

Connected Communities

Social Cohesion: Practice & Insights

Final report

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Social Cohesion: Practice and insights

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Executive summary

NCS sought to understand best practice principles for social cohesion initiatives in the youth sector

What we did

- This research aimed to understand factors driving social cohesion, as well as best practice principles for designing and implementing initiatives to improve social cohesions for young people
- An iterative programme of research identified and filled gaps in knowledge, moving from a literature review, discourse analysis to primary research with young people and with adults working in the youth sector

What we found

- Different initiatives focus on different **spheres of influence** for a young person, working across individual, peer/family, community and societal levels
- There are **stepping stones** in social cohesion, moving from preparation and readiness through to ensuring improvements last
- Overall, initiatives should consider **settings, duration and consistency, and iteration and co-design**
- **Mentors** have the potential to work across all areas of a young person's life and across the different stepping stones in social cohesion readiness and experience
- Initiatives can utilise **online spaces** to bring different young people together and help manage risks of online harm through offline counselling and education
- **The arts** can help young people get to know themselves and be open to the differences in others
- Initiatives should be less focused on which activities they include for **different genders**, but rather how to make allowances for different genders engaged in the same activity

What next?

- **Everyone in the youth sector has a role to play** and will need to **work together to tackle social division** and promote cohesion from a societal level down to individual young people



Background and Context



A country divided

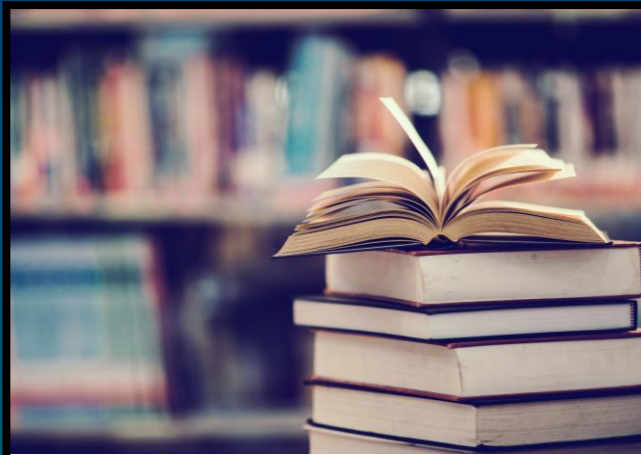
NCS may be winding down, but social cohesion needs dialling up

- In light of the Government's decision to wind down NCS Trust, it felt important to draw attention to social cohesion – the primary focus of NCS work for over a decade. NCS was founded to help build a more cohesive society and it is central to its legacy
- In recent times, social cohesion is more important than ever. We've all seen the increasing polarisation and division that people are facing in the UK.
- Young people are facing issues like intergenerational inequality, rising mental health problems, polarised public discourse on racism, and increase in sexual orientation and gender-based hate crimes
- These issues are creating a more divided society, and are further reinforced by distrust in institutions, political figures, and the spread of fake news and misinformation
- It's more important than ever to championing diversity, equality, solidarity and belonging, working towards driving social cohesion
- Engaging with young people is essential to building more cohesive societies, and youth provision plays a vital role in this – building connection and resilience, supporting them to appreciate and tolerate people with different views, and encourage young people to be active players in this space

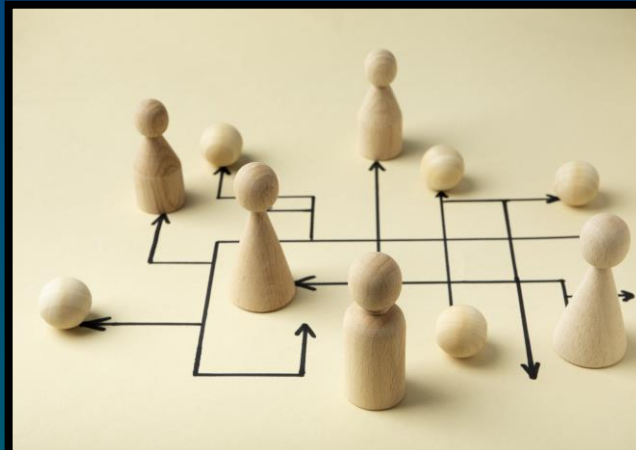


Understanding the factors driving cohesion

This important research aimed to:



Enhance our understanding of what drives social cohesion – and how these work in different settings



Improve our understanding of successful, best-practice approaches within the youth sector



Spotlight the different organisations, interventions and initiatives doing great work in this space

Thank You!

To all of the individuals & organisations that were part of this research:



The Linking
Network



YOUTH
SPORT
TRUST



LY London
Youth



Sporting
communities



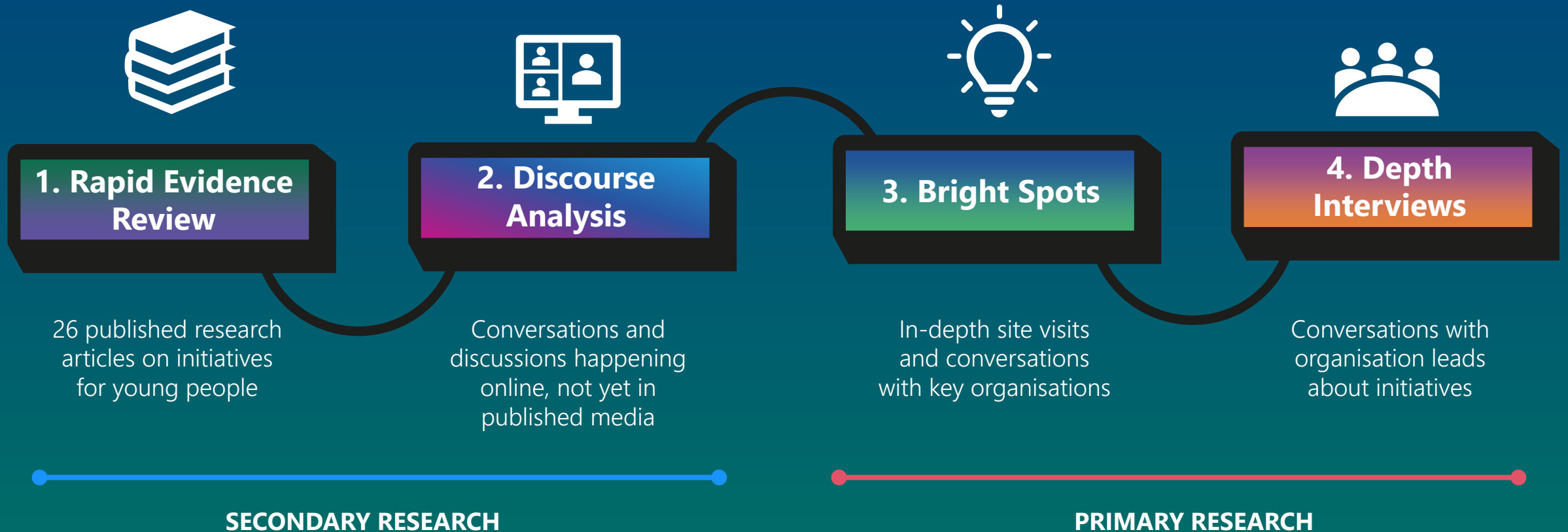
The
Boat House
Youth

making their world a better place



Identifying the gaps

This project utilised a multi-stage approach, allowing us to triangulate existing literature, online discussions and direct conversations with practitioners and young people



1. Rapid Evidence Review

SECONDARY RESEARCH

- 26 published research articles on initiatives for young people



Methodology

- We reviewed a range of current academic papers to gain a concise yet comprehensive understanding of the factors driving social cohesion amongst young people
- In total, we looked at 26 articles in depth
- We shortlisted articles that related to social cohesion initiatives, and were youth-focused and UK-based (where possible)
- Our rapid evidence review enabled us to pinpoint areas in need of further exploration

2. Discourse Analysis

SECONDARY RESEARCH

- Conversations and discussions happening online, not yet in published media via Discover.ai platform



Methodology

- A targeted online discourse analysis through an AI-driven text analytics tool
- The platform utilises AI technology to explore and identify common discourse themes across a custom database of text data from a range of online sources of discussion

Our key question:

- *What can we learn from online conversations about initiatives for social cohesion in the UK and beyond that give us best in class examples of opportunities for positive social change for young people?*
- This analysis allowed us to identify the youth initiatives being discussed in this space, exploring unique programs within the UK and globally, how they engage with young people, and how they bring them together

Together, the rapid evidence review & discourse analysis helped to inform **4 key areas of focus for our primary research:**

Mentoring - Understanding the specific mechanisms mentors use to establish strong mentoring relationships that last

Arts & Creative - Explore how art and creative activities can foster closeness and connectedness among people

Gender - Learning more about how single- and mixed-gender programmes work and the associated benefits and drawbacks of each

Online Spaces - Gaining a more comprehensive view of how online spaces could be used to facilitate social cohesion, whilst understanding the potential risks within this space

3. Bright Spots

PRIMARY RESEARCH

- Site immersions at key events, including conversations with practitioners and young people
- Interviews with 'best practice' practitioners working directly with young people



Methodology

- Spotighting key initiatives around our 4 interest areas
- Ensuring a range of perspectives from around the UK

Linking Network

- 1x site visit, to their 'Link Day' bringing together 30 students aged 10-12 from demographically different schools. The day aims to explore identity, become comfortable with difference and build connections within their local communities

London Youth

- 1x site visit at 'Unlock Your Potential' art careers event. Involved conversations with practitioners around the

potential of arts and sports programmes, as well as conversations from young people on what they want and expect from a youth programme

- 1x site visit to a 'youth board' meeting to engage with young people around what's important to them, what they expect from a youth program and how they can be supported to mix with others

Street Games (via partner organisations)

- x4 online interviews with nominated best-practice mentors, to better understand the role and value of mentorship in youth programmes and what key elements build quality, long-lasting relationships

4. Depth Interviews

PRIMARY RESEARCH

- Conversations with organisation leads about initiatives, as well as a mini-depth conversation with a youth representative



Methodology

Through conversations with youth program organisation leads, we gained insights into key practices that are working well in this space, drawing from the expertise of professionals in the field.

These discussions covered a general overview of their organisation's ethos and approach, as well as more detailed aspects of working with young people.

We also explored our key areas of focus from the primary research, including mentoring, arts and creativity, gender differences, and the potential use of online spaces.

Who we spoke to:

- Linking Network
- Youth Sport Trust (Innovation Development)
- The Boathouse Youth (Children and Young People's Services)
- London Youth (Heritage Programme)
- London Youth (Arts Culture and Sports)
- London Youth (Sector Development)
- Hoxton Hall & London Youth (Board member)
- Youth Sport Trust (Innovation)



Lessons in social cohesion



Social Cohesion Initiatives: The Big Picture

There is not one way to tackle social division. Initiatives are all part of a larger, interconnected network.



1.

Sphere of influence:

Social division can occur in all aspects of a young person's life. Cohesion initiatives should too.



2.

Stepping stones to success:

Building blocks to social change and cohesion. Young people go on a journey.



3.

Key takeouts:

Despite the variations in initiatives, there are a set of core success factors to consider

The Sphere of influence

Different social cohesion initiatives tap into different spheres of influence...

But the best ones leave an impression at every layer

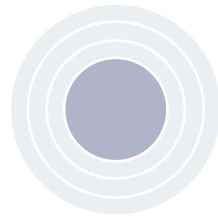


Social Cohesion

Individual Influence

Social division factors:

- Low confidence
- Low self-awareness
- Difficulties communicating and opening up
- Closed mindedness



Opening up a bit about yourself, encourages them [young people] to open up about themselves.

Work in this sphere involves:

- Improving young people's self confidence
- Helping young people express themselves
- Building empathy and openness to others

We see this happening in:

- Sports– developing confidence, learning to work with others in team activities
- Arts – encouraging an openness to others through sharing ideas, personal experiences and creative expression
- Mentoring – developing understanding of how to open up and communicate difficult feelings

Social Cohesion

Peer and Family Influence

Social division factors:

- Parental/guardian pressures to follow a certain path
- Fears of different cultures
- Misunderstandings between generations
- Gang involvement
- Peer pressure to conform



Work in this sphere involves:

- Improving relationships between young people and their parents/guardians
- Helping young people find belonging in positive spaces

We see initiatives targeting these areas through:

- Mentoring – acting as a mediator between young person and family to break down barriers in expectations
- Sports – offering spaces to steer young people away from toxic influences, gangs etc (e.g. Sporting Communities)

We intervene in those spaces and help to steer young people away from those gang related toxic influences. That's why detached youth work is so important.

Social Cohesion Community Influence

Social division factors:

- Divided communities
- Lack of understanding and appreciation of differences



Work in this sphere involves:

- Exposing young people to different cultures, religions and ways of life
- Encouraging openness and appreciation of difference

We see initiatives targeting these areas through:

- Sports – bringing together members of the community to play collaboratively
- Arts – using creativity to share their culture, heritage and interests with other young people
- Mentoring – using examples from the wider community (like local riots or conflicts) to tap into young people's behaviours and actions

[Heritage & Culture Programme] is about instilling a confidence in who they are, where they're from and their traditions. But it's also about finding ways to get young people to engage with those cultures and traditions in a modern way.

Social Cohesion

Societal Influence

Social division factors:

- Fake news and misinformation
- Social media echo chambers
- Manosphere, racism, homophobia normalisation



Work in this sphere involves

- Supporting young people to use online spaces safely
- Analysing media and identifying fake news and misinformation
- Addressing rising mental health concerns
- The pandemic

We see initiatives tapping into societal issues through:

- Social action projects, like at Boathouse Youth, designed and lead by what's important to young people, such as violence against women and girls, boys' mental health, environmental issues, gender and sexuality
- Mentoring – mentors talking about online ideology and grounding them in real life consequences

Social media can be quite toxic for young people and enhance toxic masculinity so that's what we're trying to help young people overcome... During [martial arts] sessions we help young people understand the difference between knowing how to fight and knowing how to defend yourself.



Social Cohesion Stepping Stones to Success

Different initiatives
focus on different
stages for young people
engaging in social
cohesion



1. Readiness

- Focused on the individual – building confidence, communication, openness
- Consideration: Openness



2. Engaging & Motivating

- Getting the right people involved
- Consideration: Audience



3. Providing Opportunities

- Bringing together different types of young people
- Consideration: Curation



4. Maintaining Cohesion

- Encouraging ongoing reflection
- Consideration: Change



Social Cohesion

Stepping Stones to Success

1. Readiness

What do we need to do to help young people be ready to meet people who are different to them?

How do we help young people be open with themselves and with others?

Goals:

- Laying the groundwork, enabling people to be open to others
- Ensuring young people are in the right mindset to engage – e.g. Linking Network giving a short pre-work to kids to complete before their Link Day to start considering their commonalities and differences with the other children
 - For example, mentors can work on self-confidence, openness and appreciation of diversity
- Youth leaders can tap into developing this 'readiness' by having building rapport, developing trust and having honest and open relationships with young people.



Social Cohesion

Stepping Stones to Success

2. Engaging & Motivating

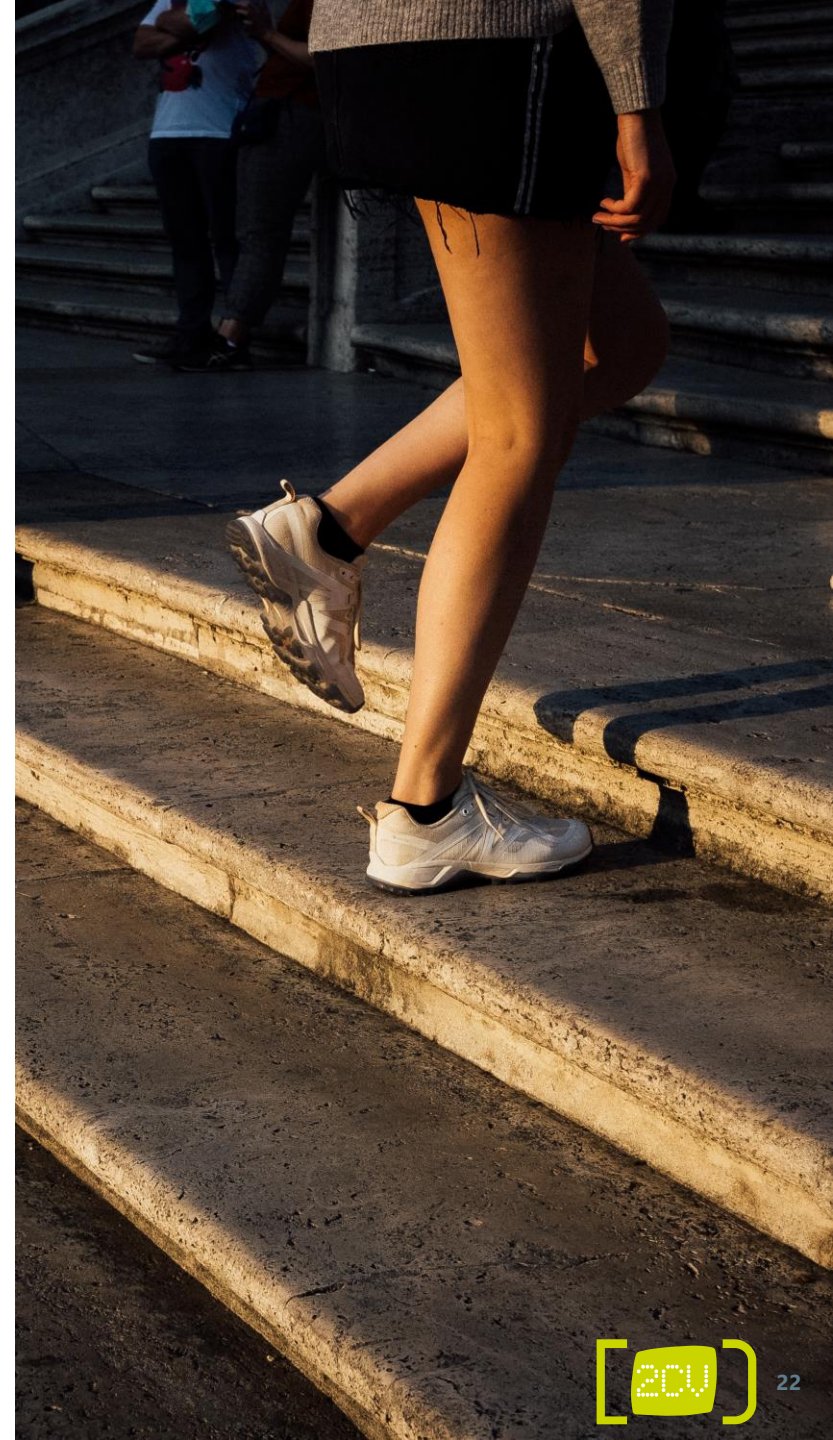
Who needs to be involved?

How do we reach the hard-to-reach?

How do we give young people a voice?

Goals:

- Making sure that the young people involved in the initiative are the ones who will benefit from it the most. The most engaged young people may be the people who need the initiative the least
- Identifying the right way to involve young people in initiatives. Being aware of selection biases, and who may be missing out
 - **Staff-selected** (e.g. Linking Network), where the staff pick the young people, or **youth-selected** (e.g. London Youth careers event) where young people are opting in to participate themselves, or **community-selecting** (e.g. Sporting Communities) where staff physically go into communities to target those 'harder to reach' groups, although this takes time, effort and team support



Social Cohesion

Stepping Stones to Success

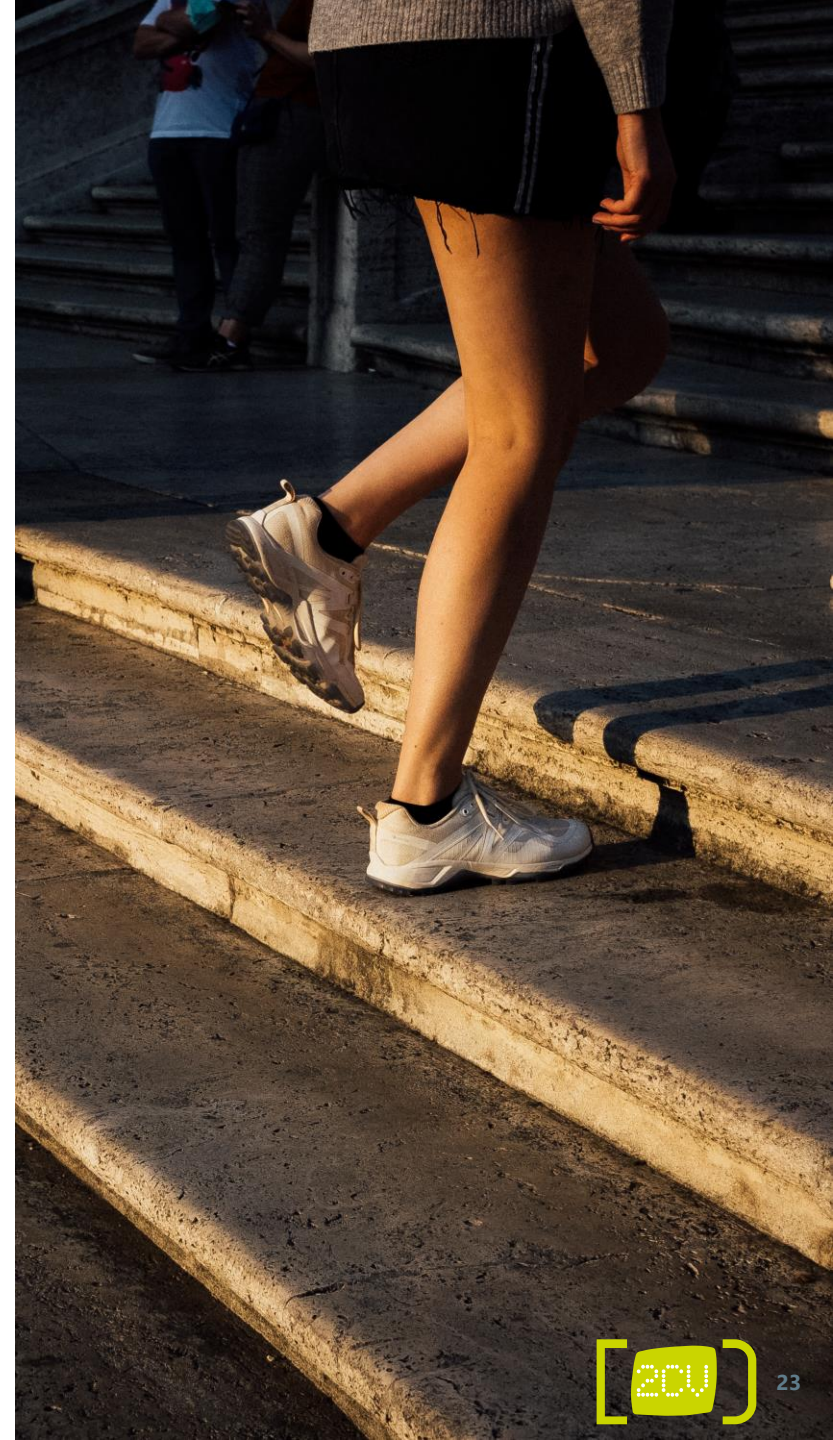
3. Providing Opportunities

How do we make the interactions meaningful?

How do we balance activities with organic socialising?

Goals:

- Curating spaces for meaningful engagement
 - Without careful planning & design it is possible that social mixing will not take place
 - Curation can involve structured activities, ideas for conversations as well as ensuring some social time is unsupervised and more natural
- Creating the perfect balance that allows social mixing to take place naturally but avoiding young people just defaulting into their original groups or communities
 - This can be tackled through co-design (e.g. Youth Sport Trust designing projects and initiatives together)



Social Cohesion

Stepping Stones to Success

4. Maintaining cohesion

How much support is enough?

How do we prevent things from going back to the status quo?

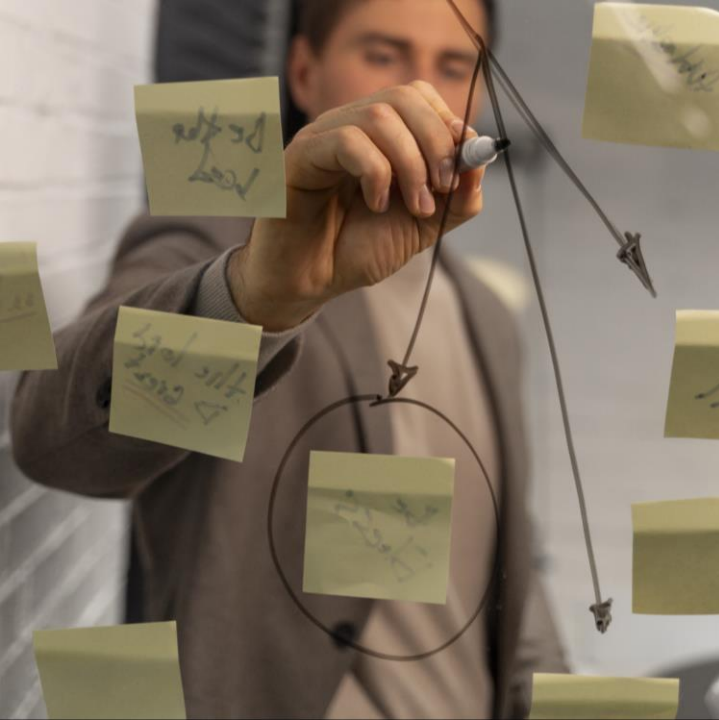
Goals:

- Ensuring that outcomes and experiences endure beyond the programme (e.g. Link Day – children go back to their schools and give a presentation to their peers during assembly - sharing their experiences and what they have learnt)
- Learning what works and what doesn't & evolving initiatives over time (e.g. Youth Sport Trust – having to change their programme, needing a minimum of 3 years to be successful, well-rounded and refined programme)



Social Cohesion Key takeouts

Despite the varied nature of social cohesion initiatives, three key success factors stood out



More dosage = more impact

- One offs don't really work
- Young people (and adults!) need to show up consistently for the initiative to be effective

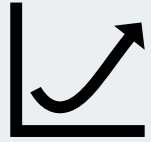
The one-off events could be brilliant, but you'd say 'Hi, nice to meet you, where do you live?' and then I never see you again. We had to change our programme to be consistent, flexible approaches that were over a 6-12 week period.



Be mindful of your setting

- Use a neutral location – to avoid conflict of feeling like one group is on another's 'turf'
- Or share the location – meaning one group doesn't hold sole responsibility but instead is hosted by a different location each time

We did a workshop where we explored the differences and commonalities between groups. And what we did was meet every month in a different venue – a mosque, a church etc... It was about developing safe space and safe environment.



Change is good

- Evolve and adapt as you need
- Good youth workers grow, alongside their mentees
- Let members co-design programmes with you
- Programmes should be refined along the way

We ran the project for four, nearly five years. And our reflection was no social cohesion project should ever be less than 5 years. It needs to be at least 5 years to make a difference and have that legacy.

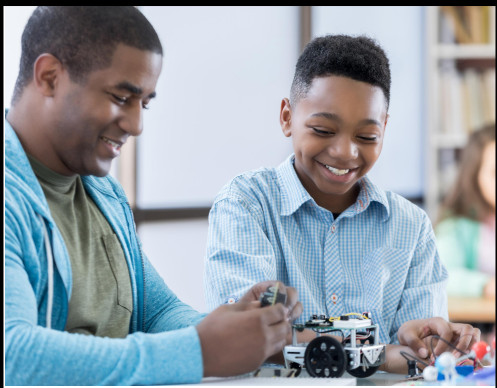


Filling the gaps



Our four areas of focus

Our research focused on four key aspects of youth programmes, addressing gaps identified in the current literature



1. Mentoring

- *The key factors that contribute to effective mentorship for young people*
- *The essential considerations mentors must take into account to provide meaningful guidance and support for young individuals*



2. Online spaces

- *How youth initiatives are using online spaces*
- *What conditions are necessary to effectively engage with young people online*
- *The risks associated with online spaces used by young people*



3. Arts & Creative

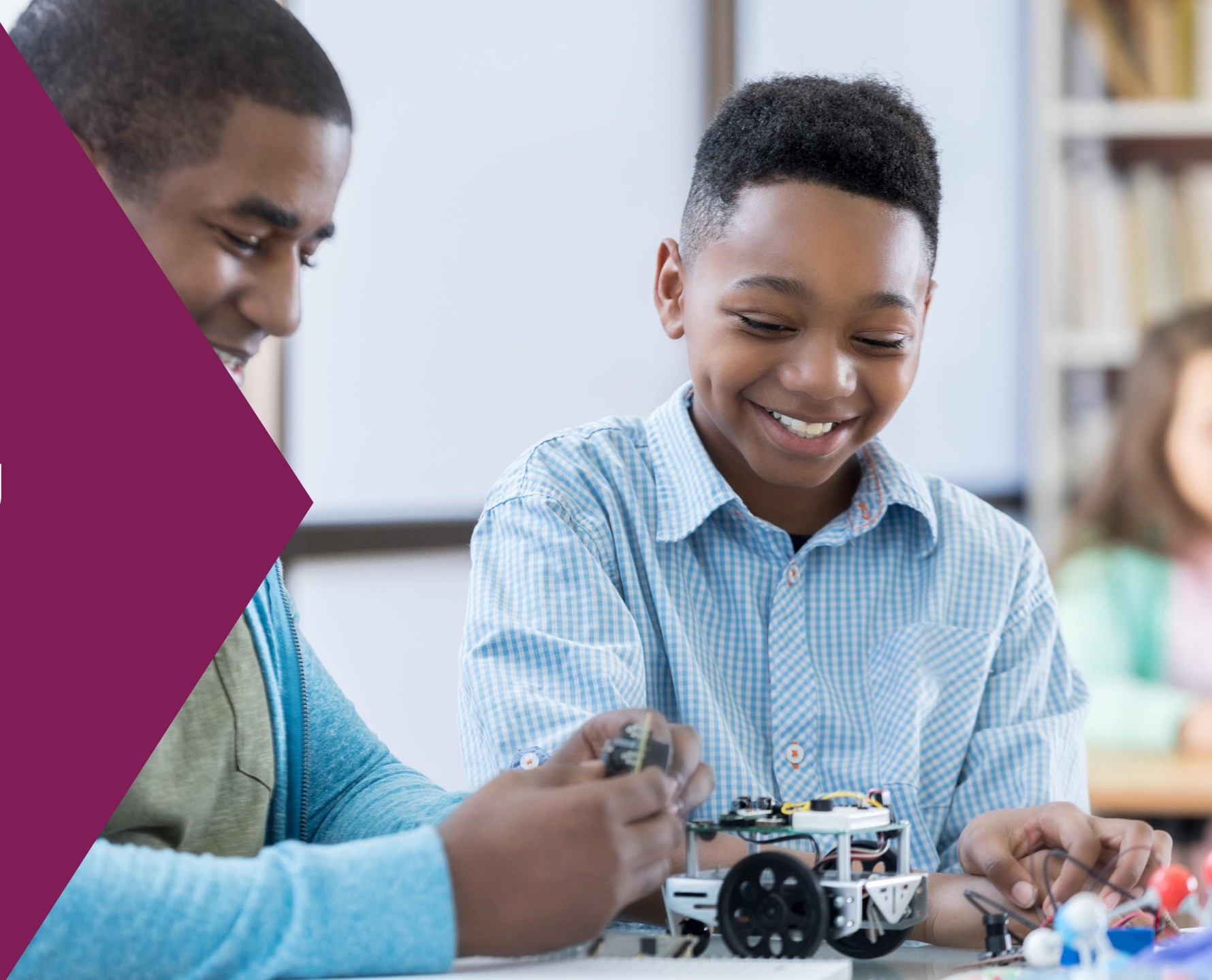
- *The unique ability of the arts to bring young people together when compared to other task-based activities*
- *The barriers stopping young people from taking part in arts-based programs*



4. Gender

- *How youth programmes address the diverse needs and motivations of girls and boys*
- *Effective strategies youth programmes use to provide equal opportunities for both genders*

1. Mentoring



Mentoring: Getting at the “how” of best practice

Background context:

What did we find in our literature review?

- Mentoring, either 1-to-1 or group support, played a key role within many youth initiatives. Even within programmes where mentoring was not the primary focus, many initiatives had a more subtle mentoring component which proved valuable to the young person
- Mentoring focused on the **individual sphere**, allowing young people to feel motivated, develop important social skills and develop a sense of belonging. This improved their **readiness**
- The development of trust and empathy within mentoring relationships was important. There was a component of sharing between mentor and mentee – either knowledge sharing, or finding cultural overlaps, or shared language or mannerisms that established and reinforced trust in young people
- We found that while mentoring tended to involve an adult member, **peer** mentors could be equally valuable and effective
- In some cases, young people were still receiving mentoring support from staff up to 10 years after initiative had finished, demonstrating the potential long-lasting effects of this kind of support

What needed further exploration?

- Though it is clear mentorship plays an important role in positive youth outcomes, it is less clear what specific elements are driving positive change. Further research is needed to explore what best practice mentoring support looks like, and how this can be replicated in other social cohesion initiatives

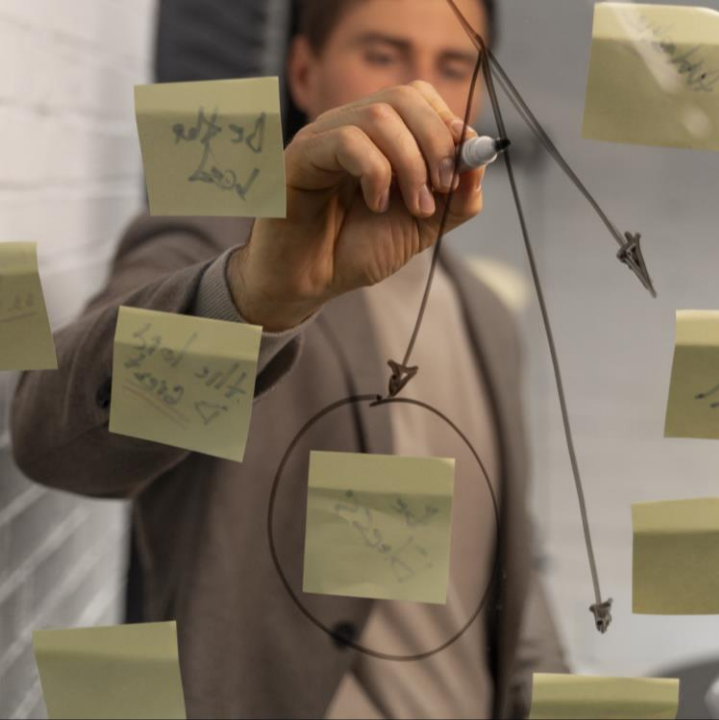
What did we do in primary research?

- We spoke to Street Games around the topic of mentoring and heard first-hand from four different best-in-class mentors from around the UK. We explored their own mentoring experiences, how they engage young people, their own mentoring principles and advice for other mentors working with young people

Mentoring

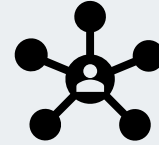
Key takeouts

Mentors tackle all four spheres and can support young people with each of the four stepping stones



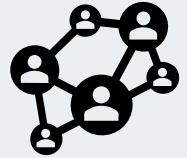
Mentors do everything

- Mentors are able to engage with all aspects of a young person's life and world
- Mentors have an ongoing relationship, and can be responsive to challenges and opportunities as they arise



Considering context

- Mentors understand the importance of culture, community and history
- Mentors mediate between different cultural backgrounds, and different generations



Working with anyone

- Mentors acknowledge the importance of shared experience and characteristics in building relationships
- Mentors can work with any young person, if they put in the effort and focus on building trust

Mentoring can mean many things

What does the 'mentoring' actually look like in real-life practice?

Varies by age

With younger age groups, you'd use more simple language and make it more fun, not being too direct. Whereas someone who's older, they might have a bit more of an understanding

Is called different things

I just like to call it humanity. It's about giving of yourself to others, to help others, to give to others. You know, it's about passing that baton of consciousness along the way.... It's a lifelong decision you make

MENTORING



Is unique

It needs to be bespoke... A good mentor should have the capacity to work with anybody. Saying 'Ok, we'll match you to a mentor, do 6 weeks, and then all problems will be resolved' – I don't like the prescriptiveness of that

Happens in different ways

1-to-1 you're more likely to get someone to open up for sure, but maybe in numbers they feel more at ease. In a group environment it can be a more relaxed, I'm just there chilling with them

Mentoring Case Study 1

Street-based work at Sporting Communities

What do they do?

- Operate primarily in the Midlands and involves street-based work where mentors physically going out into local communities
- Centred around creating a safe space for young people to come together, do activities, get some respite and meet new people

What works well?

- Street-based work seen as more cost-effective
- Has larger reach because you can target people directly in those communities, without going via a youth club/ other organisations
- Not 'traditional' mentoring – relationships start from scratch

What's their advice for other mentors?

- Be authentic – having a genuine interest in supporting a young person, whoever it may be
- Be flexible – not being too rigid/ strict about your mentoring style but adapting to the young person

It's idealistic youth provision. Sometimes you've got to flip it on its head and put yourself into their space and create that environment from within their space

When we talk about best practice, it's quite 'step 1, step 2, step 3' but a lot of the time it's about being person-centred and having the ability to flex and enter that relationship with a blank sheet of paper

A big part of it, that people don't always see or understand, is that for us to effectively work with young people, we have to make ourselves vulnerable. We go into their spaces where they feel comfortable



Mentoring Case Study 2

Self-defence initiative at Project On Guard

What do they do?

- Operates mostly in West Yorkshire
- Addresses need for safe space among young people aged 11-17, especially those in 'harder to reach' communities, combining practical self-defence training with discussions of real-world issues e.g. relationships, gangs, knife crime
- Originally created for girls and young women but has now expanded to boys as well

What works well?

- Having extensive training & experience– provides mentor with a confidence to talk about challenging issues and topics
- Building good rapport with a young person and their parent – allowing mediation to occur in the **parent sphere**, and tackling **intergenerational issues** where the mentor "translates" between generations

What's their advice for other mentors?

- Not imposing own views onto young people – being able to listen, non-judgementally
- Always ask what young people want



There's not one way to mentor



But a good one is....

Non-judgmental – Encourages open and honest sharing, not telling young people what to do

Person-centred – Listens to the unique needs of that young person & is guided by their thoughts, motivations and ideas

Culturally aware – Understands the needs and challenges specific to particular cultures or communities

Relatable – Often using real world examples (from their own experiences or wider community) to talk about difficult or sensitive issues

Self-reflective – Constantly learning about themselves and learning from their experiences

Knows importance of building trust – And that is requires strong relationships (& time)

Able to mediate – Plays a role in facilitating discussions between others –e.g. young people and their parents – tackling intergenerational division

Patient – Takes their time working with young people, often takes at least 3 to 4 sessions before trust is established and young people are comfortable opening up



2. Online Spaces



Online Spaces: The good and the bad

Background Context:

What did we find in our literature review?

- We found that through online spaces like gaming, where tasks required elements of teamwork, young people were working together to form connections and strengthen prosocial skills
- There were examples of where gaming helped to improve behaviours like peer relationships, empathy and emotional regulation
- Shared rules were hypothesised to create a common ethical ground whereby young people learn to suppress antisocial urges and resolve social conflicts through understanding the perspectives of others. This can be seen as an important step towards driving social cohesion by targeting the **individual and peer spheres** and **improving readiness**
- While there was one example of an online initiative that aimed to improve youth news literacy and fake news awareness, it is unclear to the extent that online components are being used in youth programmes

What needed further exploring?

- Research into online spaces often has a negative skew and focuses on risks and harm, so we wanted to investigate if and how, online spaces can be used to drive social cohesion

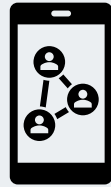
What did we do in primary research?

- We spoke to several experts who work in and run youth programmes online
- During our bright spot immersions we also had conversations with children and young people around their online interactions, how they make friends online and how they interact with people who are different to them

Online spaces

Key takeouts

Online spaces are here to stay. They can be used to widen community engagement for young people, but the risks of the toxic societal sphere must be managed



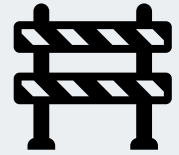
Young people live online

- Online spaces are here to stay
- Youth initiatives need to be aware of the risks and of the opportunities online spaces provide



Leveraging familiarity

- Young people are more likely to engage when using familiar online platforms
- Young people are used to interacting with one another online, and meaningful connections are possible



Mitigating risk

- Young people are exposed to toxic philosophies and opportunistic ideologies
- Youth programmes can support young people to critically engage with these spaces

Young people exist online

Socialising and interacting online is occurring naturally and frequently for young people today



And that's just their way. And we shouldn't be against that we should really foster that, and just enable them to communicate in that way safely. That's their world

Social Media

- Messaging friends
- Joining social media groups due to shared interest (eg. music artist fans organising attending gig together)
- Following & connecting with similar people online (eg. engaging with individuals with similar interests like running/fitness)
- Creating group chats during youth programmes to keep in contact with other participants

Adults are on the fringes of kids social spaces. Online there's no adults holding them to account

Gaming

- Playing videogames like Roblox with friends and family
- Interacting with strangers too, where online conversations can result in offline ones
- Using platforms like Discord to chat with other people outside of games

Education

- Using platforms like YouTube and Reddit for self-education purposes
- Seeing online forums or platforms as a place for finding information
- Following organisations, companies or media accounts for updates

Online Spaces have the potential for harm

Despite evidence of positive online interactions, it brings risks with it as well

There are risks that might impact the individual:

- **Bullying** – such as targeting or trolling someone online. The ability to be anonymous can heighten this risk
- **Talking to strangers** – young people could encounter dangerous individuals or be misled or catfished by individuals online
- **Diminish confidence/ self-esteem** – impacting areas like body image, especially from comparison with others, as well as edited or fake images

As well as risks that can impact wider communities and society:

- **Echo chambers** – where individuals become more exposed to information that aligns with their existing beliefs
- **Misinformation** – spreading of false or incorrect information
- **Fake news** – false news that can be spread for politically motivated reasons

This can impact social cohesion because:

- They can push harmful narratives, reinforce biases and exacerbate social tensions
- This can lead to more social division and instead drive people further apart
- It's important to be aware and mitigate these risks so people can interact positively online and promote connectedness instead

Yeah of course there is bullying... We've had some young people that are incredibly vulnerable be targeted by some not very nice people on social media. We do know that there is a dark side to that and it can come with its challenges

Youth initiatives are leveraging the benefits of online spaces

Lessons learnt from youth practitioners running programmes with online components

What does online youth work involve?

- Initiatives utilising online spaces bring different young people from around the country
- Practitioners engage young people and encourage participation through co-design

What might this look like?

- Example 1 - Getting young people to co-design resources to help young people to get more active. Allowing young people from different parts of the country to come together and explain what would meet their needs
- Example 2 – Providing initial icebreaker and brainstorming sessions with young people prior to attending a youth conference with other schools on wellbeing. Introducing the topic and creating a sense of familiarity amongst the young people and youth workers prior to meeting face to face

• What are the benefits?

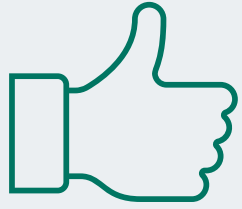
- ✓ Low cost
- ✓ Less logistical needs/ time from youth groups
- ✓ Helps young people from different locations to interact easily
- ✓ Fits in easier around young peoples time (e.g. studying for exams)
- ✓ Can combine it with face-to-face events/ initiatives

We do a lot of co-design with young people online, and we find they feel much safer sat behind a screen having a conversation than when in a classroom with 30 other peers

Doing it online like this, it's the best way for that really to happen to involve a lot of people. And again, that brings people together. I mean it can be slightly stilted compared to a face-to-face meeting because there's always some tech hitch. But it brings people together and people get the chance to talk to people who normally wouldn't and you'd never have the chance to go over to their school or something like that. It's really good like that

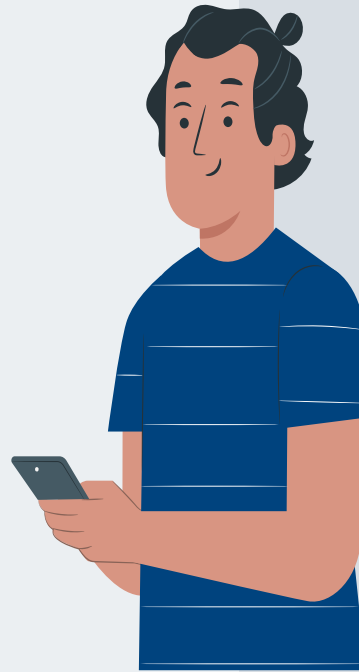
So I think the best thing is to have some sort of hybrid version where you do some online, some face to face, one key event or something like that, where they do meet face to face

Online cohesion initiatives require planning

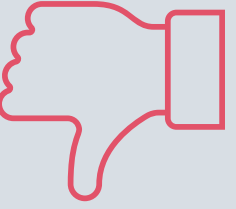


Do...

- Create a **safe space** – allow young people to feel comfortable sharing ideas & being their authentic selves
- Establish **clear communication and participation guidelines** with others
- Use **icebreakers** – provides opportunities for young people to connect & maintain engagement during longer sessions
- **Combine with face-to-face meetings** – online spaces can be used before/ after to keep a conversation going



Don't....

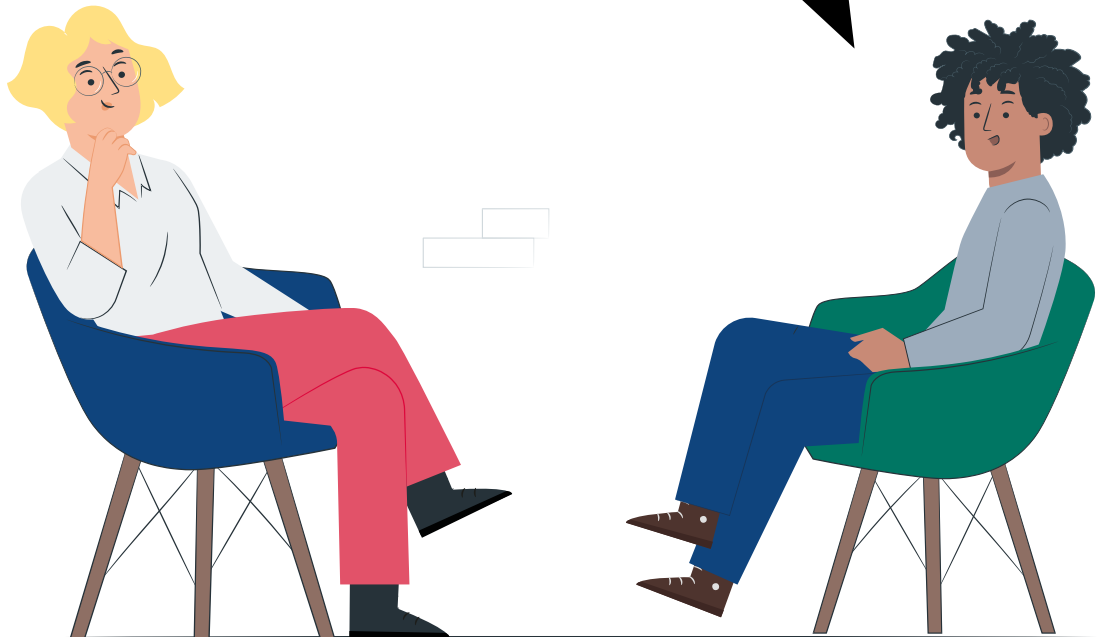


- Be **too structured** – it's important to have a framework, but that unstructured socialisation at the start can be really valuable
- Leave young people **unsupervised** - ensure 1-to-1 conversations include a third- party member for transparency and safety
 - Even if young people are in breakout rooms, assign an activity that can be viewed/monitored to make sure they are on track

Youth practitioners work with online harms in an offline way

Youth crime is on the rise, and for me social media can be really toxic for some young people and enhance that toxic masculinity that we're trying to help young people overcome

I had to support a young person who someone targeted online, created a fake profile, posted lots of pictures of them, said nasty things on Snapchat about them and within half an hour that Snapchat account had thousands of followers. This young person was absolutely devastated



Youth workers and mentors can have conversations with youth about their online lives

- Within programmes, coaches or mentors are talking about these difficult topics with young people like fake news, toxic masculinity, social media
 - This can happen in 1-to-1 conversations, or in group settings
- Some individuals use real-world examples and personal experiences to relate to young people and model appropriate behaviour
 - For instance, Project On Guard mentor used examples from her own personal life, as well as in the wider community in Bradford, to relate to young people and the consequences of antisocial actions



3. Arts & Creative



Arts & Creative: Getting to know yourself

Background context:

What did we find in our literature review?

- Within the evidence review, we found limited examples of arts-based initiatives
- Whilst there were examples of creative activities that allowed young people to work together and bond over a shared goal, it was unclear what it was about artistic activities or creative spaces that enabled these outcomes – and importantly how they differed from predominantly sports activities

What needed further exploration

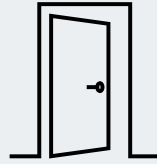
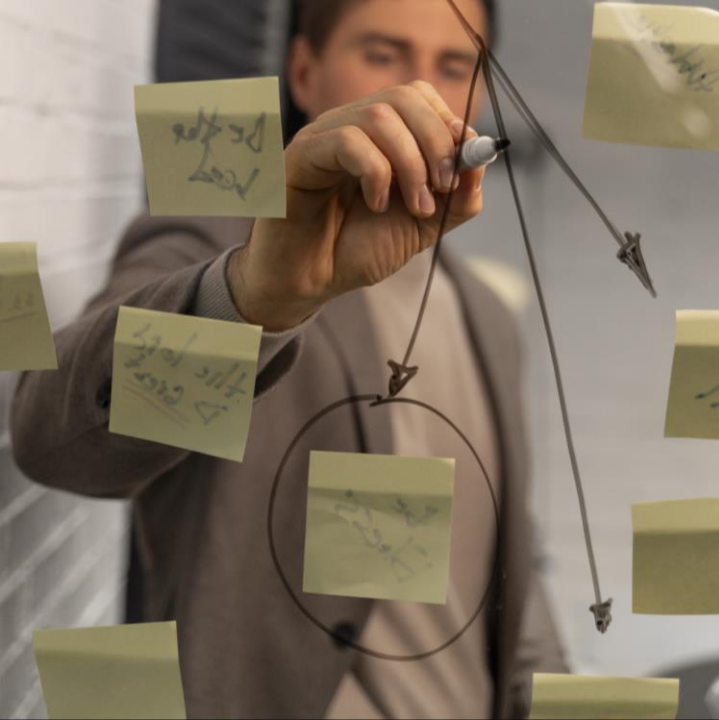
- It was evident that task-based initiatives (ones involving doing an activity) worked well in bringing young people together. However, this tended to focus on sport, particularly team sports
- Further research was needed to understand how creative tasks (such as music, crafts, theatre) could also help bind young people, and exploring the different ways this could happen

What did we do in primary research?

- We attended the 'Unlock Your Potential' art careers day hosted by London Youth, observing how art could bring people together and gaining insights from both young people and staff attending the day
- We also spoke with Heritage Programme officer at London Youth who runs a heritage & culture arts-based programme
- We gained additional insights from speaking with a Youth Representative, on their experiences of participating in arts workshops and spaces

Arts & creative Key takeouts

The arts are focused on the individual and community spheres. They also encourage readiness through openness, and opportunities to share and learn about other communities and cultures



Focus on building openness

- Young people can learn to be open to themselves and to others through artistic expression



Focus on building empathy

- Art provides a platform for empathy, as young people learn about other cultures and ways of life
- Similarities are emotional and experience-based



Focus on critical thinking

- Understanding story and narrative may promote critical thinking
- Young people can tackle fake news and misinformation with greater confidence

Art can be misunderstood, but also very powerful

Is more than just painting...

In my programme, I've found specific themes that really brings people together and they can easily speak about. Food, hair, music – they're great ways to get young people to connect and work on something

Helps organically start conversation....

We then just start chatting because our focus is on our piece of work. But actually we're in a safe enough environment to then chat or pass me the red pen. And it's just building those relationships and bringing people together on a common ground



ART

Can be both individual and group...

Art can be an individual task, but everyone is still working on it together

Can feel more effortful....

If I want to go play football, I go do that. With arts, I have to start thinking about what arts do I want to explore? What resources do I need this to happen? Do we have the money to make this happen?

Art is a mechanism to broaden understanding of others worlds

Art can expose people to other cultures and communities through sharing similarities and differences

Example 1 - Heritage & Culture Project



What did they do?

- Young people conducted their own mini-research project about their own heritage and culture
- They interviewed members of their local community to discover their stories, ideas and traditions
- They shared their experiences with other youth

What was the role of art?

- Through a focus on the **community sphere**, young people shared their stories with others and found similarities amongst different backgrounds
 - E.g. The use of plantain in different cultural dishes
- **Improved empathy** encouraged young people to develop curiosity and interest, both in their own culture, as well as others

Example 2 – Sport & Community Initiative



What did they do?

- Originally, people from different backgrounds were brought together to play cricket within their communities
- Over the course of the initiative, social time was seen as valuable alongside the cricket, and social spaces evolved into cultural and community sharing
- Young people and their parents were given cultural conversation starters, and were encouraged to share aspects of their culture within the social space

What was the role of art?

- With sport only sessions, people tended to engage through the sport, but lack further socialising outside of this
- By sharing their food, art, music, traditional dress – communities learned about one another, challenged preconceptions and opened their minds

Studying art can encourage critical thinking and help young people challenge misinformation

Case Study – Youth Representative

What was their background?

- A young adult who has experience and background in various artistic and creative initiatives, currently a member of Hoxton Hall
- Uses online spaces for self-education on YouTube & Reddit and engages with organisations and individuals online who have similar interests

How did art help change their thinking?

- Their background in media studies, as well as art and drama, has taught them to recognise how different narratives are constructed to evoke particular emotions
- Arts ability to help us learn and navigate world around us

How could this impact social cohesion?

- Having a high level of awareness around the role of media and how information can be portrayed has provided them with strong critical thinking skills
- In doing so, they can better analyse and decipher news sources which plays an important role in challenging misinformation and fake news – which can often lead to social division



I did media studies for GCSE and a big part of media studies, and even the creative work that I've done in drama and music, is about how to I invoke what I'm trying to say in what I'm putting out there... Everything I've taken an interest in has pushed the narrative of 'how do we influence the reader?' And so I'm very aware when someone else is trying to do that to me.

I think [understanding fake news] is difficult simply because there's what's posted online, and you're trying to decipher real versus fake, and also trying to decipher the purpose of it being posted in this way. It can be extremely overwhelming.

Despite enthusiasm for arts-based activities, there are still barriers for young people to participate

There is more to be done in the youth space to ensure young people have creative opportunities

Unique barriers not seen in other initiatives like sports:

- Art encompasses numerous activities, so some youth centres won't want to or even recognise that they do arts-based activities
- Lack of awareness of free and accessible arts-based activities means that young people might miss out on opportunities
- Art and creative pursuits tend to be de-prioritised as young people move through school
- Youth activities can be based on staff's background and own interests, meaning arts can be excluded

Youth work is so fluid, you don't necessarily wake up and say I'm going to be a sports organisation, it's just typically things fall into that. A lot of the time youth work comes down to where young people are at... whatever the current trend, if it's loom bands, just lean into that

So I think arts and creativity just doesn't get a lot of attention. In the earlier years in nursery and reception, that's all you do. You do nothing else but make art. By the time you reach secondary school you do it once a week, then you have to choose to do it





4. Gender



Gender: Not *what* you do, but *how* you do it

Background context

What did we find in our literature review?

- We found that youth initiatives tended to focus on sports or gaming – which tend to be more male-focused areas
- There was a mixture of mixed-gender and some single-gender initiatives, though it wasn't evident if, or how, outcomes varied for girls compared to boys
- We saw that youth outcomes tended to be quite generic and did not specify, if or how, they varied by gender

What needed further exploration?

- It was unclear from the evidence review if mixed-gender sport programmes are providing equally beneficially outcomes for girls as well as boys
- Further research was needed to investigate whether a gender skew exists within programmes, and how initiatives can effectively target each group

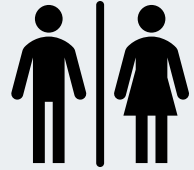
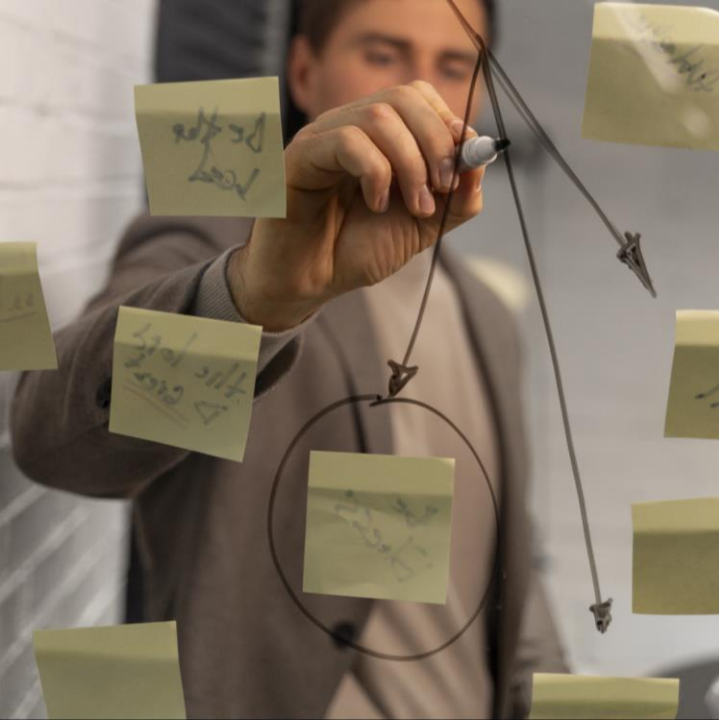
What did we do in primary research?

- During our bright spot immersion at 'Unlock Your Potential' London Youth day, we spoke to a range of staff members about girls-only initiatives and adaptations made for girls
- Within our expert and mentor interviews, we also discussed the different topics and challenges that are emerging for both boys and girls, and how facilitators and staff can discuss these gender-specific topics

Social Cohesion

Key takeouts

Despite the varied nature of social cohesion initiatives, three key success factors stood out



There are differences

- All young people face challenges, but there are noted differences between genders



Role-modelling works for different genders

- Programmes shouldn't necessarily match their staff to the gender of young people
- It is good for young boys to have women role models, and for young girls to have male role models



Adaptation is key

- Initiatives need to be flexible enough to make gender-appropriate adaptations
- For girls, this is often logistical and to preserve safety
- For boys, this may be about adapting language to be more engaging

Myth 1

Girls and boys go through the same challenges

Everyone is different.

While girls and boys can experience similar challenges and troubles, they are not all the same.

Some worries and concerns will be more prevalent for one gender than another, for example toxic masculinity amongst boys.

Youth workers and mentors should be aware of the specific issues that girls or boys might encounter.

Body image for boys is a huge issue at the moment, the expectations they're putting on themselves is unbelievable... And then you've got girls who've got different issues to deal with

Social media

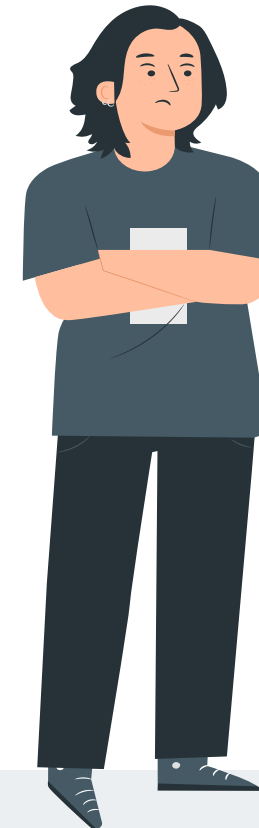
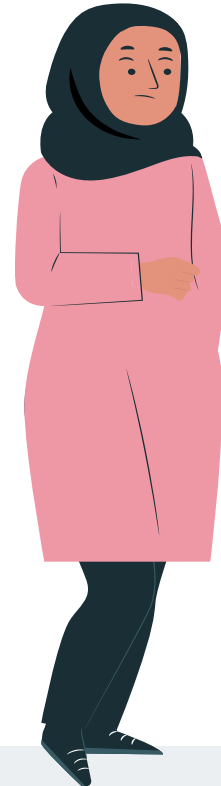
Safety/violence

Cultural expectations

Body image

Mental health

Toxic masculinity



Myth 2

You need a female facilitator to run a girls-only programme

Not true – there is no reason why a woman has to run a girls-only programme.

It's more important for facilitators be able to build rapport and have adequate training allowing them to feel confident, comfortable and well-equipped to work in that space.

In one case, a male facilitator on the Good for Girls programme, worked particularly well with the girls' group and served as a role model to younger boys in how to interact within that space.

For the Rise Up programme, one of the core units we do is gender informed practice. Ultimately, it's about equipping practitioners with the skills, knowledge, tools & confidence to hold those spaces

To be able to have a relationship with a male who can be a role model is just as powerful for young women as well. Everyone always thinks 'yay ladies' but it's just about having good role models



Myth 3

Girls and boys should do all the same activities

There's not always a one-size fits all approach.

Whilst some activities can be the same, it's important to have a range of activities e.g. discussion-based or activity-based to ensure everyone has opportunity to take part and connect with others.

Linking Network highlighted how facilitators should be mindful of how religion and culture can affect how girls and boys interact in tasks. For example, if girls attending single-sex schools for religious reasons go to a mixed-gender initiative, they could be more hesitant or nervous towards activities with boys.

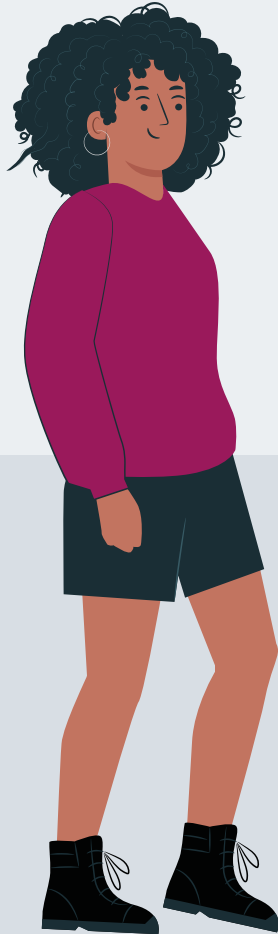
I find the girls are quite happy to sit and talk, whereas the boys like to have some kind of distraction technique, like playing darts, before they'll start to talk



How to consider gender within youth initiatives

Don't assume a one-sized-fits-all approach is always appropriate

[For girls] It's even the facilities, the changing facilities and the toilets. It's about more comfortability and changes spaces, putting in that extra effort



Think about your target audience

- Consider the **language** in how you name and frame your programmes as this can affect engagement
 - E.g. Re-naming 'self-defence' programmes 'fight smart' to encourage boys
- Some activities might be more appropriate split into each gender
 - All-boys, or all-girls football tournaments to ensure young people are comfortable & confident, and to avoid lack of participation

What adaptations can you make?

- Sessions can be made more inclusive by subtle **adjustments in the set-up**, rather than type of activity. This can include:
 - Lighting of the venue
 - Seating availability
 - Presence of refreshments
 - Feeling it is a safe space

We've adapted and tailored sessions for the boys. We teach them martial arts, but we teach them about self-defence. But we don't call it self-defence because it's 'a girls thing' so we call it Street Smart or Fight Smart training





**What could this
mean for the
future?**

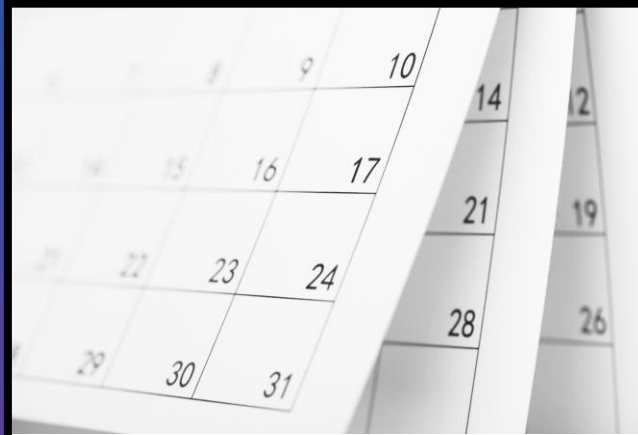


Everyone has an important role



It's a big job

All organisations, programmes and initiatives have a role to play in the wider network



It takes time

Social division is hugely complex, and it will take time to embed change and promote cohesion



It is across all spheres

Change needs to occur in individuals, communities, organisations and in wider society

A call to action



Participation: Including youth voice at all stages and making sure the right people are in the room

Networking: Opportunities to bring main players together and greater understanding of the role of each initiative

Going local: Emphasising local contexts and communities in youth work

Getting creative: Utilising online spaces alongside in-person initiatives

Ongoing change: Considering the need for maintenance and the role of follow ups

I think there just needs to be more happening... I feel like the sense of community, especially in this day and age, has never been more loud. I think that needs to be taken advantage of in a way. Promoting community, togetherness, and in-person networking

We want young people to actually be the agents of change, not the institutions or organisations

I spoke to some young people who said they'd love the opportunity to attend local events and connect with other people... But they find it very hard to find those opportunities, they don't know where to go to engage with other young people to show their talents. There's not a lot of free opportunities for them to do that



Let's talk.



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