

Detached youth work approaches

1. What do we mean by detached youth work?

Detached youth work (also referred to as “street-based” or “on road” youth work) involves practitioners trying to provide broad-based personal and social development opportunities for children and young people at their own direction, in a form largely determined by them. Work takes place wherever young people choose to be, whether that is a street, park, cafe or elsewhere.

Unlike universal youth work, detached youth work is more likely to be focused on at-risk individuals who are often highly disaffected and socially excluded. Detached youth work can still involve aspects of universal youth work or ‘outreach’ work (bringing young people into existing services). For example, many practitioners will still have some sort of office or base, and detached youth work may still involve getting young people to plug into a range of set activities as well.

Detached youth work, like youth work more generally, builds on a range of different theories about how you can change the lives of young people. Particularly influential theories include:

- **Positive youth development theory:** This theory asserts that engaging young people in activities in a safe and supportive way helps to foster meaningful relationships, which then helps them to better meet developmental targets.
- **Socio-ecological theory:** This theory asserts that young people are influenced by a range of individual, peer, family, social and environmental factors which affect outcomes for young people. Effective detached youth work can help young people become better equipped to adapt to and navigate a wide range of relationships and contexts.
- **Empowerment theory:** This theory asserts that allowing young people to develop a greater understanding of power and control in their lives (whether social, political, or economic power), helps to improve outcomes for young people.

Whilst detached youth work is highly responsive to young people’s expressed needs and particularly focused on relationship-building, this is often facilitated by various activities and support, including:

- Providing a range of general information, advice and guidance, along with opportunities for broader social 'learning'.
- Supporting young people back into education, employment or training.
- Providing specialist support (e.g. around substance misuse or access to housing).
- Supporting liaison and referral to other services.

Some detached youth work will involve getting young people to participate in leisure-related activities as well.

2. What do we know about the effectiveness of detached youth work aimed at preventing youth violence and offending?

Detached youth work can target a wide range of outcomes including social and emotional outcomes, educational and vocational outcomes, behavioural outcomes and violence, and offending-related outcomes.

There has been limited robust research into the impact of detached youth work. Preliminary evidence from pre-post studies (which measure outcomes for participants before and a period after "taking part") suggests that detached youth work can have a positive impact on outcomes across these areas including anti-social behaviour, offending, school attendance and engagement, substance misuse and family engagement. However, we do not know if detached youth work has an effect on violence-related outcomes.

3. What do we believe are the key components of effective detached youth work relevant to the Youth Endowment Fund?

Available research suggests that effective detached youth work involves:

- **Relationships:** Significant time devoted towards developing strong relationships, and practitioners having credibility with the young people and communities they are working with. This is often based on a knowledge of the young people and their context.
- **Voluntary participation:** Young people choose to take part.
- **Training and support:** High levels of staff training and ongoing workforce support.

- **Flexibility:** Flexibility around the focus of work done with young people as well as flexibility in adjusting to the language, dress code and behaviour of the young people you are working with.
- **Tailored content:** Content that is tailored to the varying demographics of participants, particularly their gender and cultural background.

4. What do we think are some of the key challenges, risks and barriers associated with delivering detached youth work?

Detached youth work can be hampered by factors including:

- **Length and frequency:** Detached youth work providing only brief support (over a single session or very brief period of time) and those with irregular contact (less than weekly) often do not provide workers with enough time or regular contact to develop significant relationships.
- **Involuntary participation:** Forced participation of young people.
- **Narrow focus:** 'Single issue' approaches that do not attempt to address a young person's range of needs and interests.
- **Family/carer support:** Resistance amongst young people's families or responsible adults to their taking part in youth work.
- **Safeguarding:** Detached youth work involves working with especially vulnerable young people and its relationship-driven nature can create challenges regarding professional boundaries, and when to trigger safeguarding concerns.

5. Given the available evidence, what are we particularly looking for in applications received in this area?

We are particularly interested in proposals that:

- Target violence, problem behaviours (including externalising behaviours such as aggression or disruptive behaviour and internalising behaviours such as social anxiety), social and emotional skills.
- Are focused on helping young people to develop skills (whether social, emotional or behavioural) rather than purely diversionary activities.
- Have a credible plan for how they will identify and develop relationships with vulnerable young people, and establish relevant knowledge of local context, communities and conflicts, and credibility in the communities they will operate in.

- Involve voluntary participation by young people and tailor content according to their needs.

Key sources

Crimmens D, Factor F, Jeffs T, Pitts J, Pugh C, Spence J, Turner P, (2010) 'Reaching socially excluded young people: A national study of street-based youth work.' The National Youth Agency

Dickson K, Vigurs C-A, and Newman M, (2013) 'Youth Work: A Systematic Map of the Research Literature.' Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Fouché C, Elliot K J, Mundy-McPherson S, Jordan V, and Bingham T (2010) 'The Impact of Youth Work for Young People: A Systematic Review.' Wellington: Health Research Council of New Zealand and the Ministry of Youth Development

Pinkney C (2019) 'Responding to Youth Violence through Youth Work.' National Youth Agency