

National Youth Work Curriculum: Youth Justice



The national youth work curriculum

The first of its kind for 30 years, the national youth work curriculum is a go-to resource for organisations that want to relate to young people effectively. It aims to increase understanding of youth work practice and is an important point of reference for policy makers, service commissioners and senior leaders, enabling them to meet their own strategic and operational objectives.

As the diagram on the front cover shows, the curriculum provides a learning framework based on the practice and process of youth work. It also takes account of national occupational standards, the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, the youth work outcomes framework, and associated quality standards.

Youth work: Magical red tops

"For months I've tried to engage with this group of young people but to no avail. Then, as if by magic, as soon as I took off my uniform and put on this red top, they wanted to talk to me."

So wrote a uniformed officer at a young offender's institution, who had received a new red top as part of their secondment to a not-for-profit youth work organisation that had been called into a prison to pilot new ways of supporting young people's engagement. Something transformational is happening in that institution. To some it might seem magical.

Yet what is taking place there is down to much more than just a change of uniform. Seconded officers are learning to apply the fundamental principles of youth work. They're learning what it takes to build relationships with young people: strong and lasting relationships that sit at the bedrock of youth work. These relationships are always entirely voluntary, and even within the confines of the secure estate they cannot be fashioned or forced by adults. It is the young people who choose whether to become involved, when to open up or to shut down and, metaphorically speaking in the context of a young offender's institution, when to walk away.

The officers are also learning through the pilot to engage with the young people on new terms: taking off the lapels that signal authority; actively listening to what young people say; building on their aspirations and ideas; responding to their interests, needs and concerns; and disrupting cycles of boredom and frustration by devising interesting, thought-provoking and participatory activities.

By doing all this seconded officers are able to co-create a safe jumping-off point from which the young people may discover a different version of themselves from that which they had imagined. They are able to develop skills and confidence, make and act on decisions and, crucially, project their voices meaningfully and powerfully in relation to the decisions made by others that affect their everyday lives.

This story goes to the heart of youth work inside what is sometimes considered the most dispiriting of settings. Seconded officers talk passionately of an eye-opening, ground-breaking, learning experience that brings positivity and hope to an institution weighed down by the extra pressures borne of Covid and lockdown.



The benefits of the youth work curriculum in youth justice settings

What unfolded here signifies the unique contribution youth work could bring to many parts of the youth justice system. Youth work is the best learning methodology for unlocking young people's potential. Youth Work works because at its heart is the relationship between the young person and the youth worker. The relationship is voluntary and never begins from a deficit position. This means that the strengths of the young person are valued and developed from the outset no matter the situation or environment which has brought the youth worker and young person together.

The youth work curriculum offers an informal education process where learning grows through conversation, exploration and enhanced shared experience – all features that are directly relevant to the Youth Justice Board's 'child first' agenda. The fundamental mind shift that secondees are making through youth work is to see the young people as young people first – not as detainees – and to promote and build on their strengths and capabilities. Youth work makes an impact through the trusting, authentic and often formative relationships that are built between youth workers and young people. By adopting the youth work principles, practitioners no longer frame young people as the 'problem'. Instead, they develop a positive narrative around young people, start from a young person's own position, and establish appropriate boundaries within which oppressive attitudes and behaviours can be challenged and conflict de-escalated. Research consistently shows that adopting youth work principles and methodologies leads to better outcomes for young people at all stages of the youth justice system – from pre-court diversion to assessment and community-based disposals to custody and resettlement. Youth work helps young people to engage in educative experiences, to develop confidence, to take ownership of their situation, developing the tools and skills they will need for life now and in the future.

These youth work principles and methodologies that you will find running through the youth work curriculum are a key ingredient in the development and integration of a child-first culture throughout the youth justice system. The principles and methodologies have the power to make a substantial positive difference, enabling key issues such as racial disparity to be addressed, and needs in relation to neurodiverse and LGBTQIA+ populations to be better met. As the youth work curriculum shows, it is the skills, knowledge and integrity of youth workers, together with the unique cultural understanding that derives from lived experience and far-reaching engagement with different communities, that enables them to build strong and lasting relationships that are the prerequisite for a fairer, more culturally sensitive youth justice system.

The youth work curriculum: an exciting opportunity

The development and roll-out of the curriculum presents an exciting opportunity to narrow the gap between youth work and youth justice. That process of alignment is already underway. The importance of relationship building, a central tenet of youth work, is now also recognised in the National Standards for Children and Young People in the Youth Justice System, the Constructive Resettlement Framework, and the Healthcare Standards for Children and Young People in Secure Settings. But more needs to be done in light of research findings that show that trusted child/practitioner relationships are paramount, and that they reap more positive benefits than programmes and interventions applied across the youth justice system.



We believe that the youth work curriculum, which offers the framework within which those relationships may be effectively developed, could be applied at all points of the youth justice system, including in relation to:

- Vulnerable children with complex needs
- Looked after children and care leavers
- Young people from the travelling community
- Those who experience mental health and/or substance misuse issues
- Youth to adult transitions within the justice system
- Engagement in formal education activities leading to better educational attainment
- The prevention of attrition from community-based programmes and interventions
- Self-harm, suicide, behaviour management and other risk-related issues
- The resettlement of young people leaving custody
- The repetition of serious and violent offences including gang involvement

The curriculum allows young people in the justice system to be placed at the heart of delivery, and for needs to be identified and met in a more participatory way. It offers the opportunity for significant and lasting change through the delivery of more youth action projects that will enable young people to gain a sense of belonging, to grow, to understand their behaviour and to see beyond the confines of their immediate world.



About the NYA

We are the national standards body and the professional statutory regulatory body for youth work in England. Our mission is to raise awareness of what youth work is, why it is important, the benefits it offers, and how to do youth work well and effectively. This includes offering strategic and practical support to youth work organisations, as well as to those that commission, fund and partner with them. We showcase great youth work practice, work on finding new ways of making youth work ever more effective through research and innovation, and set occupational standards for youth work. We also train and support youth workers, and give advice on youth work to organisations in higher education.

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