



UK YOUTH

Belong Collective

'We choose to
be here'

**Why youth organisations
are essential to tackling
youth loneliness**

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH

UK YOUTH

**Youth
focus:**
North East

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Foreword

Founded in 1911, UK Youth is a leading charity with a vision that all young people are equipped to thrive and empowered to contribute at every stage of their lives. With an open network of over 8000 youth organisations and nation partners in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, we are focused on unlocking youth work as the catalyst of change that is needed now more than ever. UK Youth’s new 2025 strategy, “Unlocking Youth Work” outlines a bold ambition to impact young lives by unlocking youth work as a catalyst for change. We will work in partnership to build a cross-sector movement, creating a society that understands, champions, and delivers effective youth work for all.

The Covid-19 pandemic has changed the world and it has further exacerbated the inequalities that exist in the availability of support and opportunities that young people need to thrive. We know that young people have been hardest hit as a result of the pandemic, with more young people reporting poor mental health and suffering from loneliness and isolation, it’s vital that we build cross sector partnerships to co-create solutions with young people to tackle the problem. We are delighted to present this work with Astra and the Co-op Foundation as part of our purpose to advocate for the essential role that youth organisations play in young people’s lives. By looking at a timely and important topic like loneliness, we hope this research can shed further light on how it can be addressed, highlighting not only the existing role youth organisations play in addressing it but also how they can be further supported and strengthened to do so in the future.

Kayleigh Wainwright, Director of Collective Action, UK Youth



Hi, my name is Molly Taylor, Belong Collective youth leadership member. I joined the youth leadership group because I wanted to 'belong'. In my first year of university, outside of the leadership group, I struggled with loneliness, feeling as though I was unable to build "deeper" relationships with others or find the friendships I had long yearned for. It got so exhausting that I even began to fear social situations to the point where I became silenced. But when I learned about the leadership group, I felt a new sense of belonging. I came to the realisation that there were avenues where young people like myself, could speak up, be heard, and hear others. Instead of telling myself that I am unworthy because I found it difficult to connect with people, I needed to create and find an environment where I could become empowered. From a professional development lens, I had been active in the youth and charity sector for ten years and knew I had a passion for this field, but as a young person from a low-income family and having faced other disadvantages, I struggled to find opportunities that suited the skills I had been working so hard to develop, such as leadership, the capacity for initiative, research, advocacy, etc. As soon as I came across the Belong Collective youth leadership group, I was immediately drawn to its mission to provide a platform where I could further the conversation regarding youth loneliness alongside like-minded people.

As you can see from this brief chapter of my life, it is crucial to have discussions regarding young people's loneliness because it can have negative effects on young people's lives. Everyone has a right to a happy, healthy life. It is important to remember that I mentioned I applied for the role because it offered the "potential" for me to have a sense of belonging, proving that the "potential" should never be ignored. As my own experience has shown, addressing the reasons of loneliness can be difficult, but groups like the Belong Collective youth leadership group are essential in tackling the effects of loneliness rather than ignoring them. Even though I am just one young person who has experience youth loneliness, there are millions of other young people who still need to be noticed, listened to, and addressed, so it is crucial that the #youthloneliness conversation continues."

Molly Taylor, Belong Collective Youth Leadership Group Member

Acknowledgements

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Executive Summary

This report focuses on the essential role that youth organisations play in supporting young people to overcome loneliness and considers ways in which we can enhance the youth work offer to support young people in the future. It has been funded by the Co-operative Foundation and the Astra Foundation who have generously supported UK Youth to relaunch the Belong Collective (www.ukyouth.org/2019/05/leading-a-national-network-to-tackle-youth-loneliness/) which supports the youth sector in sharing good practices and learning in supporting young people with loneliness. It is UK Youth's follow-up to the 'A Place to Belong' report, originally released in 2019

The report focuses on four themes:

- Which young people are likely to be affected by loneliness
- How youth organisations have been responding to youth loneliness in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic
- How we can be developing the role of youth organisations to support young people in the future
- The role of young people in tackling youth loneliness

The Belong Collective

This is a collective of youth workers, young people and other stakeholders who come together in a dynamic community to support collaboration and learning, and develop best practice. The sector-led forum also helps to drive a national conversation about how youth workers are best placed to address the issue of loneliness. It was first launched in 2018, went on pause during the Covid pandemic but was relaunched again in February 2022. The Belong Collective is now supported by a Youth Leadership Group, a group of passionate young people who share their personal experiences of loneliness and advise and lead on certain parts of the Collective

How we did the research

The research project was broken down into two parts:

1. A rapid evidence review to help us understand the current state of youth loneliness
2. Primary qualitative research with youth workers and young people who are part of youth organisations that are developing approaches to working with young people facing loneliness

A total of 58 professionals from across the youth sector and 38 young people (not including the youth leadership group) were engaged through the research project. The research was conducted through a series of interviews and focus groups that took place between February – July 2022. The youth leadership group that was formed as part of the Belong Collective acted as advisors and collaborators for the research and have provided their own insights from their experiences to help shape the research project.

Why youth loneliness matters

Youth loneliness is now an important policy issue and major focus for policy-makers, national and local charities alike (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emerging-together-the-tackling-loneliness-network-action-plan/emerging-together-the-tackling-loneliness-network-action-plan>)

Young people are more likely to be experiencing loneliness than any other age group:

- Young people aged 18 – 24, are more affected by loneliness and isolation than any other age group, with 24% saying they felt lonely 'often' (YouGov Personality Test 2019).
- Four out of five adolescents have reported feelings of loneliness at some point growing up (Action for Children 2017).
- Pre-covid, 40% of young people aged 16-24 years said they felt lonely 'often' or 'very often' (BBC Loneliness Experiment 2018)
- 1.9m young people felt lonely 'often' or 'always' following periods of lockdown during the Covid pandemic, a rise of 400,000 from the year before (Co-operative Foundation, 2021)

Which young people are likely to experience loneliness

Loneliness can affect any young person when growing up. However, we know that there are certain groups of young people who are more likely to be affected by loneliness. They include:

- Young people receiving free school meals
- Young refugees or newly arrived to the country
- Young people with caring responsibilities
- LGBTQ+ young people
- Young people with physical disabilities
- Young people in care
- Neurodivergent young people
- Young people who are not in employment

At the same time, young people are also likely to experience loneliness at certain points growing up including:

- Leaving school, moving home, going to university, leaving care, and/or finding new work
- Holiday periods, particularly school holidays
- Having new caring responsibilities, including parenthood or taking care of relatives
- Periods of ill health
- Relationship break-up
- Going through a bereavement
- Being bullied
- Being neglected by their carers

What we have learnt from our research

There have been a series of key insights that emerged from our research, reflecting on the challenges of the last two years, the changing landscape of the youth sector and the future it faces. Some of our key findings have included

- Youth organisations have been at the forefront of supporting young people with loneliness during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite having faced temporary closures of facilities, moving support online, some loss of staff and volunteers they have continued to engage young people throughout this time
- Although youth organisations have been supporting young people with loneliness, it is still not considered a priority in many local areas. Youth organisations feel, with the right support, they can be fully tackling loneliness in their local areas

- Youth organisations have been developing their digital offer to help engage young people during the Covid pandemic including utilising online platforms, developing their websites and providing staff training in using online spaces
- Youth workers have been engaging young people in public spaces, 'detaching' themselves from their youth centres to ensure they can reach out to young people in spaces where they can maintain social distancing
- Youth organisations have been providing a range of activities and interventions to support young people with skills-building, their educational skills and employability at a time when this has been disrupted due to the Covid-19 pandemic
- Youth organisations have been collaboratively working with schools and health and social care providers to help reach out to young people who may be disengaging from local services and struggling with loneliness. This has included co-locating staff in those settings, referring young people directly to youth workers, co-delivering activities in youth settings or directly employing well-being practitioners in youth organisations.

At the same time, when speaking to youth workers and young people we looked to the future in what was needed to be developed across the youth sector to help young people overcome loneliness. Our findings included:

- Digital youth work has now become critical to supporting young people. Young people now spend a lot of time on online platforms and have developed online identities. These are spaces that young people need to be engaged in more
- Building on young people's skills and strengths can help them to overcome loneliness. This means not just developing interventions that engage young people in discussions about loneliness but also using the full range of youth work support, programmes and interventions
- A need for building the capacity of peer-led groups that can help to reach out to young people who may not be engaging in youth support. Youth-led groups can help other young people to feel safe to talk about their feelings of loneliness
- More investment for detached youth work, a specific mode of delivery for youth work,

- that enables youth workers to engage young people in their own spaces, on their own territory, can help to reach young people who may not be accessing any youth support
- Developing and utilising the creative arts and cultural pursuits as a method to engage young people in youth organisation activities
 - Developing youth participation as a 'model for change' by empowering young people to lead on influencing local decisions about their communities, providing inclusive activities for young people in public spaces and peer-led groups for young people to discuss issues meaningful for them
 - Opportunities for further youth leadership positions, supporting young people to be influential voices in policy and practice development, whether locally or nationally
 - Cross-sector working and joining up approaches across youth providers, including

schools and health and social care providers. This includes integrating strategies and local action plans, co-locating staff in settings and creating multi-agency working groups, with youth sector leaders playing a central role.

Our recommendations

These recommendations are designed to support strategic, operational and delivery decision-making. We have divided these into both policy and practice recommendations.

Each recommendation has been written with a quality statement attached to help direct the future of the Belong Collective

Policy Recommendations

In addition to the specific recommendations below we call upon policy makers and funders across the youth sector to make:

A cross-sector strategy to promote youth belonging that centres the youth sector as a powerful and key stakeholder

All strategies for tackling youth loneliness should aim to prioritise the youth sector as a central stakeholder in a cross-sector approach

Practice Recommendations

Recommendations	Quality Statement
1. Young people are able to take the lead in developing peer-led support for young people at risk of loneliness	Young people are actively taking a lead in delivering peer-led support to help youth organisations connect with young people who may be facing loneliness
2. All training and resources that are created through the Belong Collective recognise and build on the strengths and skills of young people and youth workers	Youth workers and young people are building on their personal strengths, developing their skills and knowledge in how to overcome loneliness
3. Youth organisations ensure that there are activities available for all young people, including 18-25 year olds who may be most at risk of experiencing loneliness	Youth organisations ensure that all young people from 10 – 25 years have appropriate activities they can get involved in
4. Youth organisations co-locate youth workers across educational, health and social care settings to identify young people most at risk of loneliness	Youth organisation action plans make specific provision allocated for co-locating youth workers across settings
5. Youth organisations develop and deliver cultural arts projects, delivered with young people in their communities	Creative arts and cultural activities are an essential part of an offer to young people in all youth provision

“A commitment to empowering young people to lead in tackling youth loneliness and ensuring future strategies on youth loneliness utilise and champion youth work as a key component”

Recommendation	Quality Statement
Empower young people as leaders across the youth sector in developing approaches to tackle youth loneliness	Young people are actively taking a lead in building strategies and policies to help youth organisations connect with young people who may be facing loneliness
Ensure both current and future national youth offers (including the current Youth Guarantee) covers all young people aged 10- 25	Youth provision that is developed for young people makes specific provision for all young people aged 10 – 25
Future strategies for the Youth Sector should be making specific funding available for developing inclusive provision across diverse community groups	All funding for youth provision makes specific provision available for developing inclusive approaches that reaches young people from diverse community groups
Funders across statutory and voluntary sectors to increase funding for youth work, especially detached and digital youth work	Funding makes specific provision available for detached and digital youth work, ensuring youth organisations are equipped to reach out to young people
Ensure funders who provide cultural arts programmes are included in building strategies for tackling youth loneliness	Funding makes specific provision available for cultural arts programmes



Introduction

This report highlights our findings from research we have been undertaking with young people and youth workers across the youth sector to help us understand the role of youth organisations in supporting young people facing loneliness. The last two years have seen unprecedented change to the sector and presented new challenges to young people they may never have faced before. We now know that this has had significant impact on young people's feeling of loneliness.

'We choose to be here' describes the essential role that youth organisations play in helping young people to overcome these feelings of loneliness in the face of such a challenging period. By helping them to connect with others, make new friendships and explore their own identity, youth organisations act as vital outlets for young people. Through their own choices to participate in activities and groups that youth organisations provide, young people are making an empowered step to challenge their feeling of loneliness and create a new future for themselves.

This research not only describes how youth organisations play this essential role, but also, reflecting on a challenging two years for the youth sector, how we can learn from this time to build future policies and practices that policy makers, youth workers and young people can draw upon to create real change.

The research acts as a follow-up to our 2018 report, 'A Place to Belong', which first helped to set out a series of strategic and delivery-level recommendations, including both the need for further research into youth loneliness and a space for a network of youth workers and organisations to come together, share advice, experience and create innovative solutions. This report led to the creation of the Belong Collective, first launched in 2019 (<https://www.ukyouth.org/2019/05/leading-a-national-network-to-tackle-youth-loneliness/>).

The research for this report was conducted between September 2021 – June 2022 by UK Youth's Research Team.

The aims of the research were to:

- Understand how youth organisations have been developing their approaches to working with young people facing loneliness
- Identify effective practices that have emerged that could act as preliminary 'quality marks' to shape future approaches for youth organisations as part of the Belong Collective
- Highlight the role of youth workers and young people as leaders of the Belong Collective

Introducing the Belong Collective

In 2019 UK Youth launched the Belong Collective, a UK Youth-led network of organisations that come together in a dynamic community to share learning and develop best practice towards youth loneliness (www.ukyouth.org/2019/05/leading-a-national-network-to-tackle-youth-loneliness/). Following a 'pause' period during the Covid-19 pandemic, when youth organisations had to adapt to meeting immediate priorities, the Collective has been relaunched to bring back youth workers, policy-makers and young people in shared forums to look at specific aspects of work and consider steps forward.

A recap on 'A Place to Belong'

In 2018 UK Youth produced its first report on youth loneliness, 'A Place to Belong'. This research included perspectives from youth workers across the UK on the role of youth organisations in tackling youth loneliness and promoting youth belonging. The research explored four key themes that helped to inform the future Belong Collective:

- Current awareness among youth workers of youth loneliness
- Capability of the sector in addressing youth loneliness
- Barriers to helping young people overcome loneliness
- Support needed to help youth organisations effectively address youth loneliness

The report found that:

- youth workers already had in-depth knowledge and understanding of youth loneliness and regularly adapted their approaches to supporting young people;

- youth organisations provide safe spaces for young people where they can foster a sense of belonging and develop positive relationships with others;
- youth organisations were reaching out into communities to connect with young people;
- youth organisations were supporting young people to develop their personal and social capabilities to help face challenging times;
- and youth organisations helped connect and refer young people into specialist support in health, social care and advice.

Despite these strengths, there were a number of development areas were prioritised to increase the quality and availability of support:

- youth workers needed more support to reach out to and engage young people facing loneliness; youth workers would welcome resources, tools and advice in addressing youth loneliness;
- young people needed to have a more central role in developing solutions for helping others facing loneliness;
- more could be done to help build cross-sector working and pathways into specialist services;
- and more specific funding for detached youth work to help engage young people who are not accessing youth centres or existing support.

However, the relaunch of the Belong Collective in February 2022 has provoked a renewed commitment to addressing these recommendations. There has been a concerted effort to build solutions for tackling youth loneliness beyond the Collective, including the youth sector, charities and government. The tackling youth loneliness website (www.tacklingyouthloneliness.org.uk) by the National Youth Partnership, the Lonely Not Alone campaign (www.lonelynotalone.org) by the Co-operative Foundation and the Campaign to End Loneliness (www.campaigntoendloneliness.org/) all bring together dedicated resources, research and information to further support organisations and professionals in developing their understanding of youth loneliness and isolation.

Why youth loneliness matters

Youth loneliness as an important issue has become a major focus for policy-makers, national and local charities alike (<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/emerging-together-the-tackling-loneliness-network-action-plan/emerging-together-the-tackling-loneliness-network-action-plan>)

It is a common misconception that older people are the most lonely group. Young people are disproportionately affected by loneliness and the rates of loneliness and social isolation have further increased during the last two years because of the Covid pandemic.

Through A Place to Belong report, UK Youth developed a series of recommendations for the Youth Sector:



A commitment from government and other major stakeholders to fund the involvement of young people in the co-design of specific solutions and resources



Development of tools and resources to help youth workers raise awareness of loneliness, appropriately and effectively among all young people



Development of activities and funded programmes that build resilience and strong support networks and promote detached youth work across youth organisations



Development of better links between local youth organisations and local educational, health and social services to both 'refer-in' and 'refer-out' young people

Key facts

24%

Young people aged 18–24, are more affected by loneliness and isolation than any other age group, with 24% saying they felt lonely 'often' (YouGov Personality Test 2019).



Young people have been adversely affected by feelings of isolation, connectedness and belonging during the Covid pandemic (YoungMinds, February 2021).

80%

Four out of five adolescents have reported feelings of loneliness at some point growing up (Action for Children 2017).

1.9m

1.9m young people felt lonely 'often' or 'always' following periods of lockdown during the Covid pandemic, a rise of 400,000 from the year before (Co-operative Foundation, 2021).

40%

Pre-covid, 40% of young people aged 16-24 years said they felt lonely 'often' or 'very often' (BBC Loneliness Experiment 2018).

37%

Only 37% of young people feel confident talking about loneliness (Co-operative Foundation 2021).

The long-term impact of loneliness on young people's personal outcomes remains complex and varies depending upon how long young people may experience it, how long it is unrecognised and the means for young people to overcome it. (Goodfellow et al, 2022) However, where it is frequent and prolonged, it has been shown to have negative effects on young people's future life chances, including:

- Increased likelihood of both short and long-term depression and social anxiety (Mental Health Foundation, 2021)
- Lower school grades, risk of school absence, lower life satisfaction and an increase in unhealthy lifestyle choices (Kings College London, 2021)

Due to high rates of loneliness, many among this generation of young people are growing up facing an uncertain future, new risks and reduced prospects. Tackling youth loneliness remains a key issue of our time, that will have a lasting impact for future generations to come.

Methodology

The research was broken down into two phases:

1. Phase 1 – Rapid Evidence Review to help us understand the current state of youth loneliness.
2. Phase 2 – Primary qualitative research with youth workers and young people who are part of youth organisations that are developing approaches to working with young people facing loneliness

A total of 58 professionals from across the youth sector and 38 young people were engaged through the research project.

Evidence review of existing literature

A rapid evidence review was completed to help us understand the current picture of youth loneliness, what key trends there are, who is more likely to experience loneliness, and where we are likely to see youth loneliness across the country. We reviewed secondary literature through desk research, linking and cross-referencing existing papers to help gauge where the youth sector efforts are to be the most effective.

Survey with youth organisations

As part of the relaunch of the Belong Collective in February 2022 we undertook a survey with members of the Collective to understand how equipped they are in supporting young people facing loneliness. Findings from this survey are also presented in this report.

Interviews and group discussions with youth workers and young people

We recruited three youth organisations from within the Belong Collective to conduct more in-depth group discussions, which were held in open access youth centres, taking the form of a semi-structured focus group. These were recruited following a call out to the Collective for participating organisations. We also conducted 1-2-1 telephone interviews with youth workers, following advertising of the research through the UK Youth network.

All young people spoken to as part of the research project were aged 16 or over. They were initially invited by youth organisations

to take part in the research, with further information and consent then being provided by UK Youth. These were conducted via a mix of in-person and online focus groups with young people. In one example, we also spoke to young people through an open-access youth club.

Learning Event

A learning event was held in June 2022 to discuss our early findings and consider areas for further development. A total of 47 people from across the youth sector attended the event to discuss these findings and consider early next steps for the Belong Collective.

Talking about loneliness

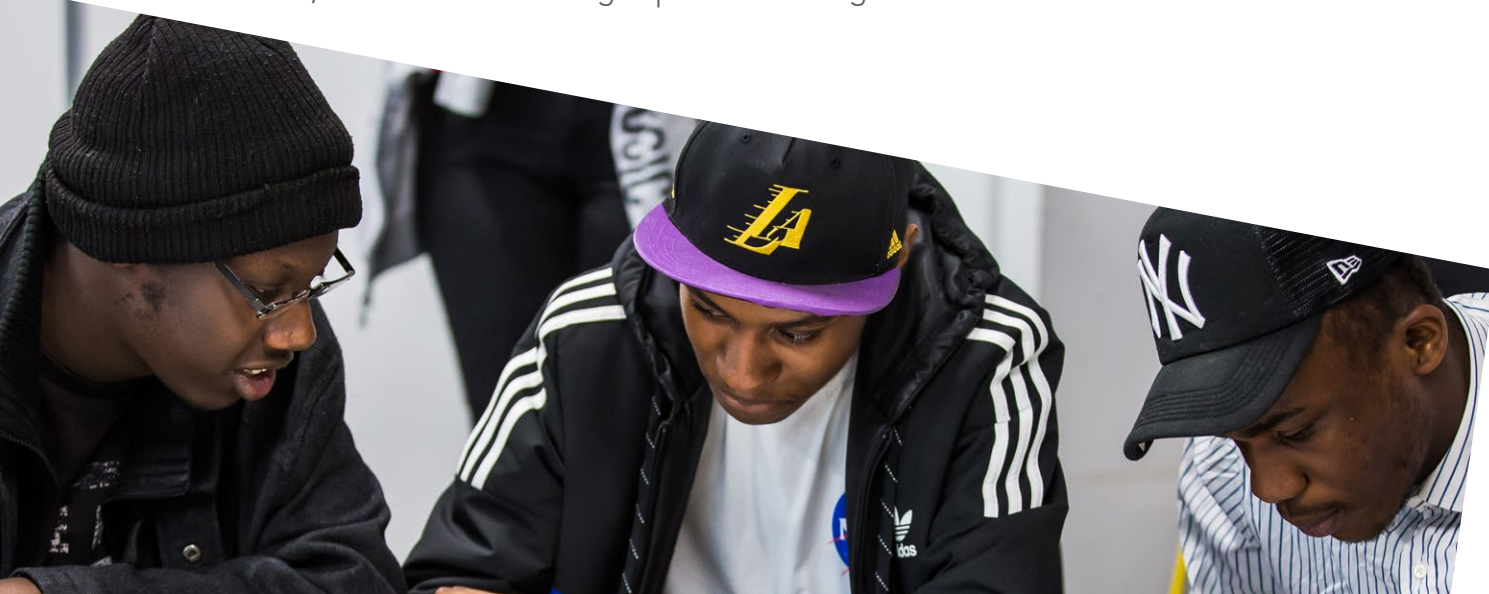
Feelings of loneliness are a highly personal experience and can be very painful, especially when they are connected to other difficult life events. Many people can experience feelings of embarrassment or shame if they are asked to talk about their experiences of loneliness. The researchers in this project were aware of the potential impact of stepping into young people's spaces or intruding in their life to ask them about difficult life experiences.

During the course of the fieldwork with young people we were careful not to specifically dwell on their experiences of loneliness. Instead, we talked about their experiences of youth services, why they valued them, why they mattered during Covid-19, what they would like to see more of and how they would like young people to be involved. This ran some risk of 'skirting the issue' but it also helped us to move forward in identifying real solutions for and with young people without the need to draw over painful experiences.

What do we mean by 'youth loneliness'

For this research we took the definition that The Campaign to End Loneliness and the Jo Cox Foundation use: "a subjective, unwelcome feeling of lack or loss of companionship. It happens when we have a mismatch between the quantity and quality of social relationships that we have, and those that we want".

This importantly recognises that loneliness does not always mean being 'alone' or 'isolated' but can also relate to young people who may be





surrounded by others but may not feel that they belong in those groups or they have anyone they can relate to. This can make loneliness hard to recognise, carrying important implications for how youth workers develop their approach.

By 'youth loneliness' we use the above definition of loneliness experienced by someone aged between 10-25 years old.

“
Challenge and encourage each other to get out of our comfort zones”
(Young person, Youth Focus North East)

Which young people are likely to be affected by loneliness?

Who is likely to be affected by loneliness?

Many young people will experience loneliness at some point in their lives. However, the intensity and duration of this experience will vary. Our evidence review found that there were certain groups of young people who were more likely to experience prolonged loneliness. These included:



Young people receiving free school meals



Young refugees or recent immigrants



Young people with caring responsibilities



LGBTQ+ young people



Young people with physical disabilities



Young people in care



Neurodivergent young people



Young people who are not in employment

(Action for Children, 2017; Co-operative Foundation 2017; The Children's Society 2019)

There are common factors that may shape why these groups of young people are more likely to experience loneliness. These include: experiences of discrimination; not having the resources or means to build connections or break out of periods of loneliness; being excluded from activities that exist in local communities; having fewer other young people in their community who they identify with; not having a settled background or existing secure connections to draw upon.

This raises important challenges for the youth sector in how it connects with young people who may not feel included in current youth offers or face certain barriers in accessing them. We reflect on this in further sections.

When are young people likely to experience loneliness?

Young people are more likely to experience loneliness at certain points growing up. These can be prolonged experiences and can lead to wider social isolation and mental health needs if a young person is left unsupported. Key periods where loneliness may occur include:



Major transitions in life, such as: leaving school, moving home, going to university, leaving care, and/or finding new work



Holiday periods, particularly school holidays



Having new caring responsibilities, including parenthood or taking care of relatives



Periods of ill health



Relationship break-up



Going through a bereavement



Being bullied



Being neglected by their carers

(Action for Children, 2017; British Broadcasting Corporation, 2018; Co-operative Foundation 2017; The Children's Society 2019)

In these cases, young people are more likely to experience loneliness when existing relationships and social connections are disrupted or broken, when they have to connect with new groups of young people and peers or are facing marginalisation within their own networks.

This creates important challenges for the youth sector in reaching out to and connecting with groups of young people who may be facing these challenges, especially where existing peer relationships may be breaking down. We again reflect on this in further sections.

Where are young people likely to experience loneliness?

There are a number of factors that increase the likelihood of young people in certain geographic areas experiencing loneliness (Manchester Metropolitan University, 2021). These are social factors that can also lead to groups of young people in certain communities experiencing higher levels of loneliness including:



Areas with higher levels of deprivation



Areas with low social mobility



Limited availability of public transport (such as rural areas)



Fewer job and training opportunities



Less availability of youth services

(BBC 2018; The Children's Society, 2019; Manchester Metropolitan University 2019)

There are clear connections here between potential rates of youth loneliness, changing social conditions and surrounding opportunities that young people have. Again this presents interesting challenges for youth organisations applying their approaches within this context, having to adapt their services to help young people to overcome wider social inequalities and personal barriers.

How are youth organisations set up to support young people facing loneliness?

Youth work is a distinct educational process adapted across a variety of settings to support a young person's personal, social and educational development (National Youth Agency, 2020). It enables young people to explore their values, beliefs and ideas, develops their voice and influence, and helps them to learn practical and technical skills.

Through this youth organisations can provide valuable support for young people where they can envision a hopeful future, a sense of connection to their community or a place where they can meet other like-minded young people to build connection with.

Youth work can be delivered through:

- Local authority youth services
- National uniformed organisations (eg. Scouts and Girlguiding)
- Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) organisations who are not affiliated to a national uniformed organisation
- Embedded youth workers in other sectors (ie. schools, health centres, children's services)
- Faith-based groups

Youth services offered through youth organisations can also be diverse, and be delivered both in the community and online. There are broadly five main modes of youth delivery offered through youth organisations:

All these modes could be universal or targeted to specific groups of young people.

1

Centre or facility-based – These services are usually open to any young person that is looking for positive activities, peer networks, advice, guidance and a safe space to hang out.

2

Detached and street-based youth work – Where youth workers meet young people in their own spaces, because they do not or can not attend youth centres. This includes young people who may be geographically isolated, lack family support or don't feel comfortable in accessing these centres

3

Outreach youth work – Also takes place on young people's own territory and is an extension of or compliments new and existing project based youth work that supports young people to break barriers to accessing support

4

Outdoor learning – Active learning in an outdoor environment to support young people's learning skills, social and emotional development and environmental awareness

5

Digital youth work – Using digital technology to engage young people in a digital world

Together, these types of youth work have the potential to support young people facing loneliness within a diverse ecosystem of youth services that includes schools, health and social care and leisure services. They help to create safe spaces for young people, build relationships with trusted adults, form new friendship groups and peer relationships and develop social and emotional skills to help to tackle difficult periods in young people's lives.

As part of the Belong Collective relaunch we surveyed participant members to help us understand how well the sector is set up to support young people in light of the ever increasing challenge of loneliness. Based on responses from 47 participating youth workers, we found:

Overall this painted a complex picture. Youth organisations feel that they are already doing much to support young people facing loneliness as part of any youth service offer but, as it had not been a

13%

felt very confident supporting young people, 40% felt slightly confident, 30% neither confident or unconfident and 15% unconfident in supporting young people

45%

offered specific support to young people facing loneliness, which may include befriending and peer support, personal mentoring or counselling, social action or peer research on loneliness

47%

felt they had the necessary resources to support young people facing loneliness, 34% were not sure and 19% said that they did not.

87%

stated that youth loneliness should be a specific priority for youth services in their area but only 51% stated that it was.

policy priority, they had not always targeted programmes specifically to address this (although some youth organisations had and were continuing to do so).

In part, asking these questions through our relaunch helped some youth organisations to think about what they were specifically offering for young people facing loneliness and what was appropriate within that offer that did not stigmatise young people they were engaging with. This meant, for example, balancing the need to specifically create targeted activities for young people who may be facing loneliness with inclusive, participatory activities for all young people. Balancing both universal offers (such as open-access youth spaces) with more targeted support (such as befriending, mentoring or counselling) was and is seen as vital in reaching out to young people and offering them something meaningful in helping them overcome feelings of loneliness.

Section summary

This section has shown which young people are likely to be affected by loneliness and how youth organisations are currently set-up to support them. We have seen from existing literature that certain groups of young people are more at-risk of loneliness because of their identities, ages, income and locations. However, we can also see from youth organisations' feedback that loneliness is still not a priority in some areas of England, meaning that there have not been specific responses to addressing this. Working across the full range of youth work was seen as vital in helping to reach out to young people who may be facing loneliness, helping them to find ways to access social connection and develop new skills.

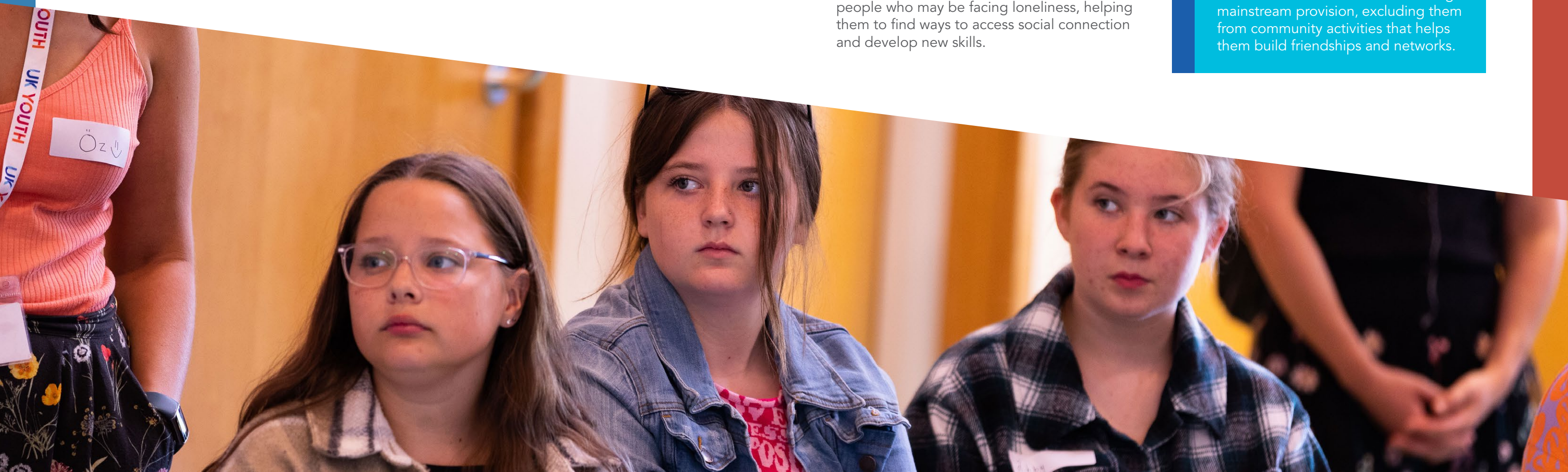
SPOTLIGHT

Me2Club



Me2Club is an inclusion charity for children and teenagers with additional needs and disabilities in Berkshire. Its purpose is to specifically tackle the social isolation and loneliness experienced by children and teenagers who are not able to access mainstream leisure provision. It does this by training and co-ordinating volunteers to buddy 1:1 with young people, provide social activities, advocate for better access to provision and provide 1:1 mentoring. All staff have specialist training to support volunteers, co-ordinate volunteer support and advocate/train staff across sectors on the needs of young people with additional needs.

They have set out a specific vision to ensure children are less isolated through the provision, bringing it into central focus as a specific vision for their service. They focused on isolation as they recognised that young people with additional needs often face extra barriers to accessing mainstream provision, excluding them from community activities that helps them build friendships and networks.



How youth organisations have been responding to youth loneliness in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic

"Some young people didn't realise they were lonely until they got out again"

(Youth Worker, Youth Moves)

Throughout the last two years, youth organisations have been adapting their responses to supporting young people in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic and pressures on service provisions. These have included: periods of lockdown, social distancing measures, funding changes, disruption of referral pathways, and sickness amongst staff. As previous research has shown, young people have been particularly affected by loneliness through the Covid-19 period and now face wider challenges with growing mental health worries as we steadily move out of the pandemic (Co-operative Foundation 2021; Young Minds 2021).

The youth workers and young people who took part in our research also highlighted that loneliness has increased amongst the young people they know and work with. School drop-out, loss of work or just not being in contact with friends all contributed to increased feelings of loneliness and isolation. It was highlighted that there are some young people who have not spoken to anyone outside of their immediate family since the pandemic began and have only recently begun to socialise or re-engage again after a two year period. It is in this moment that

some young people began to realise how lonely they had become as one youth worker told us 'Some young people didn't realise they were lonely until they got out again' (Youth Worker, Youth Moves).

Youth organisations had to adapt to the combined pressure of increasing need, changes in their methods of engaging young people (e.g. shift to digital working), and the challenges that the Covid-19 pandemic presented to their organisations. For example: temporary closure of their centres, reduced staff hours, loss in some funding streams, loss of volunteers, staff sickness, increased detached youth working as well as pressures on staff of the Covid-19 pandemic itself.

Despite this, youth organisations have shown remarkable resilience in the face of these challenges, adapting their provision to continue to engage and reach out to young people. These changes included

- **Developing their digital offer** – youth organisations quickly resorted to online provision, developing their digital offers through; increasing information through their websites; providing online quizzes, creative activities and online groups sessions, which were delivered in the evenings or at weekends when young people were most likely to feel lonely; setting up new social media accounts to inform young people of upcoming activities or materials they could use to occupy their time
- **Staff training and development** – In new digital applications or online platforms that were initially unfamiliar to some staff but were needed to stay in contact with young people
- **Daily phone calls with young people** – Keeping in contact with young people throughout the pandemic to ensure they had someone to speak to or could express any concerns they had
- **Introduced well-being practitioners** – Youth organisations specifically invested in well-being practitioners, counsellors or psychiatrists to support young people where there was more acute mental health problems caused by isolation.

This provides important context for this research. Youth organisations have gone through a turbulent period and great transition,

leaving a lasting legacy for their work. It has opened up new and interesting avenues of practice, helping them to reflect on their offer, consider what was important and actually needed to serve their communities of young people.

Good practices that have emerged during the Covid-19 Pandemic

UK Youth's previous 'A Place To Belong' report identified how youth organisations were set-up to effectively support young people facing loneliness in their communities, building on long-established youth work approaches to engage young people and develop their relationships, as well as their social and emotional skills (UK Youth, 2018).

As part of this new piece of research, we decided to ask youth workers and young people what practices and responses emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic that proved effective in helping young people to stay connected with their peers. Using the challenges posed by the pandemic, where loneliness and feelings of isolation have increased, we took this as a unique opportunity to explore youth organisation's responses. Through this, we also explored how practices that emerged could be developed further in a post-pandemic society or whether there needed to be further exploration of particular issues to support youth workers in the future.

Supporting young people to engage positively with online platforms

"We need to ensure that if we offer things online that they help young people to build connection, not lose it"

(Youth Worker,
Youth Focus North East)

With the introduction of social distancing measures through the Covid-19 pandemic, many youth organisations had to take their service offer online to continue to safely engage young people. With the need to quickly adapt to these circumstances, many youth organisations have been carefully considering

how their online offers to young people can be refined for the future. Some of these adaptations included:

- Ensuring that youth organisations websites provided enhanced information about their offer and where else young people could turn to for support
- Purchasing licenses to use new online platforms
- Purchasing new equipment for both staff and young people to use to stay in touch
- Providing training to staff, volunteers and young people in using online platforms and new digital equipment

This proved vital in staying in touch with young people who may have fallen into isolation or briefly lost contact with the youth organisation. It also offered a means for engaging young people who may not have been comfortable in attending group activities at a youth centre, either because of anxieties about other young people or fears about their personal health.

Both youth workers and young people were aware that too much time online on social media platforms could be a sign of loneliness or a trigger for isolation. At the same time, it was recognised that young people are spending more time online, have online identities and regularly engage in online communities. Further research has also shown that young people feel that it is essential to have digital skills for their future jobs and careers (Digital Youth Index, 2020) meaning increasingly they will look to organisations who can offer them ways to develop these skills.

It was identified by both youth workers and young people that youth organisations are well placed to offer additional support to young people to engage positively with online platforms and use these to build connections with others or find new friends who are outside of their immediate community. Enhancing the digital offer of youth organisations, against a back drop of where only 1% of their provision has been mainly offered online (National Youth Agency, 2021) was seen as vital in ensuring that young people feel supported to build their online skills and profile. Working with young people, youth workers recognised that they can provide training, guidance and advice to young people about how to access online

materials and positively use online platforms. This ensures that young people will be informed of the dangers of over-using the internet and supported to keep healthy relationships online.

Supporting young people to build on their strengths and abilities to move beyond loneliness

Often where young people are experiencing cycles of loneliness or at risk of falling into long periods of loneliness, youth workers told us that it can be challenging to break this, meaning they often had to focus their efforts further to support young people.

Discussions about feelings of loneliness could help young people to open up their experiences but may not always help them to combat these feelings or change their circumstances. In part, youth workers told us that modelling strengths-based practices, that is, focusing on building young people's strengths and abilities, helped them to see a better future for themselves and break cycles of loneliness. This was also supported by young people who told us that 'having things to do' or 'new people to meet' was just as important as having spaces to discuss feelings of loneliness.

Youth workers are already using a range of approaches to help young people focus on their strengths and abilities, including:

- Identifying young people's personal goals, existing skills and motivations to help them build confidence, centre their experience as a valuable asset to draw upon and envision a hopeful and bright future
- Recognising who is important to young people and what they value in their peers, social connections and community to see what resources they can draw upon to overcome feelings of loneliness
- Seeing loneliness as 'lived experience' that others can relate to and connect with instead of something to feel ashamed of or embarrassed by
- Building personal skills in young people they can draw upon and use to break down barriers to accessing education or employment.

SPOTLIGHT

Be Internet Citizens



Be Internet Citizens (BIC) is a UK Youth-led programme, funded by Google, that enables young people to be creative, confident and safe online. The programme supports 13-18 year olds to become critical consumers of information online and feel confident to use social media to communicate their views and ideas in a positive way.

Run through a series of interactive workshops, the programme equips young people with the critical thinking skills needed to safeguard themselves online, demonstrating the power of the internet to bring people together and share their voice online positively. This is vital in ensuring young people can build the necessary digital skills for a future digital world, connect safely with other young people and online communities.

Although providing spaces and groups that allow young people to discuss personal experiences of loneliness was seen as important in helping young people to open up and destigmatise their experience, it was also seen as a potential barrier for tackling youth loneliness if it was not coupled with tangible outcomes for young people. Talking about loneliness may still be challenging for some and may not offer simple solutions that some may be looking for such as participation in group activities, education or employment opportunities where they can build friendship groups and personal connections. It was this focus on young people's futures that was seen as important to centre approaches around.

Providing creative skills, arts and music activities

The use of creative skills, arts and music as a medium for bringing young people together and finding shared interests, is a common feature of youth work. This type of activity is

SPOTLIGHT

New Ground Creations



New Ground Creations (NGC) are a London-based social enterprise set up to improve the economic prospects and holistic wellbeing of young people and to strengthen their sense of community cohesion and belonging. NGC's overall aim is to reduce youth violence by improving the skills and opportunities of young people, their families and the professionals who work with them. NGC uses an innovative youth work approach that includes personal or business coaching programmes and leadership and enterprise courses. By taking a strengths-based approach, NGC builds young people's self-confidence, peer and community links and therefore their sense of belonging, tackling youth loneliness and isolation.

NGC also strengthens the support network around young people by providing services for parents and professionals, including an Introduction to Youth Work course and awareness workshops on topics such as grooming for gang involvement and child sexual exploitation. The organization provides its services beyond its own site, across various boroughs of London in the community and in schools.

participatory in nature, fun and can transcend social divisions or boundaries. Youth workers highlighted that this was an area that could be enhanced further to help create inclusive and participatory practices for young people who may have disengaged from mainstream provision or who had lost some of their social connections during the pandemic.

Creative skills, arts and music were seen as inclusive practices that could help young people facing loneliness because it is a medium that

will be familiar to many and gives young people something practical to do when engaging in group activities. It was also recognised by young people that these types of activities gave them a chance to express feelings about loneliness they may be having without having to talk about it in an uncomfortable way.

Increasing detached youth work

With the introduction of social distancing measures and the difficulty of bringing young people into enclosed buildings or spaces, many youth workers told us that they expanded their detached youth work. This ensured that they met young people in open spaces continuing to engage in a safe and reassuring way.

Detached youth work is a well-established means of engaging young people as it does not ask them to come to unfamiliar settings or spaces where they may not feel comfortable.

SPOTLIGHT

Make Some Noise



Make Some Noise are a children and young people's charity based in the West Midlands. They deliver creative youth-led groups and activities as well as training opportunities to ensure young people can flourish from the holistic benefits derived from creativity. Creativity, but especially music, is seen as an important tool to help young people to express themselves creatively, explore their identities, feelings and emotions and help to connect to others. It is a universal medium that can transcend class and cultural barriers to help young people from different backgrounds to connect and is familiar for most young people to engage in. Their work is underpinned by a creative social pedagogy that uses group-based and communal activities to promote social connection. Through the Covid-19 pandemic they continued to offer this support by moving activities online and providing weekly creativity sessions.

Your Space



Your Space is a UK Youth funded pilot programme in partnership with the Clothworkers Foundation and delivered through the Uniting Communities Organisation in Blackburn-Upon-Darwen that supported street-based youth workers to engage disadvantaged young people in their own areas and spaces. The pilot targeted areas where young people are exposed to extreme risks such as serious violence, gang affiliation, drug and alcohol abuse.

The programme was designed to support youth workers to operate away from on-site provision where there were existing barriers for young people to engage in and put themselves, with the right support and training, into spaces that were 'owned' by young people. Managing complex risk and empowering youth workers as community connectors, has enabled them to engage young people who may be socially isolated, putting them at increased risk of participating in criminal activity or anti-social behaviour.

Through the Covid-19 pandemic, the youth workers continued to engage young people, where social distancing measures allowed, discussing with them about feeling of loneliness or isolation, as well as other important topics such as knife crime, staying safe, bullying, illegal drug use or Covid testing and vaccinations.

With the lifting of social distancing measures and the re-opening of buildings and enclosed youth spaces, youth organisations have returned to on-site youth work. This has reduced some of their capacity to undertake detached youth work. Some youth workers stressed the importance of allocating extra resource for detached youth work in order to reach young people who may be struggling with loneliness

in their community or may feel uncomfortable in attending activities, clubs or groups in enclosed youth spaces.

Inclusive groups that reach out to and target specific young people

"We always want something that speaks to us"

(Young Person, Youth Moves)

Youth organisations work hard to create inclusive spaces and activities that are engaging for all young people in their local community. Young people and youth workers provided some specific recommendations for how to build more inclusive spaces. For example, many young people felt that groups where they could discuss issues of race, sexuality, gender or broader inequalities could help young people reflect on their own identity and meet others with common experiences. Having groups that are targeted towards specific groups of young people (eg. LGBTQ+ groups), could be a way of showing to young people that particular youth spaces are for them and that they are recognized by that youth organisation (if not always thought about in wider society).

Covid-19 has had a major impact on young people and youth work since the publication of the 2018 'A Place to Belong' research. These societal changes prompted many youth workers to reflect on how inclusive their current offer was and whether more targeted, identity-led work needed to be considered. There were many examples highlighted through the course of the research, including:

- LGBTQ+ discussion groups
- Groups for young carers to discuss common experiences
- Environmental awareness group to discuss and act on climate change
- Special Educational Needs groups to discuss access to leisure pursuits
- Groups for neurodiverse young people to participate in shared activities or discuss issues relevant to them

Young Women and Girls groups to provide safe spaces to discuss gender-related topics.

Enfield Carers Centre



Enfield Carers Centre aims to improve the lives of young carers in their community by championing their rights to have their needs met and a voice in how services are shaped for them. They provide a variety of training, information, support groups, counselling and respite activities. They deliver mostly through volunteers and some staff to reach out to and support young carers

Young carers are known to be some of the most at risk young people to be affected by loneliness. Through the Covid-19 pandemic this became more stark and so the Centre offered support to young carers in the shape of online classes for those who could not engage in school, zoom quizzes, one-to-one support sessions and setting up WhatsApp groups. Some young people had never used these before so volunteers took time to teach them these tools and the skills to use them.

The Centre recognises that young carers often face unseen barriers to getting involved in community activities, such as lack of transport, lack of alternative care provision or peer support for entering unfamiliar spaces. The Centre looks to offer these through their volunteering support and providing additional funds.

Developing youth participation groups

Youth organisations are regularly providing youth participation groups that support young people to have a voice in how a youth organisation is run or in how local decisions about their community are being made. Encouraging youth participation, empowering

young people to make decisions or advocate for themselves, was seen as a way of 'modelling' approaches for supporting young people to get involved in youth organisations that could also move beyond traditional activities that were targeted towards them (for example, open-access youth clubs, 1:1 mentoring, sports clubs or employability training).

Many young people taking part in the research expressed how they would like to have a greater voice in how their communities were being run, what was on offer for them and local issues that mattered most to them. It was partly this lack of 'voice' that some young people felt was why they are now the group most affected by loneliness. At the same time, feeling politically enfranchised in shaping local decisions and having youth organisations supporting them to do so by offering youth spaces and guiding young people to affect local decisions, was also a means for young people who may be facing loneliness to feel empowered in overcoming it. Hart's (1992) Ladder of Youth Participation, still remains one of the foremost guides for developing youth participation and can be drawn upon here. In addition, the #iwill movement (<https://www.iwill.org.uk/about-us/about-iwill>) a UK wide movement led movement for the youth sector, also provides guidance on involving young people to drive change in their communities through youth-led social action.



The Power of Youth Charter



The Power of Youth Charter is a framework for youth organisations to empower young people to shape decisions, take social action and make a positive difference for their communities (<https://www.iwill.org.uk/poy-charter>). It is built around a five point commitment for youth organisations to grow the power of youth through:

- Prioritising supporting young people to take social action
- Opening up decision-making structures
- Working collaboratively with other organisations
- Evidencing the benefits of youth social action
- Recognising and celebrating young people's impact

The charter was created through insight provided by #iwill campaigners and #iwill ambassadors, working collaboratively to create a clear and purposeful charter. You can sign up here (https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSdvHzwycM7HBi9IY3yWyZ6tb1v1W-d0XnSXsn_mCLdiXktdw/viewform)

Working across sectors and joining-up approaches

Connecting youth organisations with other sectors working with young people, including education, youth justice and social care providers was seen as critical by youth workers in ensuring that young people who may be facing difficulties with loneliness or isolation were able to get access to the right support at the right time. Youth workers openly spoke of how they had begun to integrate their work with other sectors by, for example:

- co-locating staff in schools or children's care homes;

- locating staff from other sectors in their youth organisation (such as well-being practitioners);
- holding joint events with other sectors in the community or youth spaces.

Youth workers felt this was invaluable in helping to identify young people who may be disengaged from all types of youth support or were facing loneliness within these spaces. Youth workers have the advantage of being able to be flexible across disciplines and organisations and can adapt their practices to those spaces to reach out to those young people.

However, they were also keen to stress that it was important that the specialism and the value of youth work should not be lost in cross-sector working and the principles of good youth work (National Youth Agency, 2020) are always adhered to when working in other sectors or partner agencies. Ensuring, for example, that youth workers were respectful to the organisation and spaces they were working within whilst also not losing their independence was seen as key to ensuring that young people would open up to them or express how they were feeling.



Youth Moves



Youth Moves are a youth organisation based in South Bristol who provide dedicated youth work to young people aged 8-19. This includes a range of on-site, detached and targeted youth work that is designed to inspire young people to realise their emotions, skills and abilities.

Youth Moves runs out of a community hub that has multiple providers on site. This includes an on-site secondary school. The organisation weaves itself into the fabric of that community so that they are seen as place for and with young people.

Youth Moves have been integrating their work across sectors throughout the Covid-19 pandemic, including embedding youth workers within schools and colleges across South Bristol. This inter-connects the working instead of continuing to refer across services/organisations and also helps to recognise where young people may be struggling with loneliness and isolation.

They also chair a local youth partnership, ensuring, for example that the voice of youth workers plays a role in local joint youth strategies. As part of this they have set up a 'Youth Opinions' group which provides a supportive pathway for young people to get involved and influence local policy and commissioning about what types of services are on offer for young people.

Section Summary

The Covid-19 pandemic has presented many challenges to youth organisations who have adapted their approaches to continue to engage with young people during this time. Moving their support and many of their activities online, detaching themselves from their youth centres, reflecting on inclusivity in their offer, developing youth participatory practices and working collaboratively with other sectors, have all been central elements of how youth organisations have proactively adapted to this situation. Through this we have seen many good practices emerge and brought to the fore in helping young people facing loneliness. Improving the digital offer, focusing more closely on young people's strengths and abilities, offering new and inclusive activities, finding new ways for young people to participate and have their voices heard and working with other sectors have all shown how the youth sector can and does continue to support young people facing loneliness.

“

Respect – even if you do or think differently, there is respect for each other”

(Young person, Youth Focus North East)

What is the role of young people in tackling loneliness

As a sector we advocate for young people to lead, where possible, in building their own activities and groups, develop their voices and influence and shape their own futures. Through the course of the research we asked young people what role they would like to play in creating approaches for tackling loneliness in the future.

To begin this we asked young people what 'belonging' meant to them to help us understand what the key features for developing responses to tackling youth loneliness needs to be.

They told us that:

"It's about community, about people who share something in common"

"Having a choice about where you are. We are here because we choose to be here"

"Being wanted to be there instead of being put up with"

"You need to be able to identify yourself within a group to understand where you belong"

"A place where you can be yourself"

"Respect – even if you do or think differently, there is respect for each other"

"You are wanted by others in the space – they miss you when you're not there"

"Being surrounded by like-minded people"

Being 'yourself', being able to express yourself and finding others who accept you for who you are was an important part of building belonging, especially where young people had found this difficult before. An emphasis on 'togetherness', but also being your authentic self in those spaces was seen as key in creating belonging amongst groups of young people.

The ways in which young people identified how they could help create these 'belonging' spaces for other young people included:

Being leaders to others

"Challenge and encourage each other to get out of our comfort zones"

(Young person, Youth Focus North East)

Young people wanted to take a lead when approaches are being developed to help young people facing loneliness. This may mean they need some assistance from youth workers to build confidence in taking leading roles or more specific training and guidance in leadership where those skills needed developing. It also meant encouraging youth leadership throughout a youth organisation, from senior decision-making to leading on day-to-day activities. There are many great examples of youth organisations that support young people to take leading roles or are led by young people themselves. The #iwill movement, for example, has been committing to empowering young people to lead on social action activities.

Peer-led groups

"I would like there to be groups that are more identity-led"

(Young Person, Youth Moves)

"We can encourage each other to push ourselves"

(Young person, Youth Focus North East)

Similar to encouraging and creating youth leadership roles, there was also a passion for creating more youth (peer) led groups within youth organisations that could actively reach out to other young people who may not be accessing youth support or may not feel that they 'belong' in the support that is offered. In part this was to create spaces for young people to feel comfortable in talking about their experiences of loneliness without shame or stigma, being able to make new friends and connections and feeling more comfortable spending time with other young people if they have spent time away from social activities.

Youth Participation

"We could talk more about big issues"

(Young person, Youth Focus North East)

Young people expressed that at the heart of all youth provision should be a commitment to youth participation, ensuring that young people are advocating for themselves and can meaningfully influence and shape decisions that affect them, not just within the organisation but also within their communities.

Creating 'youth voice' groups or building on existing groups through youth organisations, was seen as a way for young people to engage in local politics, shape how youth organisations are working or simply meeting other young people and connecting around a common cause. For young people, this also meant 'modelling' positive behaviours by supporting or looking out for other young people to participate in local activities or get involved in youth voice groups. Youth participation was seen as fundamental in efforts to support other young people facing loneliness because it could empower them to shape their own experience and the communities around them.



Encouraging positive use of social media and online platforms

"We could educate others on using social media, provide a factsheet that speaks to young people"

(Young person,
Youth Focus North East)

Many young people discussed the role that social media plays in other young people's lives, highlighting how it can be both a useful means for engaging other young people or could be harmful if engaged with in a negative way. Young people highlighted how excessive use of social media could have a negative effect on young people's sense of connection with others, especially where it was seen as presenting an unrealistic picture of young lives.

Some young people spoken to through the research expressed a desire to provide guidance to other young people on how to positively use social media, ensuring that it is designed in an accessible way for others and did not 'preach' or 'insult' their intelligence. They discussed using social media to be able to campaign on tackling youth loneliness, advertising youth activities to engage in or providing materials that have been created to help other young people use social media platforms. These proved to be open-ended conversations but were useful in helping young people to think about how to engage positively with social media and supporting others to do so.

Leading on community events

"We should do special events in unique locations"

(Young Person,
Youth Focus North East)


Volunteering and leading on delivering events in their community was highlighted by young people as a powerful means to reaching out to other young people not accessing youth support. Community events can help to bring people together from different backgrounds, create collective spaces for people to interact and show to the community how young people can take the lead in delivering these events. They could include young people holding community sports days, music events, art projects, community lunches and food shares and 'clean up your community' events.¹

Some young people spoke of the need to hold unique events in special locations that helped other young people get out of their local communities, take on new experiences or simply find new young people to connect with.

¹ These are just some of the examples given by young people about the kind of events they could hold

Section summary

Collectively, young people expressed the desire for a key role in developing approaches to supporting other young people facing loneliness. Ensuring young people are playing a leading role in future efforts ensures that our responses have greater meaning and credibility with other young people, increasing their participation and sustaining engagement. Creating opportunities for young people to lead on their own groups, influence and shape local decision-making, reach out to and support young people using social media or creating visible events in the community could all contribute to young people playing a central role. With strong support and assistance from youth workers, young people could feel empowered to take the lead and take on these roles in the future.



“You are wanted by others in the space – they miss you when you're not there”

Recommendations

From the findings discussed in this report we have provided a series of recommendations that we hope will bring together policy-makers, youth sector leaders, youth workers and young people to create practical action that will lead to real change for all young people who may be facing the challenge of loneliness.

UK Youth has set out a mission to ‘Unlock Youth Work’ so that ‘All young people are equipped to thrive and are empowered to contribute at every stage of their lives’ (UK Youth 2020). Through this we advocate for youth organisations to be equipped with the necessary resources so that they can empower young people to take a central role in creating meaningful solutions for themselves. We are keen to stress through this work that policy-makers and funders empower youth organisations and young people to build on their existing strengths and skills to create meaningful action for young people facing loneliness.

These recommendations are designed to cut across strategic, operational and delivery decision-making. We have divided these into both policy and practice recommendations.

Each recommendation has been written with a quality statement attached to help direct the future of the Belong Collective.

Policy Recommendations

In addition to the specific recommendations below we support policy makers and funders across the youth sector to make.

“A commitment to empowering young people to lead in tackling youth loneliness and ensuring future strategies on youth loneliness utilise and champion youth work as a key component”



Recommendation	Quality Statement
Empower young people as leaders across the youth sector in developing approaches to tackle youth loneliness	Young people are actively taking a lead in building strategies and policies to help youth organisations connect with young people who may be facing loneliness
Ensure both current and future national youth offers (including the current Youth Guarantee) covers all young people aged 10- 25	Youth provision that is developed for young people makes specific provision for all young people aged 10 – 25
Future strategies for the Youth Sector should be making specific funding available for developing inclusive provision across diverse community groups	All funding for youth provision makes specific provision available for developing inclusive approaches that reaches young people from diverse community groups
Funders across statutory and voluntary sectors to increase funding for youth work, especially detached and digital youth work	Funding makes specific provision available for detached and digital youth work, ensuring youth organisations are equipped to reach out to young people
Ensure funders who provide cultural arts programmes are included in building strategies for tackling youth loneliness	Funding makes specific provision available for cultural arts programmes
A cross-sector strategy to promote youth belonging that centres the youth sector as a powerful and key stakeholder	All strategies for tackling youth loneliness should aim to prioritise the youth sector as a central stakeholder in a cross-sector approach

Practice Recommendations

Recommendations	Quality Statement
1. Young people are able to take the lead in developing peer-led support for young people at risk of loneliness	Young people are actively taking a lead in delivering peer-led support to help youth organisations connect with young people who may be facing loneliness
2. All training and resources that are created through the Belong Collective recognise and build on the strengths and skills of young people and youth workers	Youth workers and young people are building on their personal strengths, developing their skills and knowledge in how to overcome loneliness
3. Youth organisations ensure that there are activities available for all young people, including 18-25 year olds who may be most at risk of experiencing loneliness	Youth organisations ensure that all young people from 10 – 25 years have appropriate activities they can get involved in
4. Youth organisations co-locate youth workers across educational, health and social care settings to identify young people most at risk of loneliness	Youth organisation action plans make specific provision allocated for co-locating youth workers across settings
5. Youth organisations develop and deliver cultural arts projects, delivered with young people in their communities	Creative arts and cultural activities are an essential part of an offer to young people in all youth provision

Conclusions

Loneliness is a problem that can affect many of us at points in our lives. However, we know from our research that it severely affects younger people. It is likely that whilst growing up many young people will face loneliness at some point and this can last for some time if they do not find the right relationships in their lives that create connections or a sense of belonging. The Covid-19 pandemic has made it more likely that young people will have faced loneliness in the last two years and may still be struggling to reconnect as we move back to normal. The affects of this can be painful and lead to further mental health issues, and poorer long term outcomes for young people. This is why supporting young people who face loneliness matters.

However, we know from our research that there are solutions.

We have shown through this research that youth organisations have already been adapting their approach to help reach young people who may have become isolated during the course of the Covid-19 pandemic or who needed to stay in contact with their youth workers and their friends. Through a challenging period we have seen many strong practices emerge that has caused some youth organisations to reflect on their offer and consider how they could be building on this to help further support young people facing loneliness in the future. Building their digital offers, increasing support for staff to reach out to young people, finding ways to empower young people to be influential in their local areas and working across sectors, have all shown how determined youth organisations are to do more to support young people in the future.

This research has attempted to show how youth organisations have adapted their approaches during the Covid-19 pandemic and identify emerging good practices that could be built on to support young people in the future. Through this we have created recommendations that we hope will give direction for the youth sector and centre young people and youth workers as real leaders in tackling youth loneliness.



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You need to be able to identify yourself within a group to understand where you belong”

(Young person,
Youth Focus North East)

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