

Better Tomorrows Programme

More young people in Cumbria getting access to quality youth work

Evaluation Report – Year 3

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Executive Summary

Key highlights: As a result of the Better Tomorrows programme by the end of year 3:

- More than £2.5 million has been raised from over 50 funders, including a National Lottery Community Fund grant.
- Over 8,055 new young people engaged in youth work.
- 61 more trained youth workers.
- 46 new youth work jobs funded across Cumbria.
- Over 22,230 hours of new youth work provision.
- It is estimated that 'for every £1 the government invests in youth work, the benefit to the taxpayer is between £3.20 and £6.40' (UK Youth). By the end of Year 3 of the programme, the £2.5 million invested in Better Tomorrows represents a benefit of £8-16 million.
- Better Tomorrows is an example to others of what can be achieved when someone in a leadership position identifies an issue, develops a clear vision and takes a collaborative approach to inspire change.

Context: The Better Tomorrows Programme was initially a three-year initiative (now extended) in Cumbria launched in 2021, which aims to increase the number of trained youth workers and improve access to youth support services. It is supported by Cumbria Community Foundation, Cumbria Youth Alliance and Francis Scott Trust. As of Spring 2025, more than £2.5 million has been raised from over 50 funders, including a National Lottery grant. The programme aims to empower young people through high-quality youth work, fostering their confidence, skills, and aspirations.

Method: The Better Tomorrows Programme aims to provide quality youth work opportunities for young people in Cumbria. The evaluation focuses on three main areas: training, youth work jobs, and improving young people's lives, aiming to provide a holistic understanding of the programme and capture both intended and unintended outcomes. For more details on the background and evaluation method, please refer to the [Year 1 report](#).

Findings from Year 3: For reporting purposes, Year 3 is from 1 March 2024 to 28 February 2025.

Training: In Year 3, Better Tomorrows training was delivered by Youth Focus/Your Edge Training, reporting to Cumbria Youth Alliance (CYA), and was funded by a grant of £445,270 from The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF) to train an additional 225 youth workers over the next five years. Therefore, it was agreed that existing, unspent funding allocated against training for 2023/24 would move into the 'additional youth work' budget line, increasing the amount available to spend on salaries. There were two cohorts of learners in Year 3 (Cohorts 5 and 6), and the high level of completion and near completion demonstrate the commitment of the training and assessment team and the determination of learners to complete their training.

At the end of Year 3, there are 61 more trained youth workers supporting young people in Cumbria, which is a testimony to all those involved. In Year 2, the elements of training and development that appeared to be more helpful were summarised as consistency, awareness, commitment and flexibility (see [Year 2 report](#)). In Year 3, these elements continued to be important.

Youth work jobs: In Year 3, 5 new organisations were funded, resulting in the creation of 8 additional new youth worker positions, taking the cumulative total to 46 new posts over three years. As was seen in the previous two years, the impact on the lives of youth workers in Cumbria was significant, with 378 people reporting they feel safer in their communities and 737 people reporting better access to services or support. Case studies in section four of the report highlight the experiences of five youth workers and two members of the programme steering group. Overall, in Years 1 to 3 of the programme, Better Tomorrows has made a significant impact on the personal and professional development of youth workers and has provided diverse and valuable experiences for young people in Cumbria.

Improving young people's lives: In Year 3, 2,720 young people engaged in the programme, giving a cumulative total of 8,055 for Years 1 to 3. For each year, the data collected reflects the number of young people supported during that year, and there may be some cross-over between years, as projects were not asked to report the number of new people to benefit. Many of the projects are in the third year of funding and have become established, enabling them to recruit and engage more young people. Engagement in the activities provided has supported young people's perceptions of functioning well: 24% reported improved engagement in education/learning, 8% reported feeling better prepared for work, and 38.4% reported increased interpersonal skills. In terms of feeling good, 32.8% reported increased confidence, and 24% reported that they feel an increase in resilience.

For the first time, following recommendations to the steering group in the Year 2 report, data was collected on the age and gender of young people, revealing a reasonably even spread between genders, with more than half of the young people (51.2%) engaged within the 12-15 year age category. Of the 2,720 young people engaged, only 17.3% were over 16 years of age, and 29.4% were under 11.

Summary of Year 3: The programme has become well established across the county. There have been a number of challenges, including staff absences and turnover, affecting consistency in youth services, and recruiting young people has required proactive outreach. Although behavioural issues remain a concern, they are managed through using an asset-based approach, with clear expectations and structured sessions, often with support from specialist services. Many young people struggle with anxiety and confidence, requiring patient, compassionate support, and youth workers are increasingly supporting families in crisis due to gaps in statutory services.

Suggested areas for review by the steering group

- Sustaining youth work funding remains difficult, with some projects relying heavily on grants due to limited success in becoming self-sustaining. The [NYA Policy Paper](#) 'Lifting young people up through youth work', published on 29 July 2025, may be useful in raising awareness of the important role of youth work in society.
- Recruiting youth workers and volunteers, especially in rural areas, is challenging. Consider ways to raise the benefits of volunteering, for example, through a media campaign, and working with schools/colleges. Long-term success is contingent on both financial support and an increase in community involvement through volunteering.
- The new data collected for Year 3 reveals that of the 2,720 young people engaged, only 17.3% were over 16 years of age. Considering that 11.4% of young people were identified as having additional needs, it may be beneficial for more activities to be provided for young adults aged up to 25.
- Consider developing and supporting a Youth Advisory Group for Better Tomorrows, or linking into an existing group.

The Year 3 report ends with a quote from Juan Shimmin from Cumbria Youth Alliance:

"Better Tomorrows has made more difference than anything else that I've been involved with or seen happening... It's the most significant thing I've seen in this sector in the 15 years I've been involved here."

Dr Tracy Ann Hayes, 3 November 2025, email: thayes@marjon.ac.uk

Introduction

Better Tomorrows is a three-year programme (which has now been extended) to encourage people in Cumbria to become accredited in youth work and substantially increase the number of young people having access to support from youth workers to help them reach their potential. The Year 1 report¹ provides an introduction to the programme, the methods for the evaluation and the findings for Year 1 of the programme. This report focuses on Year 3, which, for reporting purposes, is from 1 March 2024 to 28 February 2025. The report starts with an overview of the training and reviews the two cohorts of learners from Year 3, before then addressing the two agreed evaluation questions, drawing on case studies of individuals involved in the programme, notes and minutes from steering group meetings and meetings between the evaluator and steering group members.

1.0 Training

Training in Year 3 was delivered by Youth Focus/Your Edge Training, reporting to Cumbria Youth Alliance (CYA). Training in Year 3 has been funded by a successful bid to The National Lottery Community Fund (TNLCF), with the programme, via CYA, receiving £445,270 to train an additional 225 youth workers over the next five years. Therefore, it was agreed that existing, unspent funding that had been allocated for training in Year 3 would move into the 'additional youth work' budget line, increasing the amount available to spend on salaries.

The online application form went live on 1 February 2024 until the beginning of March. In the first week of applications, Youth Focus² had 26 applications, of which 13 were from Cumbria. It seems that joining with this existing system doubled the uptake of youth work training in the North West. A meet-the-trainers day was held on Friday, 22nd March, in Kendal, with trainers from Your Edge attending and invitations sent to all Cumbrian candidates and supervisors.

There were two cohorts in Year 3: Cohort 5 and Cohort 6 of the programme, both of which were delivered predominantly online.

Cohort 5 was between April and October 2024, with 16 x L2 and 1 x L3 students registered.

Cohort 4 was between October 2024 and April 2025, with 4 x L2 and 6 x L3 students registered.

Of the two cohorts in Year 3, 11 students have yet to complete.

¹ Available from <https://www.cumbriafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/Better-Tomorrow-Programme-Evaluation-Report-Year-1.pdf>

² Youth Focus is part of the Network of Regional Youth Work Units in England comprising seven active RYWUs, each serving one or more regions with tailored infrastructure support.c

1.1 How effective was the youth work training in readying youth workers to support young people in Cumbria?

From the evidence provided and from interviews and conversations with those involved in Better Tomorrows' training, the move from in-person to online training has been a success, making the training more accessible and increasing geographical reach. At the end of Year 3, there are 27 more trained youth workers (see Table 1 below) supporting young people in Cumbria, which is a testimony to all those involved.

Table 1: A summary of Learners from Cohorts 1 - 6, as of 31 July 2025

Total learners engaged Cohort 1-6	79 ³	Notes
Cohort 1	14	
Cohort 2	20	
Cohort 3	13	
Cohort 4	5	
Cohort 5	17	5 still to complete
Cohort 6	10	6 still to complete
Total Learners Studying at L3	42	
Total Learners Studying at L2	35	
Receiving Unit Accreditation	2	
Receiving full L3	27	
Receiving full L2	9	
Withdrawn	9	
Progressing from L2 to L3	1	
Deferred to subsequent cohorts	3	

Going forward into Year 4, Cohort 7 started in April 2025, 17 signed up with 13 actively engaging as of 31 July 2025; results are due around October. With Cohort 8 planned to start in October 2025, by the end of the year, more than 100 youth workers are anticipated to have either completed or be engaging with training. This is a significant achievement for the programme.

In addition, supplementary training is being provided to support workforce development, which will be reported on in the Year 4 report.

1.2 Which aspects of the youth work training and development were the most helpful and why?

In Year 1, the following helpful aspects were identified: expectations, appropriate level of study, placement support, motivations of individual learners and ongoing professional development. The training team worked closely with the steering group to refine programme delivery, which

³ 2 learners gained completed units, without completing the full accreditation.

strengthened the initial phases of applying for and starting the course. This established the high completion rate that continued into Year 2.

In Year 2, in addition to the five aspects identified in the first year, the elements of training and development that appeared most helpful were summarised as consistency, awareness, commitment and flexibility.

In Year 3, the elements from Years 1 and 2 continued to be important; additionally, the evaluation focused on the move to the new training provider and online delivery of training. Trainee youth workers found this a positive move, which was a better fit with other commitments. They valued the support provided by tutors and by mentors in their workplaces; however, there were some concerns about the level of the training, which at level 2 was seen as more challenging than anticipated. The case studies in section 4 provide a deeper insight into trainees' experiences.

2.0 Youth Work Jobs

2.1 How many youth worker posts were created and in which organisations?

As with training, for reporting purposes, Year 3 is from 1 March 2024 to 28 February 2025. **5 new organisations** were funded (blue text in Table 2), summarised in Table 2 below, resulting in **8 new youth worker** posts created in Year 3, included in Table 3. Additionally, there were 77 new volunteers as a direct result of the funding.

Table 2: Organisations funded in Year 3 of the programme

Organisations that received funding between 01/03/24 and 28/02/25	Year of funding
Alston Recreation Ground Trust	1 of 3
Aspatia Dreamscheme	3 of 3
Brampton and Beyond Community Trust	2 of 3
CandoFM Community Radio	3 of 3
Carnegie Theatre Trust	2 of 3
CHOFHS Youth Group	1 of 3
Cowran Care Limited	3 of 3
Drop Zone Youth Projects	3 of 3
Euphoric Circus	2 of 3
Friends of Bram	2 of 3
Kent Estuary Youth	2 of 3
Keswick Youth Centre Services	3 of 3
Kirkby Stephen Youth Centre	2 of 3
Longtown Memorial Hall and Community Centre Youth Club	2 of 3
Shackles Off Youth Project	3 of 3
South Whitehaven Youth Partnership	3 of 3

Staveley with Ings Together	1 of 3
The Harrington Youth Club	1 of 3
The Riverside Group Limited (Eden Foyer)	3 of 3
Women's Community Matters	3 of 3
Workington Town Community Trust	1 of 3
Wave Forward was a one-year grant awarded in Sept 2023 - the end-of-grant report was received during this period, so included in the indicators.	-
NOTE 1: Brathay Trust (BT) and North Allerdale Development Trust (NADT) did not receive a grant in this period; their year 3 grants will be reported next year (paid after 28/02/25).	-
NOTE 2: Like BT and NADT, the Youthability Y2 grant was paid after 28/02/25.	-

2.2 Who became youth workers in Cumbria, and how did the Better Tomorrows opportunity impact their lives?

Table 3 (below) summarises the impact of the Better Tomorrows programme for the youth workers and volunteers involved. 378 people that they feel safer in their communities, and 737 people reported better access to services or support.

Table 3: Quantitative data for youth workers and volunteers for Years 1 - 3

Youth Workers / Volunteers					
		Yr 3	Yr 2	Yr 1	Cumulative
Programme	No. of additional qualified youth workers as a result of the funding ⁴	16 ⁵	18	27	61
	No. of new volunteers as a direct result of the funding	77	59	30	166
	No. of people reporting that they feel an increased sense of belonging in their community	89	172	149	410
Employment	No. of people employed as a direct result of the funding	8	10	28	46
	No. of people who have gained employment after funding	16	18	31	65
	No. of people who have gone on to further employment in youth work	11	9	3	23
	No. of people reporting that they feel better prepared for work	41	39	16	96
Education	Total no. of hours of training/education undertaken	1,505	1,621	1,086	4,212
	No. of people progressing onto further education/training	20	7	6	33

⁴ This refers to a minimum of L2 training.

⁵ 11 still to complete

	No. of people who undertook Level 2 accreditation	19	4	8	31
	No. of people who undertook Level 3 accreditation	7	11	15	33
	No. of people who gained an accredited qualification ⁶	19	36	14	69
Skills	No. of people reporting increased practical skills	193	60	72	325
	No. of people reporting increased interpersonal (social, communication & relationship) skills	213	71	77	361
	No. of people reporting increased skills & knowledge	216	92	55	363

2.3 How many youth work sessions were delivered, and of what nature?

In Year 3, there was an average of 197 hours per week of youth work provision provided through Better Tomorrows funding. Across all the projects, a total of 10,246 hours was provided, resulting in a cumulative total of 22,230 hours provided across Years 1 - 3. The range of activities provided was similar to Years 1 and 2.

3.0 Improving Young People's Lives

3.1 Who accessed youth work funded via Better Tomorrows?

In Year 3, 2,720 young people engaged in the programme, giving a cumulative total for Years 1 - 3 of 8,055. For each year, the data collected reflects the number of young people supported during that year. There will likely be some cross-over between years, as projects were not asked to report the number of *new* people to benefit.

For the second year running, the number of young people (11-25) with additional needs, based on youth workers professional judgement, was recorded; there was an increase of 102 from year two (year 3, n = 512, year 2, n = 410); this means that 11.4% of young people engaged, come within this category. It is difficult to compare this figure to national figures, as the category 'additional needs' can encompass special educational needs (SEN), disabilities, mental health challenges, neurodivergence and other support requirements, within official UK or England-wide data sources. However, best estimates suggest that the figure of 11.4% is low. For example:

- NHS Digital's ['Mental Health of Children and Young People in England'](#) reports that around 17% of 6–19-year-olds have a probable mental disorder (including anxiety, depression,

⁶ Three received unit accreditation, not the full qualification.

behavioural disorders), suggesting a significant portion would fall under 'additional needs' if mental health is included.

- According to [Department for Education statistics](#), approximately 14.2% of pupils in England had an Education, Health and Care Plan (EHCP) or special educational needs support (SEN support) in 2023, which covers primarily school-age children (up to 18).
- For young adults aged 18–25, [ONS data indicate](#) that around 7-8% report a long-term physical or mental health condition or disability that limits their day-to-day activities.

Aggregating across the 11 -25 year age span, a conservative estimate would suggest that between 15% and 25% of young people aged 11–25 may have some form of additional needs, recognising that overlaps exist between categories and some groups (e.g., those with mental health support needs) may not appear in official SEN data. The lower figure recorded may be due to youth workers’ reluctance to label young people and preference for an asset-based approach that recognises strengths rather than weaknesses. It may also reflect a reluctance for some young people to engage with in-person youth services, or to even leave their house, as recognised within online digital youth work practice, with the development of [digital youth work standards](#).

For the first time, following recommendations to the steering group in the Year 2 report, data were collected on the age and gender of young people engaged, summarised in Table 4 below, and represented pictorially in Image 1.

Table 4: Age and gender of young people engaged in year three

Age	Male	Female	Mixed
<11	419	381	800
12 - 15	655	738	1393
>16	245	225	470
Unknown			57
TOTALS	1319	1344	2720

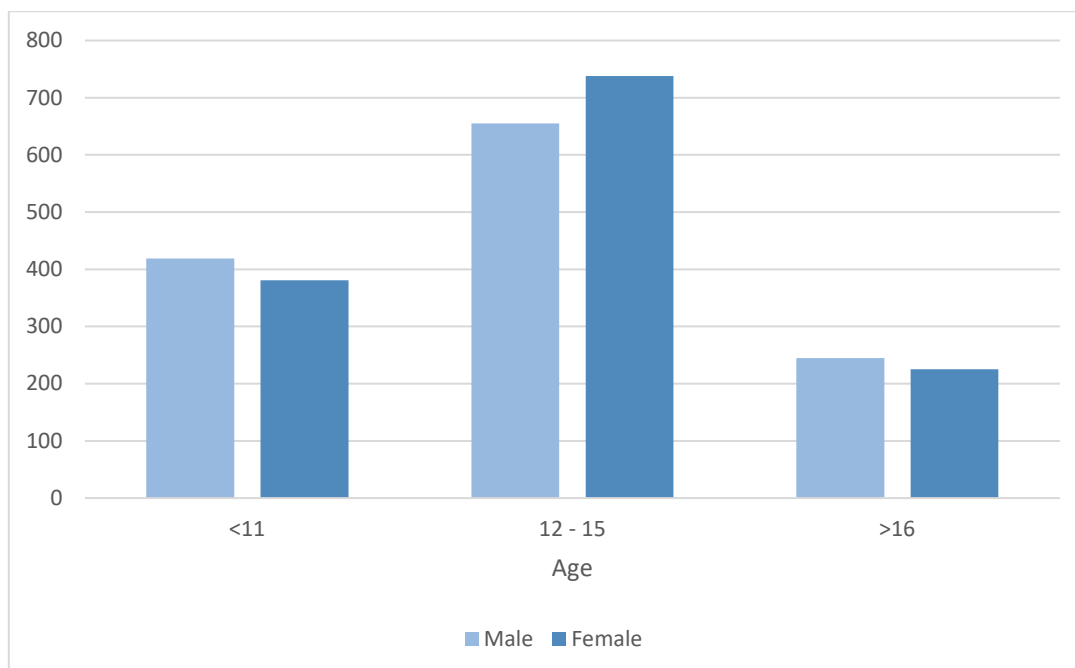


Figure 1: Age and gender of young people engaged in year three

The data show that there is a reasonably even spread between genders, with total males = 1,319 and females = 1,344, a difference of 25. More than half of the young people (51.2%) engaged are within the 12-15 year age category; within this category, 47% were males, and 53% females. Of the 2,720 young people engaged, only 17.3% were over 16 years of age, and 29.4% were under 11.

Table 5 below shows that engagement in the activities provided has supported young people's perceptions of functioning well: 24% reported improved engagement in education/learning, 8% reported feeling better prepared for work, and 38.4% reported increased interpersonal skills. In terms of 'Feeling Good', 32.8% reported increased confidence, and 24% reported that they feel an increase in resilience.

There is a marked drop in numbers between Year 2 (4,289) and Year 3 (2,720); however, in Year 2, there was one programme with anomalously high numbers, which skewed the data. Looking at it from a long-term perspective, the figures reported in Year 3 are more in line with predictions based on Year 1, with Year 3 being more than double the reported figures for Year 1.

This highlights the challenges involved in quantitatively measuring young people's engagement in youth work activities. For example, Grey (2018) highlights how an overreliance on attendance as a metric can create misleading incentives, prioritising presence over authentic involvement and undermining intrinsic motivation. Similarly, de St Croix & Doherty (2022) argue that standardised

quantitative measures often clash with the relational and youth-centred nature of open youth work, calling instead for participatory and practice-informed approaches to evaluation.⁷

From Year 4 onwards, the Better Tomorrows programme evaluation is moving towards a more relational approach, aiming to capture more qualitative data from young people to add to the Stories of Change included this year, enabling a richer insight into the experiences provided by the programme.

Table 5: Summary of impact on young people in Years 1 - 3

	Young People				
		Yr 3	Yr 2	Yr 1	Cumulative
Youth Work Activity	No. of young people (11-25) engaged in the programme	2,720	4,289	1,046	8,055
	No. of young people (11-25) with additional needs (based on youth workers' professional judgement) engaged in youth work activity	512	410	-	922
	No. of young people (11-25) involved in volunteering within the funded youth provision	102	-	-	102
	No. of young people (11-25) involved in volunteering outside the funded youth provision	78	-	-	78
	No. of hours of youth work provision provided per week (on average)	244	222	-	466
	Total no. of hours of youth work provision provided	10,246	8,314	3,670	22,230
	No. of other services offered to participants	128	161	23	312
Functioning Well	No. of people whose engagement in education/learning has improved	655	931	391	1,977
	No. of people who went into further and/or higher education as a direct result of participation.	103	92	31	226
	No. of people reporting increased interpersonal (social, communication & relationship) skills	1,045	979	724	2,748
	No. of people reporting they feel better prepared for work	220	277	59	556
	No. of people reporting increased practical skills	599	488	406	1,493

⁷ Grey, D. (2018). *Approaches to measuring attendance and engagement: Beyond “bums on seats.” Research in Post-Compulsory Education*, 23(4), 414-433. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13596748.2018.1526912>

de St Croix, T., & Doherty, L. (2022). “Capturing the magic”: Grassroots perspectives on evaluating open youth work. *Evaluation and Program Planning*, 91, 102033. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.evalprogplan.2022.102033>

Feeling Good	No. of people reporting that they feel an increased sense of belonging in their community	824	664	590	2,078	
	No. of people reporting increased confidence in keeping themselves safe	684	903	453	2,040	
	No. of people reporting an increase in personal aspirations and goals	716	452	331	1,499	
	No. of people reporting an increase in:	Resilience	651	738	444	1,833
		Competence	421	588	412	1,421
		Optimism	683	713	481	1,877
		self-assurance	580	791	579	1,950
self-care		582	684	544	1,810	
Confidence	893	934	717	2,544		
Community	No. of <i>new</i> youth sessions created	153	212	171	536	
	No. of people reporting that they feel safer in their communities	378	573	558	1,509	
	No. of people reporting better access to services or support	737	645	597	1,979	

There have been a range of challenges reported in Year 3, including:

- For small organisations, coping with staff absences and staff turnover continues to be challenging in terms of providing a consistent service for young people.
- Recruiting young people to new projects, which has been addressed using an outreach approach, including visits to sports events and drop-in sessions at weekends.
- Young people’s behaviour continues to be a concern, reported across several project reports. This is generally addressed by explaining what is unacceptable, being clear with expectations, and structuring sessions to enable needs to be met. It has also involved working collaboratively with specialist providers and mental health services.
- Some young people have experienced barriers to joining and participating in some activities due to low confidence and anxiety, and have struggled to communicate confidently with others and staff. These concerns have been addressed through providing safe places, recognising and understanding individual challenges, with compassion, empathy and patience.
- Sustaining funding for youth work longer term continues to be an issue. As one organisation’s monitoring report highlighted: *“We are trying our best to make different projects within our organisation self-sustaining, and we are having a limited amount of success. However, it seems impossible to find a way to make the youth work self-sustaining, and it appears to us that we will always need to find grant funding for the youth side of our organisation.”*
- Difficulties were encountered with recruiting paid youth workers. For one organisation, the move from offering full-time positions to part-time led both to more applications (fitting better with youth workers' other commitments) and to a more flexible delivery model.

- Recruiting, supporting and retaining volunteers is a challenge across the organisations involved in Better Tomorrows, especially those in geographically isolated areas (rural and coastal). A shortage of volunteers requires organisations to rely more heavily on paid staff, which increases financial pressures.
- Youth workers are increasingly supporting young people facing complex family issues that often require statutory intervention. With stretched services and long waits, staff are also guiding parents and carers in crisis, offering emotional support and signposting for issues like mental health, housing, and debt, helping prevent escalation to crisis.

3.2 What impact did the youth work have on young people in the short term?

Without talking to the young people involved, it is difficult to evaluate the impact on young people in the short term beyond what is captured in the quantitative data, summarised in Table 5. However, three personal ‘stories of change’⁸ and exemplar quotes from the Year 3 monitoring reports give insight into some of the impacts the youth work has had on young people:

Story of Change 1: A 12-year-old girl from a rural town arrived at the youth centre, shy and withdrawn, struggling with confidence and avoiding group activities. Her parents were concerned but unsure how to support her. Over time, she discovered a passion for drama and began running creative workshops. This helped her build confidence, take on leadership roles, and connect with others. She now directs performances with peers and contributes regularly at school. Her parents have seen a dramatic change in her self-esteem and engagement. Her journey shows the transformative power of youth work in helping young people grow, lead, and thrive.

Story of Change 2: A young person first joined the youth project in 2021, attending sessions with his brother. Initially very shy and reserved, especially due to being autistic, he gradually built trust with staff and grew in confidence. He now attends older youth sessions, volunteers twice a week, leads games, and helps run the tuck shop. Through a youth-led project, he helped plan a group trip, pushing himself to improve his maths. He’s since gained employability skills, secured a local job, and walks two miles to work. He’s now exploring university options with staff support to pursue his future goals.

Story of Change 3: We have been able to create a safe and creative space for young people across three locations, providing a codesigned programme of activities and training that has better equipped young members when it comes to community, compassion and wellbeing. The project has provided a safe, structured space for two autistic young people facing social

^{8 8} These are anonymised, summarised versions of a personal ‘Story of Change’.

challenges, helping them rebuild peer connections and manage difficulties at work and with friends. It has shown particular value in supporting those needing a more focused, controlled approach to social interaction and community building. Through collaboration and working together, we have been able to build a project that has already seen the beneficiaries come together to create a sense of community and better mental health.

Exemplar Quotes:

“Young people self report that they are better able to manage their mental health and that they know where to go, who to speak to when in mental health crisis, the increase in self confidence is evident with the number of young people taking part in community and social activities for the first time and the number of young people trying new activities during the summer. We have seen greater 'buy-in' from parents and carers this year, promoting safe spaces for young people to talk about family, relationships and opening up communications when things are difficult at home.”

“A couple of children from Ukraine came, and within a few weeks, parents were getting involved. This culminated with a father coming from the front line to see his child, which was a moment of joy not only for the child but everyone who was there.”

“When I first came here as a client, it was a bit scary because I had not done anything like it before, and I found it hard to talk about my feelings to someone without getting upset, but the more I spoke to someone about it the more I realised that speaking to someone helps and being here helped me. I saw a lot of different staff here, and they helped me get to where I am now.”

“The aim of the youth club project is to improve the lives of each user through the inclusion of fun and varied activities. We want to help build the confidence of each individual while helping them to be able to interact with others and step back into the social world. We want to give them some skills and tools to help improve their mental health and well-being while also introducing a small structure of routine.”

“Our innovative approach to youth development combines principles of youth work with digital media and technology, fostering social interaction, inclusivity, and equipping young people with essential skills in cloud working and safe online collaboration. We are very pleased to report that our project has been inclusive, catering for children with additional needs and ensuring accessibility in our programming.”

“The project's success has resonated throughout the community. Collaborations with youth organisations have expanded educational offerings and deepened community engagement. Raising awareness about media literacy and enabling young people to meaningfully engage with their community has fostered a sense of belonging and civic responsibility. Testimonials from school staff and unsolicited messages from parents and caregivers underscore the project's distinctive impact, particularly in boosting students' confidence and enhancing their self-esteem.”

“We had a new young person who accessed the group support with their mother, who experienced social anxiety. They had gender identity issues and dysphoria, so we made the process of them attending staged and short periods of time initially. By doing this, we have been able to support the young person coming into the group by themselves and they accessed a trip to [a] Museum over the summer. They have now expressed they want to access another project, which is really positive.”

“The children are now provided with a safe space in town where they can meet with their friends outside of school and make new friends from surrounding villages prior to their transition into secondary school. Unlike before the youth club existed, the children now have age-appropriate activities and a club which belongs to them, where they can attend free of charge in an area which has an extraordinarily high cost of living due to the tourist industry.”

“By offering a safe and friendly environment for young people to socialise, we have contributed to reducing social isolation within the local and wider rural community. We have brought young people together, where new friendships have been formed and given them the opportunity to find their voice and become the best version of themselves.”

“This project has helped to change the opinion of young people within the area. While the youth club sessions have been in, there are other classes that run at the same times, classes where elderly residents attend. This has contributed to social cohesion, where elderly residents have commented on how nice and polite our youth club attendees are. They now know each other by name and chat to each other regularly, where opinions before would have been to stereotype them as 'trouble makers' and feel uncomfortable or intimidated by them. We have given groups of young people a place to spend time together instead of hanging around the streets, in turn contributing to reducing anti-social behaviour in the area.”

3.3 How might this contribute to longer-term outcomes in their lives?

As can be seen from the case studies that follow, Better Tomorrows has had an impact on the individuals involved. From Year 4 onwards, the intention is to include within the evaluation some more detailed 'Stories of Change' of young people, in addition to the youth worker case studies. This extension to the programme should allow for more of a longitudinal evaluation to be undertaken, for example, by following up with participants from the initial years of the programme.

4.0 Individual Case Studies

As in years 1 and 2, case studies are predominantly from youth workers and are anonymised using pseudonyms chosen by participants, removing the names of organisations and specific areas of Cumbria. This year, there are two exceptions where the participants' identities are not anonymised due to the nature of their role within the programme: they have both consented to this and have approved their case study for inclusion before wider sharing. Including these provides a more holistic overview of the Better Tomorrows Programme.

4.1 Interview with David Beeby

A pseudonym has not been used for this story, as it would be apparent from the contents that this is David Beeby, who has led the Better Tomorrows Programme from its inception, and a quick internet search would reveal this, even if attempts were taken to anonymise him. His story is being shared as an example of what can be achieved when someone in a leadership position identifies an issue, develops a clear vision and takes a collaborative approach to inspire change. It also provides more context to the development and implementation of the Better Tomorrows Programme, serving as an example to others elsewhere who may be looking to do something similar in their locality.

David was High Sheriff of Cumbria 2021-2022. Some high sheriffs have a theme for their term in the role, others do not. David decided he would have the theme of Better Tomorrows, recognising that *"we were coming out of year one of COVID. And who knew what year two was going to be, and why wouldn't we want to look forward to better tomorrows?"* This decision followed many years of being involved with initiatives for young people, including the Prince's Trust, and encouraging apprenticeships, so this focus had an established foundation to build on. He also felt strongly that young people had sacrificed a lot during COVID-19 to help protect older generations.

He recognised he could not do this on his own, and with support from Cumbria Community Foundation (CCF), convened an online meeting with organisations involved in the youth sector, including youth clubs, police, academia, education and charities, to explore what was already available, what was needed and to avoid the risk of unnecessary duplication. This meeting revealed *"a horrible gap in youth work!"* He explains that the information gathered showed a massive decline in investment in services over the previous ten years, with estimates of about a 70% reduction in the northwest: *"... we've also seen there were youth clubs withering and less youth clubs, areas of Cumbria with no youth clubs at all."* He took the opportunity of being High Sheriff to *"do something around youth work."* The next step was to write a proposal with clarity and purpose, and he credits Annalee from CCF for doing most of the research and writing of this.

He is very clear about the primary element of the programme:

More young people getting access to quality youth work

which inevitably requires

More youth workers delivering quality youth work, supported by providing training (levels 2 and 3, aiming to link into level 4+ training) and salaries (for up to three years, aiming for the work to become embedded and sustainable). In the interview, he emphasised *“as part of the programme we have, so far, trained over 60 youth workers and funded over 50 new youth work jobs.”*

David also made a personal commitment: *“I’m not going to ask people to put money in unless I do (particularly as I really don’t like asking for money however the purpose was so compelling to me that I had to overcome my natural reluctance). So, I put some money in. I said I was prepared to, and I wanted to get enough funding so that we got half a million pounds [...] one of the beauties or challenges of the programme is the more money we get, the bigger difference we can make...”*

At the time of the interview, in Spring 2025, more than £2.5 million had been raised from over 50 funders, including a National Lottery grant. As David says, this is *“a reasonable pot [...] it’s way beyond anything I imagined when we started off, which is great”*. Through taking a collaborative approach, with decisions made by a steering group, the programme links into other initiatives around the county and benefits from a wide range of expertise and experience.

David is not a youth worker. However, he understands the importance of youth work - quality youth work - to ensure a better future for young people, and that to achieve this requires quality youth workers, who understand their role, and are provided with training and support to enable them to do this. Throughout, the programme has maintained the clear vision to enable more young people to access quality youth work. This has entailed having a strong governance structure, a steering group and a champion, *“you’ve got to have a champion, frankly”*, somebody tenacious who can stand up and say, we can do this, someone who can inspire others. As David suggests, develop such a good idea that you make it difficult for people to say no to it, especially as funding levels can vary, and collectively, we can make a much bigger difference than would otherwise have been unimaginable. People want to be involved and can feel insulted if they’re not invited to join in!

NOTE from the interviewer: David and the BT programme have clearly had an impact on me. At a recent meeting (not in Cumbria) with discussions around how to address poverty, I found myself saying what we need is **clarity of purpose** and a **clear vision**. I had David’s voice in my head at the time. The question is, **how can we ensure we do this?**

4.2 Interview with Juan Shimmin

Juan Shimmin works for Cumbria Youth Alliance (CYA) and has been involved in the training side of Better Tomorrows since the start, although his role has evolved over the years. Before BT started, Juan had led an online training pilot with the NYA, bringing knowledge and skills from that experience into the Better Tomorrows steering group. For the first two years, his role was to support another organisation (CADAS) to deliver the training, then in year three, he took on more responsibility for this, with the move to an online model of training. He says, *“more involvement for me, working with the regional Youth Focus on the recruitment, each time there's a window of opportunity for taking on people and so on... quite an interesting and varied role over a four-year period. None of which I was expecting... it's all been a bonus really. I did have some knowledge of the world of training, having in a previous life managed a training centre and so on, but this was quite unexpected to be doing it within the youth work setting.”*

He identifies that the lack of training, low pay, low number of hours and unsocial hours involved in youth work contribute to a high turnover of staff. He feels that *“the training has helped that, and for people to look at it and say, well this is actually something I want to do as a career rather than as a job... I'll get some training, so I've got a qualification to take to employers and show that I'm committed to do this and want to do more of it and make it more viable...”*. He credits the training as making a difference to the retention of staff and the general lifting of the quality of delivery around the county.

Juan is pleased to see level four training being supported through bursaries from the NYA, offering progression from the level three training provided through Better Tomorrows, and providing professional development for more experienced staff, some of whom may be working in management roles. The recent development of a degree-level apprenticeship at the University of Cumbria is much-welcomed; as Juan highlights, *“there's a whole raft of qualifications now if you want to stick with this as a career.”*

Reflecting on the move from in-person to online training, Juan recognises the higher level of recruitment for the online version, with 32 people applying in Spring 2024, 21 in Autumn, and 17 in February 2025. Challenges with recruitment to the in-person training included arranging venues and the time/costs of cross-country travel. In addition to the online training, the trainer from Your Edge offers occasional in-person days: there is one at the start of each cohort of trainees, which helps with their induction, and an optional day in the middle focused on a specific module, for example, safeguarding. However, they don't have to attend, if it's not convenient for them. Juan explains, *“It's quite a good system overall, and we've not found any major problems with it so far that we can't deal with - a lot less hassle and issues along the way to deal with because we don't have the premises and the travel and the face-to-face stuff week to week, and all the associated gremlins that went with that... from my point of view it seems like this is the preferred option as long as it keeps going and people keep wanting to do it.”* There is a similar drop-out rate, with five

people leaving the first cohort, citing personal reasons for this. With regards to progression, the online training follows a different model, with the first four units making up the level two, and then the option to re-enrol to complete the other five modules for the level three. At the time of talking with Juan, about half were choosing to go on to level three and he shared, *“The general feedback from trainees seems to be that it's going well - less reports of fewer difficulties than previously in the face-to-face training.”*

Juan is not a youth worker. He joined CYA to run a disability project and to help with fundraising, before moving to what he calls an ‘infrastructure role’. He tends to know the people who manage youth workers, rather than individual youth workers, as he has *“helped them with governance and fundraising and organising, training, recruiting volunteers, etc.”*. He reflects that when he joined CYA, many local authorities had stopped or were about to stop funding youth work delivery, due to austerity measures. In Cumbria, this left a *“massive gap in delivery... on one occasion, 34 qualified youth workers were made redundant overnight by Cumbria ... which seemed to have a major resounding echo of negativity around the county and the talk since then, in subsequent years of increasing issues for young people - anti social behaviour and problems with an endless stream of emotional issues and cyberbullying, and all the rest of it.”*

Juan wasn't aware of there being much of a conversation about bringing back youth work until *“... suddenly Better Tomorrow's programme came along and said right, let's fund some new youth work posts in some locations where it's most needed and then as part and parcel of that, we need the Youth work training, which had also disappeared, to be reinstated.”* He is now involved in mapping youth work services for both local authorities in Cumbria and without the posts funded through Better Tomorrows, it was a short list – *“they were about down to the bare bones in many districts!”* He explains that the local councils are now putting in place measures that will enable them to put a youth offer in place by summer 2025.

He identifies a need to share what is happening because of Better Tomorrows bringing together funding for posts and for training as a *“Cumbrian model which could be applicable almost anywhere.”* In 2024, there were 20 bursary places provided to youth workers in Cumbria through the NYA national bursary scheme; however, following the successful bid to the National Lottery Community Fund, there were no bursary places locally. This raises questions including: What will happen at the end of the grant? Will the local authorities be in a position to pick up this work – and sustain what has developed as a result of Better Tomorrows?

4.3 Interview with Sylvester

Sylvester (pseudonym) is a senior youth worker and project manager for a centre on the west coast of Cumbria, where he's been working for more than 20 years. The centre used to be part of a national charity; however, after Covid, when services were reduced, Sylvester decided to carry on with the work. He set up as an independent charity, and at the time of the interview, was

supported by eight volunteers. He acknowledges that *“volunteers are absolutely brilliant, but you can’t 100% rely on them. So, it was fantastic when I heard about the Better Tomorrows funding becoming available. It meant that I could now look at employing youth workers. There has been a big, massive shortage in the area of youth work for the past 6-7 years. So changed the youth service in a way that allowed me to carry on delivering what I was already delivering but also offer new services. It came at the right time for us - as a new charity, it opened a lot of avenues for us, so without it, I would have been screwed. I think to be honest.”*

Funding from Better Tomorrows has paid for two part-time youth workers: one was previously a volunteer, the other volunteered for a different community-based organisation; both have undertaken training through Better Tomorrows to support them in their new roles as youth workers. Sylvester qualified as a youth worker through a postgraduate course in youth and community work about seven years ago and is keen to support others to train. He believes having training online is a positive move, making it more accessible as the locations of the previous in-person courses meant that attendance wasn’t feasible for people from his area. The online training means that they can learn around their work.

Sylvester shared that the course tutors *“were really nice and understanding and very supportive that way”*; however, he felt that the timescales for assignments were very quick. The only negative of the training from his perspective was that he thought some of the learning was more level 3 than level 2. He explains that one of the trainee youth workers he supports has anxiety around written work and found the training a challenge. He met with them and reassured them they could do this, helping by reading through course documents and scribing for them. He recognises the need for this support, saying, *“When I got all the documents through, I thought, wow. I understood it all. Obviously, doing my degree and stuff like that, but I was a bit overwhelmed myself before I showed them. I thought some parts seemed more like a level 3 than a level 2. If they were reading it on their own, I think it could have been a bit overwhelming for some people, especially the theory of youth work, which I think is important, but it’s just in what depth you go in with a level 2.”* The two employees studied together in the upstairs office, whilst Sylvester covered their sessions.

He supports other volunteers who have learning disabilities with training to be peer mentors and reflects that they would really struggle with the level two youth work training. With his support, the trainee youth workers are putting their learning into practice and are more confidently taking a lead on delivering sessions. The combination of youth work training and paid employment has enabled them to expand their services – they have more capacity to open up to more people. At the time of the interview, they had 11 projects running. He emphasises that *“without the Better Tomorrows money, I wouldn’t have had the support team around to even deliver the basic service... the organisation may not exist. I couldn’t have done it on my own.”* They now operate five days a week, with approximately 140 young people (7-25), and he identifies that there is scope for more.

Sylvester has lived and worked in the area for a very long time. He recognises there are better paid jobs available locally but is committed to youth and community work: *“I come in every day and I see the difference - in the smiles on the face of the young people coming in, and them going back out with that same smile, or if not bigger. I'm at a stage now where I've been doing it that long, where I've got some of the young people I worked with originally, and their kids are coming in. I'll sit there with the parents - like the old young people - and have a little natter about back in the day and remember, and they'll tell me about their daughters being misbehaved at home and I'll say, well, do you not remember when you did this, when you were younger and I had to come and do this? Yeah. But that was then. Yeah, it's little things like that.”* This continuity of provision within a community setting is vital, and unfortunately, with recent funding challenges, becoming quite rare.

Many of the young people who access the organisations services have additional needs, for example, they are autistic or have disabilities: *“some of the young people we work with never go out of the house, they might go to specialist school or get on a bus, go to school, come back on a bus and that's it. They don't come out the house. We've built up a lot of trust. It takes us a lot longer than your generic youth workers to build that trust with young people”*. Then Covid hit, and many of the young people they support were identified as vulnerable and told not to leave the house. It has taken time and understanding to move on from this: *“So it's again us building that trust where it's a safe place where there are youth workers, where there are safe, confident people for them to come and see.”* The interview was five years on from the start of the Covid lockdown, and it struck us both how much the impact is still being felt, and how youth work can address some of the ongoing issues. However, we recognise that more contemporary forms of youth work delivery are likely to be very different to the more traditional forms.

Sylvester praises Better Tomorrows as *“an absolutely brilliant programme that's come at the right time... It's good that someone's investing and hopefully getting the new generation of youth workers”*, which is needed, as he identifies that he is currently the only male worker left in the area. He is also concerned about what will happen at the end of the programme: *“When this programme ends, how do I keep these staff? I don't want to train them up and get them in, and then...”*

4.4 Interview with Jake

Jake was put on the Better Tomorrows training by his manager, who thought it would help him understand what it is the organisation does. He came into the role with no experience of youth work, *“it was a bit of a jump into the deep end in some respects. But with the help of Better Tomorrows, it's been a more transferable journey than just sort of blindly staggering around... It's helped build up my confidence, because I'm not the biggest people person”*

As a young person, Jake had attended the organisation where he now works. He notes, “a couple of faces have changed, a couple of faces are still quite familiar. The building hasn't changed much”. There is a sense of continuity and familiarity with the work. Jake became a youth worker because he wanted to be able to give back to the community. He identifies that it is “*a close-knit community. You know everyone in your street, there was a time when you wouldn't mind leaving your door unlocked because you knew all your neighbours. All your friends would be out ... Your parents knew exactly who you were out with... I went there [where he now works] as a young child and I wanted to be able to help give back to the future generations and make sure they still had that space where they felt comfortable, where opportunities were provided and where they have the chance to be themselves and develop at their pace rather than be in the classroom or... Well, you know... If a group of kids are out on the street, they get a bad reputation for just anything these days ...*”. He sees what they offer as a way of helping avoid that bad reputation through providing alternative, more positive activities.

He is enjoying youth work and relishes the challenges it brings, reflecting that “*It's different to everything else I've done for work up to this point. And every day is a new challenge, new routine. You don't know who's going to come... It's a new face. It's all your regulars... Challenge that comes with the day-to-day as kids get older, all the changes they go through, transition between schools, falling out with friends. It's a lot more emotionally involving than what I'm used to.*” The training has given him an insight into what he calls, the “*very dark side... no one knows what happened at home for everyone... to hear there are some people who might be abused, not treated how you'd like to be... All the horrible things that people pretend don't happen...*” The training is helping him to get a perspective on this, to recognise when a young person may need support. He feels more confident about checking if they're all right and “*the signs of how to spot things which can be a safeguarding concern or just general cause for concern*”.

He has completed level two and is working on level three of the online training. He is finding it a more relaxed environment than school/colleague and says the tutors are “*absolutely lovely*”. He intends to look at higher level training, including doing sign language. He shares that the “*training's made a huge difference, it's given me the first steps to start a journey as a youth worker and not stumble around... it's given me a very good toolbox of some things to do...*”. In addition to his youth work role, he works in retail, and likes that young people, their parents and siblings say hello when they see him working in the store, in their community.

4.5 Paired Interview with Micheala and George

The Better Tomorrows funding has enabled the organisation they work for to provide employment for youth workers in training. They share that they've had a few youth workers over the course of the funding, starting with one young man – at one point they had four young people in training with them - then it settled into two people working for them part-time, which worked better. They identify that they've *“had sort of ups and downs with it”* due to the nature of their work, which involves going into schools and youth clubs with a focus on media clubs, aligning their work to the National Youth Work Curriculum. This dual focus enables the youth workers to enhance learning by bringing in resources and fostering discussions.

Some of the people they have worked with *“have been really good at that, others, not so... some of them have struggled with attending the youth work qualification course. So, although they were working quite happily with us on doing the media clubs, some of them struggled to maintain attendance and maintain the momentum once they actually got onto the qualification...”* One of their trainee youth workers had a natural rapport with young people, *“he was brilliant with young people”*, but struggled with the training and they found the situation untenable. Others who joined, subsequently decided it wasn't for them, one opting to go to university, another *“followed a different path”*. Of the two remaining, they are both now qualified, one of them at level three, who has *“rediscovered learning and rediscovered, enjoying learning”* and is considering higher level study.

They see the benefits of Better Tomorrows as twofold. First, it has enabled their organisation to expand youth work provision, adding a range of new activities including workshops, holiday programmes, and developing connections with local specialist colleges. Second, it has helped with their sustainability and future planning, which involves looking for longer-term funding so that they can continue their work. They state, *“What we don't want to end up with is two great, qualified youth workers, but they're still learning, they're still consolidating their skills. They like the work that they do, and we would like them to stay, but we could lose them because if we can't find funding for them, we will have to let them go...”* They value continuity, highlighting that young people, parents, grandparents and friends all use their services; they see themselves as a community organisation, not a youth organisation, recognised for their community projects, which include youth projects.

Micheala and George are on part-time salaries, topped up with other work, and have found it challenging to provide mentorship for the trainee youth workers, often providing this unpaid, which is not sustainable. Overall, they feel this has been a beneficial experience for them, their organisation and the young people they work with.

4.6 Interview with Miranda

Miranda signed up for both level two and three training and found the online sessions useful because she lives so far away: *“It makes it more accessible because I can access it. I’m not having to get a train that’s going to last like 7 hours to get there, it’s easy to get to and you can fit in around other stuff because there’s no travel time... our session is normally five to seven, so once you’ve come home from the day, you don’t have to go in your car and get somewhere. You can have your tea, come upstairs, get on, get everything sorted, and once you’re turned off, you’re at home. it’s not like a massively inconvenient journey, which is really helpful.”* Miranda is enjoying the online training and welcomes the support provided; she is dyslexic and has found the tutors to be understanding and supportive of this.

She shares that she has endometriosis, a medical condition that causes pain and discomfort, and she appreciates being able to wear pyjama bottoms and use hot water bottles whilst studying, which she wouldn’t feel able to do if the training were in-person. Miranda aims to raise awareness and remove stigmas around women’s health, and wanted the condition to be named. She talks to young people about puberty, menstruation, periods and menopause, aiming to make sessions fun, encouraging them to *“test all the period products with fake blood and they absolutely love it.”* She is motivated to do this by her own experiences, *“I’ve had a horror period since I was like 12, and then the doctors were like, oh, just put her on the pill... at 16 I looked pregnant, and I wasn’t. My mom was like, oh, that’s a bit weird. And I went, oh, you know, it can just happen sometimes. And we’re like, we don’t think it can... then eventually getting to the point where it’s not ok. My doctor suspects it’s endometriosis...”*

At the time of talking with her, Miranda was waiting for confirmation of the diagnosis. In the meantime, she is running *“period workshops so other young people would understand what’s a normal and what’s not a normal period. So if you’re doubled over in pain. Not normal. If you’re bleeding a lot. Not normal... and then they can get help quicker, but also because it’s [talking about periods] normalised... we aim to make the first period workshop really fun. So the first memory they’ve got of a period is funny and exciting. So people don’t stigmatise it”*.

She shared more of her experiences, of not being listened to by health care professionals, of the need to have easy access to period products, and most of all, the need for compassion and awareness. She eloquently stated, *“When you’re on your period, it’s like a temporary open wound inside you...”* Menstruation is an example of one of the many important, and for some, challenging conversations that youth workers have with young people to support and educate them at this stage of their lives. In addition to the more generic school/college sessions, Miranda’s youth worker role also includes creating specific sessions for young women to have *“a safe place to express themselves and meet other young women”*, which may help to address some of the ongoing challenges around young women’s health and wellbeing.

TO NOTE: Young women in the UK commonly experience menstrual health issues that affect school attendance, mental health, and quality of life. [Survey findings](#) indicate that about 28% of women aged 16-24 in England report serious reproductive health issues, including painful periods and heavy bleeding. Many lack menstrual literacy and struggle to recognise abnormal symptoms. Menstrual problems are closely linked to adolescent depression, while conditions like endometriosis are often diagnosed late or dismissed. Experts call for better education, routine menstrual data recording in healthcare, and improved specialist access to support young women's reproductive and mental health.

4.7 Quality Youth Work – contributions from Year 3

Like the participants in Years 1 and 2, the Year 3 interviewees who are youth workers were invited to share their thoughts on what quality youth work is (Appendix i), summarised below.

Sylvester: *Quality youth work is providing a professional but relatable service. Although we are professionals, we are bound to certain structures and rules, but we have flexibility, unlike teachers. It's all about that relationship. That personal relationship we have with the young people. A quality youth worker is someone who can be trusted and relied upon. And be the voice of the young people where needed, where their voice is not being heard or listened to.*

Jake: *Quality youth work is providing not only a safe space to experience things, opportunities you wouldn't normally have access to, but it's also about having access to space where you can be yourself, where, if you're being troubled by home life, by school, by anything at all, you're happy to come here. Have that little breathing space, and if you need to talk to one of us as a youth worker.*

There was a quote I gave the tutor after reading it because it stuck with me for how quality youth workers (for me at least) should be. It was a story regarding a stone mason who finds a piece of stone. He works on it for three days and three nights. And on the 4th day, his friends all come to see his work, and they admire this absolutely beautiful sculpture he's created. The stone mason says I didn't create this masterpiece, I merely took away the rough edges. As far as youth work is concerned, that's what we do to help young people... They choose their direction in life for how they want to go. We don't mould them into these perfect beings, we just chip away the rough edges.

Micheala and George: *Quality youth work has multiple levels for different children that you would meet. Ultimately, it needs to be a safe and secure environment where children are supported to aspire to be their best, where there are no limits to what they can do. It's*

about building meaningful relationships with young people that mean something to them, on a professional level. It's the relationship in the conversation that the young person can't have with anyone else - you can't have it with a friend, you can't have it with a parent. You might be able to have it with a teacher, but when you have that regular contact with a youth worker, it's a different type of relationship. I think it can be quite unique, and it can be very transformative.

Miranda: *Quality youth work is making sure the kids are having fun. I think all youth work's got to be about them enjoying it, because if it's not, they're not going to get anything from it. Quality youth work is making sure young people are having fun in a safe way... It's them getting the support that they need, and being able to ask questions that they need to ask, and also being given opportunities that they wouldn't really think about. Making sure they're given access to opportunities that they'll benefit from, helping them be the best version of themselves they can be. It's all about young people making sure they're having fun, making sure their voice is heard, making sure that they're happy and that they're safe...*

I think quality youth work is understanding that it's really not about you, being able to distance yourself... and be like, that's not what I'm here to do, I'm here to help and support, and educate, and if I can't do that, then I shouldn't be here. And it's about making sure that young people know they can talk to you about anything they want to... Basically, like being a backup dancer for the young person... their support, but you're not the main act.

5.0 Summary and Conclusions from Year 3

Since 2010, local authority spending on youth services has dropped by about 70% in real terms, from roughly £1.4 billion in 2010/11 to less than £430 million by 2018/19. This resulted in the closure of approximately 1,243 council-run youth centres and the loss of over 4,500 youth worker jobs, significantly reducing support for many communities ([UNISON](#)). During COVID-19, demand for youth services increased (66% of organisations reported higher need), yet 83% faced funding cuts, and many struggled with rising costs and limited resources ([UK Youth](#)). Expert analysis indicates the pandemic worsened existing service gaps, further disrupted in-person work, and increased young people's emotional and mental health challenges. Overall, reductions in funding affected youth infrastructure and workforce capacity, and the COVID-19 pandemic increased both demand for services and organisational challenges. These changes have been associated with shifts in social and educational equality. Better Tomorrows was set up to address these inequalities.

It is estimated that 'for every £1 the government invests in youth work, the benefit to the taxpayer is between £3.20 and £6.40' (UK Youth). By the end of Year 3 of the programme, £2.5 million has been invested in Better Tomorrows, representing a benefit of £8-16 million. This is a significant achievement by all involved in the programme.

In September 2023, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) updated statutory guidance on local authorities' duties under Section 507B of the Education Act 1996. Local authorities in England must ensure sufficient educational and leisure activities for young people aged 13-19, and up to 24 for those with learning difficulties or disabilities. The guidance clarifies existing responsibilities without adding new legal obligations. Councils must assess local needs, including consultation with young people, and map services to identify gaps, which is what Juan Shimmin refers to in section 4.2. "Sufficient" provision is locally determined, but inadequate services cannot be justified by funding limits. Both universal and targeted activities, especially for vulnerable groups, should be included. Better Tomorrows is doing this.

Provision should meet high standards, ideally be delivered by trained and JNC-accredited youth workers, and remain inclusive and accessible by addressing barriers such as cost, disability, digital exclusion, language, and culture. Better Tomorrows is doing this.

Councils must regularly review their youth offer with evidence on participation and impact, involving young people in evaluations. The updated guidance reinforces youth voice, collaboration, and quality, responsive services that foster young people's development. Better Tomorrows is doing this. It remains to be seen how the local councils will support the programme going forward.

Nationally, the government is developing a ten-year 'National Youth Strategy' for England, under development by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), to transform youth

services in England. Announced in late 2024, it emphasises youth voice, community empowerment, and local coordination. Better Tomorrows is already doing this.

Guided by a Youth Advisory Group and an Expert Advisory Group, it incorporates wide-ranging engagement, including a national listening exercise, to shape its direction. An interim report, "Today's Youth, Tomorrow's Nation," will precede the full strategy's publication, anticipated for summer 2025. With £185 million pledged, the strategy includes upgrading youth spaces, supporting youth outcomes, and winding down the National Citizen Service. Better Tomorrows could consider adding a Youth Advisory Group.

The NYA published a policy paper, *Lifting young people up through youth work*, which highlights how youth work strengthens young people's resilience, skills, and community involvement by offering trusted adult relationships, safe spaces, and early intervention. Better Tomorrows is doing this.

By framing youth work as a preventive public health and social action tool, the paper provides compelling evidence and messaging for policymakers, funders, and communities to recognise and invest in youth work's critical societal role. This policy paper could be useful to support the ongoing and future work of Better Tomorrows.

5.1 Suggested areas for review by the steering group

- Sustaining youth work funding remains difficult, with some projects relying heavily on grants due to limited success in becoming self-sustaining. The [NYA Policy Paper 'Lifting young people up through youth work'](#), published 29 July 2025 may be useful in raising awareness of the important role of youth work in society.
- Recruiting youth workers and volunteers, especially in rural areas, is challenging. Consider ways to raise the benefits of volunteering, for example, through a media campaign, and working with schools/colleges. Long-term success is contingent on both financial support and an increase in community involvement through volunteering.
- The new data collected for Year 3 reveals that of the 2,720 young people engaged, only 17.3% were over 16 years of age. Considering that 11.4% of young people were identified as having additional needs, it may be beneficial for more activities to be provided for young adults aged up to 25.
- Consider developing and supporting a Youth Advisory Group for Better Tomorrows, or linking into an existing group.

The Year 3 report ends with a quote from Juan Shimmin, Cumbria Youth Alliance:

“Better Tomorrows has made more difference than anything else that I've been involved with or seen happening... It's the most significant thing I've seen in this sector in the 15 years I've been involved here.”

Appendices

Appendix i: Quality Youth Work (from Year 1 report)

Quality youth work is a process of recognising young people's strengths and supporting and empowering them to develop the skills, knowledge, and confidence they need to reach their full potential. It places young people at the centre of practice and empowers them to overcome disadvantages or challenges (UK Youth).⁹ It involves creating a safe and inclusive space where young people can explore their identities, their interests, express their views, and engage with others in meaningful ways. It is a practice of informal education, which involves the development of democratic and associational approaches that promote learning and development in the communities or individuals who choose to take part. It is focused on work with adolescents, with groups as well as individuals, and with personal development in the context of the development of wide social networks and collective engagement with issues of social justice (Marjon, 2023).¹⁰

Quality youth work starts where young people are in terms of developmental or physical location (e.g. open access or detached/street work). The relationship between young people and youth workers is entirely voluntary: it is the young person's choice whether/how to engage with the professional (NYA n.d.).¹¹ This does not negate school-based or targeted interventions where young people have been referred; it is about the process of developing a relationship with the youth worker. Quality youth work is characterised by a number of key features, including:

- Focus on the needs and interests of young people: responsive to their needs and interests, guided by their perspectives.
- Commitment to youth participation: actively engage young people in the planning, design, and delivery of programmes and activities.
- Recognition of the importance of relationships: prioritise building positive relationships between youth workers and young people, as well as among young people themselves, and their wider communities.
- Commitment to youth development: support the holistic development of young people, including social, emotional, cognitive, and physical well-being, so that they have voice, influence and place in their communities and society as a whole.
- Focus on learning and skill-building: provide opportunities for young people to learn new skills, explore new interests, and develop their talents. This builds resilience and gives young people the confidence and life skills they need to live, learn, work and achieve.
- Commitment to diversity, inclusion and social justice: inclusive and accessible to all young people, regardless of their background or circumstances.

In the words of some Better Tomorrows youth workers, a quality youth worker is

... somebody who is caring, is kind, is compassionate. It's somebody who has the young person's interest, like their *best* interest at heart, and it's somebody who is *passionate* about it... It's about making a difference and impacting their lives in a positive way.

... always be approachable and *let them talk*... being there for them... have a *crac* with them...

Quality youth work requires training that can *inspire, encourage and nurture*... [enabling youth workers] *to become a catalyst for change and make a real difference to the lives of young people* (Marjon, 2023). The National Occupational Standards (NOS) and the National Curriculum¹² for youth work inform and underpin training.¹³

⁹ <https://www.ukyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/UKYouthStrategyPaperFINAL.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://www.marjon.ac.uk/courses/youth-work-degree-apprenticeship/>

¹¹ <https://www.nya.org.uk/youth-work/>

¹² <https://www.nya.org.uk/quality/curriculum/>

¹³ <https://www.nya.org.uk/national-occupational-standards-and-english-youth-work-policy-new-document-published/>

Appendix ii: Summary of Training Cohorts

Cumulative record.

Year / Cohort	Start Date	Venue	Enrolled / started	Completed		Unit accreditation		Deferred	Withdrawn
				Level 2	Level 3	Level 2	Level 3		
Year 1									
Cohort 1	03/03/2022	Cleator Moor	14	4	10			0	0
Cohort 2	13/09/2022	Barrow	20	3	7			2	8
Year 2									
Cohort 3	19/04/2023	Carlisle	13	2	8			2	1
Cohort 4	05/09/2023	Kendal	5 (+ 2 deferrals)	2	2	1	1	1	0
Totals from 1—4			52	11	27	1	1	3	9
Year 3									
Cohort 5	April 2024	Online	17	16	1			5	
Cohort 6	October 2024	Online	10	4	6			6	
TOTAL			27	20	7			11	

Appendix iii: Better Tomorrows Theory of Change

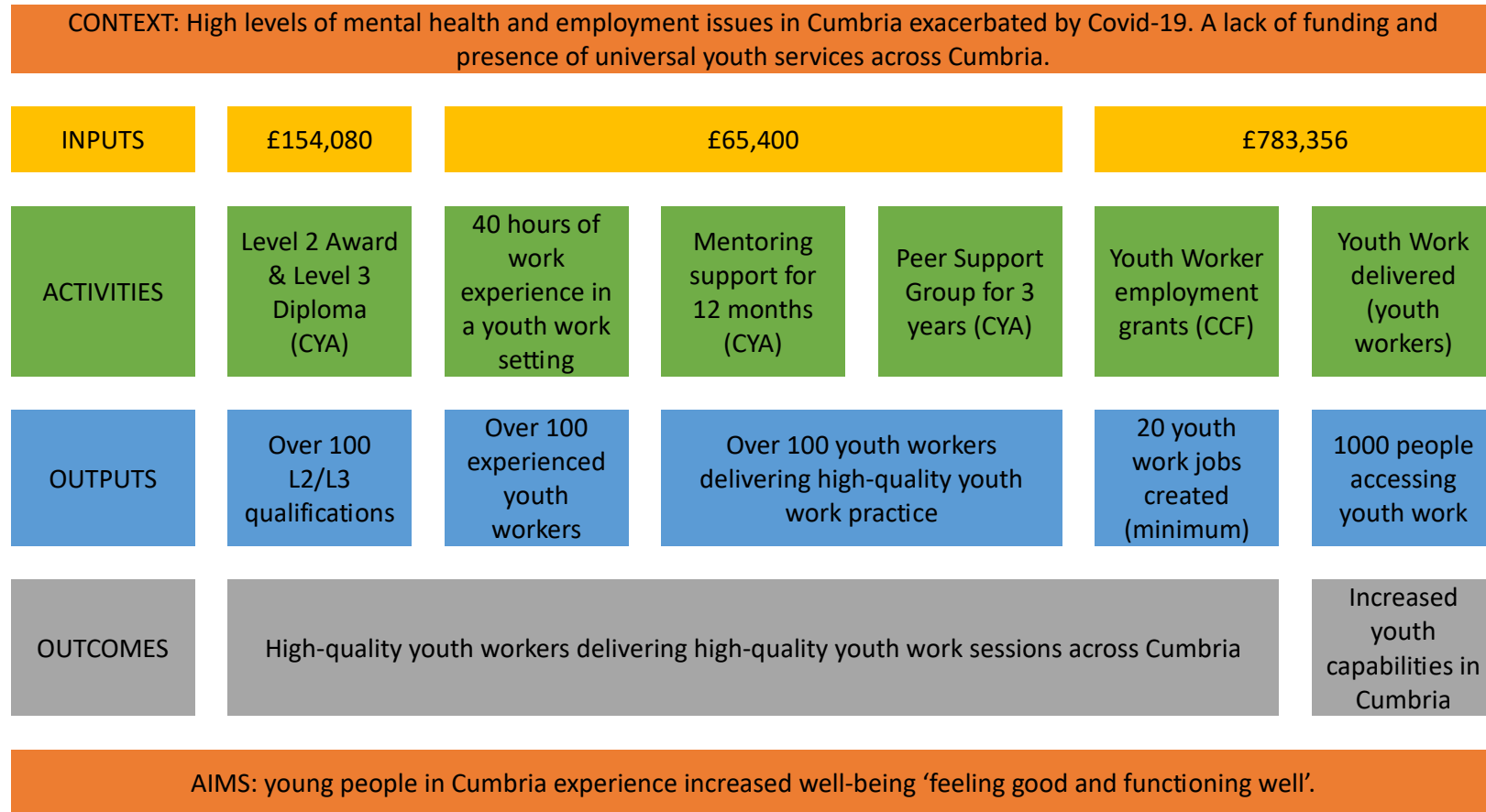


Figure 2: Theory of Change from Year 1