

LEVEL UP YOUTH WORK

NW LONDON

Evaluation report



Pr*pel

Authors: Beck Dabscheck, Dr Dom Weinberg, Maya Sethi



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About the research team

The evaluation team comprised [Beck Dabscheck](#) (project manager and researcher), [Maya Sethi](#) (researcher) and [Dom Weinberg](#) (researcher), with Abi Heselgrave Angus (researcher) involved in the first stage of research. We are a team of freelance research and evaluation specialists with extensive experience working in, and undertaking participatory research and evaluation on, youth work, and the wider youth and community sector. We share a long-standing commitment to supporting those working in the youth and community sector, using evidence and learning to strengthen practice, and deepening our understanding of how high-quality support for young people helps them thrive.

About LUYW

Level Up Youth Work (LUYW) is a 2023–2026 programme led by Young Westminster Foundation (YWF) with five other Young People’s Foundations across northwest London. Funded by City Bridge Foundation through Propel, it supports small, community-based and equity-led organisations by investing in practitioner forums, specialist training, youth work qualifications, networks and leadership opportunities, with the aim of developing a more connected, professionalised and qualified youth workforce.

About YWF

Young Westminster Foundation (YWF) is a place-based charity working to support and strengthen the children and young people’s sector in Westminster. YWF forge partnerships by connecting with voluntary, community, statutory and private-sector partners. We develop collaborations and provide funding, training and support so that children and young people in Westminster can access high-quality opportunities and services. YWF is part of the Young People’s Foundation network in northwest London.

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Foreword

For the past three years, Level Up Youth Work has been rooted in a simple but important belief: that the people working every day with children and young people deserve opportunities to connect, learn, develop and thrive.

Across northwest London, youth workers, community practitioners, volunteers and grassroots leaders are supporting young people through increasingly complex challenges. They do this with enormous commitment, creativity and care, often within organisations operating on very limited resources. Yet too often, workforce development is treated as an optional extra rather than an essential part of delivering high-quality support for young people.



This programme offered an opportunity to support skills development across the sector, while also enabling a focus where needs are greatest, enabling support for organisations that are equity-led and with fewer resources.

This evaluation shows what can happen when we invest in the people behind youth provision.

I would like to begin by thanking our partners across the Young People's Foundation network: Young Camden Foundation, Young Ealing Foundation, Young Hammersmith & Fulham Foundation, Young Harrow Foundation and Young K&C. Together, we have tested and grown a model built on collaboration, local knowledge and shared ambition. I would also like to thank City Bridge Foundation for making this work possible through Propel, and the evaluation team for capturing the programme's impact and learning so thoughtfully.

Most importantly, I want to thank the hundreds of practitioners who engaged with the programme. Whether attending a forum, undertaking training, completing a qualification or sharing their expertise with peers, they embraced opportunities to learn and connect despite significant pressures on their time. Their commitment to young people and to strengthening their own practice has been the driving force behind the programme's success.

The evaluation highlights several important lessons.

Firstly, connection matters. The youth workforce is diverse, operating across a wide range of organisations, communities and specialisms. Many practitioners do not identify with traditional definitions of youth work, yet they share a common purpose: supporting children and young people to thrive. Level Up Youth Work was designed with a particular focus on smaller, grassroots and equity-led organisations, whose opportunities for professional development are often most limited. However, the programme also demonstrated the value of bringing together organisations of different sizes, backgrounds and specialisms. Through local forums and learning opportunities, practitioners were able to strengthen their skills and knowledge, learn from one another, build relationships and develop a stronger sense of belonging to a wider sector.

Secondly, place-based approaches work. The strength of our delivery model lies in the ability to convene local organisations, understand community needs and create trusted spaces for learning and collaboration. By creating opportunities for grassroots, equity-led, voluntary and larger organisations to come together, Level Up Youth Work helped strengthen local ecosystems rather than individual organisations alone. The forums, training and qualifications supported practitioners

not only to strengthen their own skills but also to build partnerships, share resources and learn from one another, generating benefits that extended far beyond those directly participating.

Thirdly, the evaluation reinforces a reality many in the sector already know. Workforce development remains significantly under-resourced. For many small, grassroots and equity-led organisations, professional development can feel like a luxury when funding is short-term and resources are stretched. These were the organisations at the heart of the programme because the need was greatest. Yet the findings also show that workforce development is a challenge experienced across the sector. Investing in the people who work with children and young people, wherever they are based, improves practice, builds confidence, strengthens organisations and ultimately delivers better outcomes for children and young people.

As the Government's Youth Matters strategy recognises, a skilled, supported and sustainable workforce is central to ensuring every young person can access high-quality opportunities in their community. The recommendations in this report offer a practical roadmap for how place-based partnerships can continue building that workforce through connection, shared learning, professional development and stronger infrastructure.

Level Up Youth Work has shown the value of investing in people, relationships and local ecosystems. The challenge now is not whether this work is needed and valued but how we ensure that it continues and how we build on what we have learned so that more young people, communities and practitioners can continue to benefit from it in the years ahead.

Helen Mann

CEO, Young Westminster Foundation

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The research team would like to thank all the practitioners, managers and leaders from the six Young People's Foundations, and the practitioners (from member organisations), in northwest London who gave us their time, and who approached the evaluative workshops, focus groups and interviews with thoughtfulness, openness, and honesty. Especially given the pressures on their time, participants were incredibly generous to us, and expressed genuine interest in the process.

Thank you to the external stakeholders who gave their time for interviews; your perspectives, and the frankness with which you shared your thoughts, made our findings richer.

Thank you to Laurie and Nora at Young Westminster Foundation for your interest in and support for the evaluation, and your efforts arranging, booking, sorting and administering for the evaluation. Your flexibility and good humour made the logistics a (relative) breeze.

Finally, thanks to Gareth at Young Hammersmith and Fulham for generously giving extra time and headspace to the research team. Your enthusiasm for our work (and for evaluative thinking in general) is clear and was much appreciated.

Glossary of terms

Young People's Foundation (YPF)

YPFs are local organisations seeking to sustain and strengthen delivery of support and activities for children and young people in a specific area. They are independent membership organisations open to any group or organisation working with children and young people aged 0-25. They focus on collaboration in the local area. Each YPF is different, working to a flexible model shaped by local needs and ambitions.

YPF Practitioner, member organisation

A member of a YPF in a local area. Members can be any organisations working with children and young people, alongside other community cohorts, or may work exclusively with children and young people. Organisations may be charities, social enterprises, or private companies.

Equity-led organisation

The LUYW programme targeted its professional development offer to 'equity-led' youth and community organisations in northwest London and those operating at a small scale (under £100,000 turnover). The programme used [Propel](#)'s definition of equity-led or 'led by and for', which defines such organisations as ones in which

- more than 75% of Trustees are from the community(ies) the organisation serves or have lived experience of the issues it tackles
- more than 50% of staff (including senior staff) meet the same criteria.

The priority communities named in Propel's guidance, and targeted by LUYW, are:

- Communities experiencing racial inequity
- Deaf and Disabled People
- LGBT+ People
- Women and girls.

Small to medium charities

LUYW targeted its offer to small and small/medium size charities. Small organisation refers to one with a turnover under £100,000 and small/medium size refers to an organisation with a turnover under £200,000.

This evaluation

Introduction

Youth work is a form of informal community education in which young people build voluntary, trusted relationships with youth workers ([Davies](#), 2010; [de St Croix](#), 2017). Quality youth work can transform young people's lives and deliver social and economic benefits in the short and long term (for a summary, see [UK Youth](#), 2025). Yet the youth services that provide youth work have never had strong statutory protection; despite a statutory duty for 'sufficient provision of youth work', the sufficiency level has never been clarified ([APPG on Youth Affairs](#), 2019).

Local authority spending on youth services across England has collapsed, with public investment falling by 75% over the last 15 years (from £1.7bn to £0.4bn), giving a cumulative loss of nearly £15bn during that period ([YMCA England & Wales](#), 2026). Much youth provision has downsized or closed, including in London ([City Hall Green](#), 2021), leaving a patchwork of provision that in many areas doesn't meet young people's needs ([Social Investment Business](#), 2026). Local authority spending has shifted towards targeted youth services over universal provision, and, while voluntary and community sector (VCS) involvement in strategic direction and delivery has grown, it does not come close to replacing the services lost from the collapse in public provision ([SQW](#), 2024).

During recent years, the voluntary sector has seen significant financial challenges - compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, the cost of living crisis and inflation ([NCVO](#), 2025) - with many organisations struggling to find core funding ([Charities Aid Foundation](#), 2023). The COVID-19 pandemic, and its aftermath, has also had a significant impact on young people, increasing young people's needs and their demand for youth services ([UK Youth](#), 2021, [National Youth Agency \(NYA\)](#), 2025). Recent reports highlight growing concerns about future opportunities for young people ([IPPR](#), 2026; [Milburn Review](#), 2026) and children and young people in the UK miss out on many of the rights that they are entitled to ([Children's Rights Alliance for England](#), 2024).

Over the past 15 years, 4,500 youth workers have been lost and there is a growing shortage of qualified youth workers ([NYA](#), 2024). The most recent NYA survey ([NYA](#), 2026) found an ongoing decline in full-time and permanent roles (50% of respondents were in full-time posts; 67% of respondents had permanent contracts) and a corresponding rise in part-time positions. For this increasingly part-time, sessional, and voluntary workforce (reflecting wider trends in the UK's workforce; [UCL](#), 2024), there are substantial barriers to accessing training and development - such as finding suitable funding, time, or opportunities (e.g., at the weekend). The last 15 years has also seen a substantial decline in youth work courses, with the number of higher education institutions offering youth work courses falling from 73 to 15 between 2010 and 2024 ([NYA](#), 2024; [Gormally et al.](#), 2024). Some youth workers are concerned about the status of youth work as a professionally qualified workforce ([Youth and Policy](#), 2025). Change is needed to match the ambition in the government's recent National Youth Strategy (*Youth Matters*, [Department for Education](#), 2025) of 'Developing and growing a skilled and sustainable paid and volunteer youth sector workforce, with the highest standards to meet young people's needs.'

Filling in the gaps left by local authority cuts, small, community-led organisations play an increasingly important role for young people. However, there is a long history of underinvestment in workforce development in the voluntary and community youth sector ([Children's Workforce Development Council](#), 2011; [NYA](#), 2023). Such organisations are often sustained by part-time and sessional staff and volunteers who support their local communities and families with their experiences, skills, and cultural assets. These organisations may struggle with fragmented, short-term funding, and under-resourced volunteers and have been described as 'consistently unseen, underfunded, and their impact unrecognised' ([Centre for Social Justice](#), 2024). Since the pandemic, many small organisations have felt 'edged out' in favour of larger charities ([John Lyon's Charity](#), 2025).

London is a global city with a rich and complex history of youth work and youth provision. It has the highest poverty rate in England at 27% ([Trust for London](#), 2026) alongside pockets of immense wealth, and is characterised by hyperdiverse communities ([Centre for London](#), 2020). Cross-borough working is rarely straightforward and there has been a steady decline in infrastructure that supports community organisations ([John Lyon's Charity](#), 2025).

The LUYW programme (2023-2026)

The 'Level Up Youth Work' (LUYW) programme covers six boroughs in northwest London. Between 55-80% of VCSE youth work organisations are equity-led, many by global majority members, and on average approximately half of these organisations' turnover is less than £100,000 a year. These small, diverse community organisations are the face of youth service provision across northwest London and provide a substantial amount of informal, open access provision ([NYA](#), 2025).

Northwest London is also the home of the Young People's Foundations (YPF) model. YPFs are place-based infrastructure organisations (established by [John Lyon's Charity](#)), which aim to connect the public, private and voluntary sectors to support young people. YPFs aim to convene 'members' (key local stakeholders and community services) and co-develop and deliver forums that reach and support grassroots organisations. Northwest London presents a unique case for youth work, with the presence of [John Lyon Charity](#) in this area potentially bringing millions of pounds in additional investment to youth work. Yet, the establishment of the YPFs was a response to a fragile children and young people's sector and London's youth organisations remain concerned about further reductions in national and local authority funding, the pandemic aftermath and inflationary pressures, increasing demand and uncertainty, competition, and withdrawal from collaborative working ([John Lyon's Charity](#), 2025).

In recognition of these challenges, and a critical gap in youth workforce development, in 2021-22 the Young Westminster Foundation (YWF) initiated a pilot workforce professional development programme in Westminster. The quarterly Local Youth Work Forum, with 49 practitioners from 30 predominantly small to medium community-led organisations, supported 22 practitioners in obtaining Level 1, 2, and 3 Youth Work qualifications. It also showed there was demand among youth and community workers for improved networking, information sharing, and specialist training. Following this success, in 2023, YWF led a consortium to expand the model, working with five other YPFs (Camden, Ealing, Hammersmith & Fulham, Harrow, Kensington & Chelsea). The 'Level Up Youth

Work' (LUYW) programme was awarded £848,000 from City Bridge Foundation via London Funder's [Propel](#) initiative. LUYW, led by YWF, aimed to develop a more connected, professionalised, and qualified workforce within small, community-based equity-led organisations across six northwest London boroughs. This was to be achieved through investing in specialist training, qualifications, practitioner forums and networks, and leadership opportunities that recognise and amplify lived experience and grassroots expertise.

The LUYW programme intended youth workers and practitioners to be at the center of local and regional forums. They were to be supported to identify and prioritise emerging training needs, guiding the provision of four annual specialist training sessions (providing 1,000 training places across three years). These were to be delivered alongside quarterly local forums in each borough (total 24 per year). The programme also aimed to provide access to qualifications for 150-180 workers through funding for youth work and related qualifications delivered by trusted local training providers. A northwest London Network was intended to host four specialist working groups and communities of practice led by lived-experience experts drawn from the membership of the six YPFs, and focussing on priority issues, topics or themes identified by practitioners across the six boroughs.

Methods

YWF commissioned an independent evaluation of the central delivery elements of the LUYW programme (forums, training, and qualifications). This was carried out between autumn 2025 and summer 2026. The project was shaped during its inception phase in collaboration with YWF. During this phase, we reviewed quantitative data from LUYW and used the insights to develop our thinking, and to refine our learning questions and approach.

Learning questions

The following learning questions were agreed for this evaluation project:

1. Youth work as a profession today

How does today's youth workforce describe and think about their work?

- Who works with young people in northwest London today?
- What does the youth workforce think about the term 'youth worker'?
- How do members of the youth workforce describe themselves, their roles and their work?

2. What impact has the LUYW programme had on small organisational connectedness?

- What has driven these changes?
- What network and collaboration developments have occurred?
- What developments and connections have occurred?

3. What impact has the LUYW programme's training and qualification activity had on participants?

- What was valuable and why?
- What impact did the training or qualification have on them and their work?
- Were there any 'ripple effect' impacts?

Note: training and qualification findings are reported in separate sections in this report.

4. How has the LUYW programme been most impactful for practitioners and organisations?

- Which programme elements have been most impactful, and why?
- Have any 'ripple effect' developments been especially impactful, and why?

Our learning questions aimed to understand who is working with children and young people in small community organisations in northwest London today, the impact of LUYW programme activity on their connectedness, and the impact of the specialist training and qualifications elements of the programme. We sought to understand what drove any impacts, and what might be useful to sustain impact.

Project methodology was informed by the [ecological systems](#) approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1992). This thinking reflected the LUYW project, which involves four 'nested' systems - individuals (who

participated in activities initiated by LUYW), who work for organisations, which operate within and across boroughs, and which make up the youth sector in northwest London.

Our two research phases, adapted from the '[double diamond](#)' concept, involved a shorter initial research stage with a stocktake, analysis and collective learning opportunity with YWF in-between, to shape the second stage.

A mix of qualitative methods were devised to engage and accommodate stakeholders with a range of participation, communication and learning styles, including in-person participatory workshops, online focus groups and online one-to-one or two-to-one interviews. Workshops and focus groups used a blend of discussion, visual tools (e.g. mapping, dot-voting, summary 'keep, bin, change' style feedback), and more in-depth reflective discussion exercises, both as a whole-group and in smaller sub-groups, to allow participants to contribute in a variety of ways.

In the first part of the research, we facilitated:

- a workshop with senior operational staff (e.g., CEOs and operational managers) from the six YPFs involved in the project;
- a workshop with practitioner beneficiaries of the LUYW programme drawn from the YPF membership (i.e., people working within small, grassroots, community organisations)
- an interview with a trainer who delivered many LUYW-funded youth work courses; and
- a focus group with YWF staff (including a former member of staff involved in the development of the LUYW bid).

In the second stage of the research, we ran:

- six borough workshops (involving practitioners);
- five focus groups; and
- four interviews.

Borough workshops were attended by between 3 and 15 participants, drawn from local YPF member practitioners who had participated in LUYW programme initiatives. In some of these workshops, one or two YPF staff members were present. We have included short portraits of each borough's unique characteristics in Appendix A: Borough Stories.

The cross-borough focus groups, attended by between 3 and 7 participants, covered the topics:

- the experience and impact of completing a Level 1 youth work qualification (with young people from YPF members);
- the experience and impact of completing a Level 2 or Level 3 youth work qualification (with YPF member practitioners);
- youth work as a profession (with YPF member practitioners);
- sustainability (with operational managers from the six YPFs); and
- partnerships (with CEOs from the six YPFs).

Two interviewees were external stakeholders from other pan-London youth focused organisations, while the remaining two interviewees were YPF member participants whose insights were expected to form useful case studies.

All interviews, focus groups, and workshops were transcribed. We conducted a comprehensive thematic analysis following each round of data collection, including both a deductive element to draw out insights across the agreed learning questions and an inductive element, drawing out themes emerging organically from the data.

In total, we spoke with 56 participants for this study, the vast majority of whom work for the small, community-led and equity-led organisations for whom LUYW was intended to support. The findings detailed here do not represent the views of anyone other than those we spoke with, and should not be generalised to represent larger youth charities or the wider youth and community sector.

Two learning sessions took place during the course of the project. One, as mentioned earlier, occurred between the two stages of research, and the second took place after analysis was complete, to enable collective reflection on the findings.

Findings

Youth work as a profession

Learning question

How does today's youth workforce describe and think about their work?

- Who works with young people in northwest London today?
- What does the youth workforce think about the term 'youth worker'?
- How do members of the youth workforce describe themselves, their roles and their work?

This learning question sought to better understand who works with young people in northwest London today, and explore how they think about their roles and their work. It does not evaluate LUYW activity, but rather seeks to provide detailed context for the remaining evaluation questions. To understand what the LUYW programme offered the youth workforce, and whether and how participants found the offer useful, it is important to first appreciate the context in which it was delivered.

We asked how they describe the work they do, whether as youth workers or using other terms. We asked what the concept of youth work as a profession meant to them, and how they think and feel about their work, amidst the landscape of small organisations supporting local communities in their area.

The youth workforce in northwest London

People who work in small community organisations with children and young people are non-homogenous in background, mission and methods; a highly diverse workforce, connected because they all want to help and support young people. In describing how they think about and define their roles, participants working in small community organisations, fell into four groupings, with varying degrees of overlap between them. The groupings were:

- Youth worker 'through and through'
- Community-worker with multiple roles: 'Youth work is only one part of what I do'
- Specific mission-driven workers
- Young people who progress from participant to youth worker.

A. Youth workers 'through and through'

We [youth workers] don't really get spoken of, but we are so important because if there's no youth clubs, where do these young people go? So we try to build life skills, we build characters, education away from school, alongside school... We try to implement these things to help them [make] better decisions in life. Practitioner, member organisation

In each borough workshop, and in each of our cross-borough workshops and focus groups, a cohort of members described themselves unequivocally as youth workers. All these participants had positively experienced youth work themselves; they'd attended a local youth club, benefited from the connections they made with the youth workers there, and wanted to do the same valuable work. For this group, youth work was described in vocational terms, with strong emotion, and with pride. For this group, the rewards of the work are plentiful. Many in this cohort referred to their work interchangeably as 'youth work' and 'community work'. Working with young people also meant supporting young people's families and working with parents and siblings. Sometimes, participants in this cohort also referred to the multiple roles they fulfilled, while primarily identifying as youth workers.

B. Community workers with multiple roles

For many participants, 'youth worker' was too specific a job title for their work in small local organisations. For some in this cohort, the term did not adequately reflect the variety of projects they ran and the different groups they supported within the community, as exemplified by this practitioner: "We wear different hats when we're in the office. So I think when I'm in the office I'm the community worker, family worker. But when I step into the youth work project, I bring my youth side out."

For others, the term 'youth worker' didn't fit because their pre-existing notion - someone in a more 'traditional' role working primarily with young people in a youth club - didn't match their day to day work in a small organisation. Despite all participants working with young people in some capacity, many did not do so in the context of a youth club or youth centre. The small organisations they worked for were embedded in their local communities, and often their work centred on a specific cohort or need, culture, or practice model. Job titles included facilitator, coach, mentor and teacher.

C. Specific mission-driven workers

The third cohort of participants described their work primarily in terms of the specific gap or need they were addressing or the cohort of young people they worked with. Sometimes specific models or approaches were in use. Examples of this include:

- A cafe offering traineeships for young neurodiverse people;
- Teaching a specific language to children in group sessions;
- Therapeutic group work using a specific manualised model;
- Supported creative writing workshops for neurodiverse young people;
- Music, recording, and media skill development programme;
- Cultural organisations with varied activities promoting the culture;
- Play work with young people with special educational needs;
- Art therapy group work.

Many of the participants we spoke with had started these organisations themselves, or worked in them and brought passion about the model or focal area in use, as in this example:

We provide dance lessons for migrants... And then I provide them mentoring sessions because I have expertise in [it] for more than 18 years. That's my regular work. So I allow them to receive one-to-one sessions with me so they can secure a position in the UK, so they can stay. Practitioner, member organisation

They brought their lived experience, alongside a strong set of skills, experience, and qualifications relevant to their work, such as language fluency, mentoring, psychology, play work, music engineering skills, and creative writing talent. For this cohort, the notion of 'youth work' wasn't specific enough to describe their particular aims or the methods they use to achieve them.

D. Young people who progress from participant to youth worker

Young people who progress from participant to youth worker form the fourth cohort of those working with young people today. Young participants told us about their own progression from participant to volunteer and then completing a Level 1 youth work course, to paid sessional work in their project or club:

I think maybe when I was about 16 or 17, I volunteered at the youth club that I was going to at the time, just to do one session. And I really liked it and I saw the opportunity for a youth workers course. So yeah, I decided to do that and I'm here. Young practitioner, member organisation

We found participants described the pathway from participant to youth worker as an important one, for two reasons. One was for the development and advancement of the individual young people themselves, for them to gain confidence and progress to paid employment. Additionally, it is regarded as important to 'grow your own' and cultivate a future youth workforce from those with lived experience of attending a youth club or project, as described by one participant:

That's how we've grown. There's now a team of three of us and the other two people who work on the team are participants who I met on the project years ago. One of them [I] met seven, eight years ago as a participant. Practitioner, member organisation

What does the idea of 'youth work as a profession' mean for those working with young people in northwest London?

Participants were asked to share their thoughts about 'youth work as a profession'. The meaning of this phrase and the word 'profession' was introduced generally and left open to interpretation. Some participants had already given this topic significant thought, while others had not given much thought to the notion of 'youth worker', despite their work with young people. Three themes emerged from the discussions:

- A. The majority of participants didn't use the term 'youth work', or connect it with their work;
- B. Youth work did not offer a relevant or attractive professional pathway for many participants;
- C. Some respondents readily described youth work as their profession.

A. Many people don't use or connect with the term 'youth work'

I think a youth worker is someone who is dealing with young people and working with them and supporting them and coordinating some events for them... A youth worker is someone just like a support worker or case worker for young people. Practitioner, member organisation

For many respondents, the term 'youth worker' wasn't one they had thought much about, and they didn't use the term in reference to their own work with young people. One participant, with nearly 20 years experience working with young people, hadn't thought about the term in reference to their own work until it was discussed in an evaluation workshop.

Participants expressing this perspective had low awareness of the term, described their work in different terms, and had limited awareness of the qualification pathway for people wanting to study youth work. For many participants, as already explored in the findings on workforce cohorts above, the term 'youth work' wasn't a relevant term to describe their role, or their work with young people.

Many YPF team members across the boroughs told us about the limited use, and usefulness, of the term 'youth worker' in reference to the workforce in the diverse mix of small organisations in their borough:

Lots of people who have engaged with this project don't see themselves as youth workers. And I think the naming [of the programme] was a bit misleading because, in this context, in this project, anyone who works with young people frontline, we say you're a youth worker. But getting that message across to people at the beginning was quite hard because they saw, 'Oh it's for youth workers, I'm not a youth worker'. Young People's Foundation

B. Youth work does not offer a relevant or attractive professional pathway for many participants

Participants told us that youth work did not have a pathway for progression, in which they could increase their responsibility and salary over time in a well-recognised way. We were told about the low status and respect for youth workers, and the low pay, part-time and sessional employment, and relatively few permanent jobs. For the participants in this study, working in small community organisations, these factors combine to create few drivers for people to specifically pursue youth work as a profession. Participants used deficit words such as 'undervalued', 'underpaid' and 'underqualified' to describe their thoughts about youth work:

If you're going to become a youth worker, the organisation you're going to work for is going to be small and it is going to be a charity. So therefore you know the pay's not going to be good and you know that you're not gonna be working in this really big office.... It's not [seen as a] proper full time job because it's looked at like it's after school hours. Practitioner, member organisation

Repeatedly, we were told that youth work did not offer what the teaching or social work professions offer - a well-recognised qualification, a progression path, and responsibility and pay that increase with experience over time. The context of youth work roles (now largely being located in small voluntary sector organisations as opposed to in local authorities) was referenced many times, such as this example from a YPF team member: "People, if they want to work with children, young people, they quite sensibly would go into social care or into teaching, not into youth work, where it's not seen as a profession, as it maybe was once 15+ years ago."

We heard a variety of thoughts about the relative importance of experience and qualifications. Some participants felt it was relatively easy to begin working in a youth-work context without a youth work qualification, especially if previously a participant. This was seen by some as part of the 'problem' with the status of youth work, and for others it was perfectly acceptable. Interestingly, it was often qualified youth workers, with plentiful experience, who had undertaken a Level 2 or 3 Youth Work course and personally benefited from it, but expressed the view that experience mattered most. This was reiterated by some YPF staff, as in this example:

The qualification is important, don't get me wrong. And I think you do learn so much from it, but I think it's one of those roles where if you don't have the qualification, experience does make up for it in my opinion. Young People's Foundation

We asked the small group of young people we spoke with (who had completed a Level 1 course) what they thought about a career as a youth worker. One talked about wanting to work with young people in non-youth work contexts such as youth justice or health. Another felt that working with young people was something they hoped to do part-time in the evening, perhaps voluntarily, alongside other work.

C. For some participants, youth work is a rewarding profession they identify with, albeit with inherent challenges

Some participants (the 'youth worker through and through' cohort) readily identified with the concept of 'youth work as a profession'. As previously detailed, they expressed pride in their work and a strong sense of fulfillment from it. However, this group felt that the term 'youth worker' was poorly understood, nor widely respected, and that the work was difficult to convey. They felt this led to a widespread lack of awareness of, and connection to, youth work and its qualifications pathway:.

I think the career [of youth worker] isn't shown enough to people in general; the pathways. I feel like when I was a lot younger, you saw a lot more youth workers and a lot more youth clubs. There's obviously been a change... and there's not as [many] opportunities.

Practitioner, member organisation

Several attributed this general lack of awareness of professional youth work to funding cuts over the past 15 years and the closure of open-access youth spaces. This group of youth workers had often undertaken qualifications late, due to facing financial constraints (personal, organisational, or both) earlier in their career.

Connection

Learning question

What impact has the LUYW programme had on small organisational connectedness?

- What has driven these changes?
- What network and collaboration developments have occurred?
- What developments and connections have occurred?

This section explores how the LUYW programme supported connection amongst small, diverse community organisations working with young people. This is described on two levels: first, within the in-borough forums, and second, cross-borough connections.

In-borough connection: the borough forums

Prior to LUYW funding, YPFs had focussed on supporting managerial staff within their membership and, except for the pilot in Westminster which led to the LUYW programme, none had run a consistent forum specifically for practitioners. Using the Westminster model as a base, boroughs added local flexibility and made the forum ‘their own’ over time, with iterations and developments in response to member feedback.

Practitioner forums have operated in each LUYW borough throughout the LUYW programme (2023-2026). Each borough has delivered at least four forum (or network) meetings per year. Over the three years of the LUYW programme, the YPFs facilitated 75 forum meetings with a total of 1,128 attendees. Average attendance per forum was 15 practitioners.

In years 2 and 3 of the programme, 222 small community organisations attended forum meetings. Fifty-six percent of organisations with practitioners attending meetings self-identified as equity-led community organisations (56%). The majority of attendees were from small to medium sized organisations (as defined by LUYW; 62% of all attendees), alongside some practitioners representing larger organisations (37%).

Forum members across all six boroughs described many ways in which their borough forum acts as a gateway to information, support and opportunity. Forums enabled members to connect in-person with other members, and in doing so, helped members achieve a host of important personal and professional outcomes, which often had positive ripple effects for their organisation. Participants described the impact of forum attendance in six ways:

- A. Reduces isolation by enabling human connection;
- B. Space for practice discussion, advice-seeking, and problem solving;
- C. Build individuals’ knowledge of organisations;
- D. Build relationships and partnerships between organisations;
- E. Yield related benefits for young people;
- F. Supports professional development.

A. Reduces isolation by enabling human connection

We do this work because we're passionate... but I also believe this work can be quite lonely at times for a lot of organisations, for workers. Practitioner, member organisation

Participants described how their borough forum helped to combat some of the challenges inherent to working in a small community organisation. We heard about the precious little time participants had for networking and their reduced capacity for professional development. Many participants identified joining their borough forum as a priority activity, when not working directly on project delivery:

We might be super busy, but we'll make sure someone from the team can make it to that meeting so they can speak to someone else, find out something new and even if it's one thing that we find out, it would help us do much more later on. Practitioner, member organisation

The face-to-face nature of the meetings was repeatedly referenced as increasingly rare and very important to participants (who are rarely office-based workers). We heard how this connection meets an important need for sharing, and for feeling understood, within the challenging context of their daily work. Members repeatedly talked about feeling connected to their colleagues, through 'easy and natural' conversation in forum meetings.

Participants described their borough forum as a place to meet people you can trust, people with whom you can connect not just on workplace matters, but as 'human beings':

And everybody started opening up. And when people connect like that, they begin to form a different kind of relationship... just as people. When they form that relationship as people, they're more likely to work together because they begin to talk about themselves as human beings. Young People's Foundation

B. Offers space for practice discussion, advice-seeking, and problem solving

Members described their borough forum as a safe place they can go for practical help and support, to discuss and debate practice or operational questions, and ask for advice to help solve a problem, as this practitioner explained: "Many, many times I go like, 'Ah we're going through this, I'm having a hard time with this'. And many times people come over and say, 'Well, we went through this and we did that and I can recommend this'." Example topics included policy-development, risk management and thinking about a young person's particular need. Forum meetings are trusted spaces where members can talk about workplace challenges, benefit from the experiences and perspectives of others, gain depth and breadth of understanding, as this practitioner enthused: "And it's always something you learn from just speaking to people. And being able to have quite hard discussions and challenging discussions but getting something out of it."

C. Builds individuals' knowledge of organisations and opportunities

I've been given the opportunity to network in a slightly wider area. So it's not just these are the people down the road... It was really useful, as it was the chance [to see] organisations of different sizes, different scopes working in different areas.

Practitioner, member organisation

Borough forums meetings are valuable for building member knowledge of organisations working with young people and communities in the area, and sometimes further afield. Meetings enable connection with people beyond the hyper-local area in which many small organisations operate, helping build a broader understanding of the landscape of organisations operating in the borough. When time is precious, having one place to go to find out about projects, services, and funding opportunities was described as very helpful, especially for new practitioners: "That really helped me starting [out], because I got to see what else was going on for young people; what was available to my young people."

Some YPF coordinators moved meeting locations around the borough to strengthen members' understanding of the wider local landscape, directly introducing them to new organisations along the way. Other coordinators held forums within youth hubs to build smaller organisations' understanding of the local youth offer and strengthen signposting between voluntary organisations and statutory agencies' offer, such as family hubs.

D. Builds relationships and partnerships

Participants spoke about forum meetings as presenting an important opportunity to meet other members, get to know each other in person, and build relationships. We heard of numerous cases in which relationships made through forum attendance led to working partnerships and joint projects:

Weeks later I invited them to our offices. We had this idea of doing this activity but we don't have the kids... And one of them said, 'You know what, I already thought about this. I have been working on that project but I don't have the money'. She just [said], 'It's fine, I will give it to you'. So she basically gave me the kids, the plan, everything, because we [had] the money at the time. Practitioner, member organisation

Participants told us about resource sharing that has occurred as the result of connections made and relationships formed, for example regarding use of space (a precious commodity for small organisations working with young people), or even sharing a project plan and group of young people to run a programme another organisation had funding for. These relationships and partnerships can also be seen to reduce competition and minimise the risk of unnecessary duplication.

E. Benefits for young people

Members described how attending their borough forum brought various ripple-effect benefits to the young people they were working with. Benefits varied depending on the situation or need, and were

all made possible through forum-centred information and connections. For new practitioners, wanting to understand their borough's youth offer and develop it for their young people, the forums acted as a 'bridge' to deepen their knowledge and thinking about their own work, as this practitioner explained: "I'm new and I'm thinking, 'How can I help them [young people], how can I develop this work that's already been here for years?' That bridge of networking in Westminster is quite good."

For another participant, promoting a new project at their borough forum was the best way to ensure that young people most in need would benefit from the opportunity.

They said, 'We want to do a workshop for kids'. And I said, 'If we do a workshop for kids, I want to go through Young K&C... because then I know I'm going to get more of the right kids to go on it, rather than advertise it myself, because then we'll get all the affluent mums straight in'. Practitioner, member organisation

F. Supports and facilitates professional development

In many boroughs, forums offer practitioners access to professional development opportunities that may be out of reach for small organisations. For the LUYW programme team, forum meetings have played an important role in helping each borough, and the programme overall, to explore member training needs. We heard how mini training sessions were often built into the forum agenda, as described by this practitioner: "So we will go in, we'd meet the Young K&C staff, we'd sit, we'd listen to this workshop or talk for about an hour. And then after that we get up and everybody talks to everybody, and networks." Connections made at forum meetings also led to professional development support offered between organisations:

We'd never [have] met up if it wasn't for Level Up... So I've gone in and helped another organisation with how to accept children with special needs and that was such a taboo subject... So we can train each other or help each other out and give each other strategies... without additional funding. Practitioner, member organisation

Cross-borough connection

Every borough that we're working in is probably, in terms of population size, somewhere in the top 20 or 30 most populous cities... And we're working with a huge number of groups already in our local areas. We've got that focus on... [a] small and grassroots base.

Young People's Foundation

Core work for all YPFs requires focus on their boroughs and the small organisations within their membership. The LUYW programme work, with member-led training priorities emerging from borough forums, only strengthened the YPFs' in-borough focus. It is thus unsurprising that the LUYW team described a degree of tension when working to develop a shared brand and identity for the LUYW programme, broader than a single borough or YPF. Over time, the LUYW team worked to find a balance between central programme-building and the need for each YPF to independently shape their in-borough activity.

The original LUYW budget proposal included resources for cross-borough partnership working and activities. During the proposal assessment stage, City Bridge Foundation asked the YWF team to reduce their total funding request by 20%, which resulted in the elimination of a designated programme management post. YWF's senior staff took on LUYW programme management in addition to their existing work. Despite the team's ambition to cultivate cross-borough projects, this work proved time intensive and was very difficult to sustain over three years. This meant that the potential for developing a centralised picture of the work each YPF was undertaking, and for the cultivation of more strategic cross-borough vision and projects wasn't possible:

I think what's been hard is building those networks and relationships across the different boroughs because we had envisioned that that might have happened more, but I think we... from Westminster's [YWF] point of view, hadn't realised how much work that would take.
Young People's Foundation

A cross-borough lived experience network was also planned, however individual YPFs had their own existing initiatives. The LUYW team aimed to commission an external expert to facilitate the creation of a partnership-wide Community of Practice/Thematic Working Group, however, they found it difficult to attract interest. Lived experience networks therefore developed and were driven at borough level, and the LUYW team acted as supporter, connector and amplifier.

Some borough networks, such as Westminster's Helping Hands (a community-led network addressing serious youth violence), Camden's Rising Voices (a global majority leadership forum), and Ealing's emerging Preventing School Exclusions Network developed during the course of the programme, in response to needs emerging from practitioner conversations held through LUYW forums and events.

During this research, YPFs generally agreed that the cross-borough working intention of the programme was a unique chance for them to develop a programme in partnership. We heard that discussions during the first year of the programme produced a positive sense of cross-borough partnership and joint venture thinking. As described, activity toward this end was difficult to maintain over time, and resulted in missed opportunities for more joined up working around shared offers in years 2 and 3.

Towards the end of the year 2 (in April 2025), a LUYW conference brought practitioners from across the six boroughs together to hear about the programme's connection and training work to date, and talk in more detail about their professional development needs. The conference was mentioned and described positively by numerous borough workshop participants.

Cross-borough connection between YPFs

Despite the lack of resources to focus intensively on building cross-borough connection and collaboration, some cross-YPF connections were made or strengthened. These six umbrella organisations, whose priority is the local organisations in their network, are emerging from this project with further ambition to work together. The LUYW operational leads told us they made

connections across the YPFs in the course of developing their forums and training programmes, and that sharing emerging needs and priorities for training led to alignment and sharing and recommending providers:

We had a charity from Young Ealing who then hosted training for us, and I think that ecosystem of feeding smaller charities to come and lead their expertise in different boroughs, that was a really nice success of that connectedness across boroughs.

Young People's Foundation

LUYW operational leads expressed interest in strengthening cross-borough work. The group agreed they wanted to prioritise working more closely together, to explore partnerships between YPFs, and to share resources for specialist training programmes, online resources, and enabling practitioners to join other borough networks. YPF CEOs told us that despite the minimal time they'd had together to explore cross-borough partnership, that relationships and trust had been built through their participation in the LUYW programme.

I think it [LUYW] did do something in terms of relationship building between these organisations and even now we're talking about where else we could go for funding to support something like this, which again we wouldn't have been doing. And it was the first time. Young People's Foundation

Training

Learning question

What impact has the LUYW programme's training activity had on participants?

- What was valuable and why?
- What impact did the training have on them and their work?
- Were there any 'ripple effect' impacts?

In this section, we explore the value and impact of the training offered to practitioners working with young people through LUYW. The LUYW programme delivered 127 specialist training courses over three years, with 1,330 places offered across the six boroughs. Approximately 120 organisations per year benefited from training, with the vast majority (79%) defined as small to medium sized community organisations (see Glossary for definition). Appendix B is a summary of training activity.

The context

People always feed back when the trainers are good but then they don't turn up sometimes. The feedback I'm getting is that they're just working, they've got sessions to run. Like they're literally working on the ground with it, they can't just leave a session.

Young People's Foundation

Practitioners consistently described training offered through LUYW as highly valuable, and especially so given the context of their work. We repeatedly heard that practitioners had limited access to, and few opportunities for, professional development, driven by the following factors:

- part-time and sessional employment that creates significant time pressures. Planning and delivering face to face work with young people must always take priority;
- funding that pays only for face-to-face work with young people, and doesn't cover professional development time. Some participants told us they attend training in their own time;
- small teams, in which there is strong time pressure to complete a wide variety of operational tasks in a limited number of hours.

These working conditions simultaneously create a strong need for training, and make it difficult to attend:

Because we haven't got the money. It's extra hours and all the things that are necessary to go on because of the [project-based] funding that we do get. Whatever I have to do out[side] of that time, it's in my own time. Practitioner, member organisation

YPF staff also recognised these factors created challenges, coordinating the training offer and finding appropriate training timings that could fit around participants' lives. Despite this challenging context,

participants attended LUYW-offered training in significant numbers and spoke very positively about their experiences, as detailed in the next section.

The training offer

Provision of specialist training, driven by self-identified practitioner need, was a central aim of the LUYW programme. We heard that, prior to LUYW, training was not driven by workforce needs. The LUYW programme offered an opportunity to change how youth worker training was driven, on core subject matter - such as safeguarding and first aid - and specialist subjects, alongside other factors such as timing and training structure.

A training offer designed for participants, with participants

The LUYW logic model for specialist training emphasises actively involving practitioners in the process of developing the training offer to accurately identify their 'emerging needs', as one YPF team member explained: "The way we choose what trainings there are is during the [membership] renewal process. One of the questions is 'what training would you like to see?'. I guess that shows the importance of it being member-led."

Participants told us their YPF has asked about their training needs and interests in a variety of ways: at forum meetings; when signing up to become a member or renewing their membership; and via a borough-led training need survey early in the LUYW mobilisation process. Participants also told us the training sessions were designed with their time-and-resource-poor context in mind, as this practitioner explained: "There [weren't]] really any hurdles and jump throughs and deposits that you had to put down, so there was [sic] no restricting factors to it."

Factors that made training valuable for participants

Participants were very positive about the quality of the specialist training in LUYW. They identified several important factors for impactful training:

- local, face to face;
- lived experience and knowledge of trainers;
- relaxed, inclusive, and authentic tone;
- space for reflection and practice discussion;
- directly applicable to practice.

As with forum meetings, the local and face to face nature of the LUYW training offer was identified as an important success factor:

It was done in a small group. You're not at some big training hall in the centre of London... For me hands-on is much more beneficial... To be able to come here and talk to other people and ask questions in person. Practitioner, member organisation

Another factor seen as essential to the quality and credibility of the training was that it was delivered by people with lived experience of the subject matter, alongside extensive knowledge, as this practitioner emphasised: "That's the most powerful. When someone's talking to you and they say, 'So this is my back story', you're like, 'Whoa okay now I'm listening to you, I'm listening to you'."

Participants also repeatedly referenced the tone trainers created for attendees as an important part of the valuable learning experience. Trainers were described as highly personable, and able to create an inclusive space in which complex information was conveyed accessibly without losing its significance, as in this practitioner example: "And she was like, 'This is what it feels like for a young person. When they say they can't do it it's not that they don't want to and they're not trying hard enough, they actually can't.'"

For practitioners with precious little time for professional development, training sessions and in-training discussion offered valuable time and space to pause, reflect on their work, deepen their learning experience, and consider different perspectives. Participants also found training courses to be highly relevant and readily applicable to their work:

You're able to think together rather than just your own thoughts. We all have our own opinions, we all have our own stance and stuff and we're quite limited and restricted to our own thoughts. So when you have everyone else's... it opens up your thought process and you're taking different things. Practitioner, member organisation

Finally, practitioners emphasised how the specialist training was tailored specifically to their work, making it far more useful, as explained by this practitioner: "I did the...youth mental health first aid training which was really, really good. I've done this kind of training before but doing it [this time] was very different because obviously now it's applicable. It's not a general understanding."

The impact of training for participants

Participants told us that attending training led to important changes for them as practitioners, and had wider benefits for their organisations. Quality specialist training:

- built their confidence;
- led to changes in practice and organisational policy;
- provides space for reflection and practice discussion.

Participants told us that attending specialist training built their confidence as practitioners when working directly with young people. For example, practitioners told us that receiving specialist training facilitated changes in their thinking about, and delivery of, support for young people: "I feel much more reassured in handling a certain situation... It gives you more confidence in the work that you're doing."

Training on neurodiversity was particularly influential on practice, leading to changes in accessibility of programmes to young people with special educational needs. Training also influenced policy development with young people, for example, through strengthening youth voice practices:

I don't think I've ever experienced training like that before, and my understanding of autism from someone who has lived experience was incredible... And a lot of people went away changing things in their own establishment or in their own personal life. Practitioner, member organisation

Participants described how good quality training created space for, and encouraged, reflection on practice, and collective learning:

I have this scenario, how do I better handle it? So if you've been sitting with something and then this training comes on, 'Oh yes, I could go talk to someone that has a better idea than me'. So it allowed everyone to share and talk and learn from each other. Practitioner, member organisation

Participants also told us how demonstrating a commitment to professional development had positively impacted external views of their organisation. For example, training showed funders and the community that they could trust the quality of provision, as this practitioner emphasised: "When people, like service users, know that you... have undergone a specific training, it just enhances that trust in attending your provisions or undertaking your services."

Qualifications

Learning question

What impact has the LUYW programme's qualification activity had on participants?

- What was valuable and why?
- What impact did the qualification have on them and their work?
- Were there any 'ripple effect' impacts?

The context

The LUYW programme provided funding for practitioners from a diverse group of small community organisations working with young people to undertake youth work qualifications (Levels 1 to 3). The programme also funded young people volunteering in member organisations to complete Level 1 qualifications. The programme's aim was to remove funding-related barriers to undertaking qualifications and increase practitioner access by raising their awareness of courses and encouraging uptake.

Two of the six YPFs were able to offer some support to those taking up qualifications, or their organisations. Hammersmith and Fulham paid young people attending the Level 1 qualification teaching days and gave organisations with a staff member attending a Level 2 course money to help backfill for those studying, and for their manager's additional time in supervising them. Young Ealing provided £500 bursaries for practitioners completing a Level 2 Youth Work course.

As with the forums and specialist training aspects of the programme, it's important to recognise the context in which the LUYW qualifications were offered. Several participants described the challenges they faced in starting or completing studies. These echo the barriers described in the training context above in connection to:

- working hours (part-time, sessional and voluntary);
- time shortages (many 'hats' to wear and little to no time for professional development); and
- funding (which pays for project delivery time only).

Participants told us about these barriers time and again, relaying their frustrations and the challenges they had faced in trying to complete qualifications, as exemplified here by a practitioner: "I wanted to do the Level 3 myself but I just couldn't fit it into the timetable of both delivering, facilitating and everything. I just couldn't make it work." Difficulties in finding the time for undertaking qualifications were visible when LUYW-funded students began their courses. Several had been working in youth services for many years (even decades) without gaining qualifications. This sentiment was echoed by one external stakeholder who worked with LUYW as a training provider:

Youth work courses are not cheap... And often it is the most disadvantaged people that end up becoming youth workers. And so funding has always been an issue... So this [programme] was a completely different take on it. External stakeholder

For the LUYW programme team these contextual factors for small organisations made their collective work on qualifications more complicated than anticipated. The increased time commitment and course requirements for Level 2 and 3 courses led to challenges in securing the take-up the team were hoping for.

Despite these challenges, 196 practitioners registered for a funded qualification. Of the 184 who started their course, 156 (86%) completed the qualification. 52% of the qualification cohort were young people under the age of 25, predominantly completing Level 1 courses.

Impact of qualifications

The findings in this section are reported in two parts - one focusing on adult practitioners who completed Level 2 and 3 qualifications funded by LUYW, and the second focusing on young people who completed a Level 1 course.

Adult practitioners who completed Level 2 or 3 courses

Whilst undertaken in smaller numbers than the Level 1 course, for those practitioners who completed a Level 2 or 3 qualification, the impact on their knowledge and practice was marked. They described several ways the course experience had strengthened their work personally and benefitted their organisation:

- safeguarding skill development;
- empowerment for young people;
- policy awareness and development;
- ripple effects across their organisations;
- the importance and value of reflection on practice.

Several participants spoke about the attention to safeguarding in qualifications, which helped increase their knowledge and awareness and supported them to embed safer practices into their work and thinking. They described how having a solid foundation for their practice helped them to bring more awareness, nuance, inclusivity, and planning to their work:

"I feel like I had a good understanding of that [safeguarding and recognising risk and 'red flags'] but when I did my course in youth work I had an even better understanding. You're just more on the ball in terms of what you look out for." Practitioner, member organisation

One participant described how completing the qualification had enabled them to give young people more ownership to organise themselves. Participants described how attending the course had increased their awareness of policy matters, relevant law, and helped them understand the importance of these in their workplace, for example, to protect youth workers: "Let's be very equal

with everybody and really be a professional youth club... We have in place our own policies and boundaries. So it's key now. My briefings are much more detailed as well, so it's really, really good."

Participants told us about the ripple effects of their learning in their organisations: through benefits to the team's practice development; benefits for funding applications; and the strengthening of leadership skills. Participants also articulated how the course had taught them how to reflect, and to use reflective skills to learn and improve their practice. Course assessments that connect to current practice encourage reflection:

You're constantly reflecting on your work and you have to use examples from sessions that you've done... It's connected directly to your workplace and it asks you to constantly reflect on your work. So I think that makes it super helpful. pretty much from the get go.

Young People's Foundation

Alongside the positive impact of qualifications, some participants felt that qualification content may not reflect the context and needs of today's youth workforce, as described here by one YPF team member: "I would however argue that the qualification itself is just a little bit outdated and just needs some refreshing and some learning as to what is currently taking place now and what young people need now."

Young people who completed Level 1 courses

I had one of my young people, he joined the Level 1 Youth Work purely because of the money. He enjoyed it so much, his punctuality was amazing. After he left he was like, 'Whoa, I got a qualification. Maybe I should do the Level 2'.

Practitioner, member organisation

Young people attending youth clubs and projects across all six LUYW boroughs were offered the option to undertake a Level 1 Youth Work qualification, with the programme funding both the cost of the course, and an incentive to acknowledge the young people's time. Young people mainly completed the Level 1 qualification during their half-term break, in small groups.

We spoke to a group of five young people (aged between 15 and 20) who had completed their Level 1 qualification via the LUYW programme. We also asked practitioners in our borough workshops about their observations of the young people they had encouraged to complete the Level 1 qualification. Both young people and practitioners described the experience, and what had changed since, in overwhelmingly positive terms:

Obviously they [young people] relate to you a lot as well, so you feel like you can help them in certain situations. Obviously it'll make me feel better about myself... Now with being a youth worker, I could be there for the children if they need anyone to speak to.

Young practitioner, member organisation

Themes that emerged in the findings about young people who had completed Level 1 courses were:

- a positive experience of learning;
- being helped on the pathway toward the world of work;
- improvements in confidence and self-esteem.

Young people reported that the course was an enjoyable learning experience, and some contrasted this with their experience of formal education. Young people described the course as a valuable part of helping them envisage their future pathway ahead:

I never really thought about working with kids or anything like that. But after doing the course, I'm a lot more open to it now because I've enjoyed it. I never really knew what it was like. But after having done the qualification and working around them more, I'm more open to it. Young practitioner, member organisation

For some, completing the course was potentially the beginning point for a career in youth work. For one young person in the group, the course gave them the experience which helped them make the leap into paid employment as a youth worker. This pathway for young people from participant, to volunteer, to paid youth work through gaining Level 1 qualifications was mentioned frequently by practitioners in our borough workshops and by YPF CEOs (also discussed below). For the LUYW programme team, this reflects a central aim of the programme:

I think for us Level 1 was a really, really good opportunity for young people to get on that ladder. All of them that attended had engaged with a voluntary service before and have now received a paid role afterwards as well. So that's been absolutely amazing.
Young People's Foundation

For other young people, the course experience was valuable in helping them learn new skills, and think about their interests and their future more generally, whether in youth work or not. Young people reported that the qualification, through giving them the communication skills and showing them that they can support other young people, had improved their confidence and self esteem, both in youth settings and in school, as exemplified here: "I learned how to be more confident when I'm speaking and how to phrase different things."

LUYW Programme impact

Learning question

How has the LUYW programme been most impactful for practitioners and organisations?

- Which programme elements have been most impactful, and why?
- Have any 'ripple effect' developments been especially impactful, and why?

In this section, we briefly summarise overall LUYW programme impact, based on our qualitative findings. We consider each of the three central programme elements in turn (practitioner forums, specialist training, and qualifications), followed by 'ripple effect' impact.

Practitioner forums

Evidence strongly indicates the practitioner forums have made a significant positive impact on the working lives of those who attend them. LUYW's original aim was to create forums that enable the sharing of knowledge, skills, and good practice.

We found that the connections that occur at forum meetings have very positively impacted the working lives of attendees. In the challenging context for small youth-oriented organisations, with precious little time for professional development and networking activity, practitioners who attend their local borough forum feel more connected, strengthen their local knowledge, build relationships, and find space to seek advice and discuss practice or organisational problems, as one practitioner emphasised: "It's created a safe space for us. I think we needed that, because once core funding disappeared... no-one wanted to share info... If we both applied for the same funding, we'd get it and they'd lose it."

Borough forums enabled valuable offers and exchanges, such as space to run a group, specialist knowledge sharing, and, in one case, extraordinary generosity such as the gift of a project plan and a group of children. The importance of connection and network building, in an often isolating context, was consistently emphasised. Borough forum meetings are seen as safe, supportive spaces that offer much-needed collegiality and a sense of community in what could potentially be a competitive environment.

Across the boroughs, we heard about the thought and intentionality that YPF teams brought to planning and facilitation of their member forum:

"I guide them and direct them to say 'Talk about your work in relation to how somebody else can use it in their organisation'. So they're not just saying, 'Oh this is what we do', [but rather] 'This is what we do and this is how you can take from it'."

Young People's Foundation

YPFs were all too aware of the challenging and time-poor context in which their members worked, and strove to create meetings that delivered as much value as possible for participants. We heard

how meetings were shaped by and met participant needs, and how they evolved as attendee numbers increased and new members joined.

Specialist training

Being able to access so many different ones [training courses] at high quality is really, really helpful... even the key ones like first aid, safeguarding... Otherwise I just don't think we'd be able to access it as easily. We'd have to apply for additional funding for it and we're already doing that 24/7. Practitioner, member organisation

The LUYW programme's aim was to deliver a specialist training programme shaped by the most important issues for young people, that built practitioner confidence and improved capacity to respond to young people's needs. Our findings indicate this aim was met.

With very few exceptions, we heard that practitioners who'd attended specialist training had found the experience to be high quality and very valuable to their professional development and practice. They found the combination of lived experience and in-depth knowledge of the trainers hugely helpful, and facilitators to be relaxed, authentic, and inclusive. Additionally, training sessions provided valuable time for reflection and practice discussion, enabling participants to explore practice challenges and learn from each other.

Practitioners told us how high-quality training led to increased practice confidence, and to changes in how their organisation worked with young people. This was notable particularly regarding neurodiverse young people. This subject had strong demand for training and led to participants better understanding how they could adapt or open their offer to be more inclusive of neurodiverse young people.

Core training subjects, such as safeguarding and first aid, were also delivered through the LUYW programme and were just as positively received. Small organisations working with young people often have to fundraise in order for practitioners to attend core subject training. The offer of free, high-quality training that enables participants to learn and satisfy core operating requirements without having to find additional funding, was highly valued.

Qualifications

Participants attending LUYW courses, particularly at Level 2 and 3, described the impact the learning had enabled in their practice, their skill development, understanding, and awareness of policy requirements. We also heard about the positive ripple effects of practitioner learning within an organisation, both regarding modelling good practice to junior team members, and for demonstrating professional development and practice quality to funders.

Young people who completed Level 1 courses found it a very positive experience and helpful in a variety of work- and career-focussed ways, whether it represented the start of a potential pathway

into youth work or a positive engagement with learning and thinking about future work interests more generally.

In giving practitioners working with young people the funding to undertake qualifications, the LUYW programme removed one of the most important barriers - finances. This was essential for organisations in which there was enough capacity to enable a practitioner to take the time for study. Many small organisations, however, can only afford to fund part-time and sessional staff, who then typically hold other jobs to earn enough income. They are often juggling too many commitments to easily undertake further study.

Funding and workforce challenges in the small organisations that LUYW was aiming to support prevented the programme from supporting more practitioners to undertake Level 2 and 3 qualifications, as explained here by a YPF team member: "[The Level 2s proved a lot more challenging.... Lots of people were doing it alongside their job and a second job, sometimes their voluntary work. So getting people through the Level 2 \[course\] was a lot more difficult.](#)"

Ripple effect impact

The profile of the youth sector amid small organisations working with young people

By bringing together practitioners in small organisations for connecting and networking, for training and qualifications, the LUYW programme has raised awareness of, and fertilised, the current youth sector landscape in northwest London. The creation of a forum in each borough has been immensely valuable, and creates a sense of collegiality and community for those who attend. Through training and qualifications, this diverse group of practitioners are brought together again, to learn and reflect on their work alongside each other. Bringing practitioners working with young people together raises their collective awareness of varied types of youth work underway and creates a sense of a youth sector amongst this diverse group.

YPFs knowledge of their member network

Through creating and developing a member forum in their borough, each YPF has had particular cause to make regular contact with member practitioners, to survey their workforce needs, to create and evolve a space that reflects these needs. This process has introduced member feedback cycles into YPFs - they now do this at various points, for new and existing members, and use forum meetings to deepen their understanding of member needs, as this YPF team member explained: "[The forums ...just kind of helped build our relationships with our members as well because we were able to host them at different locations, and really create a bit more of an organic path through the borough.](#)"

Conclusions

The youth workforce needs and deserves more than grant funded, time-limited professional development

Due to the seismic defunding of the youth sector landscape since 2010, the small local organisations delivering youth and community support provide a critically important part of the support and activities available for young people today. These organisations operate within a depleted and precarious wider voluntary and community sector context, with many organisations struggling with inflationary pressures and financial instability (NCVO, 2025; Charities Aid Foundation, 2023; Centre for Social Justice, 2024; John Lyon's Charity, 2025.) .

Participants told us how these unstable conditions, combined with rising demand for services in their communities, can create a sense of isolation. Many feel that they are continually battling for survival and dedicating all their resources to delivering support to young people with increasingly complex needs (see also, NYA, 2026), meeting fundamental organisational requirements, and the ongoing urgency of income generation. In this context, professional development, beyond fundamentals such as safeguarding and first aid, can be viewed as a luxury, rather than essential to the provision of quality preventative services for children and young people. This practitioner explained: "[When you're a small CIC or a small grass roots charity, you can't \[afford to pay for training\]. We have to have these things but the cost... is not achievable for a lot of us.](#)"

LUYW has offered a professional development-centered antidote for many small grassroots organisations in northwest London. It provided connections, facilitated safe spaces to ask for help and to form relationships and partnerships, quality specialist training to build knowledge and strengthen practice alongside colleagues, and the opportunity to undertake a paid qualification which would otherwise be unaffordable.

Through LUYW-funded forums, YPFs have created designated time to connect, and as participants in this study repeatedly told us, connection is much-needed and hugely beneficial. It's a gateway to sharing information and opportunities, a place to discuss and debate practice related questions, a route to advice and guidance, and it enables relationships to form beyond one's own organisation. This drive to connect transcends and bridges the differences that exist amongst the highly diverse workforce in small community organisations working with children and young people (see our findings on 'Youth work as a profession'). Through their forums, today's youth workforce can meet some of their own professional development needs.

At forum meetings, YPF leaders regularly asked their members about their training and needs. These self-identified needs shaped the specialist training offer and over time, also influenced the evolution of forum meetings. This user-led process ensured the training offered through LUYW fit practitioners' specific contexts: the trainer's combination of lived experience and depth of knowledge; content readily applicable to their grassroots organisations and communities; and time

for discussion and reflection to process what they'd learned and consider how they might change or evolve their work.

The LUYW programme's offer was a grassroots-oriented, foundation-layer professional development programme. It targeted people who are part of the communities they serve, working in a sector that enjoys little of the ongoing professional development built-in for other roles working with children and young people, such as with teaching or social work. Participants in this study repeatedly made reference to those professions, looking at their clear training requirements and regulated progression pathways and requirements for Continuous Professional Development (CPD) that distinguish them from the youth sector as it stands, including its seemingly little-known and, to many in the cohort we spoke to, peripheral youth work qualification pathway.

This valuable professional development offer was a time-limited, grant-funded opportunity for six local authority areas benefiting from a Young People's Foundations. Participants consistently told the research team how much they valued the LUYW programme's offer: how much they personally need and benefit from connection; how important specialist training is for them (with ripple effect benefits for their colleagues),; and how valuable the opportunity to undertake a qualification has been for them, their practice, and the organisation they work or volunteer for.

Currently, unless a 'bolted-on' offer such as the LUYW programme exists, the practitioners we spoke with do not have access to 'built-in' ongoing, high quality opportunities for connection, specialist training, or qualification courses. Yet what LUYW delivered was not luxurious, it was essential, and especially so in today's depleted, stretched operating context.

This diverse youth workforce is exposed to substantial risk by gaps in the statutory and regulatory landscape

Our findings show that those working with children and young people in small community organisations in northwest London today are united in their commitment to the children and young people in their communities. The workforce we spoke with ranged from those who have always worked with young people and identify as youth workers, to those who have more recently taken up working with young people in a local community organisation, with a particular cohort or specific mission-driven focus.

Coming from a wide variety of backgrounds and fields, the youth workforce bring their passion and skills to the youth sector. There are some notable differences, however, in how they think about and define their roles, with some identifying strongly with youth work and others not at all. In the current landscape, the youth workforce is fragmented.

This youth workforce currently has no statute to guide their work, and no meaningful regulation to provide parameters or set standards. Infrastructure is patchy at best. In contrast to the pre-2010 era of youth and community work, they do not benefit from a local authority presence that, to a greater or lesser extent, set certain minimum requirements (and often also provided) for their training and professional development. They are largely left to their own devices, struggling to generate core

costs to pay for training, development, and the management time required to support staff, as one practitioner described: “I try to avoid mentioning management costs on funding applications, because nobody wants to fund it. It limits us.”

Our research findings indicate that practitioners in small organisations have significant need for support, advice, and guidance on matters of practice, policy, and governance (to name just a few areas critical to the safe running of a community organisation for young people and communities). These needs suggest the presence of risk, both at organisational and at practice levels.

In the absence of sector-wide support and standards, practitioners ask for and offer help to each other when they meet in forum meetings, training, or qualification sessions, as one practitioner illustrated: “You could come to my place and see how we work, what we do...I’m not sure if my [policy] documents are right or not.”

There are many practitioners with a background in youth or community work with a bank of knowledge to enable the development of effective policies, health and safety approaches, and risk management processes. However, those who come from other fields of work, and whose organisation addresses a specific gap for young people, may not always have ready knowledge of the safe running of a youth-focused community organisation. Inevitably, gaps and important operational risks may exist.

Participants in this research told us that what they learned in LUYW-funded forum meetings, training days, and qualification courses met many of their needs for practical, applicable help tailored to their work context. While this plays a role in reducing operational risks, the absence of clear expectations, standards, and the regulatory support to achieve these leaves organisations and practitioners dependent on circumstance.

There is little in the way of guard rails for practitioners and their organisations, even while many manage to effectively learn as they go, seeking and finding appropriate help along the way. The standards and qualifications in existence were largely created in a youth sector context of local authority leadership and infrastructure that no longer exists. In the highly pressured local community contexts in which today’s varied youth workforce operates, current standards and qualification courses do not meet their needs.

With the loss of much of the former youth sector and much of its workforce, essential systems of debriefing, reflective practice and supervision are being forgotten

We heard repeated reference to the value of the reflective discussion elements within LUYW’s offer, be it in training sessions or qualification tutorials. We were also told frequently how valuable participants found it to discuss their practice, their sessions, and the challenges they experience in working with young people alongside colleagues from other organisations. Yet in all the workshops, focus groups and interviews conducted for this evaluation, only once did we hear the word ‘debrief’.

It was beyond the original scope of this project to explore the supervision, debriefing, and reflective practice arrangements of the small local organisations that make up today's youth workforce. But our findings suggest that these systems that support individual practice development and quality improvement, alongside organisational risk management, are not widespread or frequent enough for today's youth workforce, as this practitioner stated: "[We do have a monthly supervision where I am, but it's not enough. It's good, but the communications between members of staff, in my opinion, is not good enough yet.](#)"

Participants told us that 'youth work' as it is commonly understood and perceived, is not of significant interest to many of those in the youth workforce today. While youth work qualifications may not be seen as an attractive prospect to some, those who undertook Level 2 and 3 courses particularly emphasised the reflective aspect of the course. They found that both the reflection on their practice that occurred during course discussions and the reflection that their practical assignments required were very valuable. Reflective learning is built into youth work course content because reflection has long been regarded as essential to quality youth work practice (Davies, 2010; de St Croix, 2017); indeed reflective practice is theorised to be essential to workforce development across the professions (see e.g., [Dewey](#), 1933; [Schön](#), 1983).

Young Hammersmith and Fulham have developed a supervision initiative [see borough spotlight, Appendix A], to address what they found to be a worrying gap within small organisations. It's likely that this gap, and the risks accompanying it, are not contained to one borough. The absence, or infrequency, of debriefing, supervision, and reflective practice when working with young people (often with complex needs) means practitioners lack the opportunity to surface and discuss what they experienced, felt, or saw during their session. They lack opportunities to consider what they noticed and discuss what it may mean, or what might need to change, and are perhaps less likely to process distress or worry. They may then not act (quickly enough) on safeguarding concerns, or alter their following session to account for differing needs, or review their approach to an individual young person.

Participants in this evaluation clearly told us that youth practitioners need to connect about, reflect on, and discuss their practice; to learn, to share, to support each other, to give and receive help and guidance. Their likely need for more regular, systematic opportunities in their place of work raises concerns about safeguarding and risk management at organisational level, alongside staff wellbeing and quality of practice.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were developed with the six participating LUYW programme boroughs in mind. Neighbouring northwest London boroughs may also find them of interest. We hope that those working in and with the youth and community sector nationally will find them a useful contribution to current debates about rebuilding youth workforce capacity as part of the government's 10-year Youth Matters strategy.

The research team proposes these recommendations as essential steps to support and strengthen the youth workforce in northwest London, beyond the LUYW programme timeframe. Coordination, facilitation, and funding support will be required to ensure YPFs can dedicate time to the recommendations below.

We encourage local authorities to increase their funding and infrastructure support for professional development of the youth workforce. John Lyon's charity, together with the YPF Trust, are in a unique neutral position to work across local authority areas in support of these recommendations.

Recommendation 1

Formalise a cross-borough strategic YPF partnership to jointly champion and capacity build the northwest London youth sector.

In the depleted youth sector landscape, YPFs' local infrastructure and influencing role is of critical importance. Each YPF does this work in their borough but there is relatively little focus on cross-borough partnership and projects. The successes of the cross-borough LUYW programme suggest that joining together with strategic focus will pool resources, reduce duplication, maximise skills and strengths, increase purchasing power, amplify influencing voices, and promote widespread awareness of sector challenges.

Recommended actions:

- A. Undertake joint strategic planning and vision-setting activity to identify sector goals
- B. Develop a cross-borough Theory of Change to clarify impact goals, and to align and strengthen central initiatives such as training programmes and forum development
- C. Better align monitoring and evaluation systems to the Theory of Change
- D. Explore opportunities for joint procurement
- E. Develop relationships with grant makers across northwest London to explore joint opportunities, and resultant economies of both scale and scope
- F. Share cross-borough plans with YPF members across the LUYW partnership, raising awareness of the drivers for the joint project, and the opportunities for working more closely together.

Note:

This recommendation matches insights from John Lyon's Charity's [Ten Years On report](#) (p 4):

Cross-borough learning: "Relationships between the YPFs are largely informal, based on personal connections. More formal or structured collaboration between the YPFs is currently missing. There is an appetite to improve peer learning and coordination among the YPFs, but this needs investment in facilitation.

Barriers to collaboration: Different local contexts and approaches can limit coordination. The YPF Trust has the potential to enable shared learning and development, but this is yet to be realised."

Recommendation 2

Strengthen YPFs' infrastructure role to develop cross-borough baseline workforce development standards for organisations working with young people.

YPFs already set some baseline expectations of organisations as part of their current ways of working. Some do this at the point of membership signup and others when an organisation has applied for a small YPF grant. These expectations include checking on risk management approaches and knowledge of safeguarding, insurance, and health and safety.

The proliferation of small organisations working with young people without the benefit of robust sector infrastructure (and the increasingly complex challenges facing young people) carries significant potential risk for staff, volunteers, and young people and families, and to the organisations themselves. YPFs, with their well-developed knowledge of local organisations and their needs, are in a prime position locally to support them to build robustness and safe practices through standard-setting, thereby supporting their long-term health and longevity).

Recommended actions:

- A. Undertake a collaborative process with members across YPF areas to identify and agree a common set of baseline standards. This process will also serve to identify the most pressing organisational and practice risks and inform the training offer. Existing youth work standards (e.g., [NYA](#), 2023) may be a useful starting point for the process, but it will also be necessary to consider what is most important for small local organisations who don't consider themselves as offering 'youth work'
- B. Add checks on debriefing, supervision and reflective practice within organisations to the existing set of baseline checks.

Recommendation 3

Add workforce professional development explicitly as a YPF focus area.

Currently, supporting the professional development of members is not an explicit part of the YPF remit. Small local organisations exist within a wider training and professional development vacuum, have a strong need for high quality training, and lack funds to purchase such provision for themselves.

LUYW funding enabled YPFs to take a lead role on training provision, developing an offer shaped by and tailored to members' needs. YPFs now have a well-developed understanding of these needs and are in an excellent position to update and deepen that knowledge through ongoing forum and training activity. A more explicit focus on training would be helpful when working on the baseline standard-setting process referred to in Recommendation 2.

Recommended actions:

- A. Develop a deep understanding of who accessed (and who didn't access) the LUYW training offer and why. Each YPF could understand borough level facilitators and barriers to engagement before pooling this information to establish regional insights
- B. Share and build on existing knowledge and learning about specialist training within the LUYW YPF group, and beyond, to deepen understanding of need and what works
- C. Explore an aligned programme tailored to understanding organisational-level professional development needs, such as governance, risk management, debriefing, supervision, and reflective practice. Understand where else training and resources may be offered, develop inter-organisational links, and consider how to meet gaps
- D. Explore ongoing appetite for cross-borough communities of practice, connecting practitioners working on important practice challenges.

Recommendation 4

Continue to offer, develop and facilitate borough forums.

Borough forums are a highly valued connecting space for YPF members and provide plentiful rewards for individuals, organisations, and the sector. Forum meetings serve to connect members to each other, better connect YPFs to their members, surface organisational and professional development needs, and pave the way for relationships and partnerships between small local organisations.

Recommended actions:

- A. Consider building or strengthening a peer-led element for each borough forum to help reduce YPF team time and sustain them post-LUYW funding

- B. Work on capacity-building members to enable them to develop and facilitate focused sessions, perhaps through regional training and support efforts
- C. Use forum meetings to share evaluation findings and plans for the future with members.

Appendix A

Borough stories

Camden: a rich and complex ecosystem

Camden is a borough with a relatively mature and well-connected youth sector ecosystem. Participants described it as a 'rich borough' to work in, with a wide range of opportunities for young people and a strong network of local organisations, infrastructure bodies, and support. Young Camden Foundation (YCF) was repeatedly positioned by participants as an important part of this ecosystem: a trusted connector, source of advice, and route into training, funding opportunities, and wider relationships, as this practitioner explained: 'Young Camden Foundation is a bit like ... part of the family. They're there and helpful. Whether it's through training or whether it's through funds or advice.'

This relative strength also brings complexity. Several participants reflected that Camden's reputation as a relatively well-funded borough can make it harder for small organisations to attract external funding; despite stark inequalities, high levels of need, and growing pressure on youth and mental health services. The picture was therefore not simply one of advantage, but of strong infrastructure alongside deep and uneven need.

LUYW funding appeared to enable YCF to strengthen this already active ecosystem, by deepening relationships and making collaboration more practical. Forums, newsletters, leadership spaces, creative networks, and the cross-borough conference helped organisations meet others, share learning, promote each other's work, and develop joint activity. This included spaces such as the Rising Voices Network, which brings together leaders and emerging leaders from Global Majority backgrounds across Camden and Kensington & Chelsea to share experience, build mutual support, and work collaboratively to disrupt entrenched inequities. Participants described YCF's CEO as an important advocate for them as small community organisations:

Young Camden Foundation are often like our spokesperson for the sector... all the stuff that we talk about in the forums and all the trainings... you'll then see Daisy the Chief Exec... at Council meetings... NHS meetings... presenting on the challenges and the problems.

Practitioner, member organisation

Camden's training offer was also notable for extending beyond youth work qualifications and practice-focused training into finance, project management, fundraising, bid writing, and social media. In this sense, YCF's offer was not only about developing individual practitioners, but also about strengthening the small organisations that youth workers sit within.

The overall picture is one of depth and consolidation. In a borough with an active but pressured ecosystem, LUYW helped strengthen the relationships, confidence, and organisational capacity that small youth and community organisations need to keep developing their work.

Ealing: intentionally creating pathways for opportunity

Ealing's story was one of thoughtful and intentionally created connections. Participants described connectedness not only as about networking, but as belonging, shared purpose, mutual support, and practical exchange, as one practitioner described: '[Level Up is basically the undercurrent of all our training and networks.](#)'

Quarterly forum meetings were described as deliberately hosted spaces, often rotating across venues and shaped around themes, speakers, an 'Opportunity Marketplace', and informal networking. Meetings help members discover local provision, identify gaps, meet potential partners, and avoid duplication:

[And then we have speakers, on average two to three speakers relating to that topic, maybe about sharing opportunities. And then we have our open segment called 'Opportunity Marketplace' where people put their hand up and just share their own \[information\]... just putting it out there. And then we have a nice lunch, networking. It's very chilled.](#)

Young People's Foundation

Through LUYW, Young Ealing Foundation used quarterly forum meetings, training, and qualifications to create purposeful routes into connection and opportunity. Participants gave vivid examples of young people and volunteers accessing Level 1 Youth Work training, discovering new interests, building confidence, and beginning to see youth or community work as a possible pathway, as in this practitioner's example: '[She came to do the training in the half term and got her qualification and it's now what she's actually interested in doing... She's continued to flourish since then.](#)'

For some young people, this was especially significant because traditional education or employment routes had not always felt accessible or positive. Training and qualifications also strengthened organisations, supporting confidence, credibility, funding applications, and better understanding of young people's needs.

Participants were clear that connection in Ealing does not happen automatically. Many organisations are small, volunteer-led, or delivered by people who also have full-time jobs, so networking has to be actively planned, hosted, and made worthwhile. The main constraints were time, capacity, and infrastructure, including limited staff, paperwork, lack of youth spaces, and rental costs. In this context, LUYW made valuable connections purposeful and practical, helping small organisations find people, knowledge, and opportunities that could strengthen their work with young people.

Hammersmith & Fulham: supervision as a route to quality and credibility

Hammersmith & Fulham's YPF (Young H&F) has an ambition to strengthen youth work quality, safeguarding, and sector credibility via a supervision and reflective practice programme, as their CEO emphasises: "We've basically lost reflective supervision from the sector along with the cuts. So people always see the cuts as being about the workers and the spaces, but it's also the professionalism and the practice."

Young H&F's work in this area responds to a widely held youth sector concern about what has been lost through the erosion of youth work infrastructure since 2010. Cuts to the sector have not only reduced staff, buildings, and services, they have also weakened the professional systems that once supported reflective practice, shared standards, and quality assurance.

In a diverse voluntary youth sector, where many organisations are small, informal, community-led or built around a specific local need, not everyone working with young people will have come through the formal youth work qualification pathway. Young H&F's approach recognises that strengthening professional practice does not require everyone to follow the same route. Reflective supervision offers a way to strengthen practice across this diverse workforce while valuing the different experience, skills and community relationships that different routes into youth work can bring.

With LUYW Programme funding, Young H&F has tested free introductory supervision sessions. They are currently drafting guidance and a quick-guide and infographic with the borough and the Local Safeguarding Children Partnership, following early mapping indicating that supervision is understood differently across the sector. In addition to this, organisations face practical barriers to accessing supervision, such as cost constraints, time, and finding the right supervisor.

The significance of this work is that supervision is being shaped as more than a support offer for individual workers. It is also a lever for wider systems change: a way to talk with organisations, funders, commissioners, and statutory partners about safeguarding, reflective practice, quality, credibility, and the infrastructure small organisations need to do serious work with children and young people. In this sense, Young H&F's contribution through LUYW points to the importance of rebuilding not only the youth workforce, but the professional and organisational conditions that allow youth work to be safe, supported, and trusted, as a team member explained: 'It's a Trojan horse... because it's using this to do lots of different things at once... Trying to change the system without scaring people off.'

Harrow: sustaining connection beyond the funded programme

Young Harrow Foundation (YHF)'s story centres on their plans following the ending of LUYW funding, and their work exploring ideas for a sustainable regular practitioner forum. YHF members valued the forum meetings as a way to meet other organisations, learn about local provision, share practice and make practical connections, particularly in a borough where organisations do not always know what others are doing or what spaces and activities are available.

Rather than trying to sustain every part of the programme in the same way, YHF focused on the forum as one particularly successful element with strong potential to continue. They were relatively low-cost, rooted in member relationships, and already valued as a way of keeping organisations connected, as explained by a YPF team member: "If you haven't got funding, you've got each other." The focus was therefore on how the forums could continue with more member ownership and a lighter, but still purposeful, level of support from YHF.

YHF's Project Manager, Keisha, described thoughtfully stepping back from leading every forum herself and encouraging members to share their work in ways that others could learn from and use. Forum meetings also began moving between member venues, encouraging organisations to visit local spaces, understand each other's offers, and identify opportunities for referrals or collaboration: "What we're trying to do up to December is seeing what it would take to actually train up three or four of our members to be leads for that and then give them some support rather than us actually take on the full whack."

Harrow's approach is a lesson in long-term planning for borough connection post-LUYW: sustainability is unlikely to mean preserving a whole programme unchanged, or expecting activity to continue without resources. It can also mean identifying the parts of the offer that members most value, can help to own, and could continue with more focused funding, coordination, and support.

Kensington & Chelsea: broadening workforce development through playwork

Kensington & Chelsea's story highlights how Young K&C built on the connections they'd developed with member organisations to adapt the Level Up Youth Work programme to reflect the needs of their local workforce.

In Kensington & Chelsea (K&C), members particularly valued opportunities for learning and connection. Accredited qualifications and accessible training supported professional development, while forums provided space for practitioners to share ideas and concerns, learn about each other's provision and make practical connections through referrals and collaboration. This was particularly valuable in a borough where a north-south divide can make connections more difficult. At the same time, Young K&C also recognised that its local workforce extended beyond more traditional

adolescent-centric youth work settings, creating a need for a broader approach to professional development.

Playwork therefore became a distinctive part of Young K&C's LUYW offer. Kensington and Chelsea has a strong network of voluntary sector-run adventure playgrounds and play centres, as well as organisations increasingly providing junior youth clubs and holiday provision. Young K&C responded by introducing the opportunity to develop specialist playwork skills, recognising both the expertise involved in working with younger children and the need for that practice to be valued alongside youth work. As one participant reflected, play can be dismissed as 'just playing', despite requiring significant knowledge and skill to manage safeguarding, inclusion, risk management, and learning through reflective practice.

By offering the Play-Way qualification (an entry-level training course developed by the University of Gloucestershire) as part of its LUYW offer, Young K&C created complementary development pathways for practitioners working with different age groups. It saw particular value in playwork's emphasis on child-led environments and inclusive practice, including for disabled children and young people, which complements youth work approaches, as this practitioner explained: *'It was one of my favourite courses I've ever done... it was such a different experience to what I was used to... I was able to take a lot out of it and provide my colleagues with lots more knowledge as well.'*

For practitioners working in play settings or with younger children, this recognition mattered. As Nicola Butler, Co-CEO of Young K&C described it, they felt *"seen, valued, respected, included, and supported alongside their youth work colleagues"*. Young K&C's experience shows how broadening workforce development beyond a single model can help recognise and invest in forms of practice that might otherwise be overlooked.

Westminster: building community in a borough of sharp contrasts

Westminster's story was shaped by contrast. Participants described a borough where visible affluence sits alongside significant inequality, with young people from very different economic and social worlds living, learning, and socialising side by side. Practitioners challenged assumptions that Westminster is simply a wealthy borough, describing high levels of need, safety concerns, cross-borough tensions, family pressures, and intense demand for youth provision: *"Demand is huge... The opportunity to be able to reach these young people is huge. There's just... we don't have the capacity to do it."* Several organisations also described reaching large numbers of young people, but having limited capacity to provide safe, trusted spaces and support for all the young people who need them.

Against this backdrop, a strong theme emerged about the importance of strengthening the youth work in-borough ecosystem, particularly after the loss of earlier infrastructure and core funding, which had contributed to fragmentation and competition between organisations. Young

Westminster Foundation's approach combined open borough-wide LUYW forums with more focused annual locality meetings for practitioners in south, north, east, and north west Westminster. These locality networks created space to discuss hyperlocal needs and share solutions, build connections between organisations working close to one another, and link them with local youth hubs, family hubs, and early help services. This helped move organisations away from a sense of 'survival of the fittest' and towards a stronger sense of community, where practitioners could share information, ask for advice, and better understand each other's work:

I was describing Westminster as survival of the fittest... But today... I realised that no, we're a community... We're literally round the corner - if we ask for help we'll get the help we need from each other. And you'll find some of our kids go to them and some of their kids come to us and it's just such a lovely community... Ever since Young Westminster have come in... we're all more willing to work together. Practitioner, member organisation

The forums and training spaces therefore carried more than practical value; they helped create a safer and more collaborative culture among organisations working under pressure. Participants described feeling backed, trusted, and welcomed, and valued being in the same room with others doing similar work. The training offer reflected the issues practitioners were seeing in their work with young people while also strengthening confidence, credibility, and organisational sustainability. While high demand, limited capacity, and lack of core funding remain real challenges, LUYW helped create the conditions for organisations to feel more connected, supported, and part of a shared youth work community.

Appendix B (supplied by YWF)

Specialist training delivered

Specialist training delivered by the Level Up Youth Work programme was designed in response to needs identified by practitioners working within small, community-led organisations across six London boroughs. The training offer provides an insight into both workforce development priorities and the needs experienced by young people throughout the programme.

Summary

- 127 specialist training courses were delivered and offered to 1,330 practitioners across the six boroughs.
- Training fell into six broad theme areas: Leadership, governance and organisational development, Health / mental health and wellbeing, Core / mandatory competencies, Neurodiversity / additional needs, Youth work practice / practitioner wellbeing, Healthy relationships / domestic violence / exploitation.
- **Core / mandatory competencies, Neurodiversity and additional needs, Health, mental health and wellbeing, and Youth work practice and practitioner wellbeing** were delivered in every borough, these reflect shared, universal training needs across the LUYW network.
- **Autism & ADHD awareness training** was the most delivered training course. The frequency of delivery of this training increased year on year reflecting growing demand from practitioners for training in this area across all boroughs. Other high demand training courses included **Paediatric First Aid, Safeguarding, Emergency First Aid and Mental Health First Aid**.

Heatmap of training delivered, by theme and borough

Theme	Harrow	K&C	Ealing	Westminster	H&F	Camden	Theme total
Leadership, governance & org. development	9	12	4	–	1	1	27
Health, mental health and wellbeing	6	2	3	8	4	2	25
Core / mandatory competencies	3	8	2	2	3	4	22
Neurodiversity and additional needs	5	1	4	3	3	5	21
Youth work practice, supervision & wellbeing	6	3	2	3	2	2	18
Healthy relationships, DV & exploitation	3	–	3	3	4	1	14
Borough total	32	26	18	19	17	15	127

Training delivered within each theme

Each core theme groups together a range of distinct training courses delivered by different providers across the six boroughs.

Leadership, governance & org. development (27)		Neurodiversity and additional needs (21)	
Communications & public speaking (storytelling, Speech Craft, comms)	6	Autism & ADHD awareness	14
Bid writing & fundraising	4	Inclusive and accessible services	2
AI for the charity sector	3	Health inequalities (autism & ADHD)	1
Cultural & racial equity	3	Deaf awareness	1
Policies & procedures	3	Neurodiversity in youth work practice	1
Extremism, riot response & critical incident response	3	SEND safeguarding	1
Impact measurement	1	RSE for neurodivergent young people	1
Leadership skills	1		
Gender equality	1	Youth work practice, supervision & practitioner wellbeing (18)	
Volunteer recruitment	1	Online safety & social media	3
Organisational strategy	1	Supervision training	2
		Youth voice & leadership	2
		Burnout / staff wellbeing	2
		Mental health for practitioners (specialist cohorts)	2
		Reflective practice	1
		Co-production practice	1
		Digital resilience (practice-focused)	1
		Children's rights & student voice	1
		Young carers awareness	1
		Sports coaching / activator	1
		Employability	1
Health, mental health and wellbeing (25)		Healthy relationships, DV & exploitation (14)	
Mental Health First Aid (MHFA)	5	Gangs & serious youth violence	3
Trauma-informed practice	3	Trusted (Youth) Allies training	3
Regulating emotions / wellbeing conversations (Anna Freud)	3	Domestic abuse awareness	2
Eating disorders	3	Healthy relationships	2
Digital resilience	2	Sex & relationships education	1
General mental health awareness	2	Conflict management	1
Vaping awareness	2	SHAME workshop (violence intervention)	1
Our Time Awareness	1	Promoting healthy masculinity	1
Drugs & alcohol	1		
Gambling awareness	1		
Managing challenging behaviour	1		
Core / mandatory competencies (22)			
Paediatric first aid	8		
Safeguarding (DSL, Level 2/3, Train the Trainer)	7		
Emergency / workplace first aid	6		
Fire safety / health & safety	1		

Appendix C

Youth Work and Playwork Qualifications

Alongside the wider specialist training offer, the programme funded Youth Work and Playwork qualifications for practitioners, delivered by trusted local training providers. These were: Manjeet Johal Associates, The Avenues Youth Project, London Tigers, The Harrow Club (Youth Work) and Oyster Training (Play Work).

Summary

- 196 practitioners registered for qualifications, of whom 184 started and 156 completed. Four practitioners have not concluded their studies at time of writing — an overall completion rate of 86% among those who started.
- Level 3 Youth Work and Playwork qualifications had 100% completion rates among starters, while Level 2 cohorts had the lowest completion rate, at 67%.
- Level 1 courses had the most uptake (101 registrations across 8 distinct courses), reflecting a strong entry-level pipeline into accredited youth work qualifications.

Qualification overview and completion by qualification level

Practitioners registered	196
Practitioners started	184
Practitioners still studying on courses	4 – Level 3 Youth Work
Practitioners completed	156
Overall completion rate (of starters)	86%
Overall completion rate (of registered)	81%

Level	Registered	Started	Completed	% Complete (of starters)
Level 1 Youth Work – Skills and Education SEG Awards (ABC)	101	96	90	93%
Level 2 Youth Work – JNC-endorsed, carrying recognised professional youth work status	57	55	37	67.3%
Level 3 Youth Work – JNC-endorsed, carrying recognised professional youth work status	27	23	19	100%*
Playwork – Skillsactive, the Sector Skills Council for Active Leisure and Learning	11	10	10	100%

Source: LUYW annual monitoring reports, Years 2–3.

*Completion rate for Level 3 Youth Work is based on 19 learners who started and completed courses. Four practitioners are still undertaking courses, due to complete by December 2026.

Qualification completion by borough

Borough	Registered	Started	Completed	% Complete (of starters)
Camden	14	14	10	100.0%
Ealing	23	21	21	100.0%
H&F	21	21	13	61.9%
Harrow	41	35	34	97%
K&C	54	50	40	80.0%
Westminster	43	43	38	88%

Qualification course breakdown by borough

Learners who started and completed each qualification, by borough, aggregated across Years 2–3.

Borough	Qualification title	Started	Completed
Camden	Youth Work Qualification Level 3	12	8 (4, ongoing)
	Level 2 Youth Work	1	1
	Level 2 converting to Level 3 (after 4 units, if criteria met)	1	1
Ealing	Level 2 Youth Work	13	13
	Level 1 in Exploring Youth Work	8	8
Hammersmith & Fulham	Level 1 in Exploring Youth Work	10	10
	Level 2 Youth Work	11	3
Harrow	Youth Work Qualification Level 1 (Youth Edition)	24	24
	Youth Work Qualification Level 3 Diploma	8	8
	Youth Work Qualification Level 2 Certificate	3	2
Kensington & Chelsea	Level 2 Youth Worker Award	27	18
	Introduction to Youth Work	13	12
	Playway: An Introduction to Playwork	10	10
Westminster	ABC Level 1 Certificate in an Introduction to Youth Work	27	25
	SEG Awards Level 1 Certificate in Exploring Youth Work	14	11