

Making youth work work

15 recommendations for investing effectively in youth services

At a time when young people are facing increasingly complex challenges, it is more important than ever to invest in high quality, long-term community-based youth work. For generations, youth work has provided young people with trusted relationships, safe spaces and stimulating activities throughout their teenage years, strengthening their community networks, and providing a basis for further support. There is growing recognition across the political spectrum of the need to restore resources for youth work.

In this context, it is particularly important to ensure that new investment is targeted effectively. [Rethinking impact, evaluation & accountability in youth work](#), an ESRC-funded research project at King's College London, working with the Policy Institute, King's College London, demonstrates the need for a multi-faceted programme of renewal that is youth focused, offers job security and training for youth work professionals, invests in people before buildings, and evaluates youth work in ways that improve practice rather than creating bureaucracy. Based on this research,¹ the following fifteen recommendations are key to rebuilding youth work that really works for young people and their communities.

First and foremost, youth work must be youth focused²

- ♦ **Ensure youth work is non-stigmatising:** Young people want youth workers to engage with them in relation to their diverse strengths, interests and needs, rather than labelling them according to perceived deficits. A focus on prevention (such as knife crime projects) can be off-putting to young people, especially those with limited trust in adults.

¹ This policy briefing is based on the findings of two ESRC-funded research projects carried out at King's College London (references ES/R004773/1; ES/1013559).

² Young people value youth work for its contribution to their everyday lives. For many, it is life changing; for some it is even life-saving. Young people emphasise how important it is that youth work is different to school, social work, mental health support and other structured services – it is less formal and they feel valued and taken seriously (Doherty and de St Croix, 2019; ES/R004773/1).

- ♦ **Focus resources on open youth work:** Open youth work – including youth clubs, detached work, and groups for specific communities such as young women and young LGBTQ people – provides an accessible, non-threatening basis from which young people can access further support and referral to other services.
- ♦ **Understand youth work’s unique contribution:** While young people need multiple services in their lives, they value youth work because it is different from school and specific support services: it is open, informal, and they engage by choice rather than being referred or required to attend.

Youth workers are the most important resource³

- ♦ **Invest in people before buildings:** Youth workers are the most important resource for youth work: decent long-term contracts and effective training and support are more important than shiny new facilities.
- ♦ **Value professionals and community expertise:** Youth work is best supported by a network of qualified and experienced professionals, alongside part-time staff and volunteers. Staff drawn from local communities and those with lived experience of issues affecting young people should be particularly valued and supported.
- ♦ **Recover lost expertise and knowledge:** Many experienced youth workers have been lost to the sector in recent years; they are a potential resource as senior youth workers, managers, advisors, supervisors, mentors, evaluators, trainers and members of local youth partnerships.

Renewing training and career pathways is fundamental to success⁴

- ♦ **Support training and education:** Youth work has a strong tradition of professional training and education routes (from introductory to university level). However, many courses have closed or are under threat in the context of reduced job prospects for youth workers, and they urgently need support and reinvestment.
- ♦ **Rebuild confidence in youth work as a career:** A generation of youth workers is demoralised and many have left the profession. Confidence must be rebuilt amongst experienced professionals and those considering a new career in youth work.
- ♦ **Offer ongoing professional development and support:** Youth workers need structured ongoing supervision and support from managers or external supervisors or mentors who understand the distinctive challenges of youth work.



Youth workers are the most important resource for youth work: decent long-term contracts and effective training and support are more important than shiny new facilities.”

³ Young people emphasise that their relationships with youth workers are key to youth work’s impact on them (Doherty and de St Croix, 2019; ES/R004773/1). However, employers are experiencing retention difficulties, and in recent years youth workers have reported feeling demoralised by limited job prospects (APPG, 2019).

⁴ Youth workers love their work, but our research has shown that they need support, training, education and long-term prospects if they are to continue in their roles (de St Croix, 2016; ES/1013559).



The UK has a strong tradition and long history of youth work, and has built up an infrastructure of professional networks, education, training and support – this infrastructure needs support and should not be side-lined in pursuit of new initiatives.”

Evaluation and accountability must be democratic and appropriate to youth work’s distinctive nature⁵

- ♦ **Make government accountable for providing youth work:** Young people should have the right to youth work; the current statutory guidance must be strengthened to ensure centre-based and detached provision in all areas.
- ♦ **Enable evaluation systems that strengthen quality:** Evaluation must be appropriate to youth work’s informal culture, focusing on light-touch monitoring and evaluation. Systems that create excessive administration, are overly intrusive, or perpetuate deficit views of young people should be avoided.
- ♦ **Foster trust and critical engagement:** Systems of supportive critical engagement (by young people, peers and experienced advisors) are more likely than top-down inspections to improve practice and ensure accountability.

Long-term grassroots youth work must be a policy priority⁶

- ♦ **Focus provision on long-term neighbourhood-based youth work:** Grassroots youth work – including youth clubs, detached (street-based), mobile and online youth work – is at the heart of youth work provision, vital both in its own right, and as a basis for innovative youth projects and programmes.
- ♦ **Build on youth work’s existing infrastructure:** The UK has a strong tradition and long history of youth work, and has built up an infrastructure of professional networks, education, training and support – this infrastructure needs support and should not be side-lined in pursuit of new initiatives.
- ♦ **Renew and celebrate grassroots youth work:** Resources should focus on supporting, sustaining and communicating the value of high quality, long-term grassroots youth work and its distinctive contribution to young people and their communities.

⁵ Youth workers, managers and young people emphasise the importance of evaluation and accountability mechanisms that are appropriate to the distinctively informal and youth centred nature of youth work practice and do not reinforce deficit views of young people. These mechanisms may include visits by peers, funders and young advisors enabling critical feedback and engagement; light-touch non-intrusive questionnaires; qualitative research such as interviews and storytelling; and creative evaluation approaches (Doherty and de St Croix, 2019; de St Croix, McGimpsey & Owens, 2018; ESRC ES/R004773/1).

⁶ In a climate of reduced spending on youth work, limited resources have too often focused on headline-grabbing ‘new’ initiatives such as the National Citizen Service (de St Croix, 2017) and MyPlace (Spence et al, 2011) at the expense of grassroots youth work, which should be the focus of ongoing support and new programmes.

References:

APPG (All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs) (2019) Youth work inquiry: Final report including recommendations and summary. Leicester: National Youth Agency

de St Croix, T. (2011) Struggles and silences: Policy, youth work and the National Citizen Service. *Youth and Policy* 106: 43-59

de St Croix, T. (2016) *Grassroots youth work in practice: Passion, policy and resistance*, Bristol: Policy Press

de St Croix, T. (2017) Time to say goodbye to the National Citizen Service? *Youth and Policy*, online at <http://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/time-to-say-goodbye-ncs/>

de St Croix, T. (2018) Youth work, performativity and the new youth impact agenda: Getting paid for numbers? *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(3): 414-438. doi 10.1080/02680939.2017.1372637

de St Croix, T., I. McGimpsey & J. Owens (2019) Feeding young people to the social investment machine: the financialisation of public services. *Critical Social Policy*. doi: 10.1177/0261018319854890

Doherty, L. & T. de St Croix (2019) The everyday and the remarkable: Valuing and evaluating youth work, *Youth and Policy*, online at <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/valuing-and-evaluating-youth-work/>

ES/R004773/1 Rethinking impact, evaluation and accountability in youth work (Economic and Social Research Council, 2018-21)

ES/1013559 Part-time youth workers in a changing policy context (Economic and Social Research Council, 2010-14)

Spence, J., Smith, M., Frost, S. and Hodgson, T. (2011) *Myplace Final Evaluation Report*, Durham and London: Durham University and YMCA George Williams College