

Youth Worker Role Cards

What is the unique role of youth work in supporting young people with their mental health?

The
UK YOUTH
Fund
Thriving Minds



DARTINGTON
SERVICE
DESIGN LAB

Introduction

Youth workers play vital roles in supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing and these roles are often undervalued and misconstrued. To understand and articulate these multifaceted roles of youth workers, UK Youth and Dartington Service Design Lab (Dartington) gathered learning from interviews, observations, and reporting from Thriving Minds Fund 99 grantees from across the UK – including youth workers and young people.

We identified a total of **10 'roles'**, which fall into three main **categories** that clarify youth workers' functions:



Interpersonal relationships with young people



Advocacy roles



Positions within the wider system

The roles are interconnected, they often blend and overlap rather than standing and functioning alone. Many of the roles naturally support or complement each other, with some laying the groundwork for others to be carried out effectively. For instance, the roles incorporating trust are often seen as the foundation for many roles that follow.

Each of the 12 cards identifies the key attributes and enabling conditions of the role, the intended outcomes, and we have linked how the specific activities that the role links to the '[Active Ingredients](#)' for creating change for young people.

Consider potential risks

Youth practitioners rely on significant discretion in their role. Ensuring they have the proper training and skills is essential for effectively supporting young people through the roles described.

Youth practitioners engage in therapeutic activities to support young people, and some may also offer specialised mental health support. However, it is crucial to recognise when young people need to be signposted or referred to more specialised services.

What are "Active Ingredients"?

The term '[Active Ingredients](#)' was coined by Wellcome in 2019, to refer to the key components of effective interventions for youth anxiety and depression. These ingredients are aspects of interventions that drive clinical effect and are linked to specific mechanisms of action. Wellcome has been researching these with a view to understand what works for different individuals and contexts, and has identified a range of potential 'Active Ingredients' that may help young people aged 14-to-24 manage mental health issues. You can read more about these [here](#).

UK Youth and Dartington applied this work to the roles relevant to youth practitioners, and the activities on our role cards are outlined to describe variations of the following ingredients:



Human Connection



Behaviour & Activities



Cognitive and Attentional Skills



Beliefs & Knowledge



Socio-economic Factors

How to use these resources

Youth Practitioners & Sector Leaders

The role cards help practitioners and leaders explain youth work's contribution to trustees, funders, and external audiences. They can also be used internally to design or adapt activities, guide reflective practice, and strengthen strategy development. In doing so, they provide practical insights into how youth workers can enhance their offer to better support young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Statutory & Community Mental Health Practitioners and Leaders

The role cards make visible the specific activities youth workers undertake and the outcomes they aim to achieve in supporting young people with their mental health. By clarifying these roles, they can help build mutual understanding and collaboration between youth work and statutory or community mental health services, supporting more joined-up and responsive provision.

Youth Mental Health Researchers & Evidence Producers

The role cards act as a launchpad for research into the varied roles youth work plays in young people's lives — from prevention and early intervention to more urgent forms of support. They also highlight the enabling conditions that shape youth workers' capacity and wellbeing. For researchers, particularly those working in areas such as youth social prescribing, the cards can provide a starting point for adding nuance to existing evidence and identifying areas for further study.

Funders & Policy Makers

The role cards draw on participatory research and wider literature to illustrate:

- ✓ the strengths of youth work
- ✓ the unique ways it supports young people,
- ✓ the gaps it fills in the wider system (from prevention to early intervention), and
- ✓ how it complements statutory services.

They highlight where targeted investment in youth work within community infrastructures can have the greatest impact on young people's mental health and wellbeing.

Youth Worker Role Cards at a Glance

<p>Role Model</p> <p>Inspires growth by demonstrating empathy, integrity, and positive behaviour. Through lived experience & trust, helps young people feel understood, supported, and motivated to build confidence & resilience.</p> 	<p>Mentor</p> <p>Guides young people through challenges with trust, encouragement, and practical advice. Builds confidence, self-awareness, and life skills through supportive, consistent relationships.</p> 	<p>Informal Educator</p> <p>Creates learning opportunities beyond the classroom. Encourages curiosity, creativity, and exploration through activities that develop communication, teamwork, and problem-solving skills.</p> 	<p>Trusted Adult</p> <p>Offers a safe, consistent, and non-judgmental space where young people feel heard & supported. Builds trust and emotional safety through empathy, compassion, and authentic connection.</p> 	<p>Youth Agency Champion</p> <p>Empowers young people to take the lead in shaping their own lives. Encourages choice, confidence, and independence through youth-led, person-centred approaches.</p> 
<p>Advocate (Sector Role)</p> <p>Amplifies young people's voices and influences systems to be more inclusive. Raises awareness of young people's needs and drives positive change across services and policy spaces.</p> 	<p>Anchor or Frontline Supporter</p> <p>Provides timely, responsive support in moments of crisis. Offers calm, practical guidance and helps young people feel safe, prioritised, and cared for when they need it most.</p> 	<p>Creative Counsellor</p> <p>Uses creativity and relationships as therapeutic tools. Offers holistic, non-clinical support through arts, outdoor, or experiential activities that strengthen wellbeing and connection.</p> 	<p>Navigator & Convenor</p> <p>Connects young people to communities, services, and opportunities. Strengthens local networks, fosters belonging, and helps remove barriers to engagement.</p> 	<p>Preventative Approaches Facilitator (Sector Role)</p> <p>Focuses on prevention and early intervention. Tackles root causes of challenges, builds resilience, and supports young people before issues escalate.</p> 
 <p>Interpersonal relationships with young people</p>	 <p>Advocacy roles</p>	 <p>Positions within the wider system</p>	 <p>Beliefs & Knowledge</p> <p>Cognitive and Attentional Skills</p> <p>Socio-economic Factors</p> <p>Human Connection</p> <p>Behaviour & Activities</p>	

These ingredients are drawn from Wellcome's [Active Ingredients](#) framework.

Role Model

Youth practitioners serve as role models by mirroring positive behaviours and attitudes. Often with lived experiences similar to the young people they support, they provide a relatable example of what is possible. Through empathy, and respect, they inspire personal growth.

Attributes and enabling conditions

- 01** Authenticity and integrity.
- 02** Consistency in modelling positive behaviour and attitudes.
- 03** Lived experience (e.g., shared neighbourhood, race, ethnicity, disability, life trajectory etc)
- 04** Supportive and safe environment.

Intended outcomes

- 01** Creating meaningful connections through helping young people feel understood and supported by relatable role models.
- 02** Encouraging personal growth through modelling.

Activities aligned with active ingredients

Developing deeper connections with the community



Modelling skills in ways to evaluate self such as displaying resilience and responsible choices



Facilitating spaces to discuss feelings and what they mean



Facilitating creative activities



Support needs

"Mental Health & Emotional Health training - practical and reflective practice to help youth workers build awareness, reflection and emotional regulation so that they can better support themselves and young people."

Human Connection

Behaviour & Activities

Cognitive and Attentional Skills

Beliefs & Knowledge

Socio-economic Factors

Mentor

Youth practitioners guide and support young people through meaningful, trust-based relationships, offering a balanced blend of listening, encouragement, and practice advice to support young people in navigating challenges in their lives.

Attributes and enabling conditions

- 01** Providing spaces and opportunities to develop life-skills
- 02** Knowledge sharing of practical advice.
- 03** Active listening and insightful guidance.
- 04** Encouraging self-reflection.
- 05** Connection and rapport.

Intended outcomes

- 01** Academic and career progression through being supported with learning, accessing services or applications.
- 02** Self-awareness and confidence of young people strengthens and they are inspired to achieve their personal goals.
- 03** Enhanced life-skills as young people feel supported, heard, and empowered.

Activities aligned with active ingredients

- Facilitating peer-to-peer support 
- Facilitating visits to local partners 
- Supporting young people to identify personal strengths 
- Providing 1:1 support 
- Exercise or sports activities 



Support needs

“Building capacity and staff time to offer more support to young people who need it the most; for one 2 one or group discussions around wellbeing and mental health as well as mentoring which has facilitated development and understanding about how to keep ‘well’”

 Human Connection

 Behaviour & Activities

 Cognitive and Attentional Skills

 Beliefs & Knowledge

 Socio-economic Factors

Informal Educator

Youth practitioners facilitate learning in a non-institutional setting, focussing on personal growth rather than academic achievement. Environments can be created that foster curiosity, creativity and exploration.

Attributes and enabling conditions

- 01** Patience and encouragement.
- 02** Engagement and creativity.
- 03** Opportunities to expand knowledge.

Intended outcomes

- 01** Enhanced critical thinking through encouraging and guiding independent thought and the ability to analyse and reflect on issues.
- 02** Skill development through fostering practical skills such as communication, teamwork, and problem solving.

Activities aligned with active ingredients

Facilitating group sessions



Supporting the development of a Youth Advisory Board



Facilitating leadership programmes



Providing 1:1 support



Nature walks/bushcraft



Support needs

funding provided employment for 3 creative practitioners who benefitted from **mental health first aider training** along with the creation of roles to support the delivery of educational creative classes for young people."

Human Connection

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Trusted Adult

Youth practitioners focus on creating a safe and supportive environment for young people. Young people choose trusted adults who offer non-judgmental spaces where they feel heard and supported.

Attributes and enabling conditions

- 01** Empathy and listening.
- 02** Building trust
- 03** Relatability and compassion.
- 04** Getting to know each other over time.
- 05** Choice and autonomy of the young person.

Intended outcomes

- 01** Building trust through the choice of the young person, enabling all the other conditions to be met by youth practitioners and the youth sector.
- 02** Strong emotional support where young people feel heard, enhancing their wellbeing.
- 03** A consistent adult presence that nurtures a feeling of acceptance and safety in young people's lives.

Activities aligned with active ingredients

Providing inclusive spaces for young people with shared experiences to meet



Providing life skills advice in a 1:1 setting



Connecting young people with their culture by offering learning opportunities and activities that support enrichment



Support needs

“Partnership working was utilised to **support staff** to ensure they have the level of skills, knowledge experience required to foster safe, calm environments and develop activities that support, promote and champion emotional, physical and mental health and wellbeing.”

Human Connection

Behaviour & Activities

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Youth Agency Champion

Youth practitioners emphasise youth-led, person-centred approaches where they can encourage and guide young people, to build confidence to exercise their choice and agency.

Attributes and enabling conditions

- 01** Empathy and listening.
- 02** Empowerment/choice and agency focussed approach.
 - ↳ Young people defining their own outcomes.
- 03** Offering guidance and holistic support.

Intended outcomes

- 01** Increase sense of choice and agency.
- 02** Greater involvement in the decision-making processes aligned with the support directed to young people.
- 03** Sustained independence as young people are empowered to become self-sufficient.

Activities aligned with active ingredients

Provides space for young people to engage with peers and develop friendships



Supporting young people to develop advocacy campaigns within their local area



Offering skills and leadership workshops to support young people's growth



Offering the space and resources for young people to develop a youth council



Support needs

"Young Voices participation program has allowed us to keep expertise, experience, and voices of the children and young people we work with at the centre of everything we do. Young people shared that they wished professionals in their lives knew about the Social Model of Disability, so we now have this as part of our art therapists **onboarding training**.

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Advocate (Sector role)

Youth work (and practitioners) actively advocate for young people's needs and ensure their voices are heard in broader decision-making spaces. Drawing attention to the issues most important to young people and amplifying the representation of their concerns.

Attributes and enabling conditions

- 01** Strategic spaces for advocacy in the system.
- 02** Convening and collaboration spaces
- 03** Opportunities to influence policy
- 04** Unrestricted funding to support strategic goals

Intended outcomes

- 01** Developing pathways for young people to influence programmes and interventions that directly affect them.
- 02** Clearer representation of young people's needs through them being communicated clearly and effectively, leading to tangible changes in policies/services.
- 03** Raising awareness within systems and structures about the unique challenges and strengths of young people.

Activities

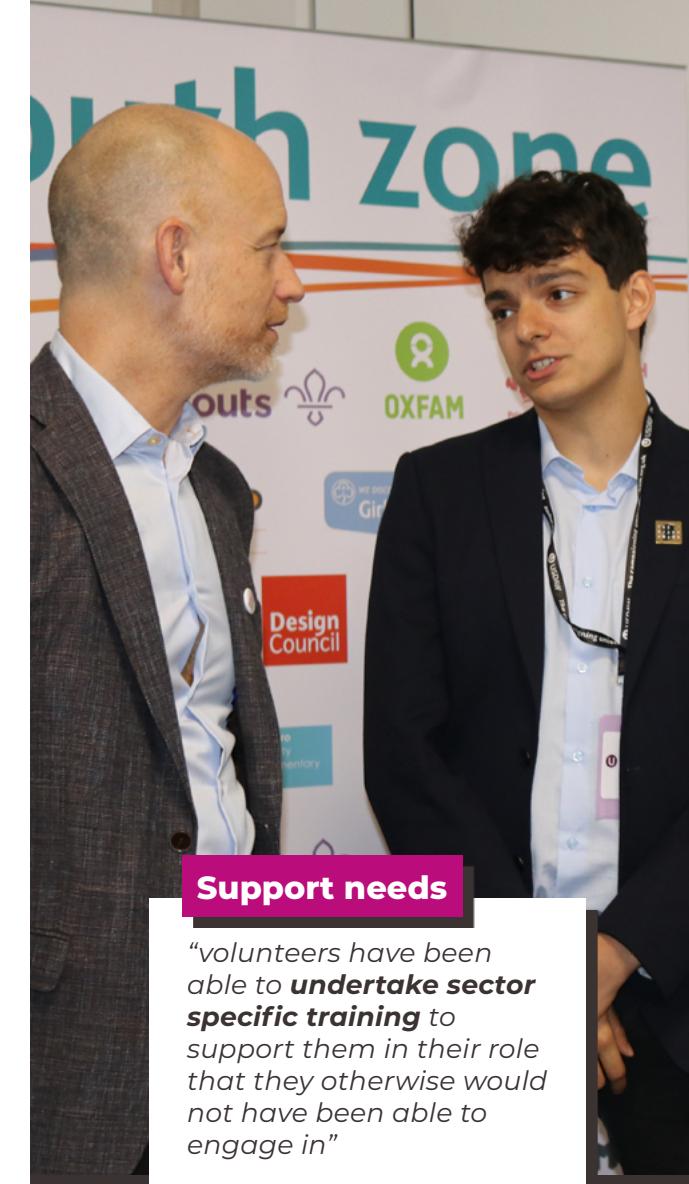
Collaborate with other services trying to support young people (e.g., Team Around the School (TAS))

Advocating within institutions to create more youth-friendly/centred and inclusive policies and spaces

Organising public awareness events

Writing blogs, reports to share insights and influence perspectives

Encouraging self and peer-advocacy



Support needs

"volunteers have been able to **undertake sector specific training** to support them in their role that they otherwise would not have been able to engage in"

 Human Connection

 Behaviour & Activities

 Cognitive and Attentional Skills

 Beliefs & Knowledge

 Socio-economic Factors



Anchor or Frontline Supporter

Youth practitioners emphasise youth-led, person-centred approaches where they can encourage and guide young people, to build confidence to exercise their choice and agency.

Attributes and enabling conditions

- 01** "Think on your feet"
- 02** Adaptive problem-solving.
- 03** Remaining calm under pressure.
- 04** Practical support skills.
- 05** Empathy and listening.
- 06** Boundaried support

Intended outcomes

- 01** Crisis de-escalation helping young people manage resolve immediate challenges.
- 02** Filling reduced service gaps for those awaiting or ineligible for formal interventions.
- 03** Young people receive timely support tailored to their needs.
- 04** Increased sense of safety providing young people with a reliable point of support during difficult moments.

Activities aligned with active ingredients

1:1 support



Providing accessible safe spaces for young people to engage



Providing young people with the tools and skills to self-regulate and cope



Referrals and signposting



Support needs

"We're there immediately, which makes all the difference for those needing help now."

*"we trained 10 youth workers in their **mental health first aid qualification**, ensuring they have the ability to deal with acute issues in their clubs/organisations"*

Human Connection

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Creative Counsellor

Youth practitioners focus on providing non-traditional, relationship-centred therapeutic support through meaningful connections, weaving therapeutic support into everyday interactions, often incorporating creative and experiential methods.

Attributes and enabling conditions

- 01** Safe, tailored and flexible environments.
- 02** Empathy and listening.
- 03** Holistic support mindset.

Intended outcomes

- 01** Offer creative/alternative support to young people through activities such as eco-therapy, outdoor activities, and creative arts.
- 02** Providing additional support in environments that feel familiar to young people.
- 03** Improved wellbeing supporting overall mental and social health through non-clinical therapeutic experiences.

Activities aligned with active ingredients

- 1:1 support and facilitating groups for young people to connect 
- Facilitating peer to peer support sessions 
- Facilitating goal-setting activities 
- Art, sports, music and offering green spaces 



Support needs

"Youth Emotional Support Worker attended training on therapeutic conversations using the arts"

*"We are not counsellors, but what we are trying to do is therapeutic on a **humanising** and **relational** level (...)"*

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Navigator and Convenor

Youth practitioners focus on fostering social connections and community integration for young people. Acting as bridge-builders, practitioners connect young people to their communities, services, and peer networks.

Attributes and enabling conditions

- 01** Embedded in the community.
- 02** Outreach expertise and detached youth work.
- 03** Connections and community knowledge.
- 04** Openness and cooperation.
- 05** Avenues of support required are available within and outside of youth services (i.e., referrals and signposting lead to appropriate support).

Intended outcomes

- 01** Strengthening local support networks through community driven approaches.
- 02** Stronger social bonds fostering peer and community connections and relationships that promote belonging.
- 03** Improved ability to navigate systems of support and access to services.
- 04** Reduced barriers to engagement and inclusive spaces created where young people can thrive.

Activities aligned with active ingredients

Creating a space for young people to meet and connect 

Creating opportunities to volunteer to create change in the community 

Supporting youth councils to solve challenges faced by young people 

Referrals and signposting  



Support needs

*"We made sure to **work closely with our partners in the area** and with **local schools**. We wanted to make sure that we weren't stepping on any other toes and that what we were offering would complement services already in existence."*

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Preventative approaches facilitator (Sector Role)

Youth work offers preventative support by addressing the root causes of challenges before young people require intervention or treatment.

Attributes and enabling conditions

- 01** Focus on prevention, root causes and social/structural determinants.
- 02** Deep knowledge of contextual issues influencing young people's personal experience and outcomes.
- 03** Build resilience through coping strategies and support networks.

Intended outcomes

- 01** Address the root causes of challenges young people are experiencing.
- 02** Strengthened coping skills encouraging self-management of future challenges and resilience.
- 03** In the long term reduce pressure on direct services by addressing symptoms of poor mental health.
- 04** Early intervention to prevent challenges from emerging and address issues which could contribute to significant challenges in young people's lives over time.

Activities aligned with active ingredients

- Providing inclusive spaces for young people with shared experiences to meet 
- Signposting or facilitating sessions to learn coping skills and self-regulation 
- Access to green spaces, economic transfers to alleviate social determinant impacts 
- Referrals and signposting  



Support needs

"the development of staff knowledge and capacity to provide support to young people with mental health needs; all of our staff and volunteers now able to access a portfolio of training during their induction, which includes ACE's, Domestic Abuse Training and Mental Health First Aid amongst other Safeguarding Training"

 Human Connection

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UK YOUTH

UK Youth London Office

Fivefields, 8-10 Grosvenor Gardens, London, SW1W 0DH
020 3137 3810

Avon Tyrrell Outdoor Centre

Braggers Lane, Bransgore, Hampshire, BH23 8EE
01425 672 347

Charity number: 1110590
www.ukyouth.org

Find us on:

