

# You are not alone

## Wellbeing and burnout among youth work practitioners

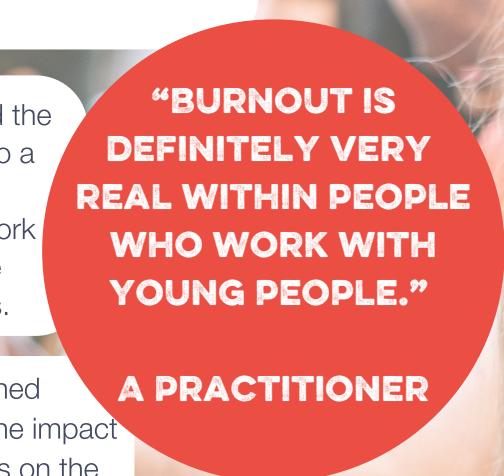
UK Youth reports that two thirds of youth organisations (63%) are seeing increased demand for services from young people, with more than half also seeing a drop in staff wellbeing (53%). What is more, young people accessing youth services are presenting greater needs than in the past.

Across the sector there are concerns around the negative impact of these pressures leading to a decrease in overall wellbeing and increase in feelings of burnout among front-line youth work practitioners, and subsequently more people leaving the profession in favour of other roles.

In June 2023, Oxfordshire Youth commissioned Research Oxford to explore the extent and the impact of wellbeing and burnout among practitioners on the sector, its staff, and the young people we serve in settings across Oxfordshire.

The study involved one-to-one interviews, focus groups with sector leaders and practitioners, an online survey and a literature review.

The full report will be available on the Oxfordshire Youth Website:  
[www.oxfordshireyouth.org/resources](http://www.oxfordshireyouth.org/resources)



**“BURNOUT IS DEFINITELY VERY REAL WITHIN PEOPLE WHO WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE.”**

**A PRACTITIONER**

This research was commissioned as part of the Youth Practitioners Wellbeing Project, funded by the Prudence Trust; a programme supporting youth workers and volunteers' mental health and wellbeing, professional skills, and to support young people. To find out more about our mentoring, specialist training, wellbeing retreats and a peer support programme, contact: [david.cruchley@oxfordshireyouth.org](mailto:david.cruchley@oxfordshireyouth.org)

# Key learnings

## **Burnout is a recognised issue. Most participants were affected by it or know someone who was.**

Youth work practitioners reported levels of emotional exhaustion similar to the average for social services, but were more likely to feel personal achievement. This may be linked to the passion that many reported as underpinning youth work.

A good support structure at work allows staff to better manage burnout and thrive, including quality supervision, control over their workload, peer-support, and a holistic approach to work-life balance that recognises the relationship between pressures at work, personal lives and other commitments.

Youth work practitioner salary in the voluntary and community sector is recognised as low, but also seen as competitive. Individuals highlight the flexibility of the role and feelings of personal achievement as benefits that offset low pay.

Lack of stability and security from short-term funding feeds into burnout and people leaving youth work.

As more youth work organisations recruit staff with lived experience, it would be beneficial to explore the best way to support those individuals in their roles.

Research focused on current practitioners. It was difficult to reach those that had left the sector or were absent due to burnout. More extensive research is needed to capture how the diverse nature of work and severity of issues effects wellbeing.

# How do youth workers describe burnout?

Mental fatigue, Exhaustion, Altered behaviour, Apathy to work, Feeling isolated, Increased absence, Lack of stability.

The World Health Organisation defines burnout as a syndrome resulting from chronic workplace stress. It is characterised by feelings of exhaustion, increased mental distance from one's job, feelings of negativism or cynicism to work and reduced efficacy.

**“I THINK WORK IS THE THING THAT NORMALLY TRIGGERS BURNOUT, WHICH THEN OVERFLOWS INTO YOUR PERSONAL LIFE.”**

**A PRACTITIONER**

## What is the impact on practitioners?

Youth work practitioners reported being aware of burnout in themselves and their colleagues, and having to balance the requirements of often challenging roles and their own wellbeing.

Burnout places extra strain on colleagues as they try to balance their own caseload and others.

**“BURNOUT HAS A KNOCK ON EFFECT ON THE WORKLOAD FOR OTHERS. THERE ISN'T ANOTHER POT OF GOLD THAT EMPLOYS A DIFFERENT PERSON.”**

**A PRACTITIONER**

**“COMPLEXITY [OF NEED], HIGHER NUMBER OF YOUNG PEOPLE BEING REFERRED, HIGHER LONE WORKING, ALL ADDS A LEVEL OF COMPLEXITY FOR WELLBEING. IF YOU DON'T MATCH THEM UP, THEN OF COURSE BURNOUT IS GOING TO START TO SNEAK IN.”**

**A PRACTITIONER**

# What is the impact on young people?



Both practitioners and organisations recognised the need to mitigate burnout in their front-line workers to limit its effect on young people.



Missing meetings and sessions, or not having the energy to meaningfully connect, can increase disengagement, feeling ill supported, and disappointment in the young people.

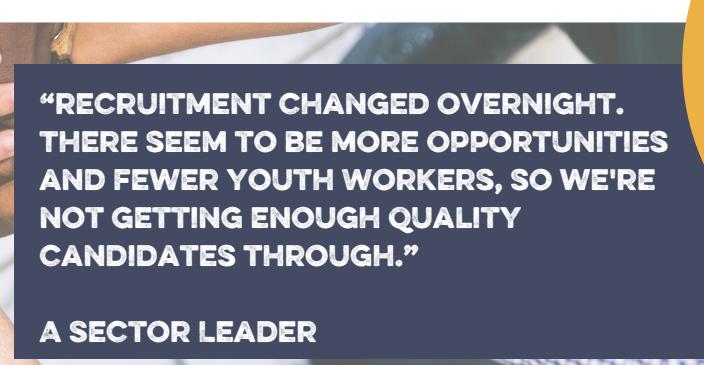
**“THE IMPACT OF  
BURNOUT IS MASSIVE  
ON THOSE YOUNG PEOPLE  
BECAUSE FOR THEM, IT'S ANOTHER  
LETDOWN. A WORKER WHO'S  
NOT TURNED UP WHEN THEY SAID  
THEY WOULD, A WORKER WHO'S NOT  
PROVIDED WHEN THEY SAID THEY  
WOULD, IT'S A SUPPORT  
THAT THEY'VE NOT GOT  
WHEN THEY'VE BEEN  
PROMISED IT.”**

**A SECTOR LEADER**

# How are sector organisations responding?



Organisations and workers accepted that 'the nature' of youth work is challenging, with leaders recognising burnout as a high risk factor.



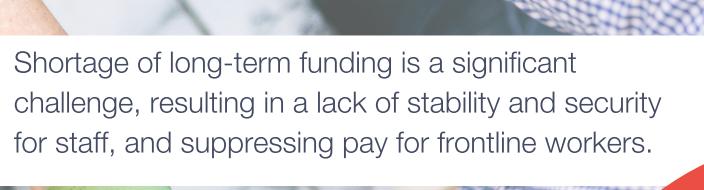
**"RECRUITMENT CHANGED OVERNIGHT. THERE SEEM TO BE MORE OPPORTUNITIES AND FEWER YOUTH WORKERS, SO WE'RE NOT GETTING ENOUGH QUALITY CANDIDATES THROUGH."**

**A SECTOR LEADER**



**"PEOPLE NEED TO HAVE A SENSE OF SECURITY. FUNDING AND CONTRACTS WITHIN THE THIRD SECTOR DO NOT ALLOW FOR A LOT OF SECURITY."**

**A SECTOR LEADER**



Shortage of long-term funding is a significant challenge, resulting in a lack of stability and security for staff, and suppressing pay for frontline workers.



Low pay or job security were reported as one of the main reasons for staff leaving. Other reasons included lack of career progression or personal matters.



**"FUNDING STREAMS ARE HORRENDOUS - HIGH NEEDS FUNDING IS CUT."**

**SO YOU CAN'T [PAY] STAFF WHAT THEY DESERVE TO BE PAID WHEN THE WORK THAT THEY DO OUT THERE IS SPECIALIST WORK."**

**A SECTOR LEADER**

# Staff retention

Staff retention is a priority, retaining skills, experience and networks.

75% of leaders reported actively trying to improve wellbeing and manage any signs of burnout. Their organisations generally reported low levels of staff turnover; practitioners who 'enjoyed' their workplace and felt supported and cared for, said it factored into their desire to stay.



Almost 60% of interviewed organisations found recruitment challenging, with many waiting to find 'the right person for the job'. More emphasis was put on experience and skills than on qualifications; 67% of survey respondents had no formal youth work qualifications.



Respondents acknowledged that front-line youth work carries a certain 'shelf-life' due to the nature of the role (e.g. shift pattern and low pay rates).



58% of survey respondents saw opportunities for progression, mainly through personal and professional development and sideways movement.



**"THERE'S A LOT OF FLEXIBILITY IN YOUTH WORK. YOU CAN MOVE UP AND YOU CAN MOVE DOWN, YOU CAN MOVE ACROSS AND YOU CAN SPECIALISE IN THIS, THAT AND THE OTHER."**

**A PRACTITIONER**



**"IF YOU WANT TO PROGRESS ... YOU HAVE TO TAKE A STEP AWAY FROM DIRECT WORK WITH YOUNG PEOPLE INTO MANAGEMENT. TO EARN MORE MONEY YOU HAVE TO SAY GOODBYE TO THE PASSION."**

**A PRACTITIONER**