

# Youth Opportunities Program

## 2022 Evaluation – Summary of Key Insights

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The **Youth Opportunities program** supports organisations across NSW to empower young people in the design and delivery of youth-led and youth-driven community projects. The program funds not-for-profit community organisations and local councils, enabling them to run youth-led and youth-driven projects that increase young people's connection and belonging in their communities.

Projects are designed by young people with the support of organisation staff to focus on issues that young people have identified as being important to them. Young people are included in the planning, delivery, and oversight of the projects, with the intention of breaking down barriers that young people face and increasing their participation and inclusion in the community.

Projects target a diverse range of young people aged 12-24 years, including homeless and disadvantaged, Aboriginal, culturally diverse, LGBTQIA+ and youth living in rural and regional areas.

The program has been operating since 2012 and in that time has administered 11 rounds of funding totaling \$16.8 million, across 364 community projects. The program is managed by the NSW Department of Communities and Justice.

The Department of Communities and Justice commissioned the Centre for Evidence and Implementation to evaluate the Youth Opportunities Program in 2021-2022.

### Summary of Key Insights

Overall, the evaluation found that the Youth Opportunities program is being implemented well, achieving program objectives and benefits for young people, and should continue to be a source of funding for community organisations in NSW.

To ensure a well-rounded view of project implementation and benefits, the evaluation explored perspectives and experiences of both young people participating in projects and key project staff from the funded organisations. The following evaluation questions were used to determine the effectiveness of the Youth Opportunities program:

#### **1. How well were funded projects being implemented?**

##### **a. What are the characteristics of best practice youth-led approaches?**

- A rapid evidence check of academic literature (relating to community projects led by young people) was conducted to identify and define best practice youth-led approaches.

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- The literature was consolidated into eight themes: authentic youth voice, youth-led project design, youth-led project implementation, knowledge and skill building, team building, supportive adult relationships, external partnerships and reflection. These factors are considered integral to authentic youth-led practice.

***b. To what extent were funded projects demonstrating authentic, best practice youth-led approaches?***

- The eight best practice youth-led approaches yielded from the rapid evidence check were consistent with the Youth Opportunities Program logic, program objectives and core components.
- All eight best practice youth-led approaches were evident among Youth Opportunities funded projects. Youth-led project implementation was particularly evident. Evaluation insights suggest that this approach is an important facilitator to successful project delivery.
- Youth-led project implementation was found to be best enabled by two other best practice approaches - authentic youth voice and supportive adult relationships.
- The evaluation found that partnering between staff and young people (supportive relationships) was strong and collaborative whilst also balanced with enough autonomy for young people to lead project design and implementation.
- A positive, albeit unexpected outcome for most projects was the formation of external partnerships (one of the eight best practice approaches). The evaluation found that funded projects have enormous capacity to help participating young people form relationships with other community organisations, local businesses, training/education services and even local government. Young people themselves acknowledged how the involvement of the community helped their project succeed and created a greater sense of belonging within their community.

***c. How acceptable, appropriate, and feasible were projects being delivered as part of the Youth Opportunities Program?***

- Project staff perceived their projects to be acceptable, appropriate and feasible, although challenging to implement.

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- Project staff suggested that they would benefit from strategies to better engage young people, additional time/resources for project preparation, better aligning of project schedules with the school calendar, acquiring additional partnerships/staff subcontractors, reducing project complexity and increasing project duration to enable greater participation.

#### ***d. To what extent did projects offer value for money?***

- The amount of funding provided by the Youth Opportunities program to projects was perceived to be either ‘mostly’ or ‘fully sufficient’.
- A project team’s ability to source in-kind support, sponsorship and additional resources appeared to be indicative of how projects perceived value for money. Projects that were ‘better connected’ or able to source these supports appeared to benefit from this greatly.

## ***2. To what extent did the Youth Opportunities program have its intended impact?***

### ***a. To what extent were Youth Opportunities program objectives being achieved?***

- All project staff and the majority of young people perceived that their projects achieved program objectives and that they benefited young people.
- The evaluation found that this is largely attributed to projects being appropriately designed to ‘fit’ the program and the Department of Communities and Justice having developed effective processes to enable them to select projects with a high likelihood of success.

### ***b. What benefits did participating young people perceive and experience?***

- Findings confirm that the Youth Opportunities program is achieving its aims, objectives and intended benefits for young people.
- At commencement, young people reported high expectations for their projects. After project completion, they reported that their projects not only delivered all intended benefits, but also additional benefits including professional development, personal growth and wellbeing, fun and enjoyment, feeling heard and supported, and identity and cultural connection.

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### *c. What factors influence the achievement of these objectives and benefits?*

- Eight enablers that facilitated the achievement of program objectives and intended benefits were described by staff and young people. These were: supporting and valuing young people, training and preparing young people, youth-led project implementation, engagement of young people, community support and partnerships, team building, preparedness of project teams, and flexibility of project delivery. These align with four best practice approaches: youth-led project implementation, knowledge and skill building, team building, and supportive adult relationships.
- Barriers to achieving program objectives and benefits (identified by project staff) were: the impact of COVID, lack of engagement of young people, lack of community support and partnerships, time commitment of young people, project duration and resources, project complexity, and a lack of diverse community representation. COVID was the only barrier reported by young people.
- Overall, project staff appeared to be very happy with their project and the provision of funding.

## Background

The evaluation sought to explore and understand the extent to which the Youth Opportunities program is being implemented as intended, meeting its intended objectives, and generating its intended benefits for young people.

To ensure a well-rounded view of project implementation and benefits, the evaluation explored perspectives and experiences of both young people participating in the projects and key project staff from the funded organisations.

Capturing youth voice<sup>1</sup> was an essential requirement for the Department of Communities and Justice. The evaluation was designed to highlight and amplify the perspectives of the young people participating in the funded projects.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: youth voice refers to explicitly soliciting the views of young people so that their lived experiences can be understood from their perspective. A key underlying assumption is the young people are the experts in their own lives and experiences.

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### Program Objectives

Projects funded under the Youth Opportunities program are required to work towards a series of objectives. The evaluation sought to understand the extent to which the program’s objectives are being achieved.



**Objective 1:** Partner with young people to deliver a youth-led and youth-driven community project



**Objective 2:** Improve young people’s access to and inclusion in community activities such as sport and recreation, cultural and other activities



**Objective 3:** Provide young people with knowledge and skills to strengthen their ability to participate in their local community such as developing teamwork, communication, decision-making and leadership skills



**Objective 4:** Recognise the contribution young people make to their local community

### Evaluation Approach

The evaluation sought to answer the following questions:



**Evaluation question 1:**

How well are funded projects being implemented?

**Sub-questions:**

- a** What are the characteristics of best practice youth-led approaches?
- b** To what extent are funded projects demonstrating authentic, best practice youth-led approaches?

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- c How acceptable, appropriate and feasible are projects being delivered as part of the Youth Opportunities Program?
- d To what extent do projects offer value for money?



**Evaluation question 2:**

To what extent is the Youth Opportunities Program having its intended impact?

**Sub-questions:**

- a To what extent are Youth Opportunities Program objectives being achieved?
- b What benefits do youth participants perceive and experience?
- c What factors influence the achievement of these objectives and benefits?

### Methodology

The evaluation’s methodology included a rapid evidence check, document review (progress reports and final reports prepared by project staff as part of the reporting requirements of the grant), online surveys for both project participants and key staff at various time points, focus groups with young people and interviews with key project staff.

### Conclusion

The evaluation found that the Youth Opportunities Program and its funded projects are being implemented well and achieving their goals, both in terms of program objectives and benefits for young people. Funding received by projects appears to be sufficient, however, perceptions of *value for money* appear to be associated with the projects ability to source in-kind benefits.

The eight best practice youth-led approaches identified in the literature were evident in all projects. The evaluation highlighted that youth-led project implementation was vital to the successful implementation of projects. This was however, challenging to achieve and most susceptible to implementation difficulties. To maximize the benefits for young people, it is important for project staff to consider strategies to address implementation challenges, including the impact of unforeseen events.

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### **Further Information**

For further information on the Youth Opportunities program evaluation please email [youth@facs.nsw.gov.au](mailto:youth@facs.nsw.gov.au)