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Evaluation of Project Oracle

How to effectively stimulate evidence
supply and demand at a city level

SUMMARY REPORT

Ruth Puttick

February 2014



Project Oracle™: Children & Youth Evidence Hub aims to improve outcomes for young people in London by promoting better evidence and understanding of what really works. It achieves this through a growing resource of independently assessed and evaluated projects and building capacity by supporting organisations and commissioners to develop evidence-based youth programmes.

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ABOUT THIS PAPER

This summary report presents the findings of the evaluation of Project Oracle that was undertaken between September 2012 and July 2013.¹

Nesta has been a longstanding supporter and champion of Project Oracle. We advised on its development,² published reports on its work,^{3, 4, 5} and hosted events to promote the model to a wider audience.^{6, 7}

It was therefore our great privilege to support the independent evaluation of Project Oracle when it left its home in the Greater London Authority to be led by consortium of evaluation experts from academia, and the private and third sectors.

We were keen to lead the evaluation for a number of reasons. Firstly, the evaluation is formative. We wanted to learn about the development and expansion in real time to help the delivery team refine and improve the model. The evaluation is also summative, providing recommendations on what has worked, and areas for improvement in future phases. As well as guiding future iterations of Project Oracle, we hope the lessons will also inspire other evidence initiatives around the world, such as the What Works network here in the UK, to learn from the effective mechanisms used.

And finally, we wanted this evaluation to contribute to the field's wider knowledge about how to effectively generate evidence on the ground, and how to then link this into the decision-making process. We are far too aware that 'evidence about evidence', or 'what works' to identify and spread effective practice, is a greatly underexplored territory.⁸ From an earlier review of other 'evidence centres' we only found a couple which had evaluated their own performance.⁹ We therefore hope that Project Oracle's willingness to have their approach scrutinised and evaluated will help prompt other arbiters of evidence to do the same, aiding all our understanding on how to effectively influence change.

We commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to undertake the evaluation of Project Oracle over 2012/13. This research summary is based on the full-length evaluation which Nesta published in February 2014.

As always, we welcome your comments,

Ruth Puttick

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research summary is based on the evaluation report published by Nesta in February 2014, *Evaluation of Project Oracle*, written for Nesta by **Rosie Gloster, Jane Aston** and **Beth Foley** from the Institute for Employment Studies.

Nesta would like to thank the Institute of Employment Studies for undertaking the evaluation. Our grateful thanks also go to the Project Oracle delivery team, and all the providers, researchers, universities, funders, and Evidence Champions involved, who willingly gave their time to be interviewed for the evaluation and provided such rich insights and reflections on their work.

1. ABOUT PROJECT ORACLE

Project Oracle is the only city-wide evidence generation campaign of its kind anywhere in the world. Led by the Greater London Authority with a consortium of co-funders, it strives to bring evaluations of youth programmes – many of which are delivered by small or charitable organisations – in line with academically rigorous and internationally recognised Standards of Evidence, improving consistency and quality in understanding what does – and does not – work.

Project Oracle seeks to achieve these objectives by:

1. Supporting charitable organisations to evaluate their projects; and
2. Creating a source of independently assessed and evaluated projects.

Project Oracle has several delivery strands to actively stimulate both the supply of and the demand for evidence. These strands are:

- **Standards of Evidence:** at the heart of Project Oracle's work is a Standards of Evidence framework to help assess and guide the evidence behind youth service providers. These are on a 1 to 5 scale and help describe what constitutes good evidence.
 - **An Evidence Champion seminar series:** a seminar programme delivered by academics to teach public sector commissioners and other funders about social research methods and evidence-based commissioning.
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- **Research placements:** Providers scope a research or evaluation project, advertise it on the Project Oracle website, and then are 'matched' to an academic researcher who undertakes the work. Placements last approximately three months and help build the provider's understanding of evaluation.
 - **Provider training:** evaluation training for providers. This includes an introduction to the Standards of Evidence and a validation process, and includes training such as developing a theory of change.
 - **Validation:** a process that providers can use to assess the evidence behind their project against the 1 – 5 Standards of Evidence framework, with the process quality-assured by the delivery team.
 - **Evidence competition:** providers of youth services can submit evaluation evidence about their projects to a competition which has prizes for efforts and progress in evaluation. During 2012/13 prizes were awarded for evaluation methods rather than evaluation findings.
 - **Synthesis studies:** a call for evidence for existing evaluations of youth services to analyse what works, for whom, and under what circumstances.
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2. ABOUT THE EVALUATION

Nesta commissioned the Institute for Employment Studies to undertake an evaluation of Project Oracle during 2012/13.

The evaluation aims were:

- 1.** To understand the Project Oracle work streams with a view to documenting the changes over the evaluation period.
 - 2.** To assess the effectiveness of the project at engaging partners for each of the activity streams (i.e. students, providers, universities, commissioners, and other funders) and their experiences of the programme.
 - 3.** To examine the effectiveness of partnership working between the delivery partners and the mix of skills, capabilities, and team structure required to deliver Project Oracle with impact.
 - 4.** To explore whether and how Project Oracle has helped providers to improve their approaches to evaluation and to develop the evidence base.
 - 5.** To examine whether and how the project is influencing the decision making of funders and commissioners.
 - 6.** To document the impact of Project Oracle including the effectiveness and impact of each of the individual work streams; and then at aggregate level, the impact of Project Oracle overall.
 - 7.** To examine the sustainability of the outcomes of Project Oracle.
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8. To make suggestions for improvement in the future delivery of Project Oracle, and to make recommendations for other institutions/initiatives which seek to emulate either elements of the Oracle approach, or to replicate Project Oracle elsewhere.

The evaluation methodology is primarily qualitative in its approach to gather the depth of information required to assess Project Oracle from a range of perspectives. In addition, many of the stakeholder groups were small and therefore best lent themselves to qualitative rather than quantitative methods.

In summary, the methods used were:

- **Qualitative interviews.** In total, 46 interviews were carried out with the Project Oracle team, funders, providers, researchers on placements and their supervisors, and Evidence Champions.
 - **Analysis of management information.** The management information captured by the delivery team was analysed to understand the providers involved.
 - **Three online surveys.** These were designed and administered as part of an earlier phase of the evaluation. They sought to provide baseline data about the position of providers, commissioners and researchers that engaged with Project Oracle.
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3. KEY FINDINGS FROM THE EVALUATION

We shall now outline the key findings which have emerged from the evaluation of Project Oracle over the past year. These findings are grouped to show the implications for overall delivery, as well as the strengths and areas for improvement in each work stream. The full details of the evaluation are published in the accompanying report, available from the Nesta website.¹⁰

OVERALL FINDINGS

Key finding 1: **Project Oracle is a much-needed initiative**

The evaluation found that Project Oracle's performance against their targets has been excellent, with strong demand for its services. Stakeholders interviewed said that Project Oracle is a timely initiative because evaluation evidence is increasingly important in an environment with reduced funding. Although in its infancy, there have been concrete impacts for providers, particularly those who have received a research placement. Providers felt they benefited from involvement in Project Oracle through its role in reinforcing a culture of evaluation, better appreciating its importance and giving them greater confidence in discussing the outcomes of their work.

Key finding 2: **Project Oracle's 'personal' approach attracts providers**

The Project Oracle team has a crucial role in engaging and supporting providers on their evaluation journey. The personal support received from the delivery team appeared to be one of the most critical factors in determining the extent of provider engagement. The most active providers were likely to report close and proactive contact from the team, whereas the least engaged had generally received little or no personal contact and were unsure what support they could expect.

STANDARDS OF EVIDENCE

Key finding 3: **Standards of Evidence are a useful tool for developing evaluation capability**

The Standards of Evidence used by Project Oracle provide a useful tool for thinking about what an appropriate evaluation methodology is for different projects. Many provider organisations felt that the Standards of Evidence had introduced them to new concepts of evaluation design, encouraged them to think in a more disciplined way about evidence and outcomes, and had also helped them become more aspirational about what they could achieve with evaluation. The concept of Theory of Change was considered particularly helpful.

Key finding 4: **Providers need more support to progress beyond level 2 on the Standards of Evidence**

Although Standards of Evidence help providers to think about different evaluation methods, they need to be supported to progress through the levels, with many expressing confusion or concern about moving through the Standards. By the end of our evaluation of Project Oracle, no providers had been accredited beyond Standard 2, and indeed, only four out of 49 providers who had been validated had reached Standard 2.

Key finding 5: **There is a mismatch between what funders and providers constitute as 'good evidence' and what is classified as good evidence on the Project Oracle Standards of Evidence**

A requirement necessary for providers to progress to Standards 3 and 4 of the Standards of Evidence is a successful randomised control trial (RCT). Yet providers and funders tended to place more emphasis on the value of qualitative evaluation or longitudinal studies, involving tracking young people before and after their participation with a programme, and were much less keen on quantitative approaches using control groups. This was a very commonly cited issue with many providers perceiving the use of RCTs to not be appropriate to their interventions. Some even called for a 'rebalancing' of emphasis from quantitative to qualitative methods.

Addressing this mismatch represents a challenge for the next year of the project if provider organisations are going to start moving up through the Standards of Evidence. It is imperative that the Standards of Evidence are seen to be appropriate to the work of providers, and help produce the evidence that funders require. This could require producing further guidance material on the use of trials to promote their use and benefit to Project Oracle stakeholders.

RESEARCH PLACEMENTS

Key finding 6: Research placements help both providers and researchers

The research placements – whereby academic researchers are matched with a youth services provider – were found to be beneficial to both the researchers and providers involved, with strong relationships forged and useful work undertaken. The opportunity to benefit from evaluation guidance from a research student was widely acknowledged as a major attraction for providers to get involved in Project Oracle.

Most students on a placement helped providers develop a theory of change or a logic model – Standard 1 on the Standards of Evidence, and few moved beyond this. Providers said that this had helped them to clarify and refine their short-term and long-term outcomes.

Key finding 7: The need to balance the demand for research placements with the ability to set up such placements

Due to the time needed to match researchers to provider organisations, there were fewer placements set up than anticipated, meaning that the target for research placements had to be revised down over the course of the year. Going forward Project Oracle could make clearer the criteria for organisations to receive a research placement.

Balancing the supply and demand for placements may become more challenging in the future as organisations progress through the Standards of Evidence and need more intensive support and expertise. Concerns were raised that it may be hard to identify students with the skills needed to undertake more advanced evaluation work.

SHARING EVIDENCE

Key finding 8: **Provider organisations are often unwilling to share evidence**

Project Oracle operates in a provider culture that is often unwilling to share findings with organisations they view as competitors. This means tensions can surface in the Project Oracle model when exploring the dual objectives of a) encouraging and supporting providers to generate evidence and b) synthesising and sharing evidence about what works.

Key finding 9: **The synthesis study proved challenging**

The synthesis study, a call for evidence for existing evaluations of youth services to analyse what works, for whom, and under what circumstances, was hampered by a lack of clarity about its intended aims. In large part, these issues could be linked to the fact that this was the first study of its kind by Project Oracle. However, providers were reluctant to submit their own evaluation studies and reports to the synthesis study. Encouraging providers to contribute to the evaluation should be an area for focus going forward if Project Oracle is going to be able to share evidence on what is – and what isn't working.

ATTRACTING AND ENGAGING PROVIDERS

Key finding 10: Make clear what the core offer is to the different stakeholder groups and explore offering a fee-paying model for additional services

Many provider organisations felt highly engaged in the work of Project Oracle, but some providers were unsure what the core offer was for them. For example, Project Oracle could set out how much one-to-one support stakeholders could expect, such as the number of phone calls and meetings. Project Oracle could also introduce a fee-paying model for anything additional to the core offer. This could help provide the structured one-to-one support and expertise that some providers will need to make evidence a core part of their organisational strategy.

Key finding 11: More work is needed to engage with (smaller) providers who lack evaluation experience

For those service providers already engaged in evaluation in some way, Project Oracle was viewed as a means to confirm the value of their current activities and/or to develop them further. Engagement had been less successful with smaller providers with little or no experience of evaluation. Such organisations had often found the language and requirements of Project Oracle daunting and confusing.

Key finding 12: There is scope for encouraging 'peer support' between providers and other stakeholder groups

The evaluation found that some providers would welcome the development of an online forum or message board for peer support purposes. Encouraging providers to share relevant information and allow Project Oracle participants to contact one another might be useful, and could also include a list of frequently asked questions (FAQs) for providers.

PROVIDER TRAINING

Key finding 13: **The training sessions offered were well received by service providers**

The training offered on topics such as evaluation taster sessions, was well received, and offered useful information and network opportunities to participants. Going forward, some providers felt that the training sessions could be more practically oriented, with a clear sense of how they applied to, and could benefit, smaller organisations.

Some of the most engaged providers would also like more advanced training to help move them up through the Standards of Evidence. Some also felt that more content-specific sessions, for example, tailored to crime and gangs, or for arts-based organisations, would be helpful.

EVIDENCE CHAMPION SEMINAR SERIES

Key finding 14: **The Evidence Champion seminars helped raise understanding of evaluation**

Evidence champions, funders and commissioners of youth services attended a series of seminars on evaluation, which helped them feel more informed and confident when discussing evaluation issues. However, in order to be most useful to funders and commissioners, the session could become more practical and have a higher number of real life examples to draw upon. In addition, some felt that quantitative methods were well covered, but a greater focus on qualitative methods, as well as how to commission evaluation or how to commission new projects with evaluation built in, would also have been useful.

4. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE DELIVERY OF PROJECT ORACLE AND LESSONS FOR OTHER EVIDENCE INITIATIVES

Having now completed the evaluation, here is a summary of the lessons learnt for delivery going forward.¹¹

- **Clarifying Project Oracle's focus:** In order to achieve its vision, Project Oracle could be more specific about its aims and objectives. Do these include for example, working with a small number of providers in depth, or a large number of organisations in a 'light touch' way?
- **Defining the Project Oracle offer:** Linked to refining the focus, Project Oracle could also benefit from making its 'offer' clearer to organisations. To date, organisations have been able to largely determine their own level of engagement, with some providers making extensive use of available services, and others just using one aspect. Yet with a finite amount of resourcing and capacity to deliver, Project Oracle could prioritise and strategically allocate support to ensure they meet their goals. For instance, there are choices on whether Project Oracle continues to support in-depth those providers who have already received a high number of services, or instead focus on engaging with new audiences.
- **Advancing the understanding of quantitative methods, particularly RCTs:** the evaluation found that no provider organisation had moved beyond Standard 2 on the Standards of Evidence, and many felt that the use of RCTs at Standard 3 and higher, was inappropriate to their work.

Addressing this mismatch represents a challenge for the next year of the project if provider organisations are going to start moving up through the Standards of Evidence, with an additional need to ensure that the evidence produced is compelling for funders. The Project Oracle team could produce guidance material on the use of trials to promote their use and benefit to their stakeholders, as well as linking to existing resources and help on the use of quantitative methods.¹²

- **Marketing Project Oracle to researchers:** as organisations progress through the Standards and require more intensive evaluation support, attention needs to be given towards finding researchers with the right skills. There needs to be a targeted marketing and recruitment strategy in place to ensure that the demand for research placements is met.
 - **Resources and scale:** Project Oracle wants to expand the number of organisations involved. However, as a key factor in attracting and supporting providers is a close personal relationship with the delivery team, they therefore may need increased resource to enable this to continue at scale.
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5. CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Project Oracle is at an early stage therefore it is not yet possible to assess the impact on changing the decision-making practices surrounding youth services in London. Yet the evaluation has shown promise, and through implementing the changes outlined in this paper, it could lead to achieving the intended aims as it becomes more established.

Although nascent, Project Oracle has generated a significant amount of learning that organisations seeking to advance the evaluation and evidence agenda will find incredibly useful. We hope the progress that Project Oracle has made will contribute to the field's understanding of how to effectively generate evidence on the ground, and to then link this into the decision-making process.

As part of this, we hope that Project Oracle's willingness to be studied and scrutinised will prompt other evidence centres and initiatives to do the same, leading to the testing and identification of more mechanisms that effectively generate evidence which is useful and useable for decision makers.

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FURTHER INFORMATION

For further information about Project Oracle™ please see:

Web: www.project-oracle.com

Email: info@project-oracle.com

Twitter: [@project_oracle](https://twitter.com/project_oracle)

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1 Plough Place
London EC4A 1DE

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