

Reviewing the Story: *Youngballymun*'s independent 'Expert Jury' review of their contribution and effectiveness:

Preliminary Conclusions

Review meeting held at the Department of Justice and Equality, Dublin;
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Background

In October 2015, *youngballymun*, a complex community initiative based in Ballymun, Dublin, convened a two-day meeting to review the results set out in a draft Performance Story Report, 'What's the Story; Is *youngballymun* contributing to improved Child Outcomes? (*youngballymun*, 2015). Results were set out in relation to four service strategies: *Ready Steady Grow*, an infant mental health strategy delivered in community health clinics; *3-4-5 Learning Years*, a pre-school development strategy delivered in local early years settings and incorporating *High Scope* and *Síolta* approaches; *Incredible Years (Toddler, Basic and 20 week parenting programmes; Dina in the classroom curriculum and Teacher Classroom Management training)*, an evidence-based programme focusing on parenting support and on teachers' classroom management and delivered in primary schools; and *Write-Minded*, a literacy development strategy, delivered in local primary schools.

The Performance Story Report drew together the results of a multi-stranded programme of evaluation, and used a method for exploring the relationships between cause and effect in complex non-experimental initiatives known as 'contribution analysis'. It focused on understanding the specific contribution of *youngballymun* as part of collective impact produced in complex adaptive systems by multiple stakeholders. At the heart of this method is the generation of a Results Chain (a theory of change) that sets out the approaches used and the outcomes expected over short, medium, and long-term time horizons. A subsequent Results Chart sets out the claims made and the substantiating evidence in relation to outputs and outcomes. *Youngballymun* created this suite of documents in a web-based format in which readers can access hyperlinks to specific evaluation products (for example, reports, data presentations, graphs and tables).

A jury of four independent experts with backgrounds in evaluation and analysis of community-based initiatives were invited to interrogate the claims made in the draft Performance Story Report at a public meeting involving a range of stakeholders, including practitioners and managers associated with the initiative, evaluators, and academics. This is a brief summary of the closing conclusions and comments by the jury, presented at the end

of the second day of the meeting, after reading the Performance Story Report, alongside other relevant documentation, and after considering oral evidence and the discussions that took place at the meeting.

In brief, the jury found clear and compelling evidence of change in a range of outcome areas, especially in the key area of implementation outcomes and capacity building in local systems of care, including health and education. In relation to population outcomes, the picture was more complex, with strong evidence of contribution to positive benefit for parents, and some evidence of contribution to benefits for children. The jury felt that some specific areas of evidence required strengthening before firmer conclusions could be drawn. More detail is given below on the jury's reflections.

Initial comments

The jury noted the creative, innovative, and thorough approach taken by *youngballymun* for synthesising the results from this complex community initiative, using the approach of contribution analysis. They applauded the decision to place all data and reports in the public domain and noted the considerable bravery that is required to achieve this level of transparency.

The jury made every effort to be conclusive. Given the volume of evidence, it was not possible for every member to examine every document in depth. They were therefore reliant on the data and evidence presented during the two days of the review process, both by *youngballymun* and its stakeholders, and on the answers given in response to their questioning in the two-day meeting. Through direct questioning of participants, the jury also worked to surface alternative plausible explanations for the results claimed by *youngballymun*. The conclusions were rapidly synthesised after the meeting at the end of day two, and should be regarded as preliminary at this stage. They will continue to be kept under review as a more detailed analysis is compiled and published in due course.

In the course of the two day hearing the jury found it helpful to consider evidence on:

- (1) *implementation outcomes* – contribution to changes at the level of individual local practitioners; organisations and agencies: and at the level of the wider system;
- (2) and separately, on contribution to *population level outcomes*, by which we mean changes for children, their families, and at the level of the whole community.

The rest of this summary is structured accordingly.

Preliminary Conclusions: Implementation outcomes

Practitioners and practices

‘Reach’ is not itself an outcome, but an output of a service strategy; reach is, however, the first step in achieving positive outcomes from service use. **We found compelling evidence of good reach into the community of practitioners** in the local area. This included evidence from data provided by external evaluation results, alongside *youngballymun*’s own monitoring, their Performance Story Report, and the first-hand accounts provided at the meeting by practitioners. **There was also clear evidence of strong engagement by practitioners** in different service sectors, both between and across sectoral boundaries, for example across health and early years education and parenting support. Practitioners who attended the meeting described the usefulness of the **collaborative learning processes** put in place by *youngballymun*, including, for example, an infant mental health study group attended over the years by a large number of practitioners from different disciplines, working together to share perspectives and study evidence of good practice.

Organisations and agencies (including schools)

The jury also considered that there was compelling evidence of **clear success by youngballymun** in relation to **embedding a number of new and innovative services and approaches into existing agency structures**, including mainstream statutory provision for families and children in Ballymun in HSE primary care, early years care and education, primary schools and community support services. This was evident across all four service strategies. Where *youngballymun* service strategies were running in parallel with other initiatives with similar goals, the particular approach taken by *youngballymun* was considered to have provided **efficacious support and scaffolding for those other strategies, adding value and intensifying the potential for positive results**. A good example of this was the literacy and language strategy *Write Minded*, which was intentionally aligned with the national DEIS literacy programme.

Within the community of 11 primary schools within Ballymun, we also heard **convincing evidence of positive changes at the whole school level**. Teachers described how, over time, the ‘balanced literacy framework’ and the *Write Minded* strategy developed by *youngballymun* had gradually permeated whole school culture, becoming school policy, in spite of the fact that not all schools were equally positive about the initiative in its early days. There was **some evidence** offered regarding ways in which organisations and agencies within Ballymun have begun to be **more data-driven and evidence aware**. It was encouraging to the jury to hear how service teams within organisations in Ballymun were increasingly convinced of the value of taking a ‘data-driven’ approach to decision-making, and how they are using data as a basis for adjusting or re-orientating practice - for example teachers across various schools planning together for instruction in certain class years. There was also some evidence that, across organisations in the local area, practitioners

were deliberately and constructively sharing information relevant to improving outcomes for families and children.

The system (service structures, whole systems, policy level)

System-level implementation outcomes were perhaps the most difficult area of impact for the jury to judge. At the meeting, the jury considered that **clear and compelling evidence was presented regarding positive change within the local system of services**. The jury heard about greater trust and willingness to collaborate, more joint working, and a level of positivity in relationships both between organisations and between individual practitioners across the local system and service structures. However, the jury were **unable to determine the extent to which these changes have become sufficiently securely embedded** so that they would persist if *youngballymun* ceased to operate. This may speak as much to the important role of intermediary and backbone organisations in achieving local systems change in general as it does to *youngballymun's* specific operational model; but it seemed clear that, despite many early and continuing challenges for *youngballymun* in forging strong collaborative relationships across the system as a whole, their leadership, persistence, modelling of participatory methodologies for service design, and support for continuous implementation quality improvement had been a very positive force within the local system.

The jury were **less sure that they could discern evidence of the impact of *youngballymun* on national systems**, although evidence was presented of input into national policy documents and discussions, and being included in consultations on a regular basis. Further data and analysis, including conversations with senior policy makers, may be required to explore this in more detail.

Finally, the use of **shared data across service organisations**, and increasing **demand for - and scrutiny of - data on results**, can be regarded as a systems level outcome, as well as an organisational level outcome. The jury was persuaded that there are promising signs of a systemic culture shift in terms of commitment to evidence-based service provision.

Preliminary Conclusions: Population-level outcomes

Demonstrating measurable change for service users in the wider population is, for any complex community-based initiative, the most challenging aspect of all. The jury noted that it is still relatively early days to detect hard, widespread evidence of sustained outcomes at the level of the local population because there is still a relatively small proportion of the population of children and parents within Ballymun who have been exposed to the mature strategy for a sustained period, long enough for it to have been maximally effective.

Reach

The jury found that there was **good evidence of the initiative having reached a substantial proportion of children** and parents within the population of Ballymun. This reflects a successful strategy for embedding *youngballymun* services within pre-existing mainstream service structures including primary health care at the antenatal and postnatal stages, and within early years settings and local primary schools. Data presented at the meeting indicated that all four strategies have reached substantial numbers of children either directly or through the intermediary of parents or staff.

Parents and families

Data from the *Incredible Years* Basic Programme, and the Parent Child Psychological Service (PCPSTM) provided as part of the *Ready, Steady, Grow* strategy were considered to provide **strong and compelling evidence of positive change for parents and parenting**, in both qualitative data and quantitative indicators, subject only to the caveat that data were not able to be compared with a 'no service' comparison group. Quantitative data included statistically significant pre- and post-service change using standardised tests measuring parenting stress, parenting confidence, and self-reports of improved relationships with children. Qualitative data were rich in supporting evidence. The jury considered this to be an area of clear success for *youngballymun*.

Infants

Data on attachment between mothers and infants were presented on infant mental health, measured in relation to the Parent Child Psychological Service (PCPSTM) using the Strange Situation Test. Two separate analyses (one conducted by an external contractor, one by the programme developer) of data collected by clinics from parents using the services at different points in time showed that most infants of parents attending the programme were securely attached at the point of testing (after at least 3 sessions), and both analyses noted that the results compared favourably with international norms (especially so in the case of the analysis in 2015 carried out by the programme developer, which included a larger number of cases). However, the jury concluded that the quantitative **results on maternal-infant attachment were the least compelling in relation to outcomes for children**, though qualitative data are positive. In particular, the jury were concerned that it was difficult to draw conclusions about positive change in attachment levels associated with attendance at the PCPSTM programme due to the absence of a pre-service or baseline measure and the possibility of interactions between attachment style and unmeasured factors such as willingness to attend services or accept guidance.

Primary school aged children

Social and emotional well being

Youngballymun consider that some of their strongest evidence of outcomes is in the area of socio-emotional well-being outcomes, measured for junior infants (4-5 year olds) and older primary school-age children (9-11 year olds), using the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ). The data that they have been collecting on a longitudinal (cross-sectional) basis across all *youngballymun* schools shows decreasing 'total difficulties' scores with successive cohorts for both these age groups, and improvement in scores on a number of the 'problem' subscales. The results compare favourably with international norms on this measure. There are also similar data available in pre- and post-test format measuring change for the individual children whose parents attended the *Incredible Years* programme and the *3-4-5 Learning Years* parent support service. These also record positive improvements.

The jury found this evidence very promising but not wholly compelling. The jury were reassured to see improvements connected with exposure to the *Incredible Years* programme, indicating that the programme was implemented with quality. This would be consistent with a large amount of international data on the effectiveness of *Incredible Years*. It also appears that the 4-5 year old data, reflecting the *Learning Years* inputs, show positive direction of travel. Triangulation of these data with the national 'Growing Up in Ireland' cohort study data analysis (conducted by Professor James Williams, ESRI in response to a request from *youngballymun*) appears to confirm modest gains for *youngballymun* relative to children in all urban DEIS Band 1 schools across the country, but these have not yet been tested for statistical significance.

Literacy

Youngballymun have made considerable efforts over the years to compile a robust data set on literacy outcomes, in order to track and monitor changes in child literacy over time and inform the implementation of the *Write Minded* literacy strategy. Results using the 'Micra-T' test were presented in the Performance Story Report to track change locally within Ballymun schools over the period, in addition to data from a similar but not identical standardised test (the DSRT) used nationally to measure achievement in literacy across the country. **There is compelling evidence of local improvement in literacy among the *youngballymun* school age population, but the results are complex to interpret.**

First, during the period of *youngballymun's* development and operation, the national DEIS¹ policy initiative was also in place in Ballymun schools, providing extra resources to develop and improve literacy teaching. *Write Minded* was intentionally aligned with the DEIS initiative. Overall, literacy attainment appears to have been improving in DEIS 'Band 1'

¹ DEIS: *Delivery Equality and Improvement in Schools*

schools (the most disadvantaged schools) across the whole of Ireland, very likely as a result of the DEIS inputs. Second, as *youngballymun* noted, the decision to use Micra-T for testing was made for pragmatic reasons: this test is routinely used by the majority of Ballymun schools and there were local baseline data against which to benchmark progress. However, representations were made by national experts to the jury that the Micra-T is a relatively narrow test and does not adequately capture the full range of outcomes that would be expected from the *Write Minded* strategy. Also, in addition to being based on an alternative and not quite identical standardised test (the DSRT), the national norms available to *youngballymun* for national comparison purposes were calculated using data collected some years ago.

For all these reasons, the jury agreed that it will always be extremely challenging to apportion historical contribution to improved outcomes between the different inputs using quantitative analyses.

However, during the course of the meeting we heard compelling stories of added value from teachers in Ballymun schools involved in delivering both the DEIS 'First Steps' programme and the *Write Minded* strategy. These teachers described the way in which the supports provided by *youngballymun* through the medium of one-to-one support, coaching, mentoring, and telephone advice have scaffolded, supported and added value to the literacy development inputs provided by DEIS. They also described the wider content and goals of *Write Minded* as extending the range of the DEIS programme in important ways. **On the basis of qualitative and implementation data, the jury concluded it seems likely that youngballymun added considerable value in the local area to the achievement of literacy improvements for children.**

Wider community

Although outcomes for the wider community were not a key focus of the evaluation data collection strategy, there is **some evidence** within the datasets (both externally and internally analysed) **of positive changes in relationships between the community and the local services**. At the meeting, stakeholders described the strategies delivered within schools as bringing parents into relationships with schools in a new and positive way, strengthening understanding of what happens in school on the part of parents. This in return was described as helping schools to form better and more connected home-school relationships.

Areas for further exploration

The jury were asked to make recommendations and suggestions for ways in which the existing evidence could be strengthened in relation to demonstrating *youngballymun's* contribution to improved outcomes for children, parents and the service community. Below

are some specific and some more general recommendations that arose in the course of the jury's review.

Supporting the development of data-driven and evidence-aware local service improvement

The signs that local services are becoming more 'data-driven' are very positive. The jury noted that this would be even more so, if supported by more structured, intentional thinking about what kinds of data should be shared, in what ways, and in what circumstances. *Youngballymun* could perhaps give leadership in capturing this in written guidance.

The jury also noted that continuing practical support work will be needed to encourage and embed the best use of evidence in daily practice, through the use of continuous quality improvement strategies, driven and shaped by these data.

Measuring infant mental health outcomes

The jury agreed that this was a particularly challenging area of child development research. They suggested that a review by *youngballymun* of other feasible measures and future strategies for strengthening the data collection on this aspect of their strategy should be undertaken in the course of bringing the Performance Story Report to completion.

Measuring child wellbeing

The recent advances in access to national SDQ norms through the Growing Up in Ireland birth cohort study are very positive and can provide an important benchmark for *youngballymun*. The jury recommended however that further analysis in the context of the finalised Performance Story Report should if possible include testing for statistical significance between local and national results.

National data and national targets

The jury also made some more general observations about the lack of robust national data available to organisations like *youngballymun* for the purposes of examining their effectiveness against the expectations of funders and the public. Requiring initiatives of this kind to convincingly demonstrate effectiveness requires a clear understanding of the thresholds above or below which results are considered acceptable or unacceptable. Such thresholds need to be agreed *a priori*, and should ideally be set in the context of expectations shaped by nationally relevant comparisons. The current availability of data suitable to be used for national comparison was agreed at the meeting to be too limited at present. Thus (on almost all indicators used) it is challenging for *youngballymun* to assess whether the magnitude of change is greater, or smaller, than they would have expected in order to be regarded as a 'successful initiative'.

Linking implementation and outcomes data

A key theme in the discussions with panels and those working on the evaluation datasets was the need to tease out the relationship between implementation processes and data on outcomes at different levels. The jury suggested that *youngballymun* could usefully undertake further analysis of how they understand the process and mechanisms of change, and linking specific aspects of their implementation strategy (for example content, mode of delivery, use of data, or presence or absence of known implementation drivers) to specific outcomes that are believed to have resulted from those implementation strategies. This could help illuminate the core components or 'active ingredients' of the *youngballymun* strategy that would need to be prioritised if a similar initiative were to be successful in future.

The value of continuing longitudinal tracking

Finally *youngballymun* is a long-term change model for a whole community of children, aligned with the various ages and stages of development in childhood, and embedded within the health, early years, school and family systems. Examining the feasibility of following and tracking children who have been in receipt of the *youngballymun* strategy in Ballymun as they progress through secondary school will be important. Much could be learned by comparing them with peers who have not been part of the *youngballymun* initiative. This may be one way of providing further evidence on the lasting value of the *youngballymun* approach.

Closing comments

The jury's overall conclusions were that *youngballymun* can claim impressive achievements particularly in the area of implementation outcomes. There is increasing recognition that implementation outcomes are the prerequisite for achieving positive service outcomes for children and families. Moreover, these are the kinds of positive changes in thinking and in practice that can, in theory, most readily be transported into the wider system after a specific initiative has ceased to operate. They are a 'pot of gold' on which future improvements in service provision may draw. Thus the jury noted that it was especially encouraging to see evidence of change at the practitioner level and at the organisational or agency level, as well as signs of various 'ripple effects' in wider local systems. These may continue to bear fruit over the longer term.

In respect of evidence of change for service beneficiaries and the community at large, the jury judged data on outcomes for parents as the most compelling, followed by outcomes in social and emotional learning amongst children, followed by data on literacy attainment. Interpretation of these data is limited to some extent by the unavailability of a robust comparison or counterfactual as detailed above. Subject to that caveat, there is evidence of positive shift in the Ballymun area, and qualitative narrative evidence that suggests

youngballymun itself has made an important contribution to this. The jury noted the challenges with the data on infant attachment, but considered that these outcomes could be verified in the future by reviewing measures used for this purpose.

It was clear to the jury that against the backdrop of considerable economic challenge and historical local factors, the achievement of having set up and sustained a suite of new strategies and services in Ballymun is in itself a major achievement. The jury heard that there was a complex proliferation of partners and stakeholders, and a complex web of interests and crosscutting agendas characterising the local community landscape when *youngballymun* first began its operations. To have reached the degree of consensus and support currently enjoyed seems a creditable success. What would now be optimal would be to devote some further attention to distilling out the active ingredients of the strategy that have contributed to *youngballymun's* survival and sustainability during this difficult period. That way, it will be possible to understand how to support and encourage those same features in the '*youngballymun*s of the future'.

**Deborah Ghaté, Geraldine Macdonald, Allison Metz, and Rob Chaskin
December 2015**

APPENDICES

Formal Terms of Reference for the Expert Jury

1. *To consider youngballymun's underlying logic and how well the evidence that has been compiled reflects the programme's theory of change*
2. *To review and comment upon the extent to which the evidence is an adequate, unbiased, relevant and credible indicator that the outcomes have been achieved*
3. *To identify any additional information and evidence that could provide stronger evidence of outcomes*
4. *To recommend improvements for implementation, evidence collection and recording in the future*

The evidence reviewed

The evidence presented by youngballymun for our consideration consisted of the following:

- a draft performance story report, authored by youngballymun staff including:
 - a results chain, setting out the theory of change for youngballymun
 - a results chart with links to a wide range of reports and data presentations offered in substantiation of the results
 - a series of narrative accounts selected by youngballymun from staff and service users' accounts of the impact of youngballymun service strategies offered as stories of 'most significant change' as a result of the initiative
- access to all external evaluation reports and their executive summaries
- numerous data presentations in slide form including presentations of longitudinal change in social and emotional well-being and literacy tests data, collected by service providers and schools, and analysed by youngballymun's research and evaluation manager

In addition, on the first day of the meeting, we heard from youngballymun staff on data pertaining to context and demography for population of children and families in Ballymun, reach in relation to the specific service strategies, the background theory of change, and data presentations numerous outcome indicators. On the second day of the meeting, three specialist panels were convened by youngballymun consisting of stakeholders including practitioners and managers, and other experts from policy, practice and academic backgrounds. These panels focused respectively on: the work in learning and development in infancy the early years the preschool years; learning and development in the primary school stage; and collective impact and systems change. The jury were given opportunity to hear directly from members of the panel and question them directly.

Jury members

Professor Geraldine Macdonald is a Professor of Social Work at the School for Policy Studies at the University of Bristol, and former director of the Institute for Child Care Research at Queens University Belfast for many years. Working on both non-experimental and experimental trials, Geraldine is a distinguished contributor to the literature on the nature of evidence in social care, including social work impact and outcomes for children and families, and is the Coordinating Editor for the Cochrane group on *Developmental, Psychosocial and Learning Problems*.

Professor Rob Chaskin is Professor and Deputy Dean in the School for Social Service Administration in the University of Chicago, and is an international authority on comprehensive community initiatives, about which he has written many articles and books. Rob's particular areas of interest are community and social policy responses to urban poverty, strategies of community change with a particular focus on participatory planning and democratic governance at the neighborhood level, and the application of knowledge to inform community practice and policy.

Rob, Geraldine and Deborah were members of a group that spent several days with youngballymun in 2010 exploring likely evaluation challenges for the then-young initiative, and so have some knowledge of the early days of the initiative and early thinking about evaluation strategies.

Dr Allison Metz is one of a group of distinguished colleagues based at National Implementation Research Network in North Carolina who were introduced some years ago to the ambitious work going on in Ireland by the Centre for Effective Services. Allison is the director of NIRN and a senior scientist at the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute. She is a leading international authority on implementation science and its application in practice, with a particular interest in early childhood interventions. She consults widely across the world, including in Ireland, and has some prior knowledge of early years services and systems in Ireland.

The jury was chaired by **Dr Deborah Ghate**. Deborah is the chief executive of the Colebrooke Centre for Evidence and Implementation in the UK, and was the chief executive of the Centre for Effective Services in Ireland and Northern Ireland from 2008 to 2011. She has a long background in research and evaluation of complex community-based interventions and programmes at scale for children and families in the UK, including in the areas of parenting support, child protection, fostering and adoption, and youth justice. More recently she has specialised in the application of implementation and improvement science principles and analysis in practice and policy for real-world services in the public and third sectors. She is chair of the UK Implementation Network.