

Valuing youth work

Seven evidence-based messages for decision makers on youth work and evaluation



The value of youth work

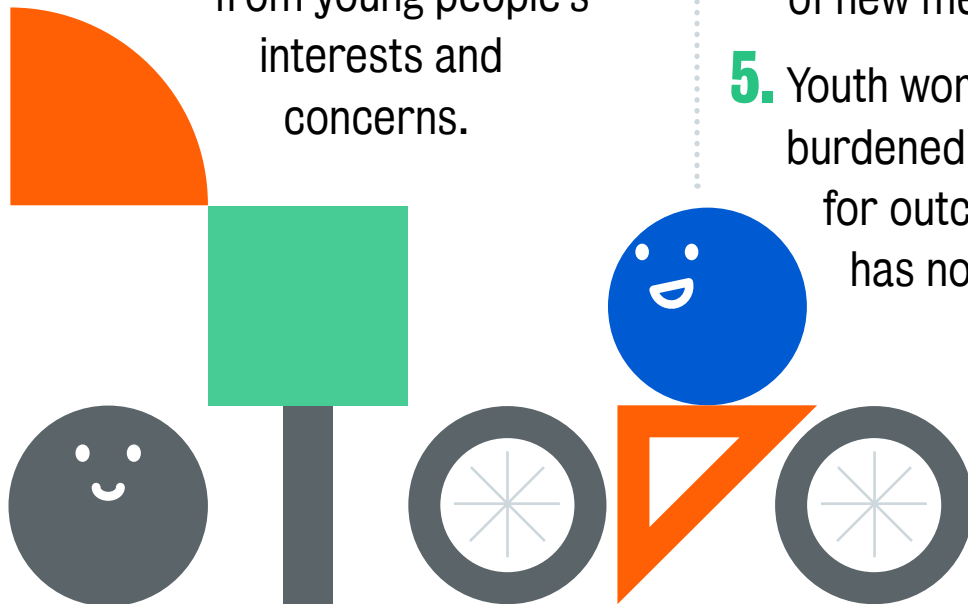
1. Youth work is highly valued by young people, particularly those in disadvantaged communities.
2. Youth work is effective in addressing complex issues – yet it must always start from young people’s interests and concerns.

Evaluating youth work

3. Evaluation methods must be flexible, adaptable, and suitable.
4. Young people and youth workers should be central to the design, testing, implementation, and review of new methods of evaluation.
5. Youth work should not be burdened with responsibility for outcomes over which it has no direct control.

Supporting youth work to flourish

6. Long-term, sustainable investment in open youth work is the most important factor in enabling high quality, accessible provision to thrive.
7. Skilled, committed youth workers are youth work’s most important resource: they need secure employment, training, support, and opportunities for professional development.



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Young people report that youth work is life-changing, life-enhancing, even life-saving. It addresses loneliness, enables belonging and social action, and provides support with difficult and dangerous situations.

Youth work provides something to look forward to, a space to gain support while relaxing, having fun, learning, and trying new experiences. This is especially true for young people with multiple challenges in their lives.

“You know that there’s always someone to talk to about things that you might not want to broach with your parents and friends... you’ve got a place to go that’s just sort of completely separate from everyday life, so if you are having a bad day you know you can sort of leave it all behind... Just a two-hour break from just anything that’s bothering you, and it makes you feel free about things.”

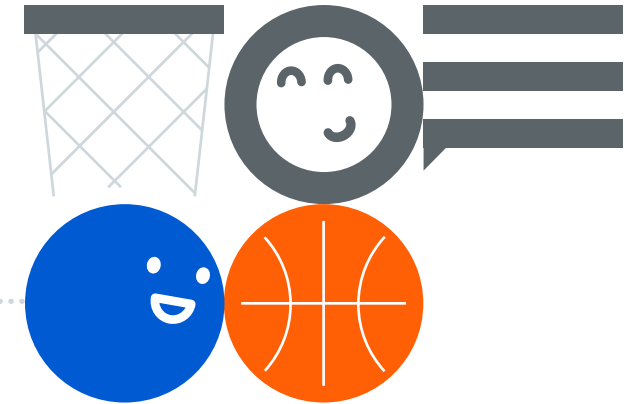
Tracey, young person

Young people value youth work because it is different. It starts from their concerns and does not label them. Unlike most targeted services, youth work enables young people to explore the issues affecting them at their own pace, gaining support in the context of their peer groups.

Young people want youth work to be open, enjoyable, and informal – somewhere to belong.

“Most of my school life I was bullied and sort of beaten up constantly... (youth club) was the first place where people didn’t do that... And it also was the place where I managed to form solid friendships, as well... it’s a great place to find where you belong. In a sense like a home away from home.”

Isaac, young person



Evaluating youth work

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Evaluation is most effective when it is flexible and suitable for an informal setting. Effective approaches include critically reflective practice, storytelling, conversation, and creative or active methods.

However, some young people and youth workers feel that form-filling disrupts the informal environment, making it feel like school – particularly if questions feel intrusive, or if surveys are used too frequently.

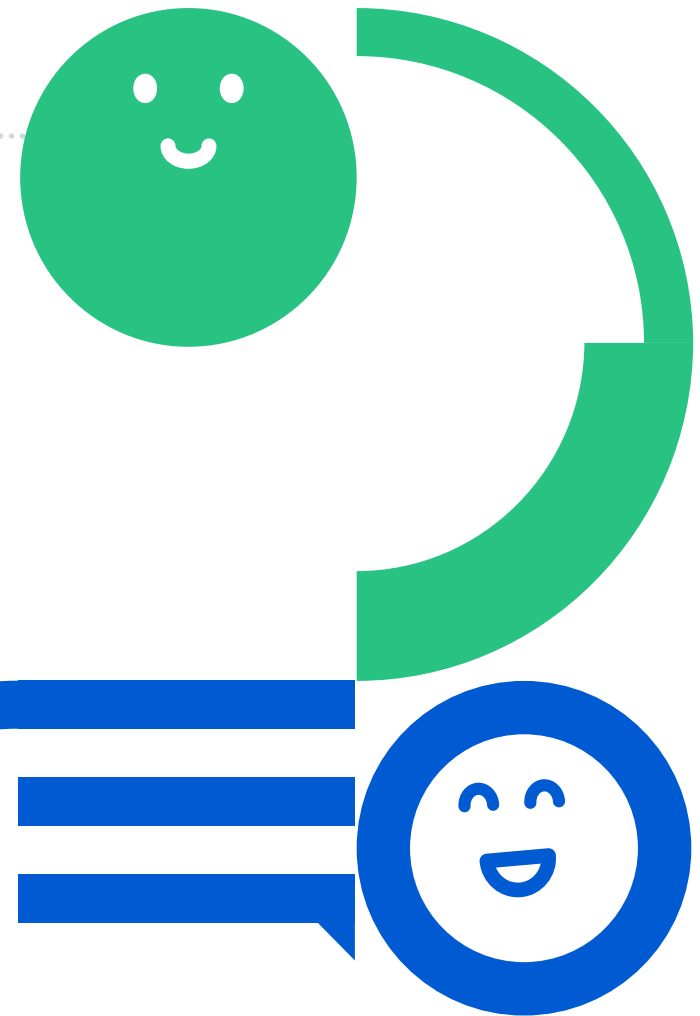
'Light touch' questionnaires (with two or three questions and space for comments) can be effective, but care must be taken to avoid questions that are stigmatising or triggering of negative thoughts.

“That’s what school is for... You don’t come here to fill forms, you know? It’s like, I’m not going there if they’re gonna make me fill forms.”

Jasmine, young person

“Some days you don’t really want to think about that question, and it can make you think too far into it, and then you can be left thinking about it for the rest of the day... sometimes the things that it says on those questionnaires can actually give you ideas instead of helping you.”

Luna, young person



5. Youth work should not be burdened with responsibility for outcomes over which it has no direct control.

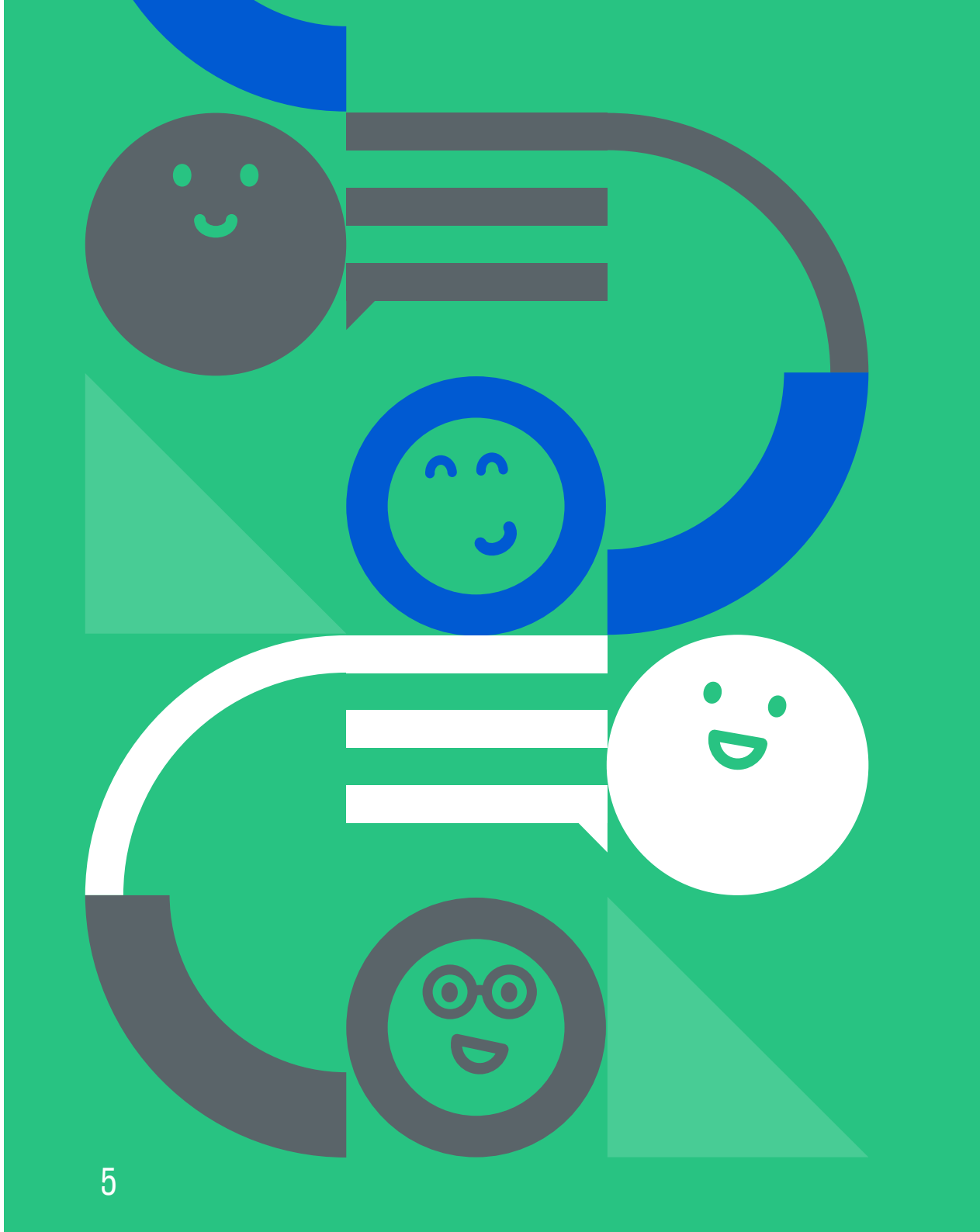
Some youth workers had current or past experiences of bureaucratic monitoring systems that are greatly time-consuming, taking time away from youth work without supporting practice development.

“It used to take up a really long time. And then it would be frustrating ’cause you wouldn’t be able to be doing your youth work, but you’d be trying to evidence youth work that you didn’t have time to do.”

Nora, youth worker

Youth work experts in the USA, consulted in our research, cautioned against linking youth work funding to outcomes that were out of the control of organisations as this can distort effective youth-centred practice.

Where projects are measured for their impact on school attendance and attainment, for example, informal and youth-centred approaches that are valued by young people may be lost.



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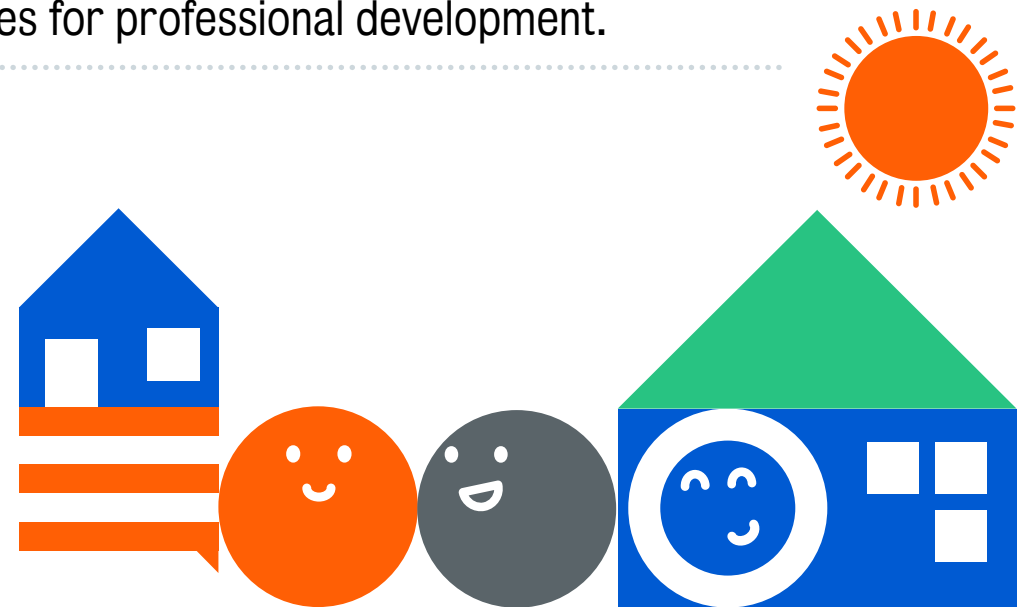
Government and funders have a key role in creating the conditions for high quality youth work.

This includes a focus on long-term investment that enables youth organisations to attract, train, retain and support inspirational youth workers, including those with lived experience of issues facing young people, who will build long-term trusting relationships with young people and their wider communities.

“There’s got to be more funding put into it... there’s been that many cuts across the board within youth work. I mean youth service alone is like, non-existent, or very reduced, or becoming very targeted. I think there needs to be more opportunities for these smaller grassroots ... projects.”

Yvonne, youth worker

Funding and contracts for community-based youth work need to be accessible to grassroots youth organisations, rather than favouring organisations with a lack of history and connection in communities.

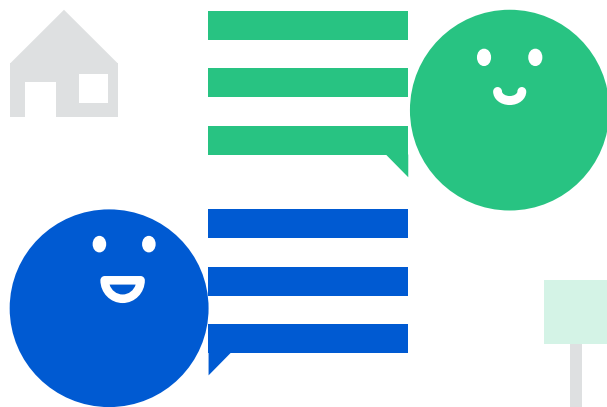


Rebuilding a youth work sector to support and inspire young people has never been more crucial.

What is open youth work?

Youth work is a practice of informal education in which young people learn through conversation, activities, and relationships with peers and youth workers.

'Open youth work' is open-ended in terms of who participates, how, why, when, and for how long, and is provided free or at very low-cost. It includes youth clubs, detached (street-based) youth work, online group work, and work with groups of young people with shared identities, experiences or interests.



¹ <https://vimeo.com/597256970>

² <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/valuing-and-evaluating-youth-work/>

The study

The recommendations in this briefing are evidenced by a three-year study, 'Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work' which included:

The accounts of **143 young people, youth workers and policy influencers**

who took part in in-depth interviews and focus groups.

Participant observation of **73 youth work sessions** in 8 organisations across 5 regions of England.

A film made by **22 young people**

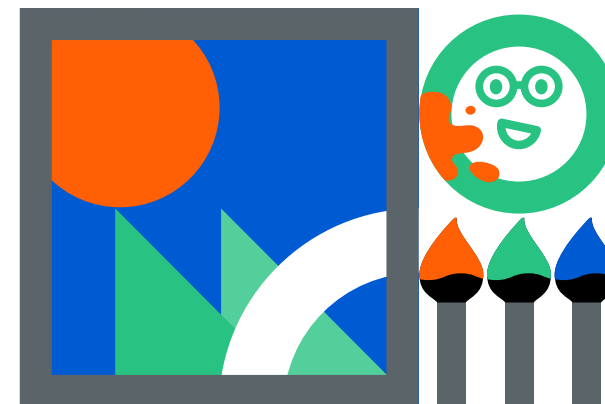
2 practitioner conferences, 4 roundtables, 20 external presentations and workshops, and consultation with 25 youth organisations.

All quotes are from the study and have been anonymised.

³ <https://rethinkingimpact.com/>

⁴ <https://reshare.ukdataservice.ac.uk/855316/>

⁵ <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/research/rethinking-impact-evaluation-and-accountability-in-youth-work>



To find out more

Watch "[The value of youth work](#)"¹, our 10-minute film made by young people.

Read our [short, peer reviewed article](#)² that proposes three principles for evaluation policy and practice.

View further peer-reviewed articles and research outputs on our [website](#)³. Our dataset is available at the [UK Data Service](#)⁴.

This resource is accompanied by a [practice briefing](#)⁵, which provides youth workers with research-informed practical ideas on the evaluation of youth work.

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Funding: 'Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work' was funded from 2018–2021 by the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) (ES/R004773/1). This briefing is supported by the ESRC Impact Acceleration Grant at King's College London (ES/T501931/1).