

Youth Hub Research



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Background

Between October 2023 and February 2024, Graham Sykes from Fourteen19[®] was commissioned by West Yorkshire Combined Authority (WYCA) to undertake qualitative research with young people attending Employment and Skills Youth Hubs targeting jobseekers aged 18-24 across the region.

Youth Hubs are a key element of the wider DWP Youth Offer. DWP work coaches are based within an agreed external provider site (not a Jobcentre) where DWP work coaches are based alongside partners. Youth Hubs have been created with the purpose of supporting eligible claimants, through a partnership approach, in addressing barriers to work.

The aim of the research was to capture the voice of young people and use their unique perspective to influence a design template for Employment & Skills-related activity in Youth Hubs. The document will provide a framework for Youth Hub delivery in West Yorkshire, drawing on best practice from around the region and wider afield to meet the needs of young people seeking employment.

The scope of the project was to focus on young people and to only include their reflections within this report. During the research some conversations were undertaken with Youth Hub staff and partners, however, these have been used for context and background only.

In total around 70 young people were interviewed across the five local authority areas of West Yorkshire: Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds, and Wakefield.

Participants were asked a range of questions relating to their individual situation in seeking employment and their experience of Youth Hubs as a means of receiving support. Each person was assured that their answers would be anonymous and jigsaw identification (the ability to put together pieces of information to identify individuals) was minimised.

Notes:

- Within the initial proposal, it was stressed that from experience a fluid approach would be necessary. This was immediately apparent from the first visits.
- A set of questions was agreed between WYCA, Local Authority partners, local and national DWP/JCP staff and Fourteen19[®] and these are included in Appendix 1.
- Following the first set of visits, it was apparent that some of the questions were not relevant – specifically Q6, Q7 and Q8 as all participants spoken to wanted to attend the Youth Hub.

In total, 19 visits were made to Youth Hubs across West Yorkshire and one day was allocated for telephone interviews (Appendix 2). In total 67 young people aged between 18-24 were interviewed. The gender split was 79% male/21% female. Age was split 18 (13%), 19 (19%), 20 (18%), 21 (13%), 22 (10%), 23 (13%) and 24 (12%). Ethnicity was split Asian 25%, Black 4%, Mixed 6% and White 64%.

Overall, this was representative of the participants observed within the Youth Hubs, apart from gender split where it was noticed that a number of females (approximately 6 – 10%) opted to not participate when given a choice.

What is a Youth Hub?

Taken from DWP Youth Offer

https://data.parliament.uk/DepositedPapers/Files/DEP2021-0349/177_Youth_Offer_V1_0.pdf

A Youth Hub is an agreed external provider site where DWP work coaches are based. Youth Hubs have been created with the purpose of supporting eligible claimants, through a partnership approach, in addressing barriers to work. In line with initial policy proposals, Youth Hubs are not contained within Job Centres.

Work coaches based in Youth Hubs only operate within the Youth Hub. They do not operate in both Youth Hubs and Jobcentres during the same period.

Work coaches within the Youth Hub work alongside DWP's network of external partners to provide intensive support to claimants referred to them. The type of support provided will differ depending on:

- the location of the Youth Hub.*
- providers that the work coaches are working alongside.*
- a claimant's individual needs and barriers to work.*

Work coaches within Youth Hubs have a primary focus of addressing key barriers that are currently preventing claimants from finding and keeping employment. This may be through interventions or referring to appropriate provision.

Work coaches within a Youth Hub provide all the necessary support that a claimant would receive through their jobcentre work coach.

Support from the Youth Hub can last up to 6 months and during this time the claimant's primary contact will be their work coach within the Youth Hub.

A claimant is referred back to a work coach within their local jobcentre when either:

- the 6 months Youth Hub support comes to an end.*
- the claimant's barriers to work have been suitably addressed by the Youth Hub.*

From this point onwards, claimants will continue to receive support from DWP and Jobcentre Plus as normal. Claimants can also be referred to a youth employability coach where appropriate.

Claimants are not mandated to participate in Youth Hub activities. If a claimant stops engaging with their Youth Hub work coach, they are referred back to Jobcentre Plus.

Only young people aged between 18-24 who claim Universal Credit and are referred by a work coach are eligible to access Youth Hub work coach support through a Youth Hub. The DWP Youth Offer is determined according to claimant characteristics for those aged 16-24.

- 1) Youth Employability Programme – for job ready claimants who can be supported into work through the Core JCP offer, in the job centre.
- 2) Youth Hub – for claimants who have some barriers to work and require motivation and practical support to address these. A 6 month offer.
- 3) Youth Employability Coach – for claimants with complex barriers, who are furthest from the labour market, requiring intensive and often multi agency support. A 6 month offer, which can be extended to 12 months by exception.

From the interviews held with claimants in Youth Hubs, it was clear that they largely wanted to work but are struggling to do so. This desire to work means that the Youth Hub offer provides a solution and support to get into work - therefore participants are enthusiastic about attending. The reasons for this will be discussed later in this report but in summary, Youth Hub support offers:

- a) the practical support needed to get a job.
- b) a different method of engagement to the standard Universal Credit appointment in a jobcentre.
- c) as a number of people stated over the course of the interviews it felt gratifying to work with “someone who is interested in helping me”. The relationships between Youth Hub work coaches in the Youth Hubs and claimants was consistently highlighted as a big positive for Youth Hub activity in West Yorkshire.
- d) a ‘hub’ of likeminded young people accessing into-work support where claimants can see that they are not alone, and many spoke of gaining confidence from this.
- e) a calm environment which contrasted with the ‘noise’ and ‘busy-ness’ of a jobcentre.

For the purposes of this research, interviews were conducted with young people accessing Youth Hub provision or related employment support activity.

Key observations from the research

Overview

The purpose of the research was to capture the voice of young people to influence the development of the blueprint document for West Yorkshire.

Over sixty unique perspectives have been listened to and recorded., A number of findings are highlighted below, split into the following thematic areas:

- Why do young people in West Yorkshire typically engage with Youth Hubs?
- What may be limiting engagement with Youth Hubs?
- What common barriers to work are Youth Hub participants encountering?
- What are the opportunities for Youth Hubs in West Yorkshire in terms of increasing engagement and removing barriers to work?

A comprehensive summary of the answers given by young people are included in Appendix 4.

Youth Hubs contain a diverse range of participants, and each young person has a unique set of circumstances that has led them to seeking support through a Youth Hub.

Some participants left school with no GCSEs, and some have a degree up to master's Level. Some went to college, and some went straight into work or an apprenticeship. Some got A Levels, a BTEC or Level 2 qualification, whilst some dropped out, were made redundant, or had parenting responsibilities.

Within the first question: *'What is your current situation? Describe your journey since school?'* data was captured relating to the highest qualification achieved by the Claimant.

Highest qualification achieved by claimants interviewed	% of claimants interviewed	Breakdown
No GCSEs	29%	<i>This cohort accounted for 85% of all young people surveyed.</i>
GCSE (including English &/or Maths)	15%	
A Levels	41%	
Degree	8%	<i>Those with a degree or Masters accounted for 10% of young people surveyed.</i>
Masters	2%	
No information	5%	

Circumstances outside of young people's control mean they often find themselves in a situation that is economically unfavourable. It has been well reported that young people have disproportionately suffered from the consequences of economic recessions, Covid and the cost-of-living crisis. This has had adverse effects on their economic status and will increase the likelihood of scarring effects on long-term employment outcomes.

Economic conditions have forced many businesses to close/reduce headcount, and whilst this can be difficult for everyone affected, someone who started a role at 16 or 18, and is let go due to a 'first in first out system' (particularly if they are 18-months into an apprenticeship) finds themselves 'outside' the traditional career trajectory. For example, only 40% of apprenticeships that were operating when the pandemic started continued as normal. <https://www.economicsobservatory.com/how-has-the-pandemic-affected-young-peoples-employment>

Forced with having to deal with this change of circumstances, many young people find themselves without the necessary skills to get themselves back into employment. In many cases this is compounded by a frustration at not being able to work that leads to a draining of personal confidence and/or worsening mental health.

It is therefore essential that Youth Hubs can be flexible in how they deliver support and are not constrained by a one size fits all approach.

Why do young people in West Yorkshire typically engage with Youth Hubs?

1. Young people attending Youth Hubs want a job and want to work.

It was clear from the outset and throughout the research piece, that young people engaged in activity through Youth Hubs are incredibly keen to find employment. Unfortunately, whilst they are fully engaged in the concept of finding employment, they are sometimes unsure of 'how' to achieve it.

All young people attended willingly and voluntarily, and it was clear that a lot of young people placed significant value on both the Youth Hub service (further explored below) and of finding/maintaining stable and meaningful employment.

One participant typified a number of conversations with the line: "You might find this hard to believe, but I really want to work". This indicates the frustration, lack of confidence and warped sense of self-perception experienced due to difficulties in accessing labour market opportunities. This is further explored below.

2. Young people trust their Youth Hub work coach

There is a pivotal relationship between participants and their Youth Hub work coach – particularly amongst those who had been within the Youth Hub for a month or longer.

A number of participants identified their work coach as the "first person who has genuinely cared about them". For many others it is the first person who has taken any interest in helping them get a job. Not only do they provide stability in young people's lives – they also become trusted friends and sources of support.

This relationship is assisted by regular contact, but is fundamentally driven by the benefits (see **3.** below) that participants are gaining from the knowledge and support

that they are receiving – support that they can demonstrably see is helping them move closer to the job market.

Additional qualities that are appreciated and welcomed by participants include:

- Empathy.
- Takes time to listen.
- Helpful.
- There when needed.
- Takes pleasure from their success.

The strength of the work coach/claimant relationship presents a unique opportunity for the Youth Hub 'offer'.

3. How is Youth Hub benefiting young people?

Every young person identified a way in which Youth Hubs had benefited them in some shape or form.

The main benefit expressed was that of 'confidence' – however it was evident that this was shorthand for generally feeling more positive in the process of finding and retaining employment. Many of the claimants struggled to express themselves, but lack of 'confidence' was the name they attached to a wider lack of self-belief. As a result, behaviours such as positive attitude, enthusiasm, resilience, self-esteem, and self-motivation would all fall under this. For some, increased confidence would be expressed by taking part in group sessions, whilst for others it would be simply getting out of the house.

Other areas identified as beneficial included:

- Thinking about things differently – a general sense of a new perspective around their journey towards employment.
- More focused on looking for work.
- More knowledgeable about how to look for work.
- More active/Getting out of the house/More sociable.
- Opened horizons to other opportunities.
- Better at face-to-face meetings/better communication skills.
- Not relying on the job search website 'Indeed' or other non-personalised methods of job searching.
- Improved CV.
- Better interview skills.
- More employable.

What may be limiting engagement in Youth Hubs?

Awareness of the Youth Hub name

Whilst all claimants spoke of being appreciative of the support offered within the Youth Hub, there was mixed awareness around the name 'Youth Hub'.

4. Even when accessing services through a Youth Hub, young people do not always identify the Youth Hub by name

In many cases, people surveyed saw their interaction with their work coach as either:

- A Universal Credit meeting.
- A jobcentre meeting.
- A meeting with [Insert first name of Youth Hub work coach]
- A meeting at [Insert name of the host location (e.g. Vibe, Platform 1 etc)]

Only one area (Kirklees) is using the Youth Hub name across all of its provision and the location for participant interviews was underneath a large 'Youth Hub' roller banner. Unsurprising all participants in Kirklees had good awareness of the name. However, across the other areas, awareness of the brand was mixed.

This lack of 'brand awareness' is not necessarily a negative – as explored elsewhere, young people felt the setting in which they were receiving support was positive, and felt they were able to trust the work coach giving support. It does however raise interesting questions for opportunities related to the Youth Hub 'brand', and how engagement amongst partners and attendees could be influenced by this.

In response to question three, how did participants perceive the 'Youth Hub' meeting that they were currently attending?

Name given to session	% of claimants
A Universal Credit meeting	21%
A meeting at [Insert name of the host location e.g. (Vibe, Platform 1 etc)]	21%
Youth Hub meeting	17%
jobcentre meeting	17%
No idea/don't know	17%
A meeting with [Insert first name of Youth Hub Work coach]	10%
Other derivation (e.g. Job Seekers)	5%

This lack of clarity on the 'Youth Hub' offer was not helped by a lack of 'Youth Hub' communications, signage, and messaging within some Youth Hubs.

5. A lack of Youth Hub branding

There is a lack of consistency in branding across the whole Youth Hub offer. This includes delivery method, signage, resources, and messaging. Due to the 'pure partnership' model of Youth Hub delivery and the different ways in which they are delivered across the region, Youth Hubs do not have a solid sense of 'brand' across geographical areas. For example, there is sometimes confusion amongst young people between Youth Hub services and a Universal Credit appointment, and this presents very little opportunity for Youth Hub to become greater than the sum of its parts.

Whilst there may be confusion around the 'Youth Hub' name, there was almost universal approval of the support and the environment that was offered – particularly in its calmness, its lack of 'busy-ness' and the fact it was "not the jobcentre". This was communicated by claimants across all the different Youth Hubs which demonstrates that it is not driven by a specific physical space. Interactions between young people and work coaches were observed in a variety of locations and settings (open plan vs in closed rooms, town centre vs rural locations, specific youth settings vs general all age settings) yet participants constantly praised the relaxed, needs-centred Youth Hub atmosphere. This would be a great starting point for defining a consistent Youth Hub brand that could be flexibly delivered depending on the local needs of partners and young people.

The 'desire to work' would also be a consistent element across all Youth Hubs and messaging in this area (e.g. *Youth Hub is packed with 18-24 year olds actively looking for jobs and who want to be given a chance to work/earn money*) would provide a great opportunity to further engage partners and employers.

Having a consistent brand for Youth Hubs could pull together all the positive elements that currently exist and be a vessel for encouraging more young people to support themselves into work and for engaging more employers and partners to help young people on their journey.

Brand principle opportunities for different stakeholder groups could include:

- For young people – 'Youth Hubs are a place I can go to get support that is focussed on my needs, and that I trust to help me find work.'
- For partners – 'Go to a place where young people are receptive to additional support opportunities that will benefit them?'
- For employers – 'Youth Hubs are a place I can go to engage with a talent pool that is keen to work.'

Anxiety/Mental Health

Throughout the interviews, many young people spoke honestly about suffering from anxiety and/or having poor mental health and that this was having a negative impact on their ability to move towards the job market.

6. Mental health & the impact of Covid are affecting youth unemployment.

Large numbers of young people spoke of challenges with their mental health and specifically the impact of Covid. Whilst there is a wide scale of symptoms and the level of debilitation it is having, lack of confidence and personal interaction are two key areas that were presenting clear barriers to finding and maintaining meaningful employment. It was evident that a number of people had self-diagnosed their condition and had not sought a professional medical diagnosis.

In many cases, participants were not looking for radical treatments, just opportunities to make small steps in their own development and personal wellbeing. One participant spoke of going into a group session without prior notice – which they would have completely overthought and worried about if it was planned. By the end of the session, they were pleased they had done it and even commented that they had made a friend through the process.

There is a large opportunity for partners to tackle this and deliver mental health focussed sessions. If a non-medical treatment or programme of work could be developed that addressed these barriers (i.e. confidence building), this would have a major impact on moving participants closer to the job market. For example, a number of participants suggested that they would not have been able to participate in the interviews for this research project before engaging with the Youth Hub - but that now they were comfortable doing so.

7. The younger the person attending Youth Hub the more nervous they were about their first visit.

Whilst on the whole young people did not seem to be phased by visiting Youth Hubs (primarily because they were sold on the idea it was “unlike the jobcentre”), it was noticeable that younger participants were more nervous than older participants.

This again potentially links into the wider issue of confidence and a lack of self-belief and that as people get older, they become more confident in the job-hunting process.

Young people don't know how to get a job

One of the main reasons why young people are accessing Youth Hub services is because they do not know 'how' to get a job. They do not know where to look for employment and they do not know the skills they need to be equipped with (or how to acquire them). This is a subject that many have never been taught and as a result do not understand how all the component parts fit together to get a job.

For example, a frequent response from claimants was: “How do you get experience for a job when you cannot get a job to gain experience.”

8. Many young people could not answer the question ‘If you had a magic wand – what would you include in a Youth Hub to improve your chances of getting a job that you want.’

This shows that many young people are unable to take a holistic view of what needs to change to get them into work. Even the simple answer of ‘a list of available jobs that I’m qualified for’ was beyond a number of participants.

For example, there was very little knowledge of youth volunteering opportunities. Many young people spoke of the lack of experience that they had, but very few were aware of the opportunities available through volunteering – such as gaining CV-enhancing experience, a foot in the door at a potential employer or simply in improving their own mental wellbeing.

This lack of understanding of the full picture was also evident when discussing activities that they had undertaken in the Youth Hub.

9. Young people do not always make the connection between Youth Hub support and getting a job, sometimes indicating a fundamental lack of understanding about ‘careers’ pathways.

When exploring the skills and activities that young people had undertaken in the Youth Hub, many could not immediately recall what they had participated in. It was unclear whether this was because they had forgotten what they had done, or that they were not aware that it was a beneficial activity (and/or how it had benefited them).

Some of the activities undertaken would have potentially filled a gap on a CV or provided an answer within a job interview – however not all were aware of the added value that an employer visit or a training course could give them.

For many participants it is as though they are trying to reach a destination without a map. Whilst work coaches are obviously acting as guides and supporting them along the journey, some participants are not aware of the main direction of travel.

Universal Credit Action Plans are agreed with work coaches as part of the typical claimant journey. Claimants engaging with Youth Hub provision could be encouraged to use this Action Plan more proactively. Self-ownership of the Action Plan as a record of their development (rather than just an administrative tool to record activity) would help Youth Hub claimants understand their own journey to employment.

As explored throughout this report, this level of careers pathways understanding is not innate to many of those seeking support through a Youth Hub, and – if developed effectively with work coach/partner guidance – would have a big impact on claimant’s ability to find and maintain work.

10. A single 10-minute jobcentre or 20-minute Youth Hub appointment could be supported/boosted through additional activities/resources.

Each Youth Hub operates differently, but on its own, a single weekly/fortnightly interview appointment is not always enough to move customers into meaningful employment. The true value from Youth Hubs comes through the additional activities such as job clubs, job fairs, and additional visits from partners and employers.

It was frequently mentioned by those interviewed that jobcentre appointments felt focused on 'what the participant had done', whereas Youth Hub appointments were more focused on putting together a plan for the week, identifying potential opportunities, and identifying areas that needed support. For Youth Hub attendees, this represented a more relevant and personalised approach to support that they felt grateful for.

As young people overall have a very limited frame of reference regarding work and employment, any additional activities that increased their vocational knowledge appeared to be welcomed and appreciated by claimants.

11. Regularity of activities can vary within different Youth Hubs

All Youth Hubs operate independently, and delivery of activities are determined by local need and capacity.

There may be opportunities for separate Hubs to share best practice/activities and as some claimants live close to Local Authority boundaries, there could be benefits for attending activities in neighbouring areas.

Having a wider offer of activities could potentially offer a more consistent baseline across all the Youth Hubs in West Yorkshire.

Lack of eligibility

Those who can take advantage of Youth Hub services are clearly appreciative and benefiting from the skills, knowledge and support they are experiencing. There is a question as to whether eligibility for Youth Hub provision could be further extended.

12. Should the invitation to participate in Youth Hubs be limited to the 'Youth Hub' cohort?

Within the conversations, some young people spoken to were in the 'Youth Employability Coach' cohort or at least had characteristics between 'Youth Employability Coach' and 'Youth Hub'. Some young people were also spoken to who were younger than 18 years of age.

This raised the question of whether eligibility could be widened to young people beyond those 'who have some barriers to work and require motivation and practical support to address' and beyond the core age group to benefit from Youth Hub provision?

This is a very difficult question to answer as clearly it depends on the reason(s) why they are furthest from the job market. In one Youth Hub, the Youth Employment coach sat alongside the Youth Hub work coach and this seemed to work. However, this would need to be balanced by the Job Club session witnessed in another area which encouraged participants to develop their own independent learning skills (supported by a Youth Hub work coach), as some claimants might struggle with larger group sessions (due to additional learning needs, for example).

It would also be important to ensure that the calm environment was maintained as this was one of the most valued aspects of the Youth Hub service.

13. Mapping a claimants position on their 'journey to employment'

From conversations with claimants, it was noticeable that many were unsure how far from the job market they were and what additional work they needed to advance on their 'journey to employment'.

The current 3-part DWP Youth Offer (page 5) gives claimants some indication, but the 'journey' has many elements and within each of the three parts there are a number of obstacles that need to be overcome and strategies that need to be developed.

By overcoming smaller barriers, claimants could be encouraged (and rewarded) to 'level up' to a new level when they had completed a task.

An individual's position on their 'journey to employment' could also be useful for employers. This would be beneficial to employers as they would have a better awareness of the type of support they may have to give to an individual (based on their point on their journey), to ensure they are retained in employment.

Framing support as a 'journey toward employment' could potentially be an incentive for those furthest from the labour market to be introduced to Youth Hub sessions to level up into 'Youth Hub'. This of course would come with stipulations – behaviour, attendance, attitude etc. This is discussed further on pages 22-24 – 'Increasing understanding of careers progression and their own contribution to their 'journey to employment'.

What common barriers to work are Youth Hub participants encountering?

Insufficient 'careers' education (lack of knowledge of labour market, what jobs are out there, or what employers want)

There are a number of barriers to work for young people, but they largely fall under the banner of not feeling equipped with regards to understanding/information on careers pathways.

14. The role of careers information

Many participants spoken to appeared to lack a good knowledge of potential careers pathways and the relevant skills required for them. Some participants expressed frustration about the effectiveness of careers advice they had previously received (or felt they had not received).

The limit of some participants knowledge of job roles was very much 'sector-level' (i.e. 'warehousing' or 'hospitality',) without necessarily knowing specific job roles within each sector. For example: a participant would confidently state that they wanted a job in "warehousing" but when pushed about what type of warehousing job they wanted, they would be unable to provide any additional details. As a result, they could potentially miss out on roles such as 'Material Handler', 'Production Worker', or 'Assembly Technician' as they do not know they are warehouse-related roles.

15. The role of colleges and universities in offering 'employability skills' as part of courses?

A number of participants suggested that careers education was not as visible to them in post-16 colleges and/or universities. There was an acceptance that if it was offered it was voluntary or concentrated in the final year when students were focused on their studies.

These conversations reinforced that some young people (particularly those that find themselves long-term unemployed) do not recognise how careers education ultimately helps them find work. When in college they are studying specific subjects and are ideally placed to step into a related job role. Engaging with careers support resources at this point would enable them to understand the range of jobs available and develop the necessary employability skills to advance into a role related to their area of study.

These are similar resources to those that are provided within Youth Hub, however at what point (before or after leaving education) does a young people decide to embark on the 'journey to employment' and make the decision to access careers/employment support services? One participant interviewed spoke of their desire to "have a few months off after his exams before looking for job". When they came to start looking for a job in October, they discovered they had "missed everything". Would they had made this decision with professional careers advice?

This lack of personal agency in their careers knowledge means that claimants rely heavily on work coaches to identify suitable roles for them, and in many cases, this is the only person helping them search for jobs.

16. No structured careers support from peers.

A significant proportion of participants reported that they did not receive any support from family or friends in their job hunting. And of those that did, a number suggested that it was well intentioned rather than being useful.

This again is linked to a lack of basic careers knowledge. The landscape of jobs has changed significantly from when parents or well-meaning family members were job hunting as a teen or young adult. Whilst some elements remain, electronic communication and the growth of new jobs means that some knowledge of the current labour market is out-of-date, and they may be providing incorrect or bad advice.

Understanding the local jobs landscape is a key waypoint on the 'journey to employment' spectrum and from conversations undertaken, some participants would benefit from spending time gaining foundational careers knowledge rather than being encouraged to dive straight into an immediate move into work.

17. Is any job better than no job?

Building a foundational knowledge, could enable some participants to explore potential careers that they would enjoy or would have an interest to doing.

The fact that it was not uncommon for participants to have been out of work for over three months, meant that many young people just wanted to be in any employment regardless of the role. This lack of long-term careers options was therefore hampering their ability to find work that was meaningful to them.

Whilst in-job monitoring was beyond the scope of this research, from previous experience it feels safe to assume that someone who values their role is more likely to be successful and stay in position than someone who doesn't.

Valuing a role could either mean 'enjoying' it or it could also relate to its 'meaningful purpose' in driving the claimant further towards a chosen career path. In either case it might be necessary to communicate both the immediate and long-term value of a job role.

This obviously needs to be balanced against the roles that are available and the pressures of needing to find a stable income and move off Universal Credit as a priority. From ad hoc conversations with work coaches, increased links with more employers would be necessary to provide more varied opportunities for employment, and more employment-related activities such as employer engagement, placements, and internships.

Stronger relationships with employers

18. Youth-friendly employers

Building more links with 'youth-friendly' employers would obviously create more opportunities for young people. Similarly, an approach to creating a 'youth-friendly' network of employers centred around a Youth Hub would create further connections between the cohort and local employers, leading to greater opportunities for young people in the labour market. 'Youth-friendly' employers could be defined by their willingness to work directly with young people through offering placements/internships,

their willingness to utilise principles like job-carving to offer bespoke work opportunities for young people, or through other activity.

As Youth Hubs have direct access to young people looking for work, there is a real opportunity for Youth Hubs to broker relationships with employers looking for young people who want to work. This partnership would not necessarily be just one way. In exchange for access to the cohort and to advertise vacancies, companies could be encouraged to become 'youth-friendly employers' (advertise roles in Youth Hub, provide feedback on applications etc).

This 'youth-friendliness' would benefit from being closely aligned to the recently launched West Yorkshire Fair Work Charter, which seeks to promote and recognise the positive impact of fair work on business and people. The Charter builds upon 5 pillars:

- Opportunity
- Wellbeing
- Employee Voice
- Fulfilment
- Security

Diversifying routes to employment through inclusive practices (Opportunity) could be achieved through close Youth Hub engagement for example. The Charter thus potentially provides a gateway referral system for employers engaged in notions of inclusive/diverse recruitment and keen to establish their credentials as Charter signees.

By establishing 'youth-friendliness' as a tenet of the Charter, employers could not only provide benefits for young people, but they could use the association to demonstrate their own values to customers, stakeholders, and employees. The Charter would therefore act as both a 'rubberstamp' of approval for Youth Hub attendees and an opportunity to encourage more employers to engage with the Hubs to meet the required tenets of the Charter.

Is there also an opportunity for Youth Hubs to build relationships with local employers to encourage the recruitment of younger people by promoting their unique benefits?

19. A 'lack of experience' is an issue when competing against older people 'with experience'.

Whilst there are issues around self-belief and confidence in terms of having sufficient experience for a role, there is also the genuine issue that young people are competing for jobs against the candidates with more experience who are typically older.

A number of participants reported that some job adverts required experience when it was felt unnecessary for the role.

Other barriers that young people faced include:

- Lack of qualifications (see 20.).
- Staying in work – anger management issues.

- Social anxiety / Mental health.
- Lack of feedback from applications.
- Being able to learn from mistakes.
- Location – reliability of public transport (see 23.).
- Unaware of opportunities.

A lack of foundational skills/qualifications

20. A lack of basic qualifications hampers the ability to find work.

A large number of people spoken to were very committed to getting a job but lacked basic qualifications and/or a demonstrable indication of their employability skills. Into-work courses that allow claimants to demonstrate commitment to working to a potential employer (and vice versa) are useful interventions that allow claimants to develop/evidence these skills. Sector-Based Work Academies (SWAPS) are examples of these interventions, and are offered through jobcentres and Youth Hubs – it should be considered how more claimants could be encouraged to engage in this type of provision.

Additionally, further integration around claimants' access to Level 3 entitlements and basic employability skills qualifications would be a boost for Youth Hub participants in enabling them to develop work-ready skills. Without these many are starting the 'journey to employment' in the wrong direction. Youth Hubs across the region should seek to integrate basic skills provision as a key partner in their delivery.

If basic skills courses could be combined with some form of 'work experience' it would also fill the gap that many have on their CVs.

21. A complex funding landscape

Throughout the course of the research, it became clear that the funding landscape related to skills and qualifications can often be complex for partners and individuals to navigate. This is despite the best efforts of commissioners, WYCA and Local Authorities and education providers.

Statutory education duties for young people are held by the relevant Local Authority. Adult Skills Funding in West Yorkshire is devolved to the WYCA, and funding rules have been changed to ensure anyone aged 19+ can access relevant training. The below diagram – developed by Combined Authority colleagues – demonstrates how different elements of the devolved Adult Skills offer support individuals and the wider economy.



However, the devolved Adult Education Budget is – in reality - a mix of funding pots that often come with their own restrictions and stipulations from the DfE. This often creates confusion amongst partners around what specific learners may be entitled to with regards to funded training/courses.

For example - on a couple of occasions it was mentioned that claimants had deferred taking up training/qualifications due to a lack of available funding, despite them seeming to meet requirements. Naturally, this limits the amount of support partners may be able to give in confidence to Youth Hub participants.

As mentioned above, partners must be credited for their ability to ‘hide the wiring’ of a complex skills system for learners, and to work collaboratively to ensure things like Travel to Work/Learn patterns do not result in learners missing out. If partners were better supported by a less complex skills system overall, positive access and outcomes for learners would no doubt be seen. Greater access to skills training for Youth Hub participants would help them access a broader range of roles and stand a greater chance of accessing/retaining employment.

22. The Maturity Line

Many participants expressed a view that they held a very different attitude to finding work/engaging with training as they became older. Many participants around the age of 20 regretted past decisions and wanted a second chance. However, they felt that this was very difficult as they felt were permanently tarred by decisions they had made previously.

The timing of this epiphany is important as it signifies a change in outlook and desire to engage positively with into-work activities. Prior to this point, many young people expressed their assumption that everything would be okay without the need for further intervention, and that a job opportunity would be waiting around the corner. However, part of the epiphany involves self-acknowledgement of needing to own the 'problem' themselves, and that only they are in control of changing their direction of travel.

Whilst participants didn't explicitly explain the reasons for this change in outlook – it was implied from other conversations that this might be because:

- Greater focus/desire to get a job.
- No longer a teenager.
- Time to grow up.
- Personal responsibility / greater parental pressure.
- Reflection on past mistakes.
- My problem to sort.
- More mature, better equipped.

There is an opportunity for Youth Hubs to build on these attitudes by demonstrating – through effective provision - that it is never too late to find help and to recalibrate a claimant's 'journey to employment'. From speaking to participants there would appear to be a Maturity Line around 20 years of age when young people realise that if they do not do it for themselves, it is not going to happen.

Youth Hubs have a great opportunity to be visible, present, and ready to provide appropriate support when young people reach this point in their lives.

Transport

23. Unreliable public transport/time spent on public transport

Many young people spoke of being unable to take certain roles because they could not rely on public transport or that services had been cut at certain times of the day (early morning and late at night). In addition, train strikes made commuting to jobs or university very difficult – and in some cases meant roles were untenable.

This is having a major impact on young people both in maintaining a job or in evaluating the ease of travelling to a new role. Again, this is linked to confidence, but the issues of unreliable transport are very real for young people.

Most of the roles being offered to Youth Hub participants do not offer home-working, and as car ownership is cost-prohibitive, public transport is their only option. If services do not run, non-attendance for an appointment or for work is often seen by young people as their own fault, rather than issues with their means of transport.

There could be a role for partners or employers to address these barriers. Youth friendly employers could be encouraged to run dedicated shuttle buses to more rural locations and/or create more youth-friendly shift patterns. Commissioners of public transport

could play a role here too, and recent announcements on bus franchising in West Yorkshire could further support the availability and affordability of public transport in deprived areas.

Partners with available resources may wish to explore the issuing or funding of travel cards for young people, or even the funding of 'active travel' measures (e.g. bikes). These resources could be available for young people wanting to attend interviews/assessments, or during an initial period of employment. Many jobcentres do this through access to Flexible Support Funding, which is used to support initial 'into work' costs prior to receiving a first pay-check. Removing travel barriers would be a major benefit for young people.

It would also be interesting to know whether young people are less travel resilient than older age groups as there seems to be a reluctance to spent too long on a bus, or that a potential journey to work is "too long" if it requires one or more changes.

What are the opportunities for Youth Hubs in West Yorkshire in terms of increasing engagement and removing barriers to work?

A Youth Hub 'brand'

Brand is not simply about having a 'Youth Hub' logo plastered everywhere. It is about building a perception in claimants minds about what a 'Youth Hub' is and how it is going to help them get a job. 'Youth Hub' is the brand name - the 'perception' of the service itself is the brand.

By defining and creating a 'brand' from the ground-up, there is an opportunity to build something that appeals to all the key stakeholders – young people, employers, staff, delivery partners, and support partners.

As previously stated, brand principal opportunities for different stakeholder groups could include:

- For young people – 'Youth Hubs are a place I can go to get support that is focussed on my needs, and that I trust to help me find work.'
- For partners – 'Go to a place where young people are receptive to additional support opportunities that will benefit them?'
- For employers – 'Youth Hubs are a place I can go to engage with a talent pool that is keen to work.'

In essence, the brand will be a combination of all the positive aspects highlighted in the first part of this report. The main difference is that they will be collated to create an entity that can be delivered consistently across West Yorkshire and potentially beyond.

For this sense of brand to be truly successful, flexibility must remain for local delivery and for Youth Hubs to reflect the needs of local labour markets. By building this into the

brand from the outset, local differences can be addressed and turned into brand strengths.

Elements to emphasise within the Youth Hub brand include:

- Youth-first into-work employment support service.
- Expertise to get into work – structured ‘journey to employment’.
- Coaches take time to get to know claimant’s strengths.
- Contacts and relationship with local employers and partners.
- Relationship with work coaches.
- Careers information.
- Calmness of Youth Hubs.
- Support in other ‘life’ areas.
- The place for young people to come to get into work.
- A cohort of young people ready to work (for employers/partners).
- A ready-made, flexible yet consistent brand to engage/support young people in employment activities (for delivery partners).

As brand development is beyond the scope of this report, further work would have to be undertaken to fully develop a Youth Hub brand, but the findings in this report will go some way to providing a roadmap.

Increasing understanding of careers progression and claimants’ own contribution to their ‘journey to employment’

When speaking to participants it was felt that despite being in the Youth Hub cohort (i.e., wanting to work but requiring support to do so) there was significant difference between individuals with how close they were to the labour market. Some were ready to work immediately and needed only light-touch support, whilst some were taking their first steps and required a more intensive form of support, often from multiple partners.

A lack of understanding of the ‘journey to employment’ was more noticeable in those that were further away. There are a number of factors that denote job-readiness including attitude, CV-readiness, employability skills, technical skills, experience, interview-ability, and in-job performance. For some job hunters, they would be better off spending time developing their skills, rather than applying for jobs straight away. This is because even if they were successful in acquiring a position, they might not have the skills to retain it.

The concept of ‘levelling up’ towards employment was a concept that was understood by young people in Youth Hubs. Participants understood the notion that, if you complete the tasks in one ‘level’ of your employment journey you unlock the next level. Incrementally increasing proximity to finding and retaining employment therefore becomes a more sustainable method of approaching work, allowing participants to develop their skills and understanding of the labour market.

This could easily be adopted by Youth Hubs and would not only help participants gauge where they were on their ‘journey to employment’ but would also help them understand the necessary activities that they need to complete at each stage.

Levelling up could also help those in the Youth Employability Coach cohort, as advancing to Youth Hub could be a more realistic target (and incentive) as well as being less daunting than advancing straight into employment.

A 'level' system would also be useful for employers engaging in Youth Hub provision as it would provide a signifier that young people they were employing were 'work ready'. It would also help them understand what level of support a young person might require finding and retaining work.

Each level would represent the 'journey to employment' – a roadmap for participants that helps them understand what steps are required to find work.

Whilst based on the 3-part DWP Youth Offer, additional levels could include:

Existing DWP Youth Offer	Level	Name of level	Description/Criteria	Focus for young person
<i>Youth Employability Coach</i>	1	Start	Not considering work	All young people start at this level before an initial assessment. Those that remain at the level are supported by Youth Employment coaches to try and advance to level 2.
	2	Introduction to work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Positively engaging with a Youth Employment work coach (intensive 121 support to overcome barriers to work) Considering work options Accessing online information 	Young people are supported with positive messaging around the benefits of working
	3	Positive about work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> As 2. but proactively job searching over a period of time <p>Ready to transition to '4. Learning about work' (see below)</p>	Young people start to proactively discover careers options
Youth Hub	4	Learning about work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Basic careers support (different 	Undertaking activities (within

			<p>types of roles available, skills / qualifications required)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Identifying additional support required Introduction to Youth Hub/Building relationship with work coach Attending a pre-determined number of sessions 	<p>Youth Hub and their own time) that introduces them to work and foundation careers knowledge</p>
	5	Developing a Work Plan	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building employability skills (developing CV, preparing for interview, meeting employers) Gaining necessary qualifications Attending a pre-determined number of sessions 	<p>Undertaking activities (within Youth Hub and their own time) that support the development of a personalised Work Plan</p>
	6	Actioning a Work Plan	<p>Ready to transition to '7. Work Ready' (see below)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interview skills Able to find vacancies Personal skills (self-belief, confidence, resilience etc) Work experience Attending a pre-determined number of sessions 	<p>Undertaking activities (within Youth Hub and their own time) that support the actioning of a personalised Work Plan</p>
	7	Work Ready	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Self-motivated and applying for jobs in own time 	<p>Looking for work and applying for roles in their own time</p>
Youth Employability Programme	8	Success – In Work	Start work	<p>Moving into work after successful application process</p>
	9	In Work - for three months	Successfully in role for three months.	<p>Staying in work, accessing support from Youth Hub if necessary</p>

	10	In Work - for six months	Successfully in role for six months – the end of the Youth Hub ‘journey to employment’	Staying in work, accessing support from Youth Hub if necessary
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A complimentary digital offer

For some young people, they only visited Youth Hub once a week, often meaning the only person that they had a meaningful ‘employment-related’ interaction with was their Youth Hub work coach.

Youth Hubs – in their optimum form – operate on a pure partnership model, drawing on relevant local/national services to further support young people with barriers to work. However, a number of reasons may mean that partners cannot always be physically present at the Hub location, meaning the right support is not always accessible in-person for young people.

Almost every research interview was undertaken with the participant’s phone on the desk. Whilst a sizeable number did stress that they liked the 1-2-1 nature of Youth Hub support, there was significant support for a complimentary digital offer.

This complimentary offer could improve access to partner services where co-location may not be available or consistent. Additionally, digital services could support the above-described ‘levelling-up/journey to employment’ framework, by offering a personalised map to help participants advance toward finding and retaining work.

Potential features of a digital offer could include:

- Access via an app/website, with personalised log-in for each user.
- Fully personalised content based on the user’s level on the ‘journey to employment’. For example, Using the table on pages 23/24:
 - A young person at Level 2: ‘Introduction to work’ would primarily see video case studies of young people in a similar situation speaking positively about how they started their journey.
 - A young person at Level 5: ‘Developing a work plan’ would primarily see videos or animations about successful interview tips or preparing a CV.
- Interaction with content builds user profile.
- Multi-media content options – video, text, audio, images (not text heavy).
 - Careers information/ employability skills related – both curated and commissioned content.
- Option for customised and personalised supporting features (e.g. virtual job fairs, events, job boards, CV generator, community areas, contact links, competitions, surveys, activity tracker etc).
- Ability to contact users via email, SMS, instant message to promote personalised and relevant content to encourage regular engagement.
- Support staff have access to user-data - based on assessment and interaction with the system.

- All data can be exported in reports and collated with other users to track outputs/outcomes and view trends within the system and the user community.
- 'Red'/'Green' flag content to identify users' specific needs or indicate they are ready to unlock the next level.
- Further links to partner offers – ideally with streamlined referral/self-referral mechanism to promote easy access to services that may remove other barriers for young people looking to access work.

Any digital offer would need the caveat that not all young people are 'digital natives' – and so the system would need to be easy to use and understand. Attention would also need to be given to digital exclusion – although it is understood that accessing Universal Credit services requires a Smart/internet enabled device and these can be provided by jobcentre staff if required.

Of the young people spoken to only a handful of people said that they didn't need a dedicated digital offer because they watched interview preparation videos on YouTube, or followed careers people on social media. Most of the people spoken to did not know how to find job-hunting related assets online or even that they existed. A digital offer that combined collated, curated content from the web and specially commissioned created content for local job hunting would be very welcomed by participants.

It would also need to be seen as a complimentary service to the role of Youth Hub work coaches rather than an alternative.

What support do young people want?

Whilst young people found it difficult to design an ideal service from the ground-up, they were supported to identify areas of support that they felt would benefit them. These would be a great basis for developing the brand or for indicating the type of content they would engage with as part of a digital offer.

Peer Support:

- Hear other people's stories related to finding employment – including success stories and shared difficulties.
- Hear things honestly.

Partner Support:

- Bring in/hear from more employers.
- Get more qualifications and opportunities to build employability-related skills not tied to qualifications.
- Get more experience of the workplace.
- More guidance to 'do things right' in search for employment.
- Greater variety of jobs, to start earning money and to build experience.
- Better access to reliable public transport.
- Address medical issues, particularly those around mental health needs.

Partner support in other 'life areas' particularly around Mental Health support

Overall, young people struggled to identify areas of additional support that they felt they needed. When prompted many said “yes, that” or “no I don’t need anything”. From the research it was clear that participants did not understand the concept of additional support or (in many cases) that it existed or that they could access it. This links back to the point around young people being unable to design a service for themselves as they do not have the knowledge or experience to understand what is being asked.

It was clear from conversations (though it was not always explicitly discussed), that many could benefit from mental health support – particularly around anxiety. Whilst a 20-week cognitive behavioural therapy course for large numbers of young people would be cost prohibitive, smaller taster activities could be developed to attempt to provide ‘something’, rather than ‘nothing’. Partners could be leveraged to deliver services such as this, through increasing presence in Youth Hubs from VCS sector organisations delivering mental health interventions, or through ‘Work & Health’ provision in Hubs.

Insight in relation to questions posed in the blueprint development document

As part of the ongoing work in West Yorkshire to design a blueprint for Youth Hub activity in the region, a group of partners across local and national government have worked to establish a set of Youth Hub design principles. These design principles – developed in consultation – propose a foundation from which Youth Hub delivery in West Yorkshire can be built.

The suggested design principles fall across 6 key thematic areas:

- *Scope – What should Youth Hubs consider their key focus?*
- *Governance & Partnerships – How should partners work together to deliver Youth Hubs effectively?*
- *Young People’s Voice – How should young people be encouraged to design Youth Hub services?*
- *Outreach – How should young people (and partners) be made aware of the Youth Hub offer, and encouraged to engage?*
- *Skills Offer – How should Youth Hub participants be encouraged to develop requisite skills for employment?*

The intelligence gained from responses to the Youth Hub user research work provides an opportunity to consider how these design principles may be further influenced by the experiences of Youth Hub attendees.

In the below section, each of the proposed design principles is stated, with feedback from participant interviews noted below.

Scope

Design Principle: *Encouraging young people to reach their potential. Supporting access and progression into personalised multi-agency support, towards and/or into work.*

Participant feedback:

- 'Reach their potential' was a concept that many young people did not understand in relation to employment.
- General feeling that Youth Hub is about working towards a job, and that qualifications are a means to getting a job – therefore, the design principle could be more practical /employability-focused.
- Many participants felt that they were in their situation because they had gone into/stayed in education – where the qualification was the focus rather than it being a means to getting a job/career. Careers advice within post-16 education establishments tends to be optional and easily avoided as students are focused on the qualification rather than the next stage of the 'journey'.
- Overall, Youth Hub participants felt that they attended Youth Hubs to find work and were less explicit about seeing the Hub as a place to get support from lots of different partners. The implication here would be that there is an opportunity to further develop the 'partner' element of the Youth Hub brand/delivery.

Governance & Partnerships

Design Principle: Leveraging strength and voice across collaborative partnerships, to tackle youth unemployment and improve outcomes for young people. Working together strategically to build local capacity for employment, education, and training support.

- From experience, few people/organisations have a comprehensive holistic view of the full range of support available, the organisations that can deliver activity or have the personal networks/individual names to contact.
- As such, there is significant opportunity to further develop partner understanding and to 'warm up' prospective Youth Hub partners, to build local capacity and work toward common goals.

Young People's Voice

Design Principle: Embed meaningful support by capturing user experience at all stages of an individual's pathway of support; ensuring a visible 'feedback loop' that demonstrates the importance of co-design and evaluates success.

- From the research undertaken, young people aged between 16-24 would struggle to design a service from the ground up to meet their needs.
- However, whilst young people cannot readily design services and provision, they can evaluate products and services, which can lead to more innovation and engagement.
- There is therefore opportunity to embed feedback via gathering user experience – but it must be recognised that young people engaged with the Youth Hub may require significant facilitation support in any aspect of service design or feedback.
- A complimentary digital offer, as discussed above, may contribute significantly to opportunities for furthering young person understanding of their own journey toward employment, therefore increasing their understanding of a coherent service and what they may need to progress. The digital offer could also offer

opportunity to solicit feedback in a non-intrusive manner (through feedback boxes or online surveys).

Outreach

Design Principle: Outreach is young person-centred, locally led and coordinated.

- As highlighted in earlier sections, many young people do not know the Youth Hub 'by name'. It is worth considering how this effects outreach. Whilst it is encouraging that young people see engaging with Youth Hubs as a useful activity, it may be hampering further outreach if participants and partners are not able to 'articulate' or reference Youth Hub as a consistent brand.
- It is important to consider whether there is sufficient resource to handle non-Universal Credit young people with Youth Hubs, and what this may mean for outreach.
- Consistency of offer across all Youth Hubs will be key to successful outreach and would be communicated via a Youth Hub brand.

Skills Offer

Design Principle: Supporting young people to access the right accredited or non-accredited skills provision, supported with careers information, advice, and guidance.

- Overall, the young people sampled do not know the breadth of jobs or roles available, or the required skills to attain or retain them. It may therefore be pertinent to consider giving careers information, advice, and guidance a more prominent role in this design principle.
- Careers aspirations are often defined by limited knowledge/experience of older family members (e.g. some parents have out of date information and are unaware of the current careers/employment landscape).
- This may be further compounded by schools, colleges, universities, and politicians pushing 'a narrative without responsibility' – "Do X and get job Y" without having to be responsible to ensure that it happens.
- There needs to be a greater link between local labour market needs and opportunities, young people, Youth Hubs, and employers.
- Employers need to be brought into the conversation (and encouraged to expand beyond traditional recruitment options). Could local / regional, national employers become Youth-friendly Employers and sign up to a commitment to support young people into work. This could be aligned to existing initiatives such as the West Yorkshire Fair Work Charter.

Outcomes

Design Principle: Outcomes that demonstrate the effectiveness of the quality and impact of a young people's progress.

- As referenced above, young people often do not consider their 'progress' towards work and have a more binary view of support – either it results in employment, or it does not. Measuring progress between 'levels' would be a way to measure the development of young people and demonstrate to participants their progression towards work. In essence – it should be considered how outcomes could be a useful tool for staff/partners AND existing and prospective claimants.
- Young people (particularly those low in confidence) prefer a journey to consist of a number of small (manageable) steps rather than one big jump.
- For some young people it will be an achievement just to leave the house, whereas for others it might be to make a job application or to undertake interview preparations. It is important to recognise the importance of all progress towards work.

And finally...

Overall, Youth Hubs are valued by the claimants that have been referred to them. This is in terms of the relationship they have with work coaches and because they provide an environment that is perceived as the opposite of the jobcentre – the calm ambience and the support to find work.

There are positive foundations for the delivery mechanism, but equally there are further opportunities to improve the offer and support more young people to find employment across West Yorkshire.

Whilst participants lacked the ability to design or improve the service themselves, they were more than able to comment on their experiences and the obstacles they were facing. This provided the basis for over 60+ conversations to explore ideas and suggestions to create an idealised Youth Hub service that was relevant and personalised to them.

It is strongly felt that this report is an accurate representation of all the interviews that were conducted, and it would be hoped that any participant who took part in the research would be able to see some element of their own views contained within the document.

Special thanks should go to all Youth Hub staff who were very helpful in arranging interviewing, encouraging claimants to take part, and making the process as easy as possible.

About Fourteen19®

Fourteen19® is strategic/creative youth agency with over 25 years' experience promoting opportunities to teens and young adults and encouraging them to engage with beneficial products and services.

From our base in West Yorkshire, we orchestrate a regional and national network of professionals, associates, and young people to deliver a flexible hybrid youth agency.

This project was delivered by Head of Agency Graham Sykes, who has extensive experience undertaking research projects with teens and young adults to influence strategic decision making. He is particularly adept in extracting essential insight from an audience often reluctant to share information or lacking the relevant skills to do so.

He also has additional knowledge and experience of:

- the into-employment sector.
- being a 'neutral expert'.
- working with young people to co-design products and services.
- ensuring that youth voice is amplified within projects and can be communicated to project stakeholders.
- in undertaking research with young people to influence government policy.

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