



THE UNIVERSITY *of* EDINBURGH

Edinburgh Research Explorer

The power of youth work

Citation for published version:

Davidson, E 2025, 'The power of youth work', *Scottish Affairs*.

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Scottish Affairs

General rights

Copyright for the publications made accessible via the Edinburgh Research Explorer is retained by the author(s) and / or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing these publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

Take down policy

The University of Edinburgh has made every reasonable effort to ensure that Edinburgh Research Explorer content complies with UK legislation. If you believe that the public display of this file breaches copyright please contact openaccess@ed.ac.uk providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.



Emma Davidson

The Power of Youth Work

Abstract

Youth work has long been recognised as a powerful tool in shaping the lives of young people, offering them opportunities to develop personally, socially, and educationally in ways distinct from formal education. Despite a growing body of research on the role of youth work, understanding its full impact remains a complex challenge. This article is based on a recent report for *No Knives Better Lives* and *YouthLink Scotland* exploring the impact of youth work through a lifecourse perspective, a method that promises to illuminate its long-term significance. By employing qualitative biographical interviews, it investigated the intricate ways youth work intersects with other aspects of a young person's life, revealing its role as a supportive, preventive service.

Keywords: Youth work, young people, support, lifecourse, qualitative analysis

Emma Davidson is Senior Lecturer in Social Policy, University of Edinburgh and an Associate Editor of *Scottish Affairs*.

Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank *YouthLink Scotland*, especially Vicki Ridley and Amy Calder, for their ongoing support of this research. I am especially grateful to the young adults who generously shared their time, experiences, and stories. This research would not have been possible without you.

Introduction

Youth work has long been recognised as a powerful tool in shaping the lives of young people, offering them opportunities to develop personally, socially, and educationally in ways distinct from formal education. Despite a growing body of research on the role of youth work, understanding its full impact remains a complex challenge. The inherent diversity of youth work - its varied settings, methodologies, and the unique needs of the young people it serves - makes it difficult to capture its effects. After years of cuts to public services in Scotland, community infrastructure in the most disadvantaged places is ever more fragile. Youth work funding has endured (and continues to endure) cuts, yet many services are under threat. It is important to evidence the power of youth work; not just in the here and now, but across young people's lives.

This article is based on a recent report for *No Knives Better Lives* and *YouthLink Scotland* (CRFR, 2024) exploring the impact of youth work through a lifecourse perspective, a method that promises to illuminate its long-term significance. By employing qualitative biographical interviews, it investigated the intricate ways youth work intersects with other aspects of a young person's life, revealing its role as a supportive, preventive service.

At first glance, youth work might seem to be about providing activities and safe spaces. These are crucial outcomes that should not be overlooked. However, the findings here clearly point to the enduring influence of youth work, and youth workers, on young people. As the accounts show, youth work's power is that its impact is still felt well into adulthood. Young people are in need of safe, physical spaces within their community, and the support of trusted adults – now more than ever. These interviews show that youth work lasts a life time, and in its absence many youths will struggle. This research is an important step toward enriching the dialogue on how best to evaluate and support youth work, ensuring its continued relevance and effectiveness in the years to come.

Research context

The purpose of the research was to identify the possible gains of examining the impact of youth work using a lifecourse perspective. To do this, we discuss findings from a series of biographical interviews with adults who, during their childhood and youth, engaged with youth work provision. The data discussed represents part of a wider ongoing study concerned with continuity and change in young lives, community infrastructures and youth work provision.

The agreed contemporary understanding of the purpose of youth work is to 'enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their potential' (NYA, 2020). This highlights the value given to a youth-led approach, with workers supporting and facilitating a young person's development. Youth work should seek to be relational, voluntary and open-ended, and therefore is typically regarded as distinct from formal education.

The personal and social value of youth work practice is well documented. Fyfe et al's (2018) transformative evaluation highlighted the impact of youth work on young people's confidence, feelings of safety and self-worth, as well as relational outcomes such as friendship and the ability to 'get on' with others. In a narrative review by Hill (2020)

evidence of impact spanned a range of domains including social cohesion, health and well-being, employment and education, relationships, skills development and personal development. In their qualitative synthesis of six European studies, Sonneveld et al (2021) found evidence of professional youth workers using preventative approaches to strengthen young people's social skills, expand social networks, create connections with support services and enhance civic engagement. McGregor's (2015: 74) critical review highlighted a range of health and well-being outcomes, noting the importance of youth work in providing safe but challenging spaces for youth. Ritchie & Ord (2017) found that young people especially valued the association, acceptance and support systems formed in open access youth work.

While there is a growing body of work on the impact of youth work, evaluative evidence tends to focus on outcomes at an individual or group level. Less attention has been given to the tightly knitted connection between youth work, space and place. Working in a low-income Scottish housing estate, Davidson (2020) found that youth work was a key pillar of the community's social infrastructure. The youth club, as a physical space in the centre of the estate, offered young people opportunities to socialise and access support. At the same time, the club and its workers were a source of community and belonging. This was not always positive, and in some cases, the community formed in the youth club prevented the formation of further, outward looking connections. Nolas's (2014) ethnographic work found that established youth work spaces provided both young people, and the wider community, with 'biographical continuity'. In their research, youth clubs were described as 'like family', with young people feeling free to 'sail in and out'. Occupying a central location for many years, the youth club's physical presence had come to positively represent 'the community'.

Research in Oldham by Thomas (2006) investigated youth work's role supporting community cohesion in the context of negative race relations. Significant benefits were identified, although notably they depended on a well-resourced and trained workforce. Djohari et al (2018) looked at non-human connections formed during a youth angling project. Here, young people established deeper relationships to waterscapes and the natural world. Together, this work supports de St Croix & Doherty's (2022; 2023) call for a closer examination of the connections between geography and youth work, and greater recognition of youth work as a form of 'third space' (public libraries have been considered in the same way, see for example Elmborg, 2011).

While there is evidence on the multi-faceted impact of youth work, defining, measuring and evaluating this remains complex (Mundy-MacPherson et al, 2012; Fyfe et al, 2018; Hill, 2020; Ord et al, 2018). For instance, it is not always possible, or even useful, to clearly separate or define the diverse activities involved in youth work. Making new friends can build an individual's confidence, but being more confident can help an individual make new friends. Moreover, the actual mechanisms or the process of doing youth work (for example, relational and youth-led approaches, volunteering, skills development) cannot be easily disentangled from impact. It is also the case that the 'value' given to different forms of impact can vary according to place, project and individual. And, of course, not all impacts are straightforwardly positive. Youth work's power, it seems, is not easily unpicked.

A further issue relates to the question of 'what counts' (and why) in the evaluation of youth work. Much of the impact described above is social, relational, and contextual - changes that are arguably the most important, yet often undervalued or difficult to translate into objective, measurable outcomes. Despite this, youth work is still more commonly evaluated in terms of

whether it achieves quantifiable targets. There are a host of reasons for this, perhaps most obviously the nature of funding which is often short-term and project focused. Reporting is shaped around funder's expectations and the need to evaluate the effectiveness of individual projects (and therefore secure ongoing funding). The emphasis on targets and measurable outcomes has been described as a consequence of wider neo-liberal ideology (de St Croix, 2018, Doherty & de St Croix, 2022; see also Davies & Merton, 2009; Kelly & Armitage, 2014).

The managerialism and datafication of public and voluntary services underscore the need for evaluation and accountability processes to be practice-informed, youth-centred, and anti-oppressive (de St Croix, 2018; Doherty & de St Croix, 2022). In Scotland this call is reflected in *YouthLink Scotland's* National Youth Work Outcomes & Skills Framework (2022) which encourages recognition and evidencing of the social and relational dimensions of youth work. Of course, the reality is that funding structures often remain short-term and project-focused, partly as a consequence of the fragile funding environment of community-based youth work (Youth Scotland, 2025). This makes sustained and meaningful evaluation challenging.

There has also been discussion over the time-limited nature of evaluation and research, and, in turn, the need for greater attention to longitudinal and temporal understandings of youth work services. McGregor's (2015:1) critical literature review of universal youth work specifically noted that 'the youth work sector needs to be more informed about the nature and purpose of their impact through ongoing longitudinal research'. Fyfe et al (2018:4) concurred, noting that 'the impact of youth work is both difficult to research and emergent, only becoming apparent after prolonged periods of engagement over a number of years'. Without this long view, we are less likely to gain insight into connections that exist between locally delivered youth work and higher, macro-level processes shaping place-based inequalities (Farrugia, 2014).

A body of work engaging in youth work over longer periods has begun to develop. A quantitative longitudinal perspective was pioneered by Feinstein et al (2006) which utilised data from the 1970 *British Birth Cohort Study* to examine the link between young people's leisure activities and life-course outcomes. They concluded that youth clubs are important settings for positive influence and inhibiting social exclusion processes. More recently, The Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS, 2024) commissioned three projects to research the impact of youth provision over time using three cohort studies (the *Avon Longitudinal Study of Parents and Children*; the *British Cohort Study*; and the *Millennium Cohort Study*). It yielded mixed results - in some cases, participation resulted in positive outcomes, in others the outcomes were more subtle. They note, however, that the lack of statistically significant differences should not necessarily suggest youth work has no impact. Rather, it may signal a convergence of outcomes resulted from a narrowing of inequalities between groups.

Also worthy of mention is Sonneveld et al's accelerated longitudinal research (2021; 2022) which examined the contribution of professional youth work to the personal development and social participation of socially vulnerable youth. The study was designed as a longitudinal cohort study of four waves during a 16-month period, gathering the data of 1,597 young people aged 10-24 who participated in Dutch professional youth work. Internationally, there are several further examples of longitudinal studies that have followed people from adolescence to adulthood (for example, *Young in Norway* and *Growing Up in Scotland* (GUS), although focus on youth work and the youth work professional is limited.

From the qualitative perspective, de St Croix and Doherty (2022) undertook longer-term engagement in youth work settings over three years, while other work has engaged ethnographic approaches for richer insight (Hart, 2015; Davidson, 2020). Body & Hogg (2019) employed retrospective qualitative research to look at the longer-term impact that engagement with a voluntary sector organisation can have on the lives of vulnerable young people. Body & Hogg interviewed ten former youth participants, ten years on, and found evidence of the ‘transformative’ impact of the support provided. This work echoes the findings presented below.

Aims and objectives

This review reveals the need for greater attention to longitudinal and temporal understandings of youth work services. Longitudinal research is more often quantitative, and relies on large scale panel surveys. This study, conversely, seeks to explore youth work and its long-term impact on young lives from a qualitative biographical perspective. Such an approach recognises that youth work is one of many parts of a person’s life, that it interacts with other systems of care and support (such as school, parents and carers, statutory services), and that its significance can grow (and wane) over time. Qualitative biographical enquiry can illuminate the complex ways in which youth work is experienced by young people over time. Moreover, it can reveal how youth work is shaped by, and connected to, wider social processes. For example, to what extent does engagement in youth work re-shape structural and material constraints? Does it help young people respond differently to social and economic conditions, and does it open up new values or future orientations?

With this in mind, the research objectives were to examine the impact of youth work through the lens of young people’s biographies, and consider the value of this approach. The study asked:

- Whether, and to what extent, is youth work significant during the course of a young person’s transition into adulthood?
- To what extent does youth work correspond to key life events and critical moments?
- How did relationships with youth workers inform how young people created and sustained their own relationships, both social and spatial?

Methodology

Thirteen qualitative interviews were conducted with adults (aged 18-30) who lived in central Scotland, and had engaged in youth work growing up.¹ Invites were extended to participants through the researchers own contacts, and with the support of *YouthLink Scotland* and *YMCA Scotland*. Interviews took a retrospective approach which invited participants to reflect on their childhood and youth, their engagement with youth services (and other forms of support), and how it had shaped (and continued to shape) their adult life. There were limitations to this approach since it is likely that those who volunteered did so because they had a positive ‘youth work story’ to tell. Notably, several of the adults interviewed were, or had previously, worked as a youth worker or volunteer. This means that those who had used youth work services, but did not recognise this engagement as significant, are not represented in the study.

The analysis was initially informed by the literature which identified the youth work profession as a source of stable, consistent, locally based support and a potential source of 'biographical continuity'. New data was reviewed with these initial themes in mind, then examined more broadly to identify new insights. Particular attention was paid to how young people and adults described their relationships with youth work, and how this shaped their future expectations and relationship to place.

A note on definition

'Youth work' can encompass a wide range of activities and practices.² This can include youth clubs and centres, community groups, uniformed and voluntary organisations, as well as detached youth work in the street or in community spaces such as schools. It can also include a range of different ways of working, for example, as open or universal provision or services that are closed or target specific groups. For this study, we have adopted a broad definition of youth work, and included individuals who had engaged in any form of youth work during their life. We recognise that definitional and contextual issues can influence our understanding of impact (McGregor, 2015: 18). For example, the intended and actual impact of street-based youth work in a low-income housing estate will likely be different from that of a uniformed organisation in an affluent area. These dilemmas are re-visited below.

Findings

Five themes were identified across the data collection: (1) risk factors; (2) place and space; (3) new pathways; (4) support and care; and (5) youth work practice. Here, each of these themes are discussed using extracts from participant interviews. In certain places, extracts and stories have been edited to ensure the anonymity of those taking part. Such edits have been made carefully so as not to affect meaning.

(1) The presence of risk factors

Participants were asked to talk first about their experiences growing up. This included accounts of significant care givers during childhood, experiences of their local area, and interactions with institutions and statutory services. Notably, all of the sample identified a range of risk factors in their childhood. These accounts are important to describe since they shaped young people's later interactions with youth work services, and other systems of support.

Several respondents had grown up in low-income areas or low-income households. Lack of resources, chances and opportunities were frequently mentioned by these participants, with activities such as shopping for clothes, leisure activities, trips and holidays being unaffordable. Wider issues associated to disadvantaged localities were also discussed, including drugs, alcohol, theft, street violence, and poor environmental and housing conditions. Jamie³, for instance, described his community as a 'rough place' despite it being subject to many years of regeneration:

... the area is challenging for a lot of people. There is a lot of people living and working in poverty, and just struggling day to day. It was difficult growing up to avoid trouble, I liked to try and keep out of trouble although in the area trouble would come looking for you. Trying to stay out of trouble when you live in trouble is hard.

(Jamie, interview).

Lili, meanwhile, did not have a clear attachment to place growing up. Rather, her early childhood was characterised by high levels of instability, moving between the homes of her parents, granddad and uncle, changing schools and social work intervention. This experience, combined with a lack of material resources, resulted in high levels of anxiety, mental health issues and self-harm. Elizabeth, meanwhile, had experience of the care system, while Joy had experienced parental bereavement in her early teens.

Other participants described growing up in stable families and communities. Brad, for example, grew up in a semi-rural suburb, which he described as a 'lovely place', with a lone parent and extended family. Social and emotional issues developed when he went to secondary school ('that is when it all kicked off'). At this point, he began regularly skipping school, and became involved in drug use and drug dealing: 'I just stopped [school], and walked out. There wasn't much they could do. It is so hard to get back into school once you go down that route' (Brad, interview).

Adam, similarly, described growing up fairly 'normal'. After moving about hostels and temporary accommodation, Adam and his mum were allocated housing in a social housing estate he described as rough: 'it was something else, that upbringing there'. They subsequently moved to a rural location with improved housing: 'I lived in a mixed community. Not a very tight family, but good. Lots of older people lived around me. It was fine' (Adam, interview). Despite it being a 'better' area the move was challenging for Adam, who at the time was in the early stages of gender transition. In a rural location his gender identity was under scrutiny: 'there everyone knew what is going on in your life'. In his later teens, he began using drugs and spent time living in a hostel. School for Adam was just something he had to 'get through'. He experienced bullying throughout his school life, from primary to high school, and much spare time (outwith youth work) was spent at home.

Jack had a similar experience, growing up in a 'normal' residential middle-class area with his parents and sister. Undiagnosed autism created a range of issues at school and challenges forming friendship. He hid these difficulties for many years until: 'There was full on mental breakdowns and it was visible. Anxiety, depression. Proper, proper self-harm. All of the stuff like that. I was in a dark place' (Jack, interview).

Cheryl shared a similar story. She had a 'good upbringing' with a strong family, however, at the end of primary school she struggled with dyslexia, and started to get into trouble. Once in secondary school, issues worsened, with physical fights, disputes with teachers and ultimately skipping class.

These accounts are snapshots of complex individual life histories. They reveal the diverse range of circumstances young people face growing up, and they give a rich context for young people's engagement in youth work. In this sample alone, we find personal experiences of bereavement, family breakdown, bullying, mental health, neurodiversity, gender identity, as well as community issues such as poor housing, antisocial behaviour and crime. We can begin to see why a holistic youth work service, based within a local neighbourhood, is ideally positioned to support young people in these complex circumstances.

(2) The impact of youth work: just a place to go?

Most participants described engaging with youth work for the first time late in primary school. In line with existing literature, a key motivation for visiting a youth club was because it was a 'place to be'; that is a physical, locally based space for young people to spend time together. The youth club had particular importance at a neighbourhood level, especially as a free source of leisure, games and other activities. Adam, for example, said he started going to the local youth club because there was nothing else to do in the area. Joy had a similar memory. There was little to do in the area, and as a result the junior youth club attracted large numbers of children weekly and during the school holidays. It became a strong focal point for children and the wider community:

... and in the summer, and like, I think it was like a Monday and a Friday, I'd come to the centre. Yeah. Um, I'm not sure who run the clubs [...] I just remember running, and running round it, and it was classic, I remember spending like the summer here. We'd go do so many things, like going to [theme park]. Every single person came. My favourite was going in the hall because it was like they had football for the whole night and it was so class, so, so good. When I had to stop going I was heartbroken. (Joy, interview).

Reflecting on the youth club space evoked a powerful memory of the space, of the two workers who ran the sessions, and feelings of freedom with the other young people her age. Cheryl also remembered the local youth club which, at the time, was the only activity she chose to engage in. She simply saw it as fun, and as a place to meet with friends: 'there was free food, games, my whole class went along as there was nothing else to do, it was just really good' (Cheryl, interview).

For Adam, the initial motivation to attend was because there was nothing to do. Fairly quickly, however, he and his friends cultivated the space into something they felt belonged to them and that they had ownership of. Importantly, it became a space where his small group of friends could hang out safely, away from peers who bullied him at school:

I was bullied the majority of primary and high school. I suppose I just got through it. I did have a friendship group though, we are still good friends. I managed to make the group of friends through my one friend, and it came from there. For us, the youth club was a good space for us to hang out. We could access the sports cupboard, playing games, and we felt like the club was ours, we kept it to ourselves, as our thing.

(Adam, interview).

Cheryl had a similar experience: while she was 'badly behaved' at school, she was completely different in the youth club because it was a place that she wanted to be and could relax with friends. While 'a place to go' was important, these experiences give deeper insight into the role of a youth centre. In these cases, the youth club did not simply have a physical presence - rather it was a place in which friendships, connections and relationships were being formed. The youth clubs were themselves creating 'community'.

The experience was similar for Bargitta, who attended a multi-cultural youth club in the outskirts of a Scottish city. She described a strong sense of community during childhood both through her large extended family and local neighbourhood. She recalled playing on the street with her neighbours and 'knowing everyone'. She attended the youth club every Friday, and

like Joy had enduring memories about youth workers (she could recall all the workers names) and the impact of the club:

We used to have such fun. We would go to my auntie's house first, after school. Get something to eat, then head to the youth club. We would play games, do arts and crafts, hang out, and learn about special events like Diwali. We would go every Friday and, really, we kinda grew up there, together.
(Bargitta, interview).

For Jamie and his brother, the youth club was also, initially at least, a place to go. The main motivation in these early days was simply that it was 'pure fun', it was a space where they could do what they wanted and where there were no restrictions. Later, Jamie found it was a place where he could escape from the troubles in the locality and feel safe and welcomed.

Common across all these accounts is the significance of the physical place of the youth centre or youth club. But more importantly, it was people, youth workers and peers, that made the place a site of belonging, collectivity and association.

(3) Creating pathways

Across the stories shared, there was frequently an account of the youth club being not only a 'place to go', but also a vehicle for meaningful change. While having fun was the first thing Bargitta mentioned, there was also a strong sense that youth work had made a difference to her life. Once in High School, the girls attended a dedicated 'girls' group' with opportunity to discuss home life, friendships, relationships and employment:

We already knew each other, but it was just nice for us on a Friday afternoon to meet up there, away from our parents and such. It was just a different environment and a relief really to talk to somebody different and get things off your chest and speak to your friends, and that sort of thing.
(Bargitta, interview).

Notably, Bargitta talked about her youth worker being the person that helped her think about what to do after school, and eventually found her an internship and volunteering opportunities.

When asked how the youth club shaped his life, Jamie replied that they had done 'so much it was hard to put it into words'. Much of what he described were practical, tangible things, such as helping him access funding for driving lessons, giving experiences such as camping, sailing, and employment support such as finding work experience, applying for jobs and accessing an apprenticeship:

They have just helped me do things that otherwise I won't have done. They provided me and my brother with opportunities that otherwise we would never of had. There were many trips and days out that otherwise we would not have got. But there were bigger, more ambitious activities too. I was supported in getting through my driving lesson, Duke of Edinburgh Awards and adventure sports.
(Jamie, interview).

For Jamie and Bargitta youth work 'buffered' the effect of social and economic inequalities by providing knowledge and opportunities that otherwise they would not have had access to. Brad had a similar experience. He had engaged in youth work from a very young age. His youth worker lived locally, and he knew him well. Despite describing youth work as 'loads of fun' at 14 he gradually stopped attending as he became involved in crime and drug dealing. Notably, at the point when he wanted to 'make a change', the person he reached out to for help was his youth worker:

He [youth worker] took us to loads of things, loads of fun stuff. I kind of phased out after 14, then spent a lot of time taking drugs and getting into all sort of stuff. But my life was probably going in that sort of way anyway in first and second year [of school]. I moved out and it gave me scope to get into mischief, getting charges for assaults, and was starting to deal drugs and owed people a lot of money. I ran away to, tried to get away. But I took a lot from that time in youth work. To the extent that when I realised I want to make a change I got back in touch with my youth worker. (Brad, interview).

For Brad, early experiences of youth work had established a trusting relationship that was remembered later in life.

Ben, unlike Brad, did not actively seek 'support' from youth workers. However, attending the youth club undoubtedly contributed to his pathway to college. He connected with the youth club, and established a friendship network. He was encouraged by his youth worker to apply to have mentor through a local 'career ready' programme. This resulted in an internship programme at the local gym. At the same time, he took up volunteer positions at the youth club, chairing committees and running sports events. When asked about the difference that youth work had made to his life he replied:

It is so hard to describe that's the thing. I was slowly taking on volunteer roles. It has made a tonne of difference to me. But overall, all the little bits of support, they are all the little bits of the jigsaw. I now feel that whatever path I take, I'll get to my destination. (Ben, interview).

A similar account was shared by Jack and Adam. For Jack, youth workers had encouraged him to begin volunteering. Through these experiences he gained skills and confidence. His youth worker supported him into University and then, when his studies did not go as planned, worked with him to identify new goals. Jack is now studying for a new course and continues to volunteer as a youth worker. Adam, meanwhile, has been playing live music with the encouragement of youth workers and has been supported to access a paid internship: 'I could never had done that if I hadn't come here. Before I never left my room and now look. I love it now' (Adam, interview).

Cheryl also described her youth club as having helped to identify education and career goals. While school was very difficult, she responded well to the encouragement of youth workers. She moved from simply attending the youth club to sitting on a youth committee. This created opportunities to visit other youth clubs, meet other young people and engage in activities: 'I never felt so special [as] when I got on that committee. It was from then on I wanted to be a youth worker, I saw them and said I want to do that. My outlook was changed' (Cheryl, interview).

(4) The small things

Supporting young people to access employment or education is a tangible, material outcome from youth work. However, it was the cumulative offer of support and care that appeared to hold the most significance to participants. Brad, for example, said that he loved going to the youth club when he was young. However, it was only with the benefit of time (and experience working as a volunteer) that he could see how much 'work' and 'care' was being put into the process. Bargitta also talked about the less tangible aspects of support that she received from her youth group, and in particular, the support provided to young women from her own culture:

It supported the women in the community, it is really, really useful that it is there. If it hadn't been their life would have been a lot more dangerous, a lot more risky, and we would have got married at a young age without the education. We were never felt to feel oh you are a girl, and you can't do that.
(Bargitta, interview).

The value of emotional and social support by youth workers was a central part of Lili's story. She was originally introduced to youth work towards the end of primary school, however:

... it didn't go so well, no reflection on the youth workers. But there was so much going on in my life that there was just too many people, and I couldn't deal with it! I really just wanted to be on my own.
(Lili, interview).

There were a number of important teachers who supported Lili, providing encouragement, space and advice. It was only later in secondary school that she became involved in youth work and began to enjoy its benefits. Here she highlights the many 'small things' that youth workers do, and the ripple affect they can have on an individual's outlook:

Once I got involved in youth work that was it. My worker was consistent and persistent, like she was, she was firm with it - but in a good way! She just realised that is what I needed, knew when to push and when to step back. Although she helped with jobs and college, it was the small things. It was the knowing someone who is constantly there. Like having a panic attack, and being able to ask her what I can do different; getting advice; having someone to advocate for you, kick you up the arse when you need it. You know, small moments where there is someone who is friendly there, someone who won't judge, someone who knows how you are feeling, someone who empathises with you but without feeling like you are being pitied or treated with kid gloves.

The reality is that I wouldn't be here today if it wasn't for [that] youth worker. And I mean that in the real sense. She is the reason that I am here. She taught me how to have a voice. If I hadn't met her, I wouldn't have had this conversation with you.
(Lili, interview).

Adam also discussed the wider range of support offered by his youth centre. Help to build confidence, opportunities to play music, support to form new and lasting friendships all happened within one space that he now calls 'home':

It was only when I started coming here that I started feeling confident about my body and my mental health. I'm a musician too, and I started playing in public more often. It has helped me make friends too, I've never had problems with my trans identity. This place has always been a home. It is like a family, it is good to be accepted.
(Adam, interview).

Across these accounts, youth work cannot easily be defined by particular actions or interaction. Rather, its impact comes from the cumulation of - in Lili's words - 'small things which together create the foundation for a trusting relationship'.

(5) Youth work practice

Throughout the interviews several features considered distinctive to youth work practice were mentioned. One of the common themes was that participants were able to recall specific youth workers. Not only did they remember names, but also styles of dress, mannerisms and specific pieces of advice. These memories remained despite it being, in some cases, many years since contact. This points to the significance of individual relationships and their capacity to create strong and lasting attachments.

Central to forming such relationships was the ability to listen and respond. For Lili, being listened to was a valued characteristic: '[youth workers] actually listen to you, they take the time and they act on it. So, the next time you meet they still have in their heads what you said to them the week before' (Lili, interview). Several participants valued youth workers as they were treated like adults and felt their views were respected. This was linked to consistency, stability and not being 'let down', an attribute especially important to those whose childhood was chaotic and unpredictable.

Like Lili, Joy talked about the ability of youth workers to know when to 'push' her, and when to back off: 'I don't know what it is, they [youth workers] know when to push, when to back off or when to do something differently. There is just something there' (Joy, interview). Cheryl also responded differently to youth work intervention. She noted that her behaviour in school was 'very challenging', yet she was completely different in the youth work space. This, she believes, was to do with a distinctive youth work approach:

The school never understood. They just said you need to go to school and that was it. There were too many pupils, I just felt like a number even though I was begging them for help. They cared but there just wasn't the time. I think, I definitely think it [the impact on me] was to do with my favourite youth worker. Back then he was just young, and fun and just, you know, cool. You could talk, he would listen. Like that kind of guy. I enjoyed and respected the youth workers, I wanted to be there so I respected that.
(Cheryl, interview).

Others also choose to make a comparison between youth workers and other professionals, most commonly teachers. Jamie, for example, had been taught not to trust teachers growing up, and this mistrust was fuelled by what he described as the school's inability to understand and address his support needs (undiagnosed dyslexia). At the same time, Jamie was keenly aware of the pressure teachers faced in the class room:

Nothing against them [teachers] but they don't have the time or space to listen and understand. I get that if you're rammed with 15 classes a day, with people that aren't going to listen to you, that you don't have the time so get every kid the support they need. But I was brought up with a view that teachers were bams and radges and generally not to be trusted.
(Jamie, interview).

Adam, meanwhile, noted the differing approaches school and youth work had in supporting his mental health and gender transition. Youth work, he felt, was more young-person-centred than he had experienced at school:

Teachers never understood about my mental health. I came here [youth club] and did a course: they taught me half the things school was meant to teach me. There are still boundaries and stuff. But you can form a bond [with youth workers]. It's totally different, the approach is so different, the way problems are dealt with are so different. Here I can always come in for a coffee and a chat.
(Adam, interview).

As well as emotional support, youth workers were frequently recognised as having access to knowledge and services that other professions did not. It is unclear whether youth workers are actually better connected to local services, or whether this is a perception drawn from positive youth worker-young person relationships. Nonetheless, several participants described youth workers as being able to introduce them to employment opportunities, provide information about college courses, or access grants or funding for training. This often sat in contrast to the knowledge and information shared at school:

The youth worker managed to find the money for this programme [youth development]. And then they knew who to talk to about getting money for driving lessons, and then a job. The school never did this for me.
(Anna, interview).

Lili echoed Anna's thoughts, reflecting here on the wider 'system':

I was lucky to find [youth worker] at the right time. The system hasn't done it, for sure. It really required the youth worker to put me into the system at the right time. They were being an advocate, having different contacts, always willing to push, and cut through the red tape.
(Lili, interview).

Given the nature of the relationships being described, it is not surprising that several participants used the words 'home', 'family', 'community' and 'friendship' to describe their interactions with youth work. These words were used both by participants accessing local youth clubs and those using services outside the locality that they lived. For those accessing youth work services within a neighbourhood setting, the youth centre did appear to assume a wider civic role due to its place within the wider community infrastructure. Jamie took this view, noting that the youth centre was well placed to guide young people since it was embedded into local issues: 'I had a good relationship to ma mum, but sometimes you just needed a place that you could get away. It was also important that the club was a community space. The club and the staff could understand the issues locally' (Jamie, Interview).

Interestingly, those adults working as youth workers or volunteering noted that community connection has, to some extent, been lost during the pandemic. Links to adult family members had been weakened as parents and carers became used to dropping young people off at the door rather than coming into the building. Some youth clubs have purposely engaged in intergenerational work as a means to better support community cohesion and relationships across the community.

Examining youth work across the lifecourse

This final section reflects on the efficacy of biographical approaches as a tool for examining the longer-term impact of youth work. With the benefit of time, participants were able to take a long view and reflect on the role that youth work had played in their lives. For instance, Jamie said his appreciation of the youth club had changed over time. Only now that he is older can he fully appreciate their work: ‘You don't even realise how much that they are helping and giving you guidance. But obviously, as you grow up, you notice what they have kept you away from, and all that type of stuff’ (Jamie, interview). Joy, similarly, was able to recall a critical moment in her childhood where she began to accept the support her youth workers were offering. Here, as an adult, she reflects on this moment of realisation:

Like not to be dramatic or that ... but [I] genuinely think that if [youth worker] hadn't been the way she had been with me I would genuinely not have been here. She was just so amazing, and I treated her like shite. And again, it was because you were young, and hurting, and had emotions. Yeah, she was just a person that was nice to me and I was, like, argh. I was like, why the fuck are you nice to me?

Later, I remember at a residential she shared a story about her own life, and then I remember like I went to the dorm and I just cried because I felt so horrible that I'd been like nasty there. And I remember I wrote her this long letter I was like, I'm so sorry like blah blah blah. I remember it's just this moment. I was like oh just like changed everything for me.
(Joy, interview).

A further notable pattern across the sample was the temporality of youth work engagement. In other words, the nature and form of youth work engagement changed over time in line with age, stage and experience. While some young people remained engaged in youth work throughout their lives, some disengaged then reconnected.

Reflecting on other critical moments in young people's lives, it was clear that the transition to high school was immensely challenging. In some cases, youth work was able to help young people during this period, pointing to the importance of youth work that offers a joined-up service that focuses on supporting young people holistically across key transition points. An important aspect of this approach is for youth work to have a stable and consistent local presence. Both Brad and Lili returned to youth work, but only when they were ready. This speaks to Nolas's (2014) concept of ‘biographical continuity’, and the importance of ‘being there’ to the youth work service.

Interestingly participants also reflected on how best to measure the impact of youth work. Both Adam and Jamie found it challenging to ‘sum up’ all that their workers had helped them achieve. Adam described his interaction with youth work as a process. At the time he could

not see all the steps happening, but looking back each interaction, class or activities was moving him forward:

It was like a wee push that I didn't know was happening. This one helped me leave the house, this one helped me get fitter, this one helped me get money, this one helped me get pals. I can't really explain it, how that change in me has happened over three years, it's amazing. Two years ago I would never have been sitting down with you for a chat, nope, no way never.
(Adam, interview).

Jamie, similarly, was able to articulate the material impacts on his life - supporting him into education and training, for example. However, the impact of youth work as a whole was less easy to put into words: 'I don't know how to explain some of the things they've done. It's just it does a certain thing for you and you try and explain it to somebody, they didnae quite get it' (Jamie, interview).

Those participants who now worked as youth workers were also aware that the work they do is hard to measure. We will end with Elizabeth, reflecting on her own role as youth worker:

[It's] all about relationships, and these can take a very long time. You cannae just jump in and talk about what is going on at home. Everything I do now as a worker is based on building that relationship ... How you begin to really measure the impact of these conversations, it's very complicated.
(Elizabeth, interview).

Conclusions

This study sought to examine the impact of youth work using a biographical perspective. Specifically, it asked:

- Whether, and to what extent, is youth work significant during the course of a young person's transition into adulthood?
- To what extent does youth work correspond to key life events and critical moments?
- How did relationships with youth workers inform how young people create and sustain their own relationships, both social and spatial?

Overall, the research confirmed existing evidence on the impact of youth work. Through the accounts collected we can identify a range of benefits associated to youth work: it offers, variously, a place to be, a place to make friends and new connections, a place of safety and belonging, and a source of 'community'. Youth work services were also shown to feature during 'critical moments' in young people's lives. In some cases, youth work services were actively sought out in times of crisis (like in Brad's case). In others, youth workers provided support and stability during key events (as experienced by Joy).

We could also identify the ways in youth work 'buffered' the effect of social and economic inequalities. Young people from low-income areas, for example, lacked choices, chances and opportunities due to their economic capital. Numerous accounts were provided in which youth work services 'filled the gap'. Examples included helping young people access funding

and resources for educational and training opportunities. Moreover, youth work services gave young people the opportunity to simply have fun through leisure activities and experiences. Most participants agreed that they would not have had the opportunity to access these types of activities without the support of their youth worker.

The young adults interviewed reported a diverse range of experiences and support needs. In the past decade, the socio-spatial dimensions of youth practices in the UK have undergone dramatic change through COVID-19, austerity, the cost-of-living crisis and associated cuts to youth services. Young people, especially those from more disadvantaged areas, have been exposed to much higher levels of risk. This will, in turn, impact on the support needs experienced by youth workers. To date, youth work organisations have responded to each crisis with resilience and creativity. However, for youth workers to be able to respond to increasingly complex needs requires long-term funding that can both sustain physical youth work spaces and sustain professional training and education.

It is, then, ever more important to demonstrate the value of youth work, and in particular its preventative role, supporting young people through challenging circumstances, and directing them towards new and unexpected pathways. The findings here also show the benefits of researching retrospective accounts. Looking back can help us improve services in the future. New research should be ambitious in its aims by considering funding opportunities for larger scale longitudinal endeavours which qualitatively track cohorts of young people over time. Using a temporal and spatial lens can give powerful insight into what support matters to young people, at different times in their lives, and in different localities. Qualitative longitudinal research could also actively challenge de-contextualised performance measures in favour of a methodology better able to identify youth work's social, relational and geographical value. Any new research should also give due consideration to those young people who are not engaged with youth work (either by choice, or otherwise). These voices are neglected, yet have the potential to challenge expectations, and identify areas of improvement.

References

Body, A. & Hogg, E. (2019), 'What mattered ten years on? Young people's reflections on their involvement with a charitable youth participation project', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 22(2): 171-186.

CRFR (2024), *The Power of Youth Work: A Longitudinal Biographical Study*, Centre for Research on Families and Relationships, September. Available at: https://www.youthlink.scot/wp-content/uploads/Power-of-youth-work_study-report_final-1.pdf

Davidson, E. (2020), 'Social justice or social control? An ethnographic study of detached youth work in Scotland', *Scottish Affairs*, 29(2), 254-276.

Davies, B. & Merton, B. (2009), *Squaring the Circle? Findings of a 'modest inquiry' into the state of youth work practice in a changing policy environment*. Leicester, De Montfort University.

Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) (2004), *Youth provision and life outcomes: a study of longitudinal research* (executive summary), February. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/youth-provision-and-life-outcomes-research/youth-provision-and-life-outcomes-a-study-of-longitudinal-research-executive-summary>

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.

de St Croix, T. & Doherty, T. (2022), "'Capturing the magic": Grassroots perspectives on evaluating open youth work', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 27(4): 486-502.

de St Croix, T. & Doherty, T. (2023), "'It's a great place to find where you belong": creating, curating and valuing place and space in open youth work', *Children's Geographies*, 21(6): 1029-1043.

Djohari, N., Brown, A., & Stolk, P. (2018), 'The Comfort of the River: Understanding the Affective Geographies of Angling Waterscapes in Young People's Coping Practices', *Children's Geographies*, 16(4): 356-367.

Doherty, L., & de St Croix, T. (2019), 'The everyday and the remarkable: Valuing and evaluating youth work', *Youth & Policy*, November. Available at: <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/valuing-and-evaluating-youth-work/>

Elmborg, J. K. (2011), 'Libraries as the Spaces Between Us: Recognizing and Valuing the Third Space', *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 50(4): 338-50.

Farrugia, D. (2014), 'Towards a spatialised youth sociology: the rural and the urban in times of change', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(3): 293-307.

Feinstein, L., Bynner, J. & Duckworth, K. (2006), 'Young People's Leisure Contexts and their Relation to Adult Outcomes', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 9(3): 305-327.

Fyfe, I., Biggs, H., Hunter, S., McAteer, J., & Milne, D. (2018), *The Impact of Community-based Universal Youth Work in Scotland. A study commissioned by the Scottish Youth Work Research Steering Group*, YouthLink Scotland. Available at: <https://www.youthscotland.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2023/04/Impact-of-Universal-Youth-Work-in-Scotland.pdf>

Hart, P. (2015), 'Young people negotiating and maintaining boundaries in youth work relationships: findings from an ethnographic study of youth clubs', *Journal of Youth Studies*, 19(7): 869-884.

Hill, P. (2020), *Open access youth work: A narrative review of impact*. King's College London.

Kelly, L. & Armitage, V. (2014), 'Diverse Diversions: Youth Justice Reform, Localized Practices, and a "New Interventionist Diversion"?'', *Youth Justice*, 15(2): 117-133.

McGregor, C. (2015), *Universal Youth Work. A critical review of the literature*. University of Edinburgh/Edinburgh Youth Work Consortium.

Mundy-McPherson, S., Fouch  , C., & Elliot, K. (2012) ‘If only “a rose by any other name would smell as sweet”’: A systematic review on the impact of youth work for young people’, *Child & Youth Care Forum*, 41(2): 213–228.

Nolas, S. (2014), ‘Exploring young people's and youth workers' experiences of spaces for “youth development”’: creating cultures of participation’, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 17(1): 26-41.

NYA (2020), *Youth Work in England: Policy, Practice and the National Occupational Standards*, National Youth Agency.

Ord, J., Carletti, M., Cooper, S., Dansac, C., Morciano, D., Siurala, L., & Taru, M. (2018), *The impact of youth work in Europe: A study of five European Countries*. Juvenes Print.

Ritchie, D. & Ord, J. (2017), ‘The experience of open access youth work: the voice of young people’, *Journal of Youth Studies*, 20(3): 269-282.

Sonneveld, J., Metz, J., Schalk, R. & Regenmortel, T. (2021), ‘Professional youth work as a preventive service: towards an integrated conceptual framework’, *International Journal of Adolescence and Youth*, 26(1): 340-355.

Sonneveld, J., Metz, J., Manders, W., Schalk, R., & Van Regenmortel, M. (2022), ‘The contribution of professional youth work to the personal development and social participation of socially vulnerable youngsters: A Dutch longitudinal cohort study’, *Child and Adolescent Social Work Journal*, 39(3): 361-373.

Thomas, P. (2006), ‘The impact of community cohesion on youth work: A case study from Oldham’, *Youth and Policy*, 93: 41-60.

Youth Link Scotland (2022), *National Youth Work Outcomes & Skills Framework*. Edinburgh: YouthLink Scotland. Available at: <https://www.youthlink.scot/education-skills/youth-work-outcomes-skills/> .

Youth Scotland (2025), *Acting on Funding*. Edinburgh: Youth Scotland. Available at: https://www.youthscotland.org.uk/story/acting-on-funding/?mc_cid=81c5451233.

¹ Ethical approval for this study was granted by the University of Edinburgh.

² See YouthLink Scotland's definition of youth work here: <https://www.youthlink.scot/what-is-youth-work>.

³ All names used are pseudonyms.