

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

**“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:
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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 affects 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.

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.

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

A PRACTITIONER


**"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