

Short-term funding to meet external targets: one youth work project's experience

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Summary

This case study sets out a youth work project's experience of accepting funding to work with young people in 'hotspots' for crime and anti-social behaviour. The project team resisted the focus on negative behaviour associated with the funding and set out their positive view of young people in their funding bid. They believed they could negotiate realistic targets with the youth service and give feedback to help the youth service see what worked and what didn't. Their bid was successful and they decided to accept the contract as the money would help fund work that they were already doing using their local knowledge and experienced staff. They provided initial monitoring information that included quantitative information and case studies with contextualised accounts of the challenges faced by young people.

However when the contract was extended by six months, the youth service tried to impose more stringent monitoring arrangements. The project leader was told that she had to evaluate their work in a way that she believed didn't value the actual work with young people. She was able to do some negotiation such as continuing to complete monitoring returns in arrears in order to capture the project's responsiveness to young people's ideas. The project met its targets but the project leader and youth workers felt that they had ended up ticking boxes for the youth service rather than working together to enable young people to set goals, build self confidence and change the community's perception. Lessons included the value of submitting a bid on your own terms, the need to look carefully at what is negotiable and who you are negotiating with, and the need to consult young people about where and when they want to work with youth workers.

Case study

The Waterside Youth Project (WYP)¹ was invited by the local youth service to apply for six-months' government funding to work on Friday evenings and weekends with young people in so-called 'hotspots'. Organisations were selected partly on the basis of where the 'hotspots' were located and partly on a judgement of which organisations were likely to deliver. As one of the 'hotspots' was in WYP's district they were invited to bid.

The WYP staff considered their motives in deciding whether or not to take the money. One positive motive was that it would help fund work they were already doing, though at different times of the week. This was in contrast to some of the other funded organisations which, as large charities, had to set up projects from scratch, employ new staff and get to know the districts they would be working in. WYP also welcomed the funding because it would help keep existing and valued staff in jobs. Another positive for WYP was a promise that all the participating organisations would meet regularly with each other and with youth service staff to discuss the work. This would also allow the organisations, if necessary, to say: "this isn't working!" – the first time the youth service had indicated it wanted that kind of feedback.

However, WYP had reservations. For one thing, the brief was very specifically focused on work on Friday evenings and at weekends but the staff saw Friday evenings as the least effective time to be on the streets as most young people were likely to be on their way to parties or going into the town centre and so would not necessarily want to spend time with youth workers. Though some contacts might be made, any issues or concerns that emerged would have to be left for follow up on other evenings. Another consideration was that Friday was an evening where the staff, who worked three other evenings of the week, traditionally spent with their families. Finally there was the brief's focus on reducing crime and anti-social behaviour. Not only was this something which the workers were clear they couldn't guarantee to do, it also started from an explicitly negative view of young people which WYP did not share.

Despite these doubts, after discussion the staff team of five agreed that they would set up a rota for regular Friday evening detached work and some weekends, as well as using the

¹ To preserve anonymity the name of the project and some personal details have been changed.

grant to fund mid-week follow up work. This had a chance of working successfully with the young people concerned because they already knew the workers.

Other than to focus intensively on twelve young people and to carry out the work on Friday nights and weekends, initially no other targets were set for the work. However it was expected that the project would meet 'crime and disorder' targets, albeit without any explicit agreement on how the work would be monitored. For the initial monitoring, WYP provided quantitative data about services delivered and numbers of young people contacted and worked with. WYP also chose 12 young people it had worked with intensively and provided anonymised case studies. These were not just success stories but real accounts, in context, pointing up the wider challenges faced by the young people who, despite the support given by workers, had struggled with family problems or with dealing with crimes they had committed in the past. The project team found writing up the case studies a useful exercise in itself.

The initial six months of funding finished in March 2009 but was then extended for a further six months. This coincided with a youth service restructure and the appointment of an acting principal officer. At this point, too, WYP bid successfully for a second 'pot' of money from the youth service which, it knew, would require it to input young people's personal information onto the youth service's computer monitoring system. This system, which set targets for participation and recorded and accredited outcomes, had always been resisted by WYP which instead provided anonymised information. For the new funded work, the staff team decided to ask each young person to choose whether or not they wanted their details to go onto the database.

However, when the officer with responsibility for monitoring confirmed the targets for this new work, she also – without any prior consultation – emailed targets for the weekend-working project. This then led to a complex series of difficult exchanges between the youth service and the WYP team leader which generated emails from one youth service manager to the WYP team leader, which she experienced as childish, bullying and on at least one occasion sexist. These exposed major differences between the youth service and WYP over whether for example WYP had previously agreed to work to specific, numerical targets for the work and to share young people's personal information.

After calming herself down, and spending some time with senior project colleagues

considering the best way to approach the situation, the WYP team leader eventually emailed back to the principal officer. Her response started from the assumption, firstly, that everyone involved was seeking the best for the young people, secondly, assuring them that WYP was willing to use the database system, with young people's consent, and thirdly, that through negotiation she was sure an agreement on targets could be reached, as negotiation had been allowed in other, similar funding streams. This prompted a meeting between three youth service managers – the acting principal youth officer, the district manager and the officer responsible for monitoring – and the WYP team leader who was relieved she had come with a colleague who by chance had some legal training. The youth service representatives started by insisting that the targets and the monitoring had been discussed with WYP. However, having brought a copy of the signed contract to the meeting, the WYP team leader was able to demonstrate that this had never been agreed – though by then the other organisations on the same contract had accepted the changed monitoring arrangements without questioning the change.

The WYP team leader maintained her position that there had been no agreement about these changes and that she would like to negotiate the targets. Though this didn't make her popular with the youth service staff, rather than argue over something she couldn't change and so simply get caught in a circular argument, she proceeded on the assumption that, if they understood her concerns, an agreement could be reached on the targets.

Having carefully identified her concerns prior to the meeting, the WYP team leader proceeded to explain them to the youth service staff. One concern was that she didn't feel confident that her project could or should try to persuade young people to give written permission to input their data which would evidence achievement of the targets for participation, as this was extremely challenging to negotiate on the streets. Another concern was that WYP already had one accredited project planned which had come from the young people themselves and was to provide the outcomes set for the second funding stream. The WYP team leader therefore didn't see the target for additional accredited outcomes for weekend working as achievable within the short time span required. Moreover, though she recognised that some organisations, by accepting high targets, might find favour with the youth service while those that set more realistic targets would not, for her a target agreed was a target to be met and she was concerned about the ramifications of not meeting the set targets. This was partly because of what she expected

of herself personally but also because she recognised that failing to meet a target would reflect badly on WYP. Finally, though the youth service at that stage was saying, 'don't worry, we'll set targets but we're just seeing how people deal with them, it doesn't really matter', she didn't believe that would be their response when it came to the point of assessing whether the targets had been reached.

As the minutes of the meeting made no mention of this latter point, the WYP team leader emailed back her own version of the minutes; and as this was never contradicted, she assumed that this version stood as a record. Her willingness to trust in verbal agreements made by the youth service had by then been so undermined that, after all subsequent conversations, she always emailed back her own record of what had been agreed. However by the end of a difficult meeting, WYP had left with renegotiated targets and a sense that they had at least tried to present their concerns to the relevant youth service staff.

WYP's understanding from these exchanges was that even if they didn't meet their targets they would still get their money, paid in arrears. Eventually, however, the project received an email telling them that if the required monitoring was not provided they would not be paid. For the project this confirmed that the youth service was now evaluating in a way that didn't value the actual work it was doing. Previously 'recorded outcomes' had been identified which came naturally out of the work, evidenced by workers' recordings; so that when for example a young person who was homeless knocked on a youth worker's door on Sunday night and was supported to find somewhere to live, that could be recognised as a recorded outcome, written up by a youth worker.

This however was no longer allowed. Instead the project was required to use the youth service's paperwork – for example to present a homeless young person with a 'record of learning' form to sign, something which to WYP's workers seemed wholly inappropriate and often impossible in many of the situations they worked in, particularly their street-based sessions. The youth service was also asking for notice of all WYP sessions three months in advance. Given that young people might at short notice ask for a trip or to do a project, this was information which workers couldn't provide comprehensively that far ahead. WYP suggested that it continue to complete its monitoring returns in arrears. This was agreed though with the proviso by the youth service that WYP statistics and

performance would always look reduced as they would be a month behind – a situation which WYP decided it could live with!

WYP also resisted the temptation to record the attendance of a young person who hadn't agreed to share their data even where workers found the young person's name had been put on the system by another project. When young people did agree to share information, the project recorded attendance, and where appropriate, an 'outcome', with sparse notes added. In the end it met its target for accredited outcomes because fifteen young people who had been part of a project whose work was exhibited in a local college had been given certificates by the college which, by negotiation, the youth service agreed could count. Without this agreement, the project would have been struggling to meet the youth service's demands even though it saw itself as having done very valuable support work with the young people on the street.

When this funding stream finished, WYP realised that, having started with a valid question about the effectiveness of working with young people on a Friday night, on which they thought they would be able to feed back to the youth service, it had ended up simply ticking boxes for the youth service. Moreover, the learning from the early stages of discussion across the participating projects had just disappeared. Though the youth service had started out talking about enabling young people to set goals, build self confidence and change the community's perception of young people, their concern seemed to be that the outcomes were entered into the database, with WYP being contacted only if didn't make the appropriate inputs.

In retrospect, for WYP some key lessons emerged from this experience:

- The team valued the opportunities to talk as a team before accepting the money – even though it was a difficult conversation because had they said 'no' it might have resulted in losing staff. As well as providing some protection for the team leader, this produced a collective agreement that they would do the work on their own terms, even though the decision to go ahead was in part a negative one.
- On reflection, the team leader recognised a need to look much more carefully in advance at what was going to be negotiable and what non-negotiable, especially now that monitoring procedures have become so much tighter. Thus, initially the project negotiated a compromise. Later it felt it had been pushed further than it

wanted to go.

- The team leader was clear too of the need to think more in advance about who the project would be negotiating with – on the premise that personalities are important.
- The team leader also saw it as important to '*know yourself and the kind of relationship you want to have with funders*', acknowledging for example that all the way through she was having to work with herself to move beyond her own comfort zones, in order to do try and do the right rather than the easiest thing:
'I feel first, then I think. I don't like conflict. I want to achieve targets to feel good about my work.'

Moreover this has to be seen in the context of getting feedback only when targets were not being met:

'Once the district manager asked if anyone in the youth service had ever thanked me for my work and I said no.'

'The monitoring coordinator once said that if I didn't hear from him I should assume everything was OK. I wrote back and said it would be encouraging to hear from you when we're doing OK.'

- Crucial, too, was being clear about the project's own purpose for the work and not changing its focus to take on the funder's aims – for example, to reduce anti-social behaviour. In its bid WYP set out its own definition of the principles and practice of informal education and its positive view of young people which assumed that they could '*love, think, create and enjoy*' and that they needed to be affirmed for these qualities rather than focusing on negative behaviour.
- Colleagues' help was also seen as important – for example, in the early negotiations, one of them drew on some legal background and another experienced worker was clear that lines needed to be drawn which made clear that '*this is what we're about*'. It had helped, too, that the team leader herself and three colleagues had had professional youth work training.
- Young people were not consulted on whether they wanted to work with the youth workers on a Friday night – and in hindsight, this is a question the WYP team leader considered should have been discussed with the young people.

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