent perspective and challenge had developed their thinking to the point that they were justified in **engaging senior management and lead members** to discuss the future of the service. It also improved consultation with commissioners and potential service providers.

The consultant was able to genuinely engage with providers and capture their views and the views of strategic commissioners, and articulate that in a single document that everyone could sign up to. If it was done another way, it would have had less integrity; it wouldn't have been as comprehensive. [It enabled us to] carry on our good relationship with our providers.

Some lead officers mentioned the sensitivity of the associates to difficulties around change and 'bereavement' of staff whose teams had been restructured. This and their independent stance **helped to engage operational staff** in the support work. The support in relation to measuring quality highlighted the importance of this agenda to staff, particularly those not from a youth work background. For instance, one operational staff member commented that she was new to the youth worker ethos at the LA and found the associate-facilitated staff workshops on developing an outcomes framework very useful. Another reflected that as the associate facilitating a training day was also a former youth worker, this practical experience made the associate's message much more credible to operational staff. Independent facilitation **encouraged staff to communicate openly** and equally; as one operational staff member explained: 'she created an environment where everyone felt that they had a stake [in the project].'

The tailored support period was valued by many as ring-fenced **time for reflection** away from day-to-day pressures: 'what it's allowed us to do is not get enmeshed in some of the local stuff but stand above it a little bit ... and think a little bit ... more laterally really'.

Due to the external nature of the support, staff were generally motivated to engage with all aspects of the support agreed with the associate, to ensure they used the time effectively and did not allow deadlines to slip.

If you come together as an internal team ... circumstances dictate when you can do these things and other things take over. When you have someone coming down and a day reserved ... we had to prepare and it really focused us for a whole day at a time which you normally don't get to do. The associate was very strict about steering us back when we went off at a tangent and making us look at things we perhaps didn't want to look at.

Examples of other benefits of the support mentioned by LAs included the associate stressing the importance of building a more detailed client profile across departments, resulting in a better understanding of need; and the emphasis on maintaining the integrity of the development work, for instance, in adhering to the NYA's 'kite-marked' QA standards rather than creating a less stringent version.

3.3 Impact

LA staff were asked what changes or improvements had been made within the service as a result of the support received. Most interviewees were able to identify changes but did not always feel able to attribute any changes to the support directly. A notable minority of lead officers reported that, at the time of the final interviews in July 2012, it was still too early in their transformation process to see an impact on the service. Furthermore, the majority of LAs believed any impact on service users specifically would be seen in the longer term, which LAs hoped to begin to see from six to 12 months after the implementation of procedural or other changes.

Impact so far

The majority of LAs were not monitoring the impact of the support in a formal way. However, they were able to discuss their perceptions of the impacts so far and report any impacts they had observed.

About half of the lead officers felt that one of the impacts of the support had been to provide clarity with regard to the service's direction of travel for staff and act as a catalyst for change. One officer described how she had 'lost sight of the importance of demonstrating the impact of youth work ... and of what our purpose is. It can be a very lonely and frustrating service to work in'. The associate's reassurance that they were on track had 'reinvigorated' her.

Some LAs are already **applying the principles of the QA framework** they have developed to monitor their own practitioners' work, for instance, improving outcomes recording: they expressed confidence that the tools suited their needs and would be usable across different types of interventions. Getting such a framework established was a common priority for LAs and some noted that this was achieved more quickly with the associate's input than if they had been working on it in isolation, yet with more credible results as it reflects the NYA's overview of national good practice.

Linked to the development of QA frameworks was the **up-skilling of staff** to use new monitoring tools, which helped to **boost staff morale**. One lead officer reported that this was the case with his team because staff felt assured that their work in a detached team would be assessed on an equal footing to that of other specialisms. In this example, an operational officer at the LA agreed that they were well prepared to make fair assessments of colleagues' work. Another LA noted that, as a result of associate's support in training senior practitioners on their updated roles, those staff were more embedded in their teams and had started to take on more management responsibility. The fact that the tailored support has helped to instil confidence in staff around how their performance will be monitored, as well as confirm the core purpose of their service, is particularly encouraging given that team restructures and job role changes have left staff in many LAs uncertain about their contribution to creating positive outcomes for young people.

In some LAs, the associate steered staff to make **more effective use of data and data management systems** and staff, therefore, gained a clearer picture of their work and its outcomes; in some cases the data disproved their assumptions about who they were reaching. For this reason, one lead officer said that they valued this element of the support the most.

One LA reported that **data analysis** with the associate's support enabled them to identify vulnerable groups and argue for the introduction of an 18–19 early intervention service. The lead officer explained that this was a more **strategic approach** to taking on cases. The lead officer said that without the support they would not have felt able to propose the new service during a process of overall LA restructure. They commented: '[The associate] helped us in building the confidence that we could be proactive rather than reactive'. The associate also supported the up-skilling of staff to enable them to work with a more targeted group of young people in the new service. Referrals to this service have reduced the caseload pressure on Children's Social Care (CSC), and resulted in a closer working relationship with them.

LAs who undertook data analysis with their associate intend to regularly repeat the process, for example, in performance clinics with locality-based teams. They thought this more robust analysis would continue to be useful in providing a **stronger demonstration of their services' impact**.

Three lead officers could not identify any change or impact from the tailored support. Reasons included: difficulties sustaining contact with their associate due to other priorities; delays in taking the work forward due to an ongoing LA restructure; and a difficult working relationship with the associate.

Anticipated impact

While a small minority of lead officers were unable to identify impacts so far, the majority of LAs were able to describe the anticipated future impact of the tailored support.

LA staff were positive about new QA frameworks and referrals procedures, as they want to ensure young people's needs are being adequately assessed and the youth offer will be consistent across the LA. One lead

officer stated that their new quality framework would lead to a **better infrastructure for involving volunteers in some youth services**, which they anticipate would increase the number of sessions available and in turn increase the numbers of young people who could access the services. One officer at an LA which was establishing a referrals process to their newly integrated support team, noted that this would potentially improve communications and working relationships with their young clients and partner agencies.

In addition, LA staff implementing new QA frameworks in their own practice and commissioning specifications hoped that this more robust QA would also result in:

- better informed decisions on procuring services
- enhanced buy-in of prospective third sector partners, and
- more consistent and effective services.

LA staff envisaged continuing to **demonstrate the value of their services**, using analysis specifications and monitoring tools introduced with the associates' support:

I'll be able to articulate in a fairly accessible format, what have been the outcomes, what's the value for money ... I want people to see that in terms of our early intervention and prevention work, this money is an invaluable investment.

Some staff hoped that sharing this evidence base would provide budget holders with a better understanding of youth work, so that they continue to support this area during difficult economic times. Their plans to regularly review data would also help them be **more aware of changes in young people's needs**, and strengthen any business case for adapting their services in response. For instance, one lead officer described how having a better understanding of their vulnerable groups would enable them to continue targeted work to reduce the number of young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The workforce development that took place in some LAs and the enhanced understanding of how to

translate national policy into practice has to some extent made staff better **prepared for future changes**, such as internal restructures or new government policies. One lead officer said: 'I feel confident that whatever structure is imposed on us ... we will be able to respond to it and shape the targeted service effectively'.

These responses indicate that LAs perceive the current impact of the tailored support to be mainly in procedural improvements. However, many interviewees expressed confidence that these changes will ultimately contribute to their vision of demonstrably high quality and effective services for local young people.

4 Barriers and challenges

This chapter describes the barriers and challenges experienced by LAs in the process of receiving support, including the associates' perspective on any challenges in providing support. It explores barriers to building on the progress achieved through the associate's support.

4.1 Internal challenges

Lead officers typically reported experiencing challenges in the process of receiving support which more frequently stemmed from internal pressures; an indication of the difficult climate in which the support was being delivered.

Interviewees more commonly identified the following internal challenges:

- A **lack of time, capacity and resource** to engage effectively with the consultancy due to, for example, the restructuring processes. One lead officer remarked: '... some days, it's quite difficult for me to even identify thirty minutes where I can fit in a phone conversation'. There was some indication to suggest that staff sickness had contributed to delays in decision making and subsequently increased time pressures on other staff.
- **Achieving buy-in** to the process from all stakeholders. One lead officer observed: 'when times are tight, senior managers are quite often reluctant to let you engage with these opportunities'.
- **Delays in progress** caused by internal politics/tensions or logistical difficulties in trying to get the relevant staff involved in discussions.

4.2 External barriers

Lead officers were also able to identify external challenges relating to the delivery of support. These typically included the **amount of time** used on the scoping process or updating the associate on the local context in light of the 'changing landscape' for LAs.

One lead officer observed: 'that's always the danger when you're operating something at odds with a different timescale that you ... get hooked into the movement at a pace'. This resulted in a reduction in the time available to work on the objectives set by the associate. Nonetheless, there were cases where lead officers praised the associate's ability to understand the LA's position quickly.

Lead officers also made reference to the **time spent by the associates travelling to the LA**, which reduced the overall amount of contact time between the associate and the LA. In order to overcome this challenge, one LA chose to maximise face-to-face communication by travelling to the associate for meetings.

It is also worth noting that the lead officer in one LA reported having a difficult working relationship with the associate, with some disagreement over the focus of the support. He felt that the associate's skills and interests were not aligned to the objectives of the LA. Nonetheless, the lead officer appreciated the challenge and benefit from the consultant acting as a 'soundboard' for ideas.

From the NYA programme management perspective, the main unforeseen challenge related to the lead-in time required before the support could begin. In practice, it had taken associates more time to set up the scoping meeting with the LAs than they envisaged and to achieve sign-off of the memorandum of understanding. Subsequently, the lead-in time for support had been much longer than anticipated, resulting in activities starting much later than planned.

The associates identified a range of challenges in providing support to the LAs. The following list highlights some examples of these:

- a slow start to the process due to communication difficulties from the LA which was attributed to the challenges being faced internally

- difficulties getting the draft scoping plan signed off (although the associate appreciated the difficulties being experienced internally)
- getting the LA to 'step back' and articulate what their support requirements were and the time required to undertake this task
- the time required to understand the complexity of the LA
- completing the work within the timescales provided or having to change timings to reflect the pace at which the LA was working
- the changing landscape resulting in an ever evolving process – '... what were the original objectives way back in August 2011 are still relevant but other things have come into the process ... as an external consultant, my job is to respond to their needs'
- the availability of information and data. For example, one LA requested benchmarking data which is currently unavailable. This meant that the associate was unable to provide examples relating to regional and statistical neighbours.

4.3 Barriers to building on progress achieved

LA interviewees identified a range of barriers to building on the progress achieved through the associate's support during the final phase of the evaluation. These included:

- capacity issues as a result of illness
- other priorities such as service restructuring
- timing of the support – 'It's not that I don't value the consultancy but there were urgent tasks that needed doing which didn't give us the luxury of extended reflection [and] planning time as a wider team'. One lead officer highlighted the importance of having a clear brief from the outset, including the required outcomes.
- an unannounced inspection.

These barriers highlight the internal, and in some cases, ongoing difficulties experienced by LAs.

5 Development of the tailored support offer

This chapter examines suggested developments of the support offer. It also discusses interviewees' reflections on what would be done differently, if they were to be involved in the programme again. It also summarises interviewees' advice to other LAs interested in taking up the support offer.

5.1 Future developments of the offer

A typical view amongst interviewees regarding possible improvements or developments to the tailored support offer included some form of **follow-up** support at a later stage to, for example, review progress and developments against goals set and provide some external scrutiny. Linked to this, one operational interviewee highlighted that some LAs will be at the start of their journey, during which time it is important to keep the momentum going. It was recommended that, in these cases, a partial rather than full withdrawal of support might be appropriate to allow for contact as and when required. The following comment provides an illustration of the extent to which LAs welcomed additional support:

It's a very finite end, unless we want to buy some more [support]; I suppose that's a possibility, but we're in difficult times in terms of where LA funding is at ... so it was a great opportunity and the NYA and the consultant have been great, I just would have liked an extra day or two, probably ... five or six months on, as a bit of a challenge back to us as an LA, to say "you were going to do this, and you haven't, or you have. What else could we do with you to help you achieve that?"

A notable minority of LAs would have welcomed additional **travel time** for associates to try and maximise contact time. One LA suggested appointing consultants in closer proximity to the LA to overcome this challenge. However, one operational interviewee erred on the side of caution: '... but I wouldn't want to sacrifice quality because of geography', noting the

importance of the associates having the appropriate skills and expertise irrespective of location.

There was some indication of the need for **more flexibility in the delivery of support** to accommodate circumstances for individual LAs. For example, one lead officer suggested that the consultancy needs to be mutually agreed between the NYA and LA on an individual basis, to ensure that the time is used effectively and is provided at a time that is suitable for both the LA and the associate. In this authority, two days of support were lost because the work had to be completed within a particular timeframe and the LA was unable to deliver within this time. Another interviewee said that they were hoping to extend the support for a month or two 'to really reap the rewards of all the work that [the associate] has started to put in'.

Examples of other comments given by interviewees included:

- The **allocation of additional days** in order to, for example, help progress the work on a stage.
- The **sharing of information and good practice** amongst LAs to gain an understanding of the work being undertaken and the challenges experienced. Additionally, one lead officer suggested the facilitation of a regional event 'so you're hooking up with other local authorities earlier rather than at the end'.
- **Changes to the menu of options available** to prevent restriction – one suggestion related to expanding the support options, while another focused on asking LAs which areas they require support with.

In the case of one LA who experienced a less positive relationship with the associate, they felt that it would have been beneficial to have been involved in the allocation of an associate to ensure that they had the relevant experience and had a similar mind-set.

Where suggestions were made by associates, these included the need to ensure preparation is undertaken by both sides and offering a few additional days to enable slightly more scope for the work. One associate felt that there is always room for improvement, noting that the NYA has to recognise that the strategic context of work can be very fast or slow to change.

5.2 Recommending the support to other LAs

The general consensus amongst lead officers was that they would recommend the support offer to other LAs, as illustrated by the following comment:

... definitely, without a doubt ... I've found them very supportive and very helpful ... friendly and professional.

One lead officer spoke about the opportunity to reflect on ways of working and receive external challenge. In a few cases, however, interviewees advised LAs to be clear about what they wanted to get out of the process before applying. One interviewee said:

If you get the brief right, then it's a two-way process and I think you're going to get something out of it.

In a minority of cases, lead officers were more cautious in their response, noting that they were too early on in the process to comment.

5.3 Reflections on what could have been done differently

A range of comments were provided by interviewees when reflecting on what, if anything, they would want to change if they were to receive the support again. These included:

- the timing of support received or the opportunity to extend support over a longer period of time. One

operational interviewee remarked: 'The consultants can come and do a whole range of things but it takes a long time for local authority processes to work themselves through'

- providing continuity of a single point of contact at the LA
- greater buy-in at the strategic level
- sharing of information with staff and the LA as a whole about the involvement of the associate.

One of the pieces of advice offered to other LAs interested in taking up the offer was **the need to be clear about what they want from the support.**

To this end, it was suggested that additional time should be invested in the work at the outset to ensure that the authorities have formalised their expectations of the support and its desired outcomes.

Tailoring the support to the local context was considered important to ensure that it is relevant and meets the needs of the authority. One strategic interviewee advised: 'Be sure that it integrates with any internal processes that you're undertaking and spend time talking about tailoring'. The following comment illustrates the perceived value of the support:

Grab it with both hands ... in the current climate, to get that additional resource that comes in with no local baggage ... it's an external view, it's a professional view, it's objective. I think we can all benefit from that particular type of approach to all sorts of agenda, not just young people's services.

Lead officers considered working in partnership with the NYA to design the support as central to this process. Linked to this was the need to respect the information and guidance being provided by the associate who may be, for example, identifying gaps in management practice not previously noted by the authority.

6 Conclusions and recommendations

Overall, **LAs value the support** provided to them through the NYA tailored support offer and they were largely positive about the support received. In particular, they felt they benefited from the external expertise and critical friend role undertaken by the associate which are central to the success of the support. The support helped to further develop or reinforce their thinking, enabling them to confidently move forward with changes to the service. It is important to remember that the support is not passive in that the LAs are fully engaged in the process and it is challenging in nature, requiring the LAs to undertake their own thinking, something which the LAs found very useful.

Recommendation – LAs need to be aware that this support is designed to facilitate and challenge their own thinking and, therefore, requires them to invest time and energy into the process. The NYA needs to provide clear guidance to LAs at the application stage on what the support can look like and what they will be expected to contribute.

While it can be seen that the programme of support had generally **met the needs of the LAs** and they were beginning to see the impact of this support, the evidence suggested that LAs had not yet thought through the ways in which they would measure and document the impact.

Recommendation: LAs should consider from the outset how they wish to monitor the impact of the tailored support offer. This consideration should be built into initial discussions between the NYA associates and the LAs.

Overall, the **matching of the associate** to the LA appeared to work well and provided the relevant expertise for the support required. However, where this match was not deemed appropriate, this resulted in a breakdown in the relationship and the support process. This highlights the importance of this relationship to the support and its success.

Recommendation: Provide the LAs with the opportunity to have an informal discussion with the potential associate prior to formally commencing the support to ensure that they are appropriately matched on both sides.

The evidence showed that in some cases, LAs were not clear from the outset that the allocation of days included the **associates' travel time**. In addition, LAs felt that they missed out on contact time with the associates due to the distance they had to travel to the LA. While the suggestion was made that the associate could be assigned based on geography, it is clear that the matching of the associate based on expertise outweighs the importance of proximity.

Recommendation: Provide guidelines to LAs clearly outlining how the days are used, including an indication of what can be achieved within the timescale.

Where possible, the NYA should take into account the distance that some associates are required to travel and exclude these from their allocation. If this is not possible, associates should invest in other methods of communication such as web or teleconferences.

In some cases, **a lot of time was spent in the initial stages** of the support process developing the scoping document in order to identify support requirements. This was often due to LAs not having thought through the process in any detail prior to the support commencing. The result of this was that valuable days were used up before progress could be made.

Recommendation: Provide guidance on what LAs need to consider prior to their initial scoping meeting to ensure that both parties are clear about the focus of the support and the desired outcome.

It is clear to see that LAs were going through a period of change and were at very **different stages of their journey** when they received support from the associate. This was reflected in LAs' perceptions of the different stages they were at in terms of taking the work forward and seeing an impact, with some

identifying process-based impacts and others being able to see hard impacts, namely measurable changes to services. Circumstances within individual LAs can change at any given time, and associates recognised this and were **flexible in their approach**. However, this flexibility was not always reflected in the timescales offered to LAs.

Recommendation: Ensure that the timings of the support are flexible to accommodate the circumstances of individual LAs and within reason not restricted to a specific time period.

Given the different stages LAs are at in their journey of change, some LAs would have **welcomed ongoing support** and felt that the support ended abruptly.

Recommendation: Provide ongoing support on an informal basis (where required), whereby LAs can contact associates as and when required for a maximum amount of time after the end of the support.

Part of the success of the offer related to the external nature of the support which meant that throughout the support there was ongoing impetus on the LAs to continue to make progress. Because of this, once the support has finished, there is a **risk that this momentum could be lost**.

Recommendation: In order to keep the momentum going, LAs should be provided with follow-up support up to one year after the support has finished in the form of a one-off meeting, to discuss and review progress and next steps.

Overall, it is evident that **a lot of positive developments** have been made within the LAs involved in the tailored support offer. In light of such developments, it would be valuable to consider ways in which the lessons learnt and experiences could be shared amongst other LAs.

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Recently published reports

The Local Government Education and Children's Services Research Programme is carried out by NFER. The research projects cover topics and perspectives that are of special interest to local authorities. All the reports are published and disseminated by the NFER, with separate executive summaries. The summaries, and more information about this series, are available free of charge at: www.nfer.ac.uk/research/local-government-association/



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Evaluation of the NYA tailored support offer to local authorities: case studies report

This document presents 11 standalone case-studies which highlight examples of the types of support local authorities have received through the NYA's tailored support offer. Areas of consultancy support include commissioning, measuring outcomes, quality assurance and service redesign. It draws on interviews with local authority strategic and operational staff.

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The LGA commissioned the NFER to undertake an evaluation of the National Youth Agency (NYA) programme of tailored support to local authorities. The evaluation aims to help NYA tailor their support more effectively in order to help local authorities to improve their youth service.

This final report captures the LA perceptions of the support received. It covers:

- The support offer to LAs
- Benefits and impact of the tailored support offer
- Barriers and challenges faced
- Development of the tailored support offer.