

Workforce Wellbeing

More than ever, it is important to make sure that youth workers, who consistently provide such exceptional support for young people, can also access the help they need to stay mentally and emotionally healthy themselves. With this in mind, YouthLink Scotland's Youth Work Recovery Group asked us to gather some examples of the different ways in which youth work teams are currently investing in the wellbeing of their staff and volunteers.

The examples overleaf provide food for thought – some straightforward practical ideas that could perhaps be trialled in other contexts, as well as insights to inform wider organisational strategy. And even in this small number of examples, it's interesting to notice some common threads emerge:

- It's clear that any support for workforce wellbeing works most effectively when it is part of a wider organisational culture, where staff and volunteers at all levels are encouraged to look after themselves and each other – and to ask for help if they need it.
- It's helpful to think about young people's health and wellbeing alongside workforce wellbeing – they are closely connected, and this understanding creates new opportunities for shared learning.
- Not all support for health and wellbeing can or should come from line managers. Peer-to-peer support – either one-to-one or in a group setting - can work well in some contexts.
- In some roles, youth workers are dealing with young people in crisis most of the time – perhaps we need to recognise that they have the same need for professional support and supervision as other health and social care practitioners?
- There may also be a need for individual support that does not connect directly to work (e.g. relationship, family or financial issues). Sometimes this provision will be most effectively offered through counselling services that sit beyond organisational boundaries.
- Youth work principles apply when developing new organisational approaches to workforce wellbeing: developing ideas for support with or by staff and volunteers themselves is always more effective than designing these 'for' them.
- The support that organisations offer will need to evolve over time – as needs change, the response has to change too – the same things won't continue to work indefinitely.

"It doesn't matter who you are at the moment – everyone is struggling some of the time. Our youth workers are constantly there for young people, offering practical and emotional support and helping young people to stay active and connected. It's really important to encourage and support our staff to do the same things for themselves – and to make sure they feel OK ask for help when they need it. This support has to run in parallel with what we offer young people – it can't be any other way."

Gillian Kirkwood, Manager, Y Sort-it

"Some of the supports put in place to support health and wellbeing are popular for a time and then taper off, to be replaced by new approaches. That's as it should be. The important thing is that we are all involved in building a culture where mental health is taken seriously and all staff feel confident they can ask for help if they need it."

Ian McLaughlan, CEO Youth Scotland

Case Examples

A Collaborative Approach to Workforce Wellbeing Youth Scotland

In 2019, Youth Scotland staff team contributed to a consultation process, designed by a student in Human Resources from Napier University who worked with the organisation for 6 months and facilitated focus groups and structured interviews to gather views of the organisation from a workforce perspective. The subsequent report highlighted that, whilst most staff felt very positively about their experience of the working for the organisation, there was an interest in developing new / better ways to support mental health and wellbeing.

A Wellbeing Group was set up, made up of staff from across the organisation who volunteered to contribute. Together they established a framework of different activities designed to support workforce wellbeing. These included:

- A health and wellbeing learning activity at every quarterly staff planning meeting
- Wellbeing on the agenda at each monthly staff meeting
- A weekly 'tune in' meeting as staff worked from home during lockdown. Walk-and-talk meetings were also part of lockdown support, when restrictions allowed
- More recently, a check-in on health and wellbeing has been incorporated as an integral part of line management supervision.

Youth Scotland also offer a free access to an employee counselling service. Any member of staff can access it, however often they might need it. It is provided by an external HR contractor and is completely confidential. It costs the organisation under £500 per year.

Wellness Strategy Y Sort-It

This year, following the experience of lockdown, Y-Sort it decided to take a whole-organisation look at how best to look after the wellbeing of everyone connected to their organisation: young people who attend their programmes, the Youth Management Board, as well as staff and volunteers. They started from the premise 'we are all going through this together'.

- They adapted a Mind Wellbeing and Work survey to explore a few key questions across the organisation (what do you know about your triggers for poor mental health; what coping strategies do you use; what are we already doing as an organisation that supports your mental health; how could we improve?)
- Everyone completed the survey anonymously and the findings were collated and shared across the organisation
- Ideas for new support were developed collaboratively – some were small ideas: wellbeing packs, walk-and-talk peer support and the use of free resources from organisations like Breathing Space (breathingspace.scot). Recently, additional funding has been secured for more comprehensive support from LifeLink – to enable staff and volunteers to access group supervision sessions. One group is made up exclusively of staff and volunteers connected to Y Sort-it, the other has been opened up to include external partners too. This group work will also enable those who need it to connect into a 1-to-1 counselling service for 6-12 sessions for additional support.

Funding for Coaching and Self-Care YouthBorders

With funding from the Scottish Government Wellbeing Fund, YouthBorders provided a range of support for their staff and membership organisations during 2020. The overall aim of this project was to directly increase the capacity of youth work leaders, staff and volunteers, encourage and promote organisational resilience, increase social connectivity and contribute positively to the mental health and wellbeing of volunteers, staff and young people. Support offered included:

- Ten managers leading youth work organisations were offered 1:1 leadership coaching during the pandemic. This took the format of 2 online coaching sessions which were confidential and supported the manager to explore any issue or need impacting on them or their organisation. Feedback from participating managers was very positive:

“It gives us added skills to work on young people to help with mental health issues and make us aware of our own anxieties and behaviours”.

- Staff from member organisations had access to five mindfulness sessions. These were a mixture of mindfulness for practitioners; and also for skills and approaches when working with young people. Those who accessed the sessions very much valued the opportunity:

“I wanted to say a huge thank you to both of you for gifting our service the wonderful self-care mindfulness session on Tuesday! As a team we are huge advocates of self-care for others but at times we often forget that we too need to show ourselves self-care. The last few months have been challenging for everyone and as a sector we have all done our absolute utmost to support and help young people, it really was wonderful to take the time as a Team on Tuesday, to switch off from the needs of others and to give ourselves permission to learn more about how to look after ourselves!”

- YouthBorders used the app/website World Walking and set two “Walk the World” challenges, inviting youth workers, volunteers and young people to bank steps using fitness trackers to reach a collective goal. They walked John O’Groats to Land’s End; and then set a longer challenge coast to coast Europe. This involved 19 youth workers.

All of the offers, apart from the walking challenge, were time-limited due the nature of the funding.

Confidential Support for Workforce Wellbeing Scouts Scotland

Two years ago, Scouts Scotland made a commitment to providing support via an external counselling support service. The organisation agreed to invest in this service, because they wanted to ensure that team members were confident to ask for help when they needed it. All staff have the opportunity to access up to 6 counselling sessions. They do this by confidential, self-referral - they don't have to seek permission to access the service.

Scouts Scotland does not know the names of any staff who take up counselling sessions. The only information they receive from the counselling service is how many staff per year access the service. Counselling can be done online or by telephone. In normal times the support can also be offered face-to-face.

Resilience Training High Life Highland

High Life Highland has an established focus on staff wellbeing, but this has been a particular concern over the last year. Most staff were furloughed between March and August, and as they returned, many were dealing with a range of anxieties in their home and family lives, whilst also supporting young people, many of whom were in crisis, at work.

Staff came back feeling “am I good enough?” – leading to frustration and low motivation.

The service is split in to 3 geographical areas: North, Mid and South. Each has an area officer who line manages between 7 and 11 youth workers. The area officer for the North, covering Caithness, Sutherland, Easter Ross and Ullapool felt that her team needed some kind of input to help them through work and home challenges of course particularly exacerbated by the Covid-19 situation. She knew about an organisation – Bouncebackability – and arranged 3 sessions over 4 weeks before Christmas, focused on practical strategies to build resilience.

The training was delivered online, so many of the usual geographical and logistical challenges of bringing people together in the Highlands were overcome – and the support was tailored to meet the needs of the group at a particular point in time. The experience brought the team together in a different way – the focus was not ‘work’ or ‘social’, but on them as people, individually and collectively. The group particularly valued the opportunities the training provided to build a stronger network of peer-to-peer support.

A series of 3 workshops tackled issues holistically, and whole team sessions, alongside breakouts, meant staff felt safe to open up. The nature and skills of the facilitator fostered this safe environment, and covered a wide variety of personal characteristics from being more self-aware of our behaviours, to what triggers responses to anxieties and worries, including that sense of feeling underutilised. The sessions were fun as well as being progressively purposeful.

One of the participants said “I feel really confident just now and able to cope with life much better than I had been” going on to say “Where once I might have felt stressed about a piece of work, or under pressure, now, I can organise myself and take a step at a time. I’m in control of what I am doing.”

Since the course, we have one member of staff accessing external supervision with Bouncebackability.

“One of many positive things that came out of the sessions was a recognition that some staff would benefit from something which is more than support (peer and/or line management) but less than counselling; I guess we would call it supervision.”

Nigel Brett-Young, Youth Work Manager

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