

Observations on the *youngballymun* evaluation

Research Advisory Group¹, *youngballymun*
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1. The Research Advisory Group (RAG) for *youngballymun*, chaired by Professor Tony Fahey, was first convened in April 2015 to help oversee and advise on the evaluation. As much of the evaluation data had been collected at that stage, the primary task for the group was to advise on the reporting phase. This note offers the RAG's observations on evaluation completed to date, focusing especially the recently completed Expert Jury report on the programme.
2. Since its inception the *youngballymun* programme has had a strong focus on evaluation and put in place a regime of detailed data collection in keeping with that focus, capably and energetically directed by a full-time Research Manager. The Expert Jury examination of the programme presents a balanced, well-informed and rigorous assessment of the programme based on that information and on the presentations and discussions which took place at the workshop with the Expert Jury conducted on October 20-21, 2015. The four-person Expert Jury was of strong international academic standing, worked well as a unit, expended much effort in reviewing available evidence, and was careful and discriminating in arriving at conclusions.
3. The Expert Jury found clear evidence of **good implementation outcomes**. These included:
 - Good reach into the community of practitioners
 - Strong engagement and collaborative learning among practitioners
 - Successful embedding of new and innovative services and approaches into existing agency structures
 - Effective support for other existing strategies and services which added value and increased the potential for positive results from those services
 - In the eleven primary schools in the programme, positive change at whole school level, especially in regard to a strategic approach to literacy improvement
 - Positive change within other local social services
 - Some increase in uptake of a data-driven, evidence informed approach to service planning and delivery.
4. These findings on implementation outcomes amount to **a strong endorsement of the *youngballymun* implementation model and the potential of that model to effect change in existing mainstream social services**. *youngballymun*'s work on implementation through mainstream agencies is an important overall contribution. It warrants attention in the design of future area-based anti-poverty initiatives since local instances of successful mainstreaming yield full value only if their positive elements are identified and promoted for scaling up to national level.
5. The Expert Jury's findings on **developmental outcomes at community level were less clear-cut**. While the jury found **strong and compelling evidence of positive change for parents and parenting** the evidence was less compelling in relation to maternal-infant attachment and

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promising but not wholly compelling in relation to socio-emotional well-being in primary school children. They also noted **compelling evidence of local improvement in literacy among the youngballymun school age population**, while recognising that attribution of these changes to particular inputs was complex. They noted *‘that it is still relatively early days to detect hard, widespread evidence of sustained outcomes at the level of the local population’* (as youngballymun has implemented just five years of what was designed as a 10-year change programme). They also pointed to general difficulties relating to data and national data-sets. The RAG concurs with the Expert Jury’s conclusions in regard to the evaluation of outcomes at community level and suggests that lessons and implications be drawn from the youngballymun experience to flag up a number of evaluation issues that deserve close attention in the future.

6. A key generic problem which hampered effective user outcome evaluation was the absence of **data on relevant comparison or control groups**. While the establishment of control groups within Ballymun (from whom the programmes, supports, and resources provided under youngballymun would have needed to have been withheld) was clearly not advisable in a complex community change initiative, the lack of comparison data presented challenges for the evaluation. Their absence, in turn, is compounded by **the lack of an adequate national data infrastructure** from which local implementation agencies like youngballymun could derive benchmarks and comparison data against which to measure outcomes of their own programmes. The evaluation requirements which national agencies now typically build into funding arrangements for local programmes have limited meaning when the external data conditions which would make rigorous local evaluation possible do not exist. These circumstances also give rise to concerns that national funding agencies impose evaluation requirements without fully appreciating what evaluation entails and the data role that those agencies themselves must play in making it possible. The Expert Jury identifies some areas where future work in youngballymun could help strengthen evaluation. The RAG agrees with these points and highlights the wider national significance that could arise from progress that youngballymun might make in these areas in the light of the limitations on effective evaluation which hampers effective learning from many local and national projects.
7. One such avenue of future work is the extraction of indicators on child development from the *Growing Up in Ireland* survey to be used as a source of benchmarks and comparison data in evaluating youngballymun’s local programme outcomes. As noted by the Expert Jury, youngballymun has already taken steps in that direction in regard to data on children’s social-emotional adjustment (the SDQ) from the GUI, an exercise which could yield general valuable lessons on how such data can be used in this context.
8. Similar developments might be possible with regard to national data on literacy attainment in primary schools. Under the Department’s Literacy and Numeracy Strategy (2011), all primary schools are required to report aggregated standardised test results in English and Maths annually to the Department of Education and Skills. Currently schools submit test results for all pupils in second, fourth and sixth classes. Although these data have limitations (e.g., at present, they are reported in the form of percentages of pupils scoring in ten ‘Sten’ categories, and half of all schools in the state use a different sets of standardised tests from the other half), the data may have the potential in future to be used as some kind of benchmarks for literacy.
9. The evaluation of the DEIS programme by the Educational Research Centre (ERC) on behalf of the Department has been ongoing at both primary and second level since 2007. Among many other things, the evaluation is monitoring reading and maths achievements in a large sample of DEIS primary schools in urban areas. Pupils in a sample of 120 of the 340 urban DEIS schools

have participated in testing at 2nd, 3rd, 5th and 6th class levels on three occasions: 2007, 2010 and 2014. Two of the 11 primary schools in Ballymun are in the sample of 120 schools while nine are not. The ERC is planning to conduct another round of testing in May 2016. It would be possible to include the remaining nine schools as an add-on to the evaluation. Although there would be no historical achievement data for these schools, collecting achievement (and possibly other) data in 2016 would at least provide independent data at pupil level. It should be noted that the forthcoming testing in 2016 will represent the final round of DEIS testing in its current form. Consideration is being given to collecting test data from DEIS schools as part of the National Assessments of achievement in primary schools, which have been carried out by the ERC for the Department for decades.

10. It is not within the current remit of *youngballymun* to extend the reach of the evaluation beyond primary school level outcomes. While acknowledging this, it would seem wise to give consideration to initiating some kind of longitudinal study in which the child cohorts currently participating in YB are tracked to second level and possibly even beyond. This is important because some of the impacts of participation in *youngballymun* may not become evident until the longer term. For example, children exposed to *youngballymun* may be more engaged in school, remain in school longer, have higher expectations, have higher achievements, or have better life chances and experiences generally than those that did not experience the programme. Issues such as these cannot be investigated without some longitudinal study. The ERC already monitors retention levels to Junior and Leaving Certificate and performance in the Junior Certificate Examination of all 195 schools in DEIS at second level as part of the formal evaluation. While it probably would not be possible to use these data directly – they are provided annually to the ERC by the State Examinations Commission and the Statistics section of the Department for DEIS evaluation purposes only – consideration could be given to collecting comparison data directly from post-primary schools that receive students from the 11 primary schools in *youngballymun*. While this would not be a straightforward exercise (it is complicated by enrolment patterns and the sheer number of receiver schools at second level), it would greatly enhance the evaluation.