We often think of volunteering in terms of the added value the volunteer brings to a service or organisation; what they are ‘doing’ for others. However, what the volunteer gains from the experience can be equally as valuable. The Citadel Youth Centre in Edinburgh is capitalising on the benefits afforded by volunteering, to help young people on an Activity Agreement develop the skills, confidence and experience to progress to a positive destination.

“One of our aims at the Citadel is to encourage young people to become more actively involved in their community and the Young Volunteer Project helps us to do this, allowing young people to explore their interests, build on their strengths and develop the ability to engage with the opportunities available, whether that be in future employment, volunteering or formal training”.

The Citadel’s Young Volunteer Project (YVP) offers young people on an Activity Agreement a programme of training followed by a supported volunteer placement in their local community. Training takes place two days a week, for around 12 weeks. Young people participate in a range of sessions to build their confidence and interpersonal skills and prepare them for a successful volunteer placement. This includes timekeeping, attitudes and values and personal presentation. Each training group is structured depending on participants’ interests but many groups have been specifically aimed at young people with an interest in going on to work in youth work and childcare settings. These groups will also cover topics such as confidentiality while on placement, equality and diversity and the role of a volunteer/being a good role model. Extra sessions can be added to cater for the goals and interests of individuals. For example, some young people have completed their kayaking ‘paddle power’ award and also the ‘go mountain biking’ certificate.

The Citadel has two members of staff who undertake the Trusted Professional role. They meet regularly with young people on a one-to-one basis. During these sessions young people are encouraged to reflect on their learning through the training programme and identify their interests and goals for a volunteer placement. This ensures placements are arranged on an individual, needs-led basis. The length and structure of placements are also led by the young person.

Rachel Rowan, Futureheads Project Worker, believes that the success of the project is down to its needs-led approach; “Preparation is key. We need to give young people the time, through training, to prepare for volunteering. Young people only move on from the training stage when they are at a place where they are ready to volunteer. The most successful placements are also those that give young people the chance to try out working in an area they are interested in, to really get a feel for whether it is something they would like to pursue”.

The Citadel has developed links with other third sector organisations as well as private employers such as nurseries and hairdressers who provide placement opportunities. In addition, there are opportunities for volunteer placements within the Citadel, in the various clubs and groups. Prospective placement organisations are prepared for their role and the young person supported to visit the organisation prior to confirming. In addition, a mentor is identified in each placement to ensure that young people have support while they are volunteering. Where necessary, the Citadel offers training for people carrying out this mentoring role.

The Trusted Professional and placement mentor work closely to support the young person on placement. In addition, as young people become ready to move on from their Activity Agreement, they are also encouraged to attend the weekly Careers Café drop-in, to help plan their next steps.

Young people taking part in the YVP gain valuable experience in a work environment – something most have never had. This experience is gained in a supportive placement, where they are able to explore their interests in a chosen area of work. Young people gain accreditation for their volunteering through the Saltire Awards scheme and also develop important employability skills such as teamwork, problem solving and communication skills.

The Citadel is one of eight Activity Agreement Hubs established across the City through a partnership between Community Learning and Development and the voluntary sector. The Hub approach engages young people through youth work activities, whilst also offering targeted support. The Citadel offers a wide range of youth clubs and groups for all ages, allowing staff to build trusting relationships with young people from an early age. The Citadel also makes contact with young people who are likely to benefit from Activity Agreement support through their 15+ group work sessions delivered in schools. This work is funded by Children and Families at City of Edinburgh Council. This and the Careers Café drop-in have seen increasing numbers of young people sign up for an Activity Agreement over the past year.