



Llywodraeth Cymru  
Welsh Government

## RESEARCH

# Research to inform development of the Youth Work Strategy: summary

The report consolidates what is already known by stakeholders about Youth Work in Wales. It sets out a theory of change and will inform development of a sustainable youth work model.

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# 1. Research aims and methodology

This document summarises the findings of research carried out by Wavehill on behalf of the Welsh Government between July and October 2020. The research was commissioned to consolidate the available evidence about youth work in Wales and to enable the Welsh Government and the Interim Youth Work Board to reflect on the current evidence and inform the strategic direction of their work as they work to support a sustainable delivery model for youth work in Wales.

In pursuit of its ambitions for youth work, the Welsh Government appointed an **Interim Youth Work Board** in 2018 and published a high-level **Youth Work Strategy** in June 2019. To support its ongoing work in this area, Welsh Government commissioned Wavehill to carry out a research project with two high-level objectives, specifically to:

- generate an understanding of effective youth work interventions and current evidence about the variety and quality of youth work models that exist across Wales, including any barriers and opportunities that should be addressed.
- facilitate the Interim Youth Work Board to create a shared theory of change for the Youth Work Strategy based on that understanding.

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## Methodology

A mixed methods approach to the research was agreed following a series of scoping interviews with key stakeholders. Reflecting the need to consolidate what was already known within the sector and the wider literature on youth work, the study drew together insight from desk-based research with findings from consultation with sector stakeholders and representatives of young people. Key tasks included:

- scoping interviews with 17 stakeholders
- in-depth stakeholder interviews with a further 60 sector stakeholders and representatives of young people
- three theory of change workshops with members of the Interim Youth Work Board, Strategy Participation Groups and Task and Finish Groups
- two theory of change workshops with representatives of young people
- a review of literature relating to the key research themes
- a review of data about the sector collected by Welsh Government

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, all interviews, workshops and presentations were held remotely using Microsoft Teams. All elements of the research below were available bilingually. Full copies of the discussion guides used to facilitate these interviews are included as an annex in the [full research report](#).

## 2. Findings and recommendations

### What published evidence says about the benefits of the youth work approach

Research generated about Wales, the UK and internationally tells us that a youth work approach is defined by the purpose of the work done with young people, focusing on holistic development and involving young people as empowered partners.

The literature reviewed indicates that the evidence base for the benefits of youth work is not very strong, particularly in relation to youth work carried out in Wales.

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Until recently, there has not been much research that has explored the benefits of the youth work approach. This evidence base is improving, however, with several studies having been published in recent years, including high quality studies commissioned in Ireland and Scotland. Much of this recent research has been carried out using participatory evaluation methodologies such as **Transformative Evaluation**, which employ youth work principles in their methodologies. A similar evidence base is not currently available for Wales.

The evidence base emerging from these studies in other countries is strongest in highlighting the soft outcomes that result from engagement with youth work, including positive inter-personal relationships and self-confidence as well as the evidence that these soft outcomes contribute to longer-term 'harder' outcomes, including improving educational participation and attainment.

## **The volume, nature and scope of youth work being delivered in Wales**

This research has found that there is an inconsistent and incomplete picture of youth work provision in Wales. Due to the reporting requirements facing statutory youth work provision, there is a good picture of what is delivered by statutory providers in Wales, but altogether less is known about provision delivered by voluntary and third sector organisations.

Data about youth work delivered by statutory providers indicates that in **2018/2019** around 15% of 11 to 25 year olds in Wales were registered members of local authority-delivered youth work. This figure is down from 20% of all 11 to 25 year olds in Wales in **2013/2014**. Stakeholder interviews indicate a perception among the youth work sector that this is the result of reduced funding and an increased emphasis on more targeted forms of youth work. However, at present there is no evidence about whether reductions in the volume of youth work being delivered by local authorities have been offset by increases among voluntary and third sector delivery.

**Recommendation 1:** Reflecting the lack of systematic information about youth work in Wales, particularly that which relates to non-statutory provision, Welsh Government should consider expanding the scope of the data it collects about

youth work provision in Wales to include all youth work organisations in Wales, including voluntary youth work delivery. This would extend beyond existing information provided by local authorities to Welsh Government and would enable Welsh Government to establish the extent to which a universal entitlement to youth work provision has been met.

There are considerable disparities between local authorities in relation to the volume of youth work being delivered, the nature of provision, the number of people engaged by this provision, and the funding available to support it.

There is also considerable variation in the volume of youth work delivered through the medium of Welsh. At a national level, Welsh Government figures indicate that around 17% of local authority-delivered youth work projects are delivered entirely or mainly through the medium of Welsh. However, regional figures show that all local authority youth work projects in Gwynedd were delivered in Welsh in 2018/2019, whereas no projects were delivered through the medium of Welsh in Flintshire during the same period.

Youth work organisations consulted during this research reported a view that Welsh medium youth work is essential not only because youth work can contribute to national strategies such as 'Cymraeg 2050: A million Welsh speakers', but also because engaging with young people through their language of preference is essential to the youth work methodology. As data is limited only to statutory provision, and there is a considerable amount of Welsh medium youth work delivered by third sector partners, the available evidence does not allow for a comprehensive assessment of the extent to which young people that wish to can engage with youth work through the medium of Welsh.

**Recommendation 2:** The extent to which youth work provision is available through the medium of Welsh should be a key component of the data collection process recommended in Recommendation 1. Understanding what provision is available and where there are gaps is crucial to establishing what support is required to enable all young people who want to access youth work through the medium of Welsh to do so.

# Challenges and opportunities facing youth work in Wales

To inform recommendations about how the Youth Work Strategy can be operationalised as a sustainable delivery model for youth work in Wales, stakeholders were asked about challenges, opportunities and their aspirations for the youth work sector.

The availability of funding to support youth work in Wales was identified by stakeholders as the main challenge facing the sector. Across statutory, voluntary and third sector stakeholders, there is a perception that during the last 10 years, youth work organisations have been asked to do more with less. This has been compounded by recent changes to youth funding and commissioning, which stakeholders perceive to have resulted in youth work delivery focusing more on targeted forms of provision. Although [international evidence](#) suggests that this is a trend seen across Europe, with youth work becoming increasingly tied to employment outcomes, stakeholders identified the Learning and Skills Act 2000 as a driver of this shift. This is consistent with research conducted by [Wrexham Glyndwr University and Cardiff Metropolitan University](#) which found that the previous iteration of the [National Youth Work Strategy for Wales 2014-2018](#) focused too much on targeted provision and provision linked to schools. Among stakeholders, a general view emerged that more could be done to protect open access youth work in the new strategy.

Another challenge identified by stakeholders is ensuring that youth work is recognised by policymakers and the public as a skilled and valued way of working with young people, delivered by a professional workforce. Many stakeholders consulted during this research reported a perception that youth work is often misunderstood by policymakers and that this is related to the lack of an evidence base surrounding the impacts of youth work, particularly more universal elements of provision which are not working towards pre-defined outcomes.

## The impact of COVID-19 on the youth work sector

Like many other sectors in Wales, youth work has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. The evidence available suggests that youth work

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organisations have adapted well to the challenges posed by COVID-19, but that the effects of the pandemic and the resulting economic disruption are likely to present long-term challenges. Existing forms of digital delivery may have to be more closely integrated into service models depending on any potential future restrictions put in place due to COVID-19. There is also emerging evidence that young people may present to youth services and other youth support services with a greater number of more complex challenges, particularly in the area of mental health. Being mindful of this will be important for future service delivery.

Many youth work organisations consulted during this research identified the pandemic as an opportunity to embed forms of integrated digital working more effectively, and to work in collaboration with other services that work with young people. Many stakeholders reported that while COVID-19 had caused youth service provision to be closed down or moved online, youth workers had become more involved in delivering other services. Some stakeholders identified this as having advertised the benefits of the youth work approach to other stakeholders who may not be fully aware of what it is and what it can offer. However, despite the positive views about how successfully the sector had adapted to new ways of working during the COVID-19 pandemic, the majority of stakeholders identified a danger that digital provision is normalised as the standard model of youth work delivery, rather than something that complements existing models of face-to-face or telephone provision.

## **Sector perceptions of how youth work strategy can be delivered**

### **The scope of the strategy**

Some concern was raised by stakeholders that youth work has been insufficiently differentiated from other ways of working with young people in previous strategies. In particular, there is a perception that it has been included with other ‘youth support services’ that do not work with young people in the same way. Stakeholders reported a view that youth work is centred on the holistic development of young people and relies on their voluntary engagement and their empowered participation. Figure 2.1 shows stakeholders’ responses



when asked to define youth work. Stakeholders were generally of the view that the **National Occupation Standards and Principles and Purposes of Youth Work** are sufficient to define youth work, although some stakeholders and representatives of young people suggested that ‘active citizenship’ and ‘political education’ are important parts of youth work not currently covered in the definition.

**Figure 2.1: Stakeholder Definitions of Youth Work**



Source: Stakeholder interviews

Reflecting the importance of voluntary engagement and the holistic development of young people, stakeholders identified universal open access youth work as something that should be more central to the strategy. To reflect this, there is a case for more research to explore the impact of open access youth work in communities, particularly in terms of its contribution to the objectives of the Well-being of Future Generations Act and Prosperity for All priority areas.

**Recommendation 3:** Welsh Government should consider commissioning research into the contribution made by universal open access youth work. It



should use this evidence base to justify and re-assess expenditure in this area.

If, as the high level youth work strategy suggests, youth work is to be seen as a universal entitlement for young people, Welsh Government should work to establish a youth service that is available and accessible to all young people in Wales. The majority of stakeholders consulted were of the view this could be achieved through greater ring-fencing of funding available for open access youth work or establishing minimum standards for what local authorities must provide, either via local authority youth services or third sector providers.

**Recommendation 4:** Welsh Government should consider measures to ensure that a consistent universal open-access youth work offer is available across the country. Measures could include ring-fencing funding for open-access youth work in the core youth work budgets provided to local authorities or establishing a duty for local authorities to make sufficient youth work provision available for young people in their area.

Although there is a desire for ensuring greater commitment to open access youth work as a universal entitlement, stakeholders recognised that open access provision needs to be integrated with other provision, including both more targeted forms of youth work and other support services for young people. More evidence is needed to develop a better understanding of pathways into other provision from open access youth work, and how best to integrate youth work into other services that support young people.

**Recommendation 5:** Welsh Government should consider commissioning research to understand pathways for young people from youth work into other forms of support and how youth work can work closely with more targeted forms of provision.

## Governance and leadership

Stakeholders consulted during this research were broadly positive about the role of the Interim Youth Work Board and the Welsh Government in developing the new strategy. The new strategy is seen as a 'step in the right direction' and setting up the Interim Youth Work Board is seen as a commitment to exploring

more collaborative ways of working that will benefit the sector. However, stakeholders reported concerns that momentum may be lost if the Interim Youth Work Board's work comes to an end. Strong support was expressed for the idea of making the Board's role permanent.

**Recommendation 6:** Welsh Government should consider making the role of the Board permanent or appointing it for a longer period to provide ongoing input into the development of the youth work strategy.

Stakeholders also suggested that one of the problems facing previous youth work strategies has been that there have been insufficient resources to support their implementation. Remedying this is seen as an essential part of developing a more sustainable delivery model for youth work in Wales and was identified as a priority for developing a more sustainable model of youth work delivery. It was noted that previous research about how a national youth work representative body could be developed has already been carried out and that this continues to provide a good starting point for thinking about how to achieve this.

**Recommendation 7:** Welsh Government should use previous research to think about the future delivery model for the youth work in Wales. It should consider supporting the development of a national representative body for youth work. It should consider how statutory and voluntary providers are represented and make youth voice central to its work. It is important that whatever is developed is specific to the needs of the sector in Wales.

While national coordination and support was identified as a priority for a new youth work delivery model, the existing focus on local delivery is viewed as a key strength of the current model. Local authority youth services and third sector youth work delivery organisations are perceived to have good local intelligence, having built up many years of experience working with communities in their area, and it is important that this is not lost. However, there is a perception that since the demise of Children and Young People's partnerships, coordination of local delivery has been less effective than it might be. In particular, coordination between local authority and third sector providers, as well as coordination between youth work organisations and other organisations providing support services to young people are seen as something that could be improved. Welsh Government should consider working with local authorities, third and voluntary

sector providers, as well as other stakeholders, to identify the best structures to support local coordination of youth work.

**Recommendation 8:** Welsh Government should consider how coordination of youth work provision, and coordination between youth work and other youth support services, can be best supported at a local authority level. These partnership structures should embrace the role of voluntary organisations as delivery partners working together with local authorities.

### **Young people's role in operationalising the strategy**

Finally, in line with the children's rights approach to youth work outlined in the strategy, there was a consensus among stakeholders that it is important for young people's voices to be prominent in delivering the new youth work strategy. The principles of participation and accountability are important parts of the children's rights approach, and both stakeholders and young people alike reported a view that more could be done to ensure that policymakers and stakeholders are accountable to young people and include them in decisions about how youth work is designed and delivered.

**Recommendation 9:** Welsh Government should consider how youth voice is included in national governance structures for youth work and require local authorities to include young people's voices in local authority level governance structures. Recommendations 1 to 8 should be understood in the context of Recommendation 9, and youth voice should be weaved into all levels of youth work planning and delivery in Wales.

## **3. The theory of change for youth work in Wales**

Building on the findings and conclusions of the research outlined above, the report presents a theory of change for youth work in Wales. This theory of change was based on stakeholder interviews with members of the Interim Youth Work Board and sector stakeholders, as well as a series of theory of change workshops involving Board members and representatives of young people.

Throughout the research, concern was expressed by stakeholders that developing a theory of change and associated indicators may increase the burden on youth work organisations to collect data about the young people they work with and focus on achieving particular outcomes. To reflect this, the theory of change has been structured to demonstrate that different stakeholders have responsibility for different parts of the theory of change and have contrasting priorities in trying to understand the difference that youth work makes.

The theory of change has therefore been presented in four sections, each of which are the responsibility of different stakeholders:

- strategy and policy enablers that contribute to a high-quality youth work offer in Wales (understanding the effectiveness of this is the responsibility of policymakers such as Welsh Government and the Interim Youth Work Board as stakeholder representatives)
- youth work practice and short-term outcomes for young people resulting from it (this is the responsibility of organisations delivering youth work)
- long-term outcomes for young people resulting from youth work (this is the responsibility of sector stakeholders, such as the Interim Youth Work Board)
- The contribution of youth work to Welsh Government policy objectives (this is the responsibility of Welsh Government)

Based on the research and the theory of change workshops, the following activities were identified as priorities to support a more sustainable youth work delivery model.

- Strengthening the legislative basis of youth work, involving greater ring-fencing for funding open access youth work or establishing minimum sufficient standards of youth work that local authorities must deliver.
- Continuing to provide strong and coherent leadership for youth work by forming a national representative body and making the role of the Interim Youth Work Board permanent.
- Ensuring greater co-ordination of youth work at a national level, by developing a national youth work representative body, which represents maintained, third and voluntary sectors. This body could support the commissioning of youth work delivery, quality assurance, workforce development, and leveraging in funding from external sources.

- Fostering greater partnership working and co-ordination between local delivery organisations, building on the strengths of the current delivery model and ensuring greater co-operation between local authorities and third and voluntary sector organisations in local areas.
- Recruiting a workforce that it is representative of Wales' diversity will ensure that young people from all backgrounds have role models to look up to within youth work settings, and make youth work more accessible for all. A key part of this is ensuring that all young people who wish to access youth work through the medium of Welsh can do so.
- Supporting the development of the workforce to ensure that it is able to deliver high quality work. This will involve supporting and further developing initiatives such as the quality mark and workforce registration.
- Filling data gaps and using up-to-date data to tailor the youth work offer, which will enable youth work to be planned and resources allocated to ensure that every young person in Wales can access youth work. An important part of this is also ensuring that every young person who wants to access youth work through the medium of Welsh can do so.
- Ensuring that young people are involved in strategy development and service design, which will mean that decision-makers are accountable to young people for the youth work they fund and provide, and ensuring the children's rights approach is fully embedded in youth work delivery.

## 4. Contact details

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Views expressed in this report are those of the researchers and not necessarily those of the Welsh Government

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