Demonstrating the value of digital signposting

Penny Nkrumah, Jenny Lowthrop, Kavya Sangam, and Tris Lumley

July 2024

Contents

Foreword

Signpost+ is a collaborative programme that aims to ensure that young people can find the right information and support online about the things that matter to them. The internet plays a huge role in all our lives, but it's not clear today that it helps young people to address important issues and challenges that face them, like mental health, housing advice and support and sexual health. In fact, it is much easier for a young person to find their nearest takeaway than it is for them to find the support or opportunities that they need.

Signpost+ is a fundamentally collaborative programme, working on systemic issues that organisations cannot tackle individually. It has been spearheaded by NPC (as programme manager) and Nominet (as funding partner) and delivered through a partnership of charities, businesses and social enterprises working on signposting.

It is an ambitious programme of work which aims to shape signposting infrastructure, services, and products. Throughout the programme we have used the Three Horizons model—representing the current world in the first horizon, a vision of a transformed world in the third horizon, and a bridging phase connecting today to that future in the second horizon. It has helped us to think about where we are aiming, with a focus on collaboratively building towards the second and third horizons. However, at each stage we have had to remain grounded in today—working practically with the resources and organisations that exist.

The Three Horizons Framework
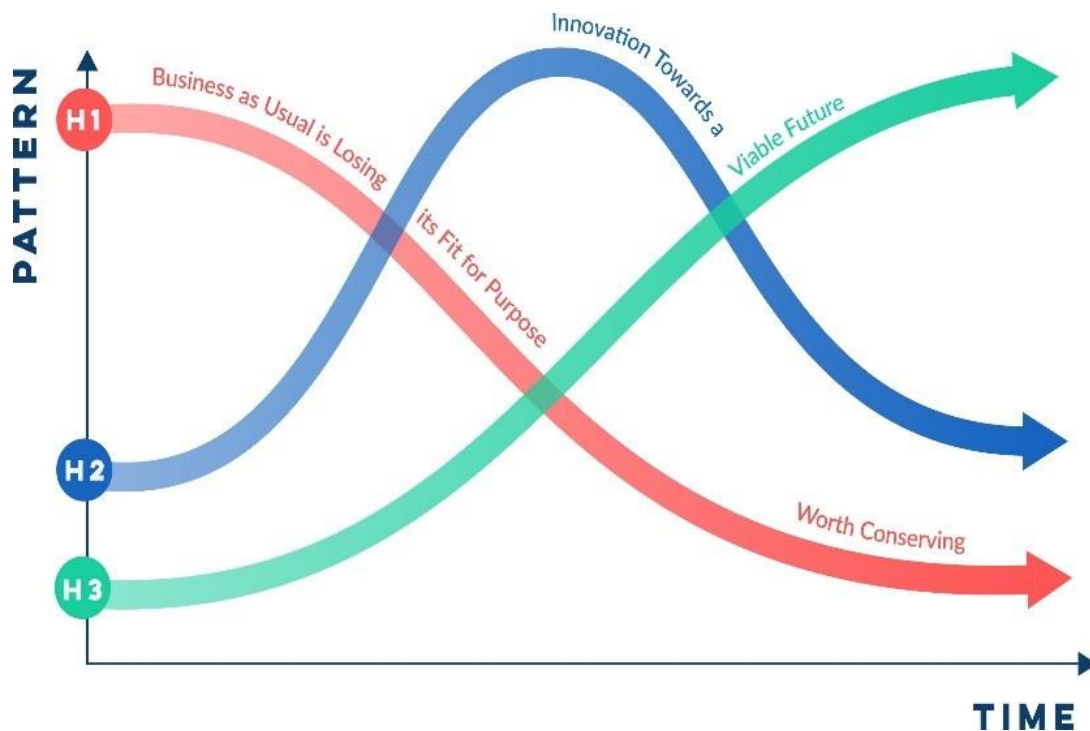
Three Horizons Framework, Bill Sharpe[1]

In the programme's first phase, we conducted research and worked with partners to scope out areas of opportunity for improving signposting. This culminated in our 2023 report, 'How might we improve signposting for young people?' We started this phase of work with three defined areas of opportunity: building on signposting through open data standards, building on existing information and directories, and testing existing models to demonstrate their value and increase their uptake.

In this phase, we discovered that existing signposting services had many challenges to tackle before they could shift towards the future approaches that we believe have the greatest potential—like open data standards. Current services have scarce funding to maintain existing data collection, let alone improve it and move towards sharing it. There are also many practical gaps in building bridges towards sustainable infrastructure.

This report focuses on what existing signposting services can do to ensure that they provide the greatest value and benefit to their users and young people's well-being. Good practice is also an essential foundation for sharing robust and reliable data openly in the future. Moving forwards, we hope to continue to build on these foundations and work towards a future where every young

---

[1] Daniel Christian Wahl, 'The Three Horizons model of innovation and culture change', *Medium*, 7 June 2017, <https://medium.com/activate-the-future/the-three-horizons-of-innovation-and-culture-change-d9681b0e0b0f> [accessed 10 June 2024].

person has the information and support that they need, when they need it in a way that works best for them.

About this guide

This guide is based on findings from Signpost+, an exploratory digital and data project led by NPC in partnership with National Support Network, Mind Of My Own, Chasing the Stigma, and The Mix.

Through quarterly collaborative partner meetings, individual meetings with our partners, and focus groups with the young people from our user research group, we gathered information and tested our assumptions about what good signposting looks like.

The young people were aged between 18 and 25 years old. The definition of youth tends to include 15–16-year-olds, but we were concerned with safeguarding and chose to only recruit young people who were considered adults in the UK.

They shared their feedback on different models of signposting and gave us a wealth of insight into the experiences of young people searching for support online. With our partners, we discussed the strategic possibilities for the consortium and shared learning.

This helped us to shape the best practices found in this guide. They have been shaped by our partners' use cases and feedback from the user research group.

Who is this guide for?

This guide is intended to provide the principles of best practice in signposting, by highlighting examples from our partners.

It is for any organisation that signposts to young people, but especially those that operate directories and information-sharing platforms or use them to support young people.

Example of a journey with and without signposting

with Signposting

SEARCH → YP starts their search for support on a signposting website tailored for young people (YP)

TARGETING → Search results are targeted towards YP with several accessibility options (including language)

SELECTION → With clear data quality processes, signposting services offer options that are relevant to YP's needs

ACCESS → YP access services with the knowledge of opening times, contact information and what to expect

without Signposting

YP starts their search for support using search engines like Google

Search results target all user demographics which makes it difficult to find options that suits YP needs.

There is an inconsistency with accessible content and YP attempt to locate support with patchy information

YP find it difficult to find key information to access they support they need which is frustrating

---

Language and terms used in this guide

Signposting: Signposting is the process of sharing details about another organisation's service with an individual. This can occur at any stage of an organisation's relationship with an individual. This is often due to an individual's needs being outside the remit of the organisation's work or a lack of capacity. Signposting provides lists or directories of places to find information and help online. Young people use signposting services to find organisations to help with their specific needs.[2]

Test and learn sprints: Sprints are a term from agile methodology used by designers when creating or updating a product, but the principles can be used for other projects. The basic principle is to decide on an area to test with real people so that they can provide feedback. The sprint is intended to be quick and delivered over a short time so that teams can, learn, adapt, and iterate their products quickly. They usually take a few weeks to conduct but due to our

---

[2] Anna Dent, Rachel Coldicutt, Will Bibby, 'Meeting young people where they are: Towards a new model of essential digital support', *Promising Trouble*, [accessed 10 June 2024].

availability, we worked in quarterly sprints. We delivered three tests and followed up with a focus group at the end of each sprint.

User research group: User research focuses on understanding user needs and motivations[3]. It involves collecting and analysing data through various methods such as surveys, interviews, and usability testing. This data is then used to evaluate whether design solutions meet their needs[4].

Infrastructure: The tools, resources, standards, and governance that enable the flow of data and information, as well as the development, use, management, and maintenance of digital and data technologies.

Direct service organisations: Charities and community organisations that deliver direct support to young people.

Partnership: The collective group of organisations that delivered digital signposting to young people on this project.

Open data: Open data is data that is available for everyone to access, use and share.

---

[3] Jenni De Luca, 'What is user research, and what is its purpose?', *Career Foundry,* May 17 2023, <https://careerfoundry.com/en/blog/ux-design/the-importance-of-user-research-and-how-to-do-it/#:~:text=User%20research%20is%20the%20process,2>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

[4] 'User Research', Interaction Design Foundation, <https://www.interaction-design.org/literature/topics/user-research>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

Acknowledgements

This project would not be possible without the collaboration of our partners: National Support Network (NSN), The Mix, Chasing the Stigma, and Mind Of My Own, as well as the participation of our user research group. We are grateful to them for their openness and honesty.

Thank you to Nominet for their commitment to this project and the development of data and digital infrastructure. Nominet continues to pioneer and support this much-needed work.

Our signposting partners are experts in digital delivery and provide digital signposting through their respective online tools. This guide was developed with their inputs, alongside contributions from Neontribe who led the observation and facilitation of our 'test and learn sprints' with our user research group. The findings from these sprints and our learning throughout the project form the key insights in this report.

About our partners

National Support Network

'Tech for good' company, National Support Network (NSN) delivers up-to-date, reliable information on UK helplines and other vital support services through public, private and third-sector partnerships. Their holistic Support Hub directory spans over 1,000 life problems and, through user-friendly and intuitive, white-labelled websites for their clients, makes it easy for end users (customers, communities or colleagues) to find help fast. These innovative Signposting services focus on data quality and active engagement with partners and users to deliver impact at scale.

Mind Of My Own

Mind Of My Own builds social impact software that connects children and families to services and helps them to thrive. They adopted and continue to develop My Best Life, an innovative signposting tool for young people and families. They work in partnership with local authorities, who play a pivotal role in the lives of young carers, parents, and families. Whilst building My Best Life, they have worked in close partnership with Together for Children Sunderland as their primary co-production partners.

Chasing the Stigma

Chasing the Stigma is a mental health charity that operates across the UK. They aim to promote open and honest discussions about mental health and provide accessible pathways for anyone who needs support. They have developed the UK's biggest directory of mental health support services—the Hub of Hope. The app is specifically designed to help individuals find mental health support services in their area for themselves and others.

The Mix

The Mix is a youth charity supporting millions of young people every year. They aim to empower and support young people through a peer-led and moderated community, one-to-one webchat, counselling service, crisis support messenger, and support content. Signpost+ helped them to develop an AI chatbot and design new pathways to support young people.

Neontribe

Neontribe designs and builds websites and digital services for charities and tech-for-good companies, working with them to help the people who need it most. They had worked with us on the original 'My Best Life' prototype, so they were familiar with NPC and the project. They base their projects on solid user research, and it was that strand of their offering that we needed for this phase of Signpost+.

Demonstrating the value of digital signposting

In 2013, NPC published a report titled '[The power of data: Is the charity sector ready to plug in?](#)'[5]. Over a decade later, this question remains unanswered. We continue to discuss the benefits and limitations of open data.

The pandemic highlighted the need for stronger digital infrastructure across the charity sector, and many charities have made some attempt to embrace and improve their data and digital frameworks. But this has not been without issues, as many struggle with limited capacity and digital skills.

In addition, many charities have struggled to recover since the pandemic; income generation and meeting the demand for services have become the key priorities for charities[6]. A lack of digital-specific funding means charities cannot take full advantage of new technologies or innovation, as many funders often aren't interested in infrastructure and 'find it boring'[7].

We need to rise to the challenge. The charity sector has already fallen behind. If we continue to operate at the same level for another decade, we risk getting stuck in a vicious cycle of continually asking the same questions and seeing the same results. While the health and education sectors are imperfect, they have understood the benefits of information sharing and seen collaborative efforts materialise into more effective and efficient services for their users.

In phase 2 of Signpost+, we implemented a multi-faceted approach to explore the possibilities of a more connected digital and data ecosystem. We used the recommendations from the previous phase (below) to shape our objectives, taking note of our learnings along the way. This helped us to identify six areas of good practice, which are Horizon 1 solutions–making incremental

---

[5] Lucy de Las Casas, Tracey Gyateng and David Pritchard, 'The power of data: Is the charity sector ready to plug in?, *NPC*, 10 October 2013, <https://www.thinknpc.org/resource-hub/the-power-of-data-is-the-charity-sector-ready-to-plug-in/>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

[6] 'Charities Aid Foundation: Charity Landscape 2022', *Charities Aid Foundation,* <https://www.cafonline.org/docs/default-source/about-us-research/charity_landscape_report_2022.pdf>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

[7] All-Party Parliamentary Group on Charities and Volunteering (APPG), *NCVO*, February 2024, <https://www.ncvo.org.uk/get-involved/all-party-parliamentary-group-on-charities-and-volunteering-appg/>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

improvements for where we are now. Horizon 3 solutions foster better alignment between services and how they are signposted.

The result of limited resources, reduced capacity and inconsistent funding in a highly competitive environment means that many organisations are not able to develop their services beyond Horizon 1. This was also true for the Signpost+ project, as we hoped to explore Horizon 3 solutions in the second phase but found ourselves taking a step back to explore the foundational principles of signposting. We'll share more about these principles with our 'areas of good practice' in the next chapter.

By taking this approach, we were able to consider how organisations approach signposting and think practically about how to foster collaboration to improve the digital infrastructure and effective data sharing.

Recommendation 1: Identify opportunities to improve user journeys and connections to services

What we learned: Improving user journeys should focus on helping young people to navigate content that exists, and being honest when there are no services on offer.

Recommendation 2: Leverage existing service information and directories by committing to collecting and maintaining information

What we learned: Data standards are integral to ensuring organisations are committed to maintaining information. However, different organisations approach this in very different ways based on their areas of focus.

Recommendation 3: Test existing models, technology & standards to demonstrate the value of good signposting

What we learned: Each organisation approaches things differently. We identified the need for a collective agreement on the key data principles that should be followed by every organisation in the ecosystem to improve the flow of information.

Signpost+ enabled us to delve into the systemic levers that drive change, helping us to lay the groundwork for organisations to become more open. Building strong relationships with our partners served as a solid foundation for creating an open, collective, and collaborative consortium. We started by dedicating our time to understanding each organisation's individual data standard frameworks and how they collect and utilise data. We encouraged our partners to share their best practices, challenges, and progress throughout the project in the hope that it could lead to changes in their approaches to signposting.

Areas of good practice

Many organisations use a variety of tools to help them understand and deliver services to young people. We identified six areas of good practice that we believe are core to ensuring digital signposting is delivered well. These practices are essential for improving signposting in Horizon 1 but are also the foundation for collective and open data standards in Horizon 2 and 3.
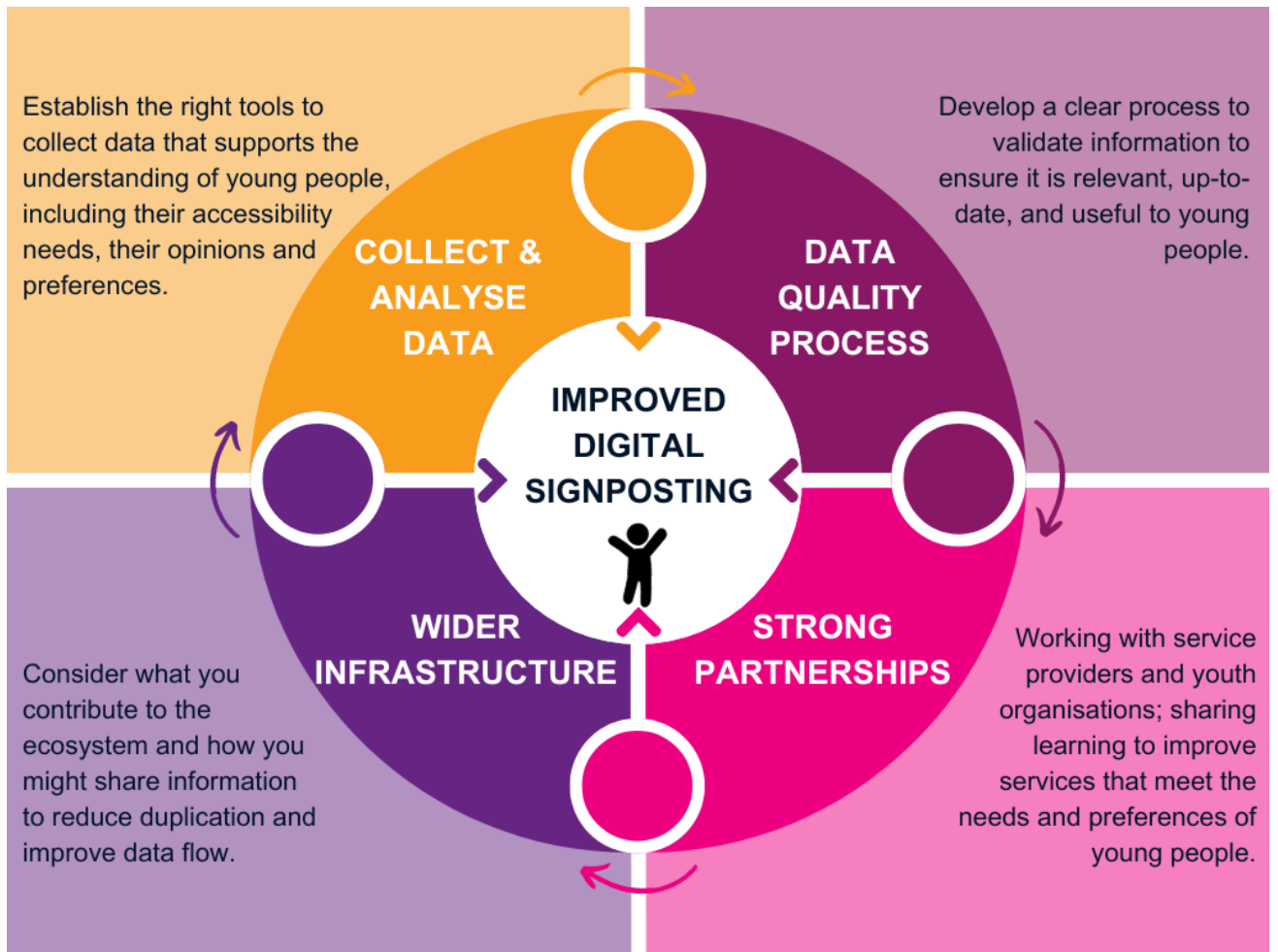
We hope these practices provide a gateway for a stronger, more connected ecosystem. Our objective is not to establish a universal data standard for the sector. We acknowledge that part of the problem is a lack of connectivity, relevance, and regularly updated data. We believe that part of the solution involves a standardised set of practices to improve stakeholder connectivity which will enable greater efficiency and effectiveness to support young people to access the right information.

These areas of good practice are not intended to be an example of a universal standard. Instead, we seek to highlight areas for improvement as a step towards consistent, reliable, and up-to-date online information.

Six areas of good practice

1. Listen to the **needs of young people**.

2. Ensure that the signposting service is **accessible** to users.

3. Continually **collect and analyse data** to better understand the needs of users.

4. Develop clear **data quality processes and protocols** to ensure that the information shared with young people is relevant, useful, and up-to-date.

5. Build strong **partnerships** to work closely with service providers and share your signposting services with a wider audience.

6. Develop and build **wider data infrastructure** to share learning across sectors so that youth services match the needs of young people.

How to improve signposting through good practices

Establish the right tools to collect data that supports the understanding of young people, including their accessibility needs, their opinions and preferences.

COLLECT & ANALYSE DATA

Develop a clear process to validate information to ensure it is relevant, up-to-date, and useful to young people.

DATA QUALITY PROCESS

IMPROVED DIGITAL SIGNPOSTING

WIDER INFRASTRUCTURE

STRONG PARTNERSHIPS

Consider what you contribute to the ecosystem and how you might share information to reduce duplication and improve data flow.

Working with service providers and youth organisations; sharing learning to improve services that meet the needs and preferences of young people.

1: Listen to the needs of young people

To effectively meet the needs of young people, it is important to try to understand their individual preferences and experiences. Every young person's journey is unique, and support should be designed around their needs. Taking the time to understand the types of support they want, and their preferred method of communication and accessing services, is crucial.

Many young people aren't sure of what they need, where to go to find help, or what their issue is. They often resort to starting their search on Google. Signposting services can play a key role in helping them to iteratively explore, understand themselves, try things out, and narrow down the options available. Signposting plays a pivotal role in informing and equipping young people to learn and have agency over their own circumstances.

'All these terms are on all of them, so it doesn't really narrow them down…I'd just want to search for support for dyslexia.'

Young person

Asking the right questions and providing a useful taxonomy of services with well-written supporting content are all useful.

Once a young person has developed a clearer understanding of what assistance they need, they should have the autonomy to choose the most suitable option for them at that moment. Offering related services may be beneficial due to the interconnected nature of support issues.

'Attempts to understand and meet the needs of young people should therefore be tailored both by the geography of an area and different personal risk factors within an area – including small pockets of poverty and deprivation.'[8]

Carrie Henning-Smith, Ira Moscovice and Katy Kozhamannil

Meeting the needs of young people involves continual interaction and collaboration with testers

---

[8] Carrie Henning-Smith, Ira Moscovice and Katy Kozhamannil, 'Differences in Social Isolation and Its Relationship to Health by Rurality', *J Rural Health,* 35(4), (2019), pp. 540- 549. Doi: 10.1111/jrh.12344.

from the target audience, iteratively refining services based on their feedback and that of other users. Ultimately, the goal is to empower young people to discover the support they need at every stage of their journey towards improved outcomes.

We ran three test and learn sprints, iterating on the objectives we set ourselves and the techniques we used each time. We conducted observations, facilitated focus groups, and collaborated with the group. We had eight fully engaged participants aged between 18 and 25 years old who identified as male (2), female (5) and non-binary (1).

In the first sprint, we concentrated on the usability of signposting services; how usable do young people find the partner sites in one fictionalised scenario?

In the second, we moved on to considering the breadth of services offered by signposting sites; how helpful do young people find the partner sites across a range of issues?

For the third, we focused on the group's experience of each of the sites; they were asked to share a positive and negative for each tool based on their knowledge across the previous sprints.

From numerous rounds of testing with our youth group, we identified five main themes:

Theme 1: Focus on their issues

Research by Mind found that young people are still building their understanding and knowledge of mental health[9]. They often don't know what terms to search for when searching for support or services. Our research showed that young people find an interface more usable when it talks about what their issues are, rather than simply listing services that the site has available. Features beyond signposting services, such as guidance articles or other means of support, were welcomed by young people. This also helps them to 'focus on their issues', as content surrounding services often discusses examples of the issues young people face rather than just listing services. Not only that, but such content can also fill gaps where services are not available to signpost.

'If it's not focused on youth issues, the site becomes more useless than a Google search.'

Young Person

---

[9] 'Supporting young people – with a focus on trauma', *MIND*, August 2021, <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/13447/yp-with-focus-on-trauma-scoping-research-report.pdf>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

Theme 2: Speak their language

There was a mismatch between the words that young people were using to describe their issues and the words that websites and services used. This is important because it made it harder for them to find what they were looking for. Young people may not understand sector-specific jargon and if they cannot understand what is written about a service, they're less likely to use it. They can feel overwhelmed when there is too much information. This issue is magnified for websites populated by content from other organisations, which can create issues with content consistency and word length.

'Screams council website…'

Young person

Theme 3: Help them explore

Young people will explore through multiple categories and subcategories to find the right services.

It seems that sometimes they are not sure which words to use, so using the categories helps them to reflect on what they need. They do use the search function, however, they are frustrated when they are presented with too many options that are not relevant.

'So, as a young person struggling at work with stress, I'd probably go to the work tab but just have a quick scan through the other ones to see if there's anything else which might help first.'

Young Person

'…instead of searching for something specific, I'd just have a look at these categories and then just see what is most relevant to me.'

Young Person

Theme 4: Deliver on your promises

Young people were disappointed when a site didn't deliver what they thought it would from the signpost. This applied to signposts that had too little and too much information. Too little, and a young person didn't know what to expect, too much and the website gave nothing extra. It was most frustrating when sites gave links that led to error pages.

'*It's different to what I expected. I wasn't expecting to see an advert to buy a t-shirt or these articles. It's good to know ways you can support but I want their support'.*

Young Person

Theme 5: Say when you cannot help, and do it well

Young people were often not able to find what they were looking for. Sites that promise local provision, and then list services tens of miles away, or show categories with no content in, are frustrating to use. They often felt that the services they were being shown were not relevant. Some said that they did not know where to go next or that they would give up and look elsewhere. Visitors who end up disappointed need to know what to do next if what they need is not there.

'I live in Walthamstow. This is the second closest, can't do it… I've got one option.'

Young Person

According to Mind's research, young people can be negatively impacted if they are turned away from support because it does not match their needs, which can prevent them from trying again.[10] Providing support also means being clear about what is on offer, what is not on offer, and who it is for.

---

[10] 'Supporting young people – with a focus on trauma', *MIND*, August 2021, <https://www.mind.org.uk/media/13447/yp-with-focus-on-trauma-scoping-research-report.pdf>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

2: Ensure that the signposting service is accessible to users

Accessibility is a principle and practice. In principle, a service or product should be accessible to anyone who needs to use it. In practice, every organisation needs to think about how an individual might be excluded and put measures in place to mitigate this.

'All users will have different needs at different times and in different circumstances. Someone's ability to use a service could be affected by their:

Location – they could be in a noisy café, sunny park, or area with slow Wi-Fi.

Health – they may be tired, recovering from a stroke, or have a broken arm.

Equipment – they could be on a mobile phone or using an older browser.'[11]

This requires a lot of thought before offering a service or developing a product. Digital signposting should cater for individuals with a wide range of needs.

We identified three core accessibility areas that need to be considered when offering any kind of service, especially signposting:

Digital accessibility

Digital accessibility means developing websites, tools, apps, and technology that are designed so that anyone can use them. All digital products and content should follow the accessibility standard

---

[11] 'Accessibility and assisted digital - Making your service accessible: An introduction', *UK Government*, <https://www.gov.uk/service-manual/helping-people-to-use-your-service/making-your-service-accessible-an-introduction>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

set out in the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG). These guidelines are widely accepted and endorsed on an international level[12].

Given we are talking about digital signposting, any organisation providing support in any capacity online must adhere to the WCA guidelines. All our partners are working towards being fully WCAG compliant, to differing degrees.

- Gathering feedback to improve service delivery —Mind Of My Own's product, My Best Life, focuses on providing ease of administration so that information can be easily updated by professionals. They adopt a user-centred approach to design by regularly gathering feedback from young people to improve their experience.

- Consider the impact delivering a service online may have on specific conditions, particularly those with photosensitivity —Chasing the Stigma have specifically focused on providing support for people with epilepsy, considering how they can prevent triggering symptoms so there aren't any adverse effects to their conditions when accessing information about services.

- Factor in adjustments that need to be made—National Support Network continues to improve accessibility further with additional digital accessibility support adjustments available to users including contrast, text size, and making content dyslexia friendly.

Service accessibility

Service accessibility considers how an individual accesses physical services. There are no clear guidelines that outline how to ensure that services are accessible to everyone. Some factors that need to be considered include providing alternative communication options for people with disabilities, ensuring ease of access to buildings, and offering tailored provision where necessary.

Service accessibility should involve implementing inclusive policies and ensuring that support staff are trained to cope with the unique needs of service users. For example, providing information in advance about accessible entry points for people with disabilities.

---

[12] 'Introduction to web accessibility', *Web accessibility initiative*, <https://www.w3.org/WAI/fundamentals/accessibility-intro/>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

Partner Example: Hub of Hope offers support for people who are deaf and blind. They identified that people in the criminal justice system often face difficulty accessing support services and are frequently turned away. So, they recently expanded their services to include support for those in prison, probation, and their families.

Language accessibility

Language accessibility can be either digital or service related. Providing the option to access a website in multiple languages and ensuring that services employ multi-lingual staff that can support young people is essential.

It's important to note that young people have varying reading and comprehension levels. Jargon should be minimised by using clear plain English that can be easily understood by anyone.

Partner Example: The Mix offers an option to access their AI chatbot in multiple languages. They found that this feature is popular with their young people with 35 different languages being used.

'Language accessibility is not just about foreign languages but also jargon. The average reading age in the UK is nine years old. The importance of keeping service descriptions and other information as clear and simple as possible should not be overlooked.'

Cat Divers, NSN Founder and CEO

Partner Example: Mind Of My Own offers an option on the My Best Life app that allows young people to access the site in multiple languages. This feature ensures that young people who do not speak English are included and has received positive feedback.

3: Continually collect and analyse data to better understand the needs of users

Data is vital in our digital world and when it is used correctly it can provide evidence for continuous improvement of signposting services. Currently, the internet is primarily designed for commercial use, and data is frequently utilised to attract consumers. We share the perspective that data should be utilised to broaden knowledge about the most effective ways to reach young people and the type of information they need to make well-informed decisions to access services when they need them most. The right data can also help identify service gaps and demand.

'Intelligent use of data can significantly increase the effectiveness of charities. This isn't new: most—even all—charities use basic data in some way.'[13]

There is a wealth of data available from signposting services that can be used to develop services for young people and ensure that the needs of young people are being met. However, organisations need to understand what data to collect, where to get it from, and how they are going to process, analyse, and ultimately use this data to make necessary changes. It is also vital that all data is collected ethically with informed consent and privacy by design per the Data Protection Act and GDPR guidance.

Most of our partners shared the limitations of using Google Analytics data—it doesn't tell them enough about their users and how they might improve their service.

Data is useless if it is not used. Data should be used to better understand a service and the changes that may need to be made.

During phase 2 one of our partners, Chasing the Stigma, conducted research of their own to broaden their understanding of which search filters were most used and how closely services were to their users.

Data could also help organisations to learn more about:

---

[13] 'Increase the effectiveness of charities with data', *Good Data Institute*, < https://www.gooddatainstitute.com/>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

- Common search locations.

- Search terms used and common topics searched.

- The level of engagement to the length compared with depth of service information shared.

'Organisations make key business decisions based on what they know, and what they know is derived from analysing their data. Therefore, to enable the best decisions, data must be accurate, reliable, and most importantly, accessible.'

Charities Network[14]

Promising Trouble's research on digital support found that pushing services at young people is not effective, but designing support with them ensures their needs remain at the heart[15]. In our last session with the young people from our user research group, they shared their ideal template for service information on any signposting tool. This may not directly help organisations to understand individual needs, but it highlights the need for consistent information.

They felt the most necessary information is:

- When the service is available and can help people.

- Age ranges the service might help with.

- Distance of the service to you.

- A video description of the service.

- Specific things the service might help - depression, self-confidence, anxiety, etc.

- General things the service might help - mental health, money, career, etc.

- Form the service takes—phone, face to face, etc.

- One sentence description of service.

- The sort of organisation that runs the service—voluntary, faith-based, public, private.

---

[14] 'Improving data strategy for charities', *Charities Network*, October 2023, <https://charities.network/articles/improving-data-strategy-for-charities/>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

[15] Anna Dent, Rachel Coldicutt, Will Bibby, 'Meeting young people where they are: Towards a new model of essential digital support', *Promising Trouble*, [accessed 10 June 2024].

Additionally, signposting organisations can work with direct service organisations to meet the needs of young people by creating new services where needed or ensuring existing services appear in search results.

Partner Example

[Hope in the Community Westminster](#) is a programme led by Chasing the Stigma in collaboration with Central and Northwest London NHS Foundation Trust (CNWL).

Hope in the Community provides third-sector organisations with a free space to run services, activities, and groups that focus on wellness. It is open to anyone who lives or works in Westminster borough, and offers young people free services and activities.

When Hub of Hope data revealed that 96% of people in CNWL service area look for support from the Voluntary, Community, and Social Enterprise (VCSE) community, while only 4% of people specifically search for NHS support, CNWL decided to play a part in empowering local VCSEs to co-deliver with NHS.

An opportunity emerged with the initiative to repurpose the Gordon Hospital in South Westminster. Chasing the Stigma carried out a comprehensive assessment of available services within the area. Hub of Hope and CNWL identified the most frequently searched terms within the catchment area.

The data analysis helped to mobilise and bring the right VCSE services to Hope in The Community Westminster, and informed the tailoring of communication and assets to the target audience.

4: Develop clear data quality processes and protocols to ensure that the information shared with young people is relevant, useful, and up to date

Data standards and analysis play a pivotal role to guarantee that signposting is delivered well. By utilising data, organisations can build their understanding of current mental health trends and the most prominent needs. This can help them to improve youth experiences by ensuring information is useful to them when they search for help. This information must be kept relevant, up-to-date, and accurate to prevent frustration and ultimately young people becoming discouraged.

'Good quality data is paramount for delivering effective support services to young people. Poor data quality can lead to misinformation, confusion and frustration among users, potentially delaying or hindering their access to support.'

Cat Divers, NSN Founder and CEO

Signposting organisations also need to ensure that information is safe and reliable. This is why data standards are important. Developing a clear methodical process to update and validate the information on any website should help teams perform frequent validity checks. There is a capacity requirement, but we must stress how integral this is to accessing information safely online. Without a clear data quality policy, the information provided to young people can easily cause more harm than good and can quickly become out of date and unfit for purpose.

'High-quality data that can be converted into engaging and informative insights has the potential to significantly impact policy, strategy, and spending related to mental health provision.'

Jake Mills, CEO and Founder of Chasing the Stigma

Data standards ensure the accuracy, reliability and relevance of the information provided. They should include an audit of the accuracy, authenticity, reputation, relevance, and accessibility of information. Across the consortium, each partner produced a different set of policies to audit their data. We have collated and produced key general points that might help other organisations that support young people.

Data quality principles

Data quality principles should ensure any service listed is suitable for young people to access, appropriate for the identified need where stated, clearly represented, and accessible. Information that is collected and shared should be checked against Charity Commission registration, the British Medical Association if providing medical advice, website links, and suitability for need.

Data validation

Organisations could adopt a five-stage process for data validation, which includes executive review checks by peers. The process may include auditing the source of data in line with data quality principles and standards and a detailed quality assurance policy that includes frequent checks of information.

Stakeholder management

Perhaps the most important feature of a healthy ecosystem is the relationship management that should exist between different stakeholders. 'Interoperability' is a term frequently used with regards to information technology and the health system. It is crucial to the effectiveness of multiple actors working together in one system.

Building relationships with charities, community organisations and institutions that support young people can help build efficient, accurate, and up-to-date service listings. In an ideal world, different stakeholders in the ecosystem will share and update live information.

Testing models of digital signposting

We conducted test and learn sprints on our partner's existing websites with our user research group, to show the importance of good signposting through different models. They also developed key areas related to signposting with the grants we provided through this project. Everything we learned has been the basis for this report.

Tool development

This is an overview of the tools our partners have developed and are developing:

The Mix developed an AI chatbot to accompany their helpline and The Mix connect (their signposting tool). The chatbot is designed to offer a new pathway to support young people.

The Mix trained the chatbot on data they collected through services like their helpline, so that it is able to respond as a person trained by the Mix would. The chatbot is intended to provide 24-hour support. Chatbot data is analysed regularly to understand the questions people ask and ensure the right answers are provided.

Mind Of My Own continues to develop My Best Life. With funding from Signpost+, they have enhanced the user experience for professionals within Local Authorities tasked with maintaining the content. They can quickly and easily publish events, services and resources by enabling them to update information quickly, easily and efficiently. This will hugely benefit young people to access accurate and up-to-date information tailored to their needs.

Chasing the Stigma carried out comprehensive user research and discovery activities to better understand how young people engage with their platform, what they need and how they can provide more tailored support.

They are using the research findings to improve the interface and inevitably reach more young people. They have also tested internal processes and workflows which contributed to improved service development and quality assurance practices, resulting in increased quality and diversity of services on the platform.

National Support Network (NSN): Funding from Signpost+ enabled NSN to further develop new user-friendly Support Hub website and widget solutions, including Insights Platforms for their partners to access new insights into the support needs of their communities and outcomes from platform usage. NSN delivers these innovative services to a growing number of partners including colleges and youth charities such as The Prince's Trust and the Nightline Association.

5: Build strong partnerships to work closely with service providers and share your signposting services with a wider audience

'Navigation and joining up is difficult for organisations, which means that young people have to navigate a complex landscape to find the support they are looking for….in the main young people have to do the navigation and weaving together of different services themselves. Solving this is the big challenge.'

Promising Trouble

Throughout this project, we learned the importance of building relationships across the consortium and understanding the integral relationships they built with direct service providers. We discussed and shared the key challenges, learning what is useful in building a sense of collectiveness and aligning overall motivations for the project and beyond.

Collective responsibility requires a collective vision and a collective goal (to transform the digital and data ecosystem so information is shared freely). It takes time for organisations to engage.

At the end of this phase, we learned how beneficial it would have been to involve project teams rather than solely working with project leads, which would bring in different perspectives and expertise. This highlights the need to create space for exchanging ideas and addressing innovation and development with experts, frontline, and strategic staff.

Collaborative working presents an opportunity for infrastructure and youth organisations to work more closely together, benefiting from each other's strengths. Our partners have different areas of expertise that they brought to the project. Our user research group's insights showed that no organisation did everything perfectly.

Collaboration is needed to share expertise, knowledge, and create the best products for young people. But in the social sector, competition breeds fragmentation. Collaborating can be hard when organisations are competing for funding, and it can be easier for organisations to work in silos than together. It is essential to develop an ecosystem that values signposting and youth provision expertise for the benefit of young people.

Without effective infrastructure, the sector is restricted to making bets on individual organisations while working in the dark. Perhaps even more importantly, infrastructure is required for us to achieve greater equity in the youth sector. Digital and data inequalities are growing. The youth sector will fall further behind as new technologies like generative AI advance, which will result in fewer opportunities for those without privilege, access, and digital skills.

Young people with privilege have more access, support, and contacts to help them obtain the best opportunities. Young people without that privilege need the infrastructure to help them find what they want and need, and to level the playing field.

Most of our partners (3 out of 4) agreed that working together enhanced their capacity to embed innovation in their design processes and that we can achieve more together than on our own. This is a message that has been preached many times but is no less relevant for that. No one organisation can do it all. So, it is vital that, where possible, signposting organisations work together to share data, support, and ideas. Our user research group had positive and negative things to share about all of our partners, which emphasises that every model has its pros and cons.

6: Develop and build wider data infrastructure to share learnings across sectors and build youth services that match the needs of young people

All of our partners work with external stakeholders to deliver support to young people. Each partner has a different approach depending on the scope of their work. Data collated by signposting organisations through search results can provide rich information to understand the needs of young people, the demand for different types of services, and results in geographic areas.

While this is useful for signposting organisations to improve user journeys, it is vital for the wider sector. It can help local councils, youth organisations, and NHS Trusts to adapt to demand and need. This data can also help funders to better understand service gaps and uncover where funding is needed most.

Partnerships facilitate greater collaboration and innovation, allowing organisations to co-create solutions that address the evolving needs of young people. Our Signpost+ partners utilised a combination of licensing models and contracts (with local government and the NHS). Two of them developed partnerships with direct service delivery organisations to reach a wider population. Working closely with service delivery organisations, information directories and signposting platforms to get up-to-date or real-time information on who is accessing the service can:

- Help drive improvements in usability and engagement.

- Provide feedback to service providers so that they are aware of demand, and emerging needs.

- Save time that frontline workers spend searching for data and trying to understand if it's trusted, accurate, and reliable.

Case Study: Glasgow Clyde College on National Support Network

As a large urban FE College with a community focus, we deliver learning and teaching to almost 17,000 students and support an incredibly diverse student population. We offer a range of bespoke support services and have partnered with NSN to provide our students with an accessible information service on support that is available on a local and national scale.

This is particularly helpful for students who are unsure of what support they need so they can search and discover services, or they can look at available support information independently if they feel nervous about talking to a member of staff. There are a range of assets that are customised for us, and this has allowed us to publicise the service for both students and staff.

Our experience tells us that students all have different needs and we have found that using NSN to complement our face-to-face support and internal online resources provides greater information on available support networks and services for our students.

Challenges and opportunities

Funding is scarce for infrastructure organisations

Funding is an issue that continues to concern the social sector, but it is an even more significant challenge for infrastructure organisations, as there is much more of a focus on service delivery. Research from ideas42 found that donors prefer and support direct-service organisations more than systems-change organisations.

'Participants gave 29% more to direct-service nonprofits than systems-change nonprofits when considering them individually, and, when comparing them with one another, 61% of people said they were more likely to give to direct service'

ideas42[16]

This is further exacerbated for signposting providers who need to balance the tension between direct and indirect impact. This can be hard to explain as outcomes aren't linear and are often intangible.

They may be perceived as valuable as direct services, without the indirect value of the data they produce being recognised. We believe that direct services can be improved with greater investment in infrastructure organisations and will lead to more effective support.

Short-termism and a lack of investment mean that the sector continues to address solutions at a pace that cannot keep up with the severity of the issues raised in this report. Infrastructure on its own is not the answer. The right services need to be funded too. But without infrastructure, young people won't find the right services, and scarce resources invested in youth services will be wasted or ineffectively deployed. The young people of today are the digital generation. When they access support online, we want to see digital pathways designed for them so that they can understand what services are available, how to access them and which services are relevant to their needs.

---

[16] Nick O'Donnell, '"What Do You Mean by 'Systems Change?'" The Challenge of Communicating Social-Sector Lingo to Everyday Givers', *ideas42*, < https://www.ideas42.org/blog/challenge-of-communicating-social-sector-lingo-to-everyday-givers/>, [accessed 10 June 2024].

The six areas of good practice are a start, but we know that this work can go further. Without funding, the social sector is guaranteed to continue as it has been, stretching resources as far as they can go. Adequate funding is crucial for the social sector to thrive and maximise its impact.

As technology companies continue to develop products faster than the social sector can adapt, young people will get left behind. This is a huge risk, and it is more important than ever for the sector to consider the implications of how these technologies impact the lives of young people and how they interact with services.

Keeping up with changes in technology

AI is the most recent advancement but there will be others. As AI continues to grow, it offers opportunities to support the work of signposting. However, if it is not set up properly or the data used is not fit-for-purpose it can quickly bring back incorrect results, often causing more harm than good. We must ensure that AI is used ethically and fairly by continuing to consider what 'good' looks like and ensuring that there is a consistent standard of quality across signposting.

In the Third Horizon, signposting and AI may involve assisted AI, where the product extracts open data from the internet. A youth professional could conduct data quality checks to verify the accuracy of the information provided and edit where necessary. However, due to the significant investment needed, we recommend implementing the six practices first.

Where next for signposting?

Developing a taxonomy

How we categorise different services for young people can be challenging and inconsistent across platforms. If we want to ensure access to youth services is equitable across the country, we need to ensure that young people know what to expect when searching for support and understand how to find it.

Open Referral are doing work to define a clear data standard for councils. This organises community service data in common ways, so that different directories and signposting organisations can better communicate with each other, and data can be more easily shared.

This leads to better connectivity amongst services and communities, helping the people using services to find the information that they need. However, this is in the early stages and is currently not fit for young people who may consume data differently or use different terminology and categorisations.

We see the next step as creating a shared taxonomy that works for youth services. This must be developed in collaboration with a mix of signposting services and a diverse group of young people.

Signposting with charities and youth organisations

There are multiple benefits of delivering signposting to charities, community organisations and well-known institutions. Partnerships between signposting organisations and youth charities or universities could be mutually beneficial with each delivering on their strengths. This could help to streamline operations and maximise efficiency, equip frontline staff and volunteers with the means to signpost with confidence and access insights to inform decision-making.

Reviews as a quality assurance tool

Reviews are a part of the online community. They offer valuable feedback to help consumers make informed choices about products and services. They are yet to be utilised for service delivery, and as a concept for signposting the outcomes are currently unknown.

On one hand, reviews on signposting platforms can help young people to identify the quality of a delivery service through other people's experiences, guiding their choices. On the other hand, given the subjective nature of reviews, there is always a risk that the quality of a service can be misrepresented by individual reviews.

One way to mitigate this bias is to ensure that there is a moderator in place for quality assurance. They could identify that each review is genuine and truly reflects a customer experience. This structure would allow for context to be provided about the experience of the individual who sought support and how they received it. In addition, a warning explaining the subjectivity of each review could add another layer of scrutiny.

Reviews offer a sense of agency for people to share their experiences but require more thought into how they can be implemented in a considered way that keeps safeguarding front and centre.

Conclusion

Successful signposting takes time, money, collaboration and a lot of checks and processes. Data standards and developing the practices shared in this guide should be a focus for all organisations that support young people, especially those that signpost or use signposting.

Signposting is crucial for delivering effective youth services, but it's not always given the attention it deserves. Search engines are currently optimised for consumers as opposed to citizens. This means accessing information is dictated by companies looking to sell products and services, or organisations with a wide reach but might not be youth focused. This needs to change if we want to see improved pathways for young people.

We understand that infrastructure can be an alienating concept, particularly for smaller charities. We acknowledge that it can be challenging for charities and community organisations to respond to shifting demands with restricted funding limiting the scope of their work. Many organisations do not have the means to work in an agile way because they need certainty. However, we would argue that this tension and conflict can be lessened by consistent collaboration.

We know that building these relationships takes time. But it is so important when tackling systemic issues. Improving the flow of information in the sector can help to bridge the gap between organisations. This ultimately should lead to a stronger, more efficient, and more effective ecosystem that benefits young people.