



HEALTH AND YOUTH WORK STUDY

Mapping Survey Findings

Summary Report

May 2026

Summary

- Youth workers are being increasingly employed to support young people living with long-term health conditions. However, we know very little about this particular group of youth workers.
- We conducted a survey across the UK to find out about the characteristics of these youth work services.
- Most services were targeted at young people living with a physical health condition with far fewer targeted at young people who experience mental health difficulties.
- Charities funded most services either alone or jointly with a statutory organization. Most services were provided by the NHS.
- Youth worker roles included emotional support, self-management support, service transition support, and advocacy.
- Currently it is unknown how these youth work services influence young people's engagement and wellbeing and how they work with the multi-disciplinary team and wider service system.

Background – why we carried out this study

About a quarter of young people now live with a long-term physical health condition or experience mental health difficulties. This can mean that they are more likely than their peers to face challenges with their day-to-day living and how well they do at school.

Becoming an adult can be difficult for these young people and they can find it difficult to look after their health, work with healthcare professionals and attend appointments. This can negatively affect their health and wellbeing. Health services struggle to provide the right support that young people need and want as they move into adulthood. Young people see them as overly clinical and do not feel involved in decision-making. Many health care professionals feel unprepared to support adolescents.

In response to this problem, youth workers have been employed to support young people who experience long-term health conditions. However, we know very little about this group of youth workers and there is no database of these services. As part of a larger study about youth work services targeted at this group of young people, we conducted a survey across the United Kingdom to find out about the characteristics of these services.

The research – what we did

We used an online survey between January and May 2025 to collect information about youth work services. This was co-designed with our Young People's Advisory Group and Study Advisory Group and then distributed by email via key organisations and networks

and by using social media. We also used online searching to identify additional services across the UK.

What we found out

We found 188 youth work services that were supporting young people living with a long-term physical health condition or who were experiencing mental health difficulties. Three quarters of these services were based in England.

The focus of services

- Most services primarily supported young people living with physical health conditions.
- Fewer than 20% of services were targeted at young people who experience mental health difficulties.
- Approximately half of the services were focused on young people with specific health conditions - mainly young people with cancer or palliative care needs, diabetes or rheumatic/musculoskeletal conditions.
- Two thirds of the services supported young people aged between 11 and 25 years.

The funding of services

- Charities funded most services either alone or jointly with a statutory organisation such as the NHS.
- Over half of the services that focused on young people living with long-term physical health conditions were funded solely by a charity.

The organisation of services

- The NHS was the main service provider, followed by charities who provided 28% of the services. Over a quarter of the services were jointly provided by a statutory organization and a charity.
- Almost half of the services had been operating for six years or more. However, one third of services had been operating for two years or less.
- Half of the services were formed of one youth worker and most of these focused on young people living with long-term physical health conditions.
- Most services employed at least one youth worker with a recognized youth work qualification.

Support for young people

- The main ways in which young people accessed youth work services were via referrals from child health services or via self or parent/carer referrals.

- The most common forms of support that youth work services provided were emotional health support, service signposting/navigation, self-management support, service transition support and advocacy.

Conclusions

There appears to be considerable variation in how services are organised and funded, their size and which groups of young people they support. We now need to understand how youth work services influence young people's engagement and wellbeing and how they work with the multi-disciplinary team and wider service system. In the second stage of the research, we are conducting six case studies of youth work services to investigate these issues.

Further information

Further information about our mapping survey can be found in this paper: <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1186/s12913-026-14227-5>

You can keep up to date with the project by following us on social media or viewing our website:

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Contact us by email at healthandyouthwork@manchester.ac.uk

Susan Kirk, Marie Marshall, Rosie Gordon, Claire Fraser, Nicola Rigby, Nicola Bennett, Rajesh Patel, Albert Farre, Michael Devine, Donna Hilton.

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