



# NETWORK IMPACT REPORT 2023-24



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# FOREWORD

**Youth work is an untapped resource with the potential to transform young lives; it must be recognised for its true value.**

Being a young person today is more challenging than it's ever been. The cost-of-living continues to put pressure on young people and their families, which can impact them in later life, including poorer health, reduced educational outcomes, and limited opportunities in adulthood. The youth mental health crisis has also intensified. Research shows that close to two in five 6 to 16-year olds have experienced a deterioration in their mental health during recent years.

These challenges make the need for youth work even more pressing. Those that work in the youth sector know how life-changing it is – it should be an essential right for all young people,



not a nice to have. Those who don't work in this sector or whose own lives haven't benefited from youth work may not see this, so we need to make a compelling case for why far more investment is needed in youth work.

We have a responsibility to make this case, given OnSide's reach across the country and our investment into impact measurement through our ME App evaluation system, which is co-created with our academic partner, King's College London, and has become embedded into youth work practice across all Youth Zones.

I'm proud to present our impact report for 2023-24, which demonstrates the outcomes of youth work on young people's lives. It is so encouraging to see the proven positive impact of Youth Zones over the last year: Youth Zones are making a tangible difference to young people. Our data shows 77% of young people increased or maintained their mental health through attending universal, open-access youth club sessions, 81% of young people increased or maintained their self-confidence, and 79% of young people increased or maintained their resilience at a time when external factors became more challenging.



This year, we're proud to have supported 50,975 young people through engagements. Each one of these thousands of young people have their own story, some of which have been shared in this report. We are also pleased that we are engaging increasing numbers of young people in our evaluation – with two and a half times the number of complete datasets available for analysis this year compared to last year. This increase wouldn't have been possible without the work of hundreds of youth workers across the Network. Their efforts in engaging with young people made this report possible and mean we can be increasingly confident in the quality of insights we gain.

These findings not only highlight the value of youth work but also deepen our understanding of the support young people need, allowing us to better target our resources where they're most needed.

**Jamie Masraff**  
Chief Executive, OnSide



# OUR MEMBERSHIP 2023-24

50,975 young people attended Youth Zones through 574,933 engagements across the Network. These numbers reflect a decrease (9%) in the total number of young people compared with the previous year. This decrease reflects how some Youth Zones have had to slightly reduce their delivery session hours in light of rising utility bills, wage inflation (a 10% increase in the Real Living Wage), higher food costs (up 25% between January 2022 and January 2024) and increased facility maintenance costs. Additional fundraising campaigns are underway to return these sessions to original levels.

During 2023-24, proportions of young people in receipt of free school meals have increased nationally to 24%, a 40% increase from January 2020. Our Network data shows that almost one third of Youth Zone members received free school meals during 2023-24; a 5% increase from the previous year. Youth Zones were attended by higher proportions of young people from the most deprived areas of England: 49% were from the 20% most deprived, and 72% from the 40% most deprived parts of the country.<sup>1</sup> Therefore we can see that Youth Zones engaged with higher proportions of young people living in poverty and challenging circumstances.<sup>2</sup>

Youth Zones engaged with almost exactly even proportions of Junior (aged 8-12) and Senior (aged 13-19 or up to 25 for young people with additional needs) members. We were pleased to see an increased proportion of engagement with Senior members following strategic focus by Youth Zones.

A trend of fewer young people identifying as 'girl' or 'woman' attending Senior sessions has emerged across the Network. Youth Zones' senior leadership teams have sought to understand the barriers to girls and young women. Data and analyses have been regularly reviewed and discussed by Youth Zone Boards and trustee sub-committees, ensuring priority is given to addressing challenges. OnSide have supported, investigating Network-wide statistics and effectiveness of different approaches tested to identify best practice. For example, membership marketing targeted specifically at girls and young women, and 'girls only' spaces and sessions in Youth Zones.

OnSide was one of the first Back Youth Alliance (BYA) organisations to transition young people's membership data to align with new 'gender identity' categories. This was part of new demographic data standards agreed by the BYA, a collaboration of the UK's leading youth charities working together to



present a coherent voice to decision-makers with and for young people.

Youth Zones often play a vital role supporting young people with additional needs and/or disabilities and their families. Proportions of young people with additional needs and/or disabilities attending Youth Zones increased slightly from the previous year: 13% (2022-23) to 15% (2023-24).

Each Youth Zone strives to represent the diversity of people living in its nearby communities, engaging young people from a broad range of backgrounds. Collectively, the Network membership contains a lower proportion of young people who describe themselves as 'White' (50%) and nearly three times as many young people who describe themselves as 'Black, Asian, Mixed Race or from other ethnically diverse groups' (43%), compared with national Census data.<sup>3</sup>

1. 47% and 70% respectively in 2022-23

2. 26% 2022-23 to 31% 2023-24

3. Census data England and Wales: 81% identified as 'White', 9% identified as 'Asian, Asian British', 3% identified as being from 'Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups, and, 4% identified as 'Black, Black British, Caribbean or African'

# NETWORK IMPACT REPORT 2023-24: KEY FINDINGS

## Goal 1:

Giving young people a safe, exciting place to go, to have fun, build their social networks and support their personal development.

**77%**

young people increased or maintained their mental wellbeing

**81%**

young people increased or maintained self-confidence

## Goal 4:

Support young people to raise their aspirations and fulfil their potential.

**89%**

young people increased or maintained aspirations

**88%**

young people increased or maintained self-efficacy

## Goal 2:

Help young people to lead healthier, happier lives.

**90%**

young people increased or maintained their physical health

**88%**

young people increased or maintained life skills

## Goal 5:

Strengthen communities by supporting young people to be empowered, active, responsible citizens.

**82%**

young people increased or maintained feelings of citizenship

**86%**

young people increased or maintained empathy

## Goal 3:

Enabling young people to better face the challenges of life.

**88%**

young people increased or maintained their ability to manage their feelings

**83%**

young people increased or maintained their problem-solving skills



# METHODOLOGY

**As a Network, we are passionate about delivering high quality youth work to support young people's personal and social development.**

We are committed to monitoring and evaluating the reach, quality and impact of youth work delivered, to help us learn and continuously improve the range of activities and opportunities offered to young people. We achieve this by collecting the following information:

- **Young people's information, including ethnicity, gender, disability, postcode (mapped against Indices of Deprivation)**
- **Engagement data, i.e. how often young people attend, what activities they engage with, etc.**
- **Outcome data and impact stories, measuring young people's journeys**

We measure impact in two ways: the percentage of young people reporting improved or maintained outcomes (found in the Key Outcomes sections) and the average level of improvement (shown in the charts).

This report provides an overview of impact data collected between April 2023 to March 2024, the second full year of the ME App evaluation system. During the year, ME Apps have become

embedded into youth work practice at all Youth Zones in the Network.

4,352 complete evaluation records were available for analysis, representing two and a half times more datasets than the previous year.



## WHAT IS THE ME APP EVALUATION SYSTEM?



The ME App evaluation system was designed in partnership with the EDIT (Evidence Development and Incubation Team) at King's College London. It is a survey with a short series of attitudinal questions that ask young people to rate themselves between one and five in several areas aligned to our defined outcomes, including self-confidence, social skills, physical health and mental wellbeing.

Young people complete the questionnaire alongside their trusted youth worker at different points throughout the year, so we can monitor changes over time. Answers are logged online and pulled through to our content management system, Salesforce, from where we analyse the data locally and nationally.

# OUR NETWORK GOALS AND OUTCOMES

To align our efforts with achieving our mission, we have established five Network goals to measure Youth Zone activities:

## GOAL 1:

Giving young people a safe, exciting place to go, to have fun, build their social networks and support their personal development



## GOAL 2:

Helping young people to lead healthier, happier lives



## GOAL 3:

Enabling young people to better face the challenges of life



## GOAL 4:

Supporting young people to raise their aspirations and fulfil their potential



## GOAL 5:

Strengthening communities by supporting young people to be empowered, active, responsible citizens



By delivering these goals, Youth Zones positively impact on young people's lives, particularly within the following five outcome themes:

## CONFIDENCE:

Self-esteem and self-efficacy



## SOCIAL SKILLS:

Relationship and communication



## EMOTIONAL SKILLS:

Emotional intelligence and resilience



## HEALTH AND WELLBEING:

Physical, mental and emotional



## ASPIRATIONS AND ACHIEVEMENT:

Motivation and determination





# HOW YOUTH ZONES USE DATA TO DRIVE DECISION MAKING

**As a Network, we're committed to giving young people the best opportunities and support.**

As well as assessing the impact of the youth work delivered in Youth Zones, data collection is regularly used to evolve and adapt the offer within each centre, addressing the changing needs of members and ensuring resources and facilities are utilised in the best ways possible.

## Inspire, Chorley Youth Zone

The standard practice at Inspire Youth Zone is to review data monthly, proactively looking out for trends.

The team look at young people's engagement data, building a picture of usage, and numbers of staff and volunteers on session. This enables a better understanding of the quality of the offer and the impact this in turn has on young people's experiences, which underpins trends in engagement levels.

Like many other youth providers across the country, Inspire experienced a dip in its membership following Covid. There may have been several reasons for this - many may have settled into new routines or lost touch with the organisation during the prolonged disruption. Some may have been hesitant to return to group activities due to health concerns, changes in friendship groups or shifts in personal priorities.

In the first month after restrictions were lifted, our senior membership dropped to 598 active members regularly attending the Youth Zone.

In response, in the summer of 2023 the youth work team utilised their membership data to focus efforts on rebuilding senior member numbers and engagement. They monitored the number of young people coming to the Youth Zone, the schools they attended, and the wards they lived in.

Youth workers identified schools with the lowest number of young people attending Inspire, specifically focusing on three local secondary schools. From September to December 2023, the team ran lunchtime drop-in sessions, assemblies, engagement sessions to build relationships, and spoke with groups of young people to understand their needs. Through these conversations, the team gathered information on the barriers to attending sessions at Inspire and the challenges young people faced. One example of what the team learnt was female pupils were interested

in playing netball, in response the team started offering girls netball sessions.





# HOW YOUTH ZONES USE DATA TO DRIVE DECISION MAKING



“Tracking data and analysing trends has transformed how we work with young people. It’s about understanding our impact and using insights to adapt and improve. By responding to what the data tells us, we make better decisions and meet the real needs of the young people we serve. The lessons we’ve learned have refined our approach and helped us share best practices across the OnSide Network.”

**Ryan Powell, Chief Operating Officer, Inspire, Chorley Youth Zone**

Another example of useful feedback was that young people expressed a strong interest in having access to a digital space where they could learn about 3D printing, laser cutting, and coding. In response, we developed a dedicated creative tech hub named the Maker Zone, equipped with the necessary tools and resources to support these interests. This new space empowers young people to explore cutting-edge technology and develop valuable skills and is attracting new young people into Inspire.

To better understand and engage with local areas where young people were not being reached, the team analysed data by Local Authority wards and member locations. They mapped out local cold spot areas for attendance, which informed their approach to detached and outreach youth work. Out of 14 wards, they focused on having a community presence in the four closest wards with the lowest numbers of young people engaging, building relationships with young people and signposting them to Inspire. Through knowledge gathering and insights from other stakeholders such as local schools, Chorley Borough Council Community Team, Children and

Family Wellbeing Service and the police, the team broadened their detached work to other wards. This approach resulted in an increase of up to 60% in engagement from young people in some of the targeted wards, significantly boosting participation from those areas.

By the end of June 2024, the Youth Zone had seen a 67% growth in their active senior members to 1,004 young people. At the start of the new academic year in September 2024, the team re-focused on engaging with local secondary schools. They continue their great detached work and are working to remove barriers by creating a new transport offer so young people living in more rural wards can attend.

**67%**

growth in active senior members  
thanks to data driven decision making



# WHAT THE 2023-24 DATA SHOWS



# GOAL 1: Giving young people a safe, exciting place to go, to have fun, build their social networks and support their personal development.

574,933 visits, activities and opportunities were delivered by Youth Zones during 2023-24, providing young people with a safe and fun environment to enjoy time away from school and home.

Research shows the likelihood of children and young people having a mental health problem has increased by 50% in the last three years. 39% of 6 to 16-year-olds have experienced a deterioration in their mental health during recent years. Access to activities to help young people build their resilience, confidence and awareness of what supports their mental health has never been more important.

Youth Zones' open access, universal youth work helps young people to build confidence, self-esteem and resilience, whilst improving their health and wellbeing through engaging with activities. These outcomes are essential to prepare young people to be positive, active and contributing members of society, now and throughout their adult life.



## Key Outcomes

81%

young people increased or maintained self-confidence



78%

young people increased or maintained self-esteem



77%

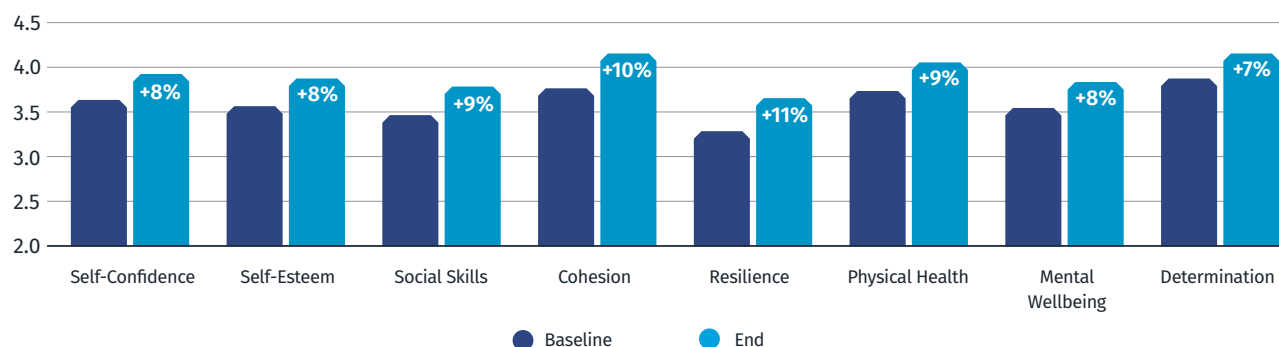
young people increased or maintained their mental wellbeing



Baseline and end datapoints for all open access session outcomes were higher in 2023-24 than in 2022-23.

Analysis shows that young people rate themselves more highly in almost every outcome when completing a baseline ME App survey within the first 90 days of becoming a Youth Zone member. This could be due to young people having a temporary lift in how they feel during the initial excitement of the joining period. We will investigate during 2024-25 to understand the reasons why this trend might be occurring and how youth workers could support young people to provide more consistent responses.

## Open access session impact on young people





# HARRY'S STORY

**Meet Harry, a 20-year-old member at The Hive, Wirral Youth Zone.**

“

*I remember staff coming in to school to talk about The Hive, it looked fun and would get me out of the house. I was nervous when I first started as it is a huge place, there were new people, and I had to get to know the staff.*

*At first, I didn't really talk to anyone, now I have made friends and talk to more staff. I have come a long way and the staff have seen me grow and become more confident. Coming to The Hive has pushed me out of my comfort zone. I now regularly reach the top of the climbing wall, go to the gym, and participate in external men's mental health group walks thanks to a project at The Hive called Raw n Real.*

*When at The Hive I do basketball, climbing, archery, and I play pool. The staff and my mentor have helped me and gave me someone to talk to. They have been a good support network and I have had good conversations with them.*

*If I hadn't come to The Hive I wouldn't be into fitness. I have done a 5k and 10k run, and I have completed two wellbeing projects. I am more aware of myself and know when I need to speak to someone.*”



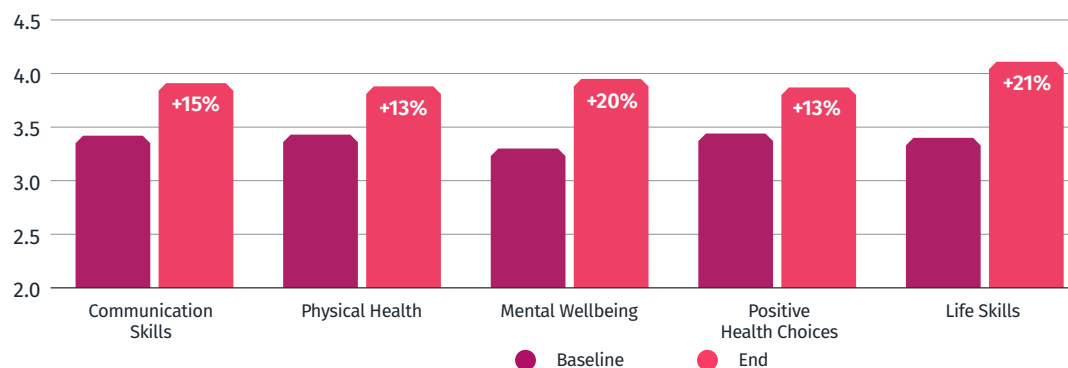


# GOAL 2: Help young people to lead healthier, happier lives.

Youth Zones reflected the national picture, supporting increasing proportions of young people living in deprivation and in receipt of free school meals, both of which are indicators of young people with challenging home lives. [OnSide's Gen Iso report \(2023\)](#) showed 26% young people had stopped out of school activities due to the cost-of-living crisis, and 50% of young people describe high or very high feelings of anxiety. This aligns with research showing young people in poverty face challenges [living healthily](#), often missing out on fun, everyday activities that can positively impact mental health and wellbeing.

Targeted youth work provides specific, tailored interventions aimed at young people who need extra assistance in addition to universally provided, open access sessions. Youth Zones' delivery of targeted emotional wellbeing projects and mentoring provide crucial additional support for young people in most need, to help them live healthier and happier lives. Physical activity is a key element of this, as it not only supports the improvement of health outcomes, but recent [research](#) also showed a strong link between students who engage in sports and their chances of progressing to higher education or employment.

Targeted project impact on health and happiness



## Key Outcomes

90%

young people improved or maintained their physical health



85%

young people improved or maintained their positive health choices



88%

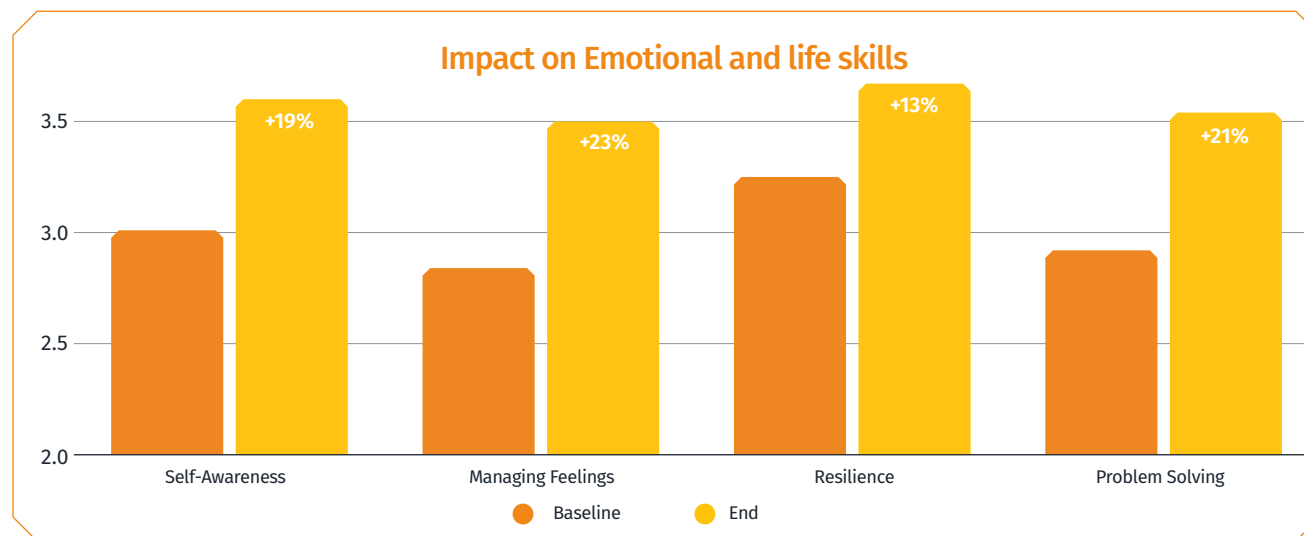
young people improved or maintained life skills



# GOAL 3: Enabling young people to better face the challenges of life.

Research has found that young people's resilience is strengthened through supportive adult-child relationships: providing opportunities to build problem-solving and emotion-management skills. Youth Zones provide safe environments for young people to build strong relationships with dedicated youth workers.

Often when young people start engaging with Youth Zones they express that they are unable to manage their feelings. Through open-access youth club sessions and group activities, and targeted youth work, young people can develop crucial emotional and social skills to face and overcome challenges in life.



## Key Outcomes

**88%**

young people increased or maintained their ability to manage their feelings



**83%**

young people increased or maintained their problem-solving skills

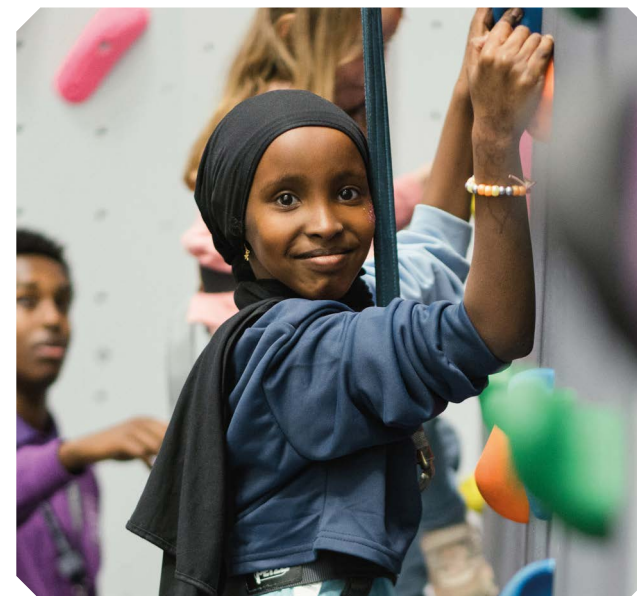


**79%**

young people increased or maintained resilience



Young people rated their ability to manage their feelings as the lowest of all outcomes in baseline surveys, therefore the potential for improvement was greatest.





# HOW YOUTH ZONES SUPPORT YOUNG PEOPLE TO PREPARE FOR ADULTHOOD.

## Q&A with Bex Pollard, Youth Worker, The Hive, Wirral Youth Zone

**Q: What skills do you think young people today need for the future?**

**A:** I think resilience and confidence are key skills for adulthood, as is having the ability to think outside the box, to have an awareness and curiosity about your future. Skills like leadership, public speaking, empathy and active listening are also important. These are all things young people can pick up at the Youth Zone and are often things they don't have the chance to learn in school or at home.

**Q: What is it about youth workers that make them skilled at building trusted relationships with young people?**

**A:** The key to the relationship is that it's informal. Young people choose to be at the Youth Zone and to engage with youth workers. Those discussions enlighten them and can spark a fire within them. The little interactions and touchpoints they have at the Youth Zone all adds up, giving them the skills they need to be prepared for adulthood. Our role is to provide support and to educate them to become independent.

**Q: How does The Hive help with that transition into adulthood?**

**A:** Unlike more formal education settings, we can look at young people individually. We work with young people to identify the area of need, MeApp data has been a helpful tool to do this - we see what a young person's challenges are, we can signpost them to the right support, and we can monitor and track their progress.

Ensuring they have opportunities to connect with their community is massively important. It not only gives them access to more support but also breaks down barriers.

We also offer targeted interventions. We run a 10-week programme, called Bee Independent, for young people aged 16 and over with additional needs with the aim of supporting them to be independent. They learn how to cook, go food shopping and manage money.

For young people nearing the end of their journey with The Hive, we provide exit plans for those struggling with their transition from the Youth Zone onto their next steps. It isn't a case of reaching 19 and then not being allowed to attend, we work with them to maybe reduce their time, have regular check ins, and help them to plan what's next. For those with additional needs, we work with them to identify support they can access in the community.

**Q: You mentioned being engaged in their community as one of the ways you prepare young people for adulthood, why is this important?**

**A:** I think it's important for young people to build an awareness of the world around them and to connect with their community. One way we do this is through our youth voice work, which has been very strong since we opened seven years ago. We have an active junior council, which gives young people an introduction to youth social action by engaging them in community issues, helping them share their voices, and enabling them to make a positive difference. This group then feeds into our Young Ambassadors. It's their group so they drive and decide on what they want to do.

One of our current projects is an intergenerational project. Young people spent the summer going into assisted living accommodation for the elderly. They've been running activities and providing entertainment, it was incredibly rewarding. Past projects we've ran include period poverty, homelessness, refugee support, and during Covid we did a lot around loneliness. Many people may have misconceptions about young people, by partnering with local organisations we can remove those stereotypes.

# GOAL 4: Support young people to raise their aspirations and fulfil their potential.

Youth Zones play an important role in preparing young people for adulthood. Through relationships with local businesses and corporate supporters, targeted youth work equips young people with an understanding of career and life options. In a world where technology is constantly changing, Youth Zones help young people understand new opportunities, like AI, which can sometimes feel confusing or overwhelming. They play an important role in giving young people the chance to embrace and learn about these advancements, especially for those who might otherwise be left behind due to digital poverty.

Young people with complex needs (e.g. mental health problems, young carers) and those living in the most deprived areas are significantly more at risk of not engaging positively with education, employment or training. Open access youth club sessions, discussions and activities enable young people to develop the soft skills needed to be successful. Young people are supported to build the aspiration and determination to dream big, believe in themselves and their ability to achieve goals. This translates into young people engaging more positively with education, more likely to progress in employment and fulfil their potential.

## Key Outcomes

**89%**

young people increased or maintained aspirations



**88%**

young people increased or maintained self-efficacy



**83%**

young people increased or maintained determination

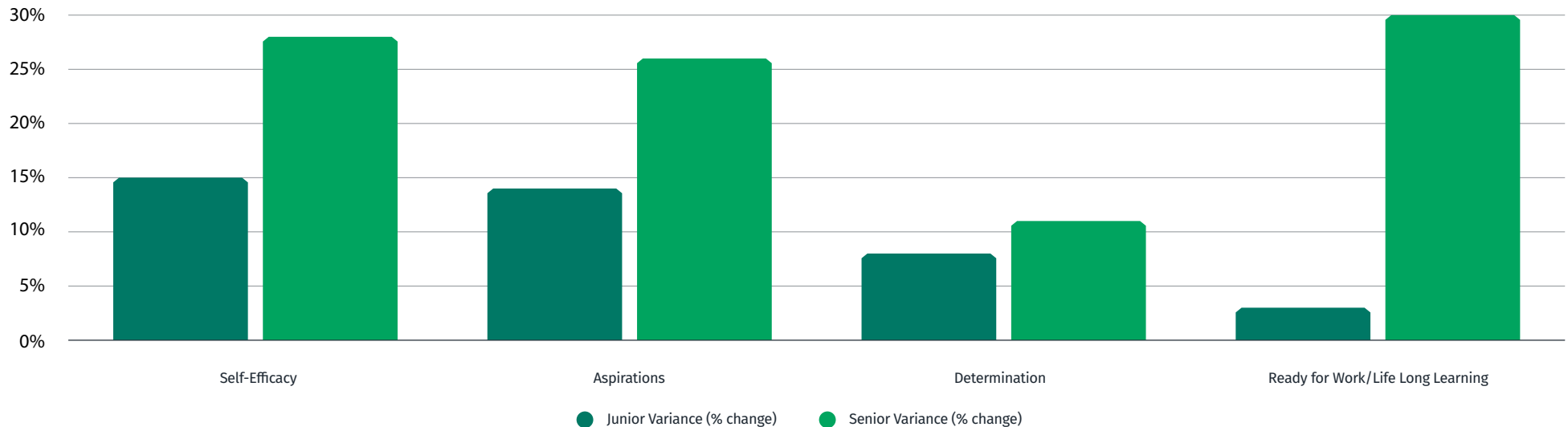


Analysis of impact on young people's self-efficacy and aspirations shows a significantly greater impact is created with those who are older and closer to adulthood.

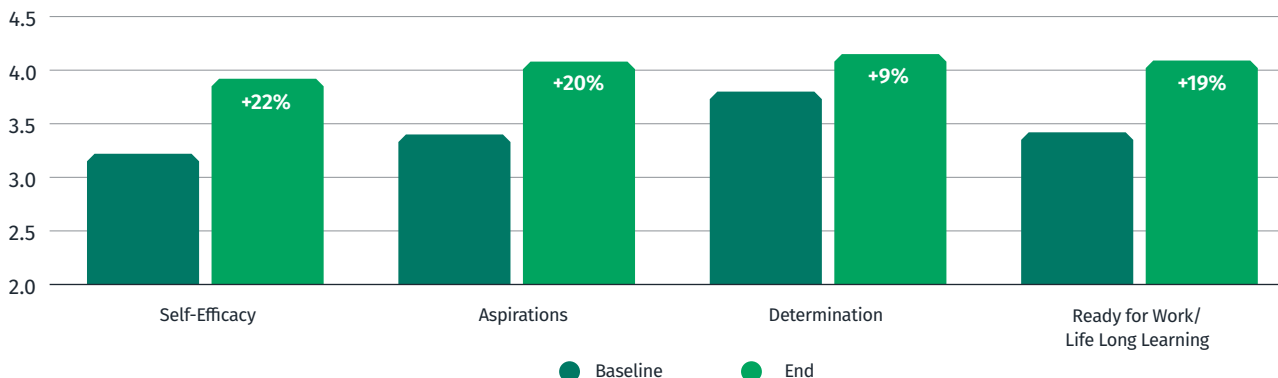


# GOAL 4: Support young people to raise their aspirations and fulfil their potential.

Junior/Senior differences



Self-efficacy and aspiration





# KRYSTIA SOUZA

## Targeted Youth Work Manager, Manchester Youth Zone

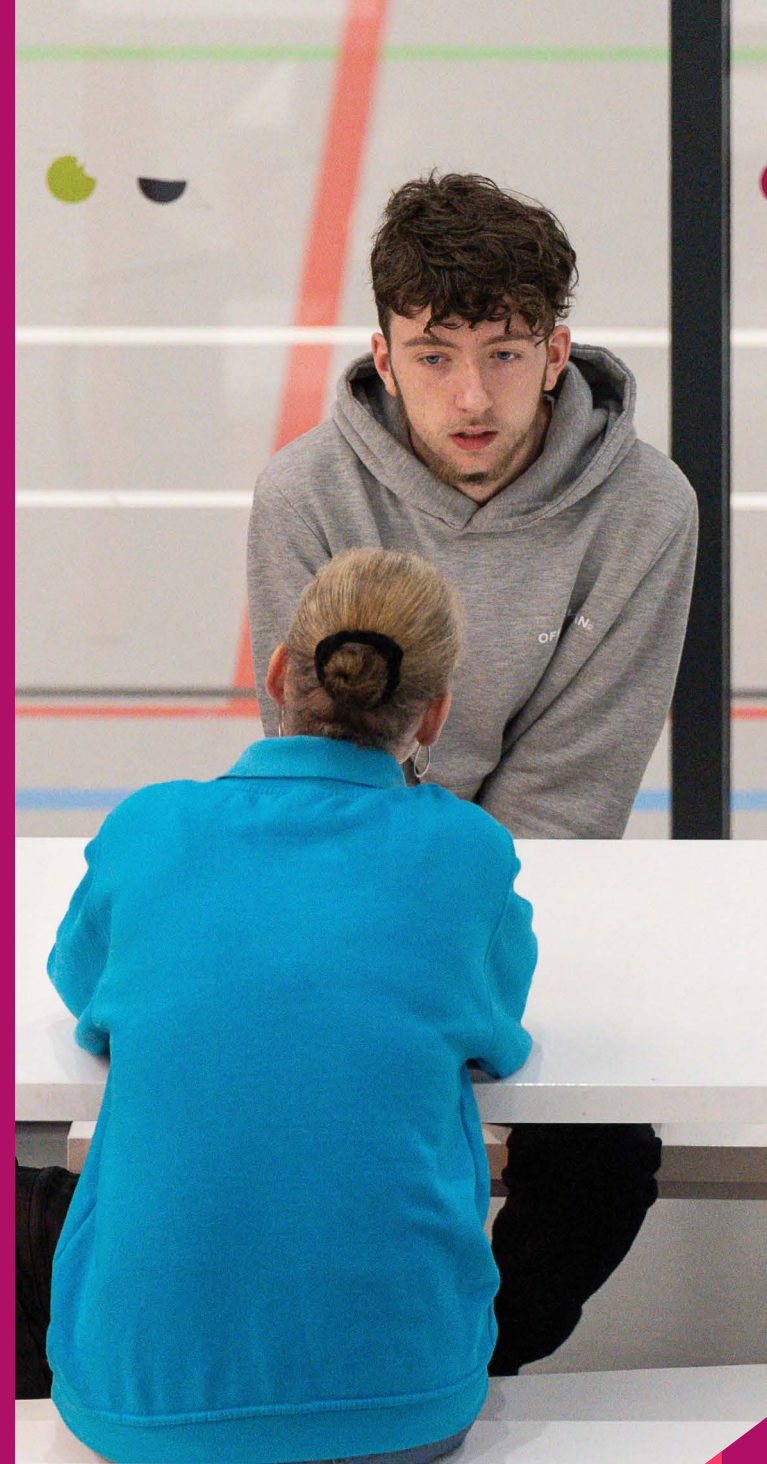
Many of our young people don't have exposure to employability or employers. When they come to Manchester Youth Zone many struggle with basic skills, like timekeeping and communication. We have a lot of 16/17-year-olds who are eager to work but find it hard to find work. They may have been let down quite a lot in their lives, so the process of applying for roles and looking for employment can be difficult. We also work with a lot of young people with additional needs, and we often find they don't know they can ask employers for the support they need to be their best in the workplace.

We offer a variety of employability support for members; CV and cover letter writing, job searches, financial literacy workshops, and connecting them with employers by hosting job and apprenticeship fairs. One of our most successful offers is our Work Safaris, where young people visit employers and participate in industry-specific activities. We work with lots of sectors from banking to construction and law. They teach young people about interview preparation, what would be expected of them in the workplace, the importance of teamwork, and how to set yourself apart when applying for jobs.

We once took a group to an employer in central Manchester, and the young people didn't recognise that part of the city as their own. This was the motivation for the employer to get more involved, and they invited colleagues who grew up in similar parts of the city to share their journey. It helps members to realise they can achieve what they want because if someone from a similar background or area has done it, they can do it too.

We also run an 8-to-10-week project every summer for young people not in employment, education or training. A lot of these young people don't get on at school, so we worked to engage them creatively. We help them to map their path, equipping them with the skills to manage their wellbeing, building their confidence and resilience, and giving them more practical experiences in industries.

I've seen a lot of growth in our members' confidence, and they've been able to search and apply for jobs independently. Over 375 members have accessed our employability activities and events over the past two years. The feedback from the businesses we've worked with to enhance our employability offer is that they want to do more, be more involved. Everyone wants to support young people to access the range of opportunities available to them.



# GOAL 5: Strengthen communities by supporting young people to be empowered, active, responsible citizens.

Research shows that engagement with youth clubs, groups and activities promotes cohesion, particularly in young people who feel isolated due to poverty or challenging home lives. Youth Zones draw young people from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Themed discussions and activities enable young people to share their lived experiences and learn from others, developing greater empathy and understanding.

Opportunities such as Youth Zone Young Leaders programmes, provide space for Senior members to volunteer on Junior sessions, developing their leadership skills and in some cases, accreditation too. By empowering young people to be active and responsible, Youth Zones play a key role in preparing young people to be positive and contributing members of society.



Year on year, young people's baseline data point for empathy is the highest of all outcomes, with an average rating of 4 out of 5. Youth workers support young people to recognise and maximise this strength, to achieve their goals.

## Key Outcomes

**86%**

young people increased or maintained empathy



**82%**

young people increased or maintained feelings of citizenship



**84%**

young people increased or maintained cohesion



## Impact on cohesion and citizenship





# ALEX'S STORY

**Meet Alex\*, a 19-year-old member at Manchester Youth Zone.**

“ I've been volunteering as a Young Leader since October 2023. I joined the Learn2Lead programme as my friend took part in it and it seemed like a really good opportunity to gain work experience.

I've been volunteering on the Juniors sessions. I enjoy helping in the art area and Makers Space. I really feel like part of the team when working with Karl and Tom, the youth workers. I feel like an adult as they trust me to help and handle some of the equipment.

I'm really excited to volunteer more, I feel like I've got more responsibilities. Since being a Young Leader I've represented young people from North Manchester in the Greater Manchester Youth Combined Authority. I'm excited to talk about my passions such as inclusion and safety for young people. It was cool meeting new people during my first meeting. Everyone seemed chill and friendly.”

\*Name has been changed



“ Alex is a true superstar, it has been fantastic to see their growth. Since starting their Learn2Lead journey they have become an integral part of the Makers Space and are ready to step in straight away. It has also been fantastic to see Alex become more independent and proactive when developing their STEM skills.”

**Sarah Errey, Youth Voice and Volunteering Co-ordinator, Manchester Youth Zone**



# IMPACT OF LENGTH OF MEMBERSHIP ON OUTCOMES

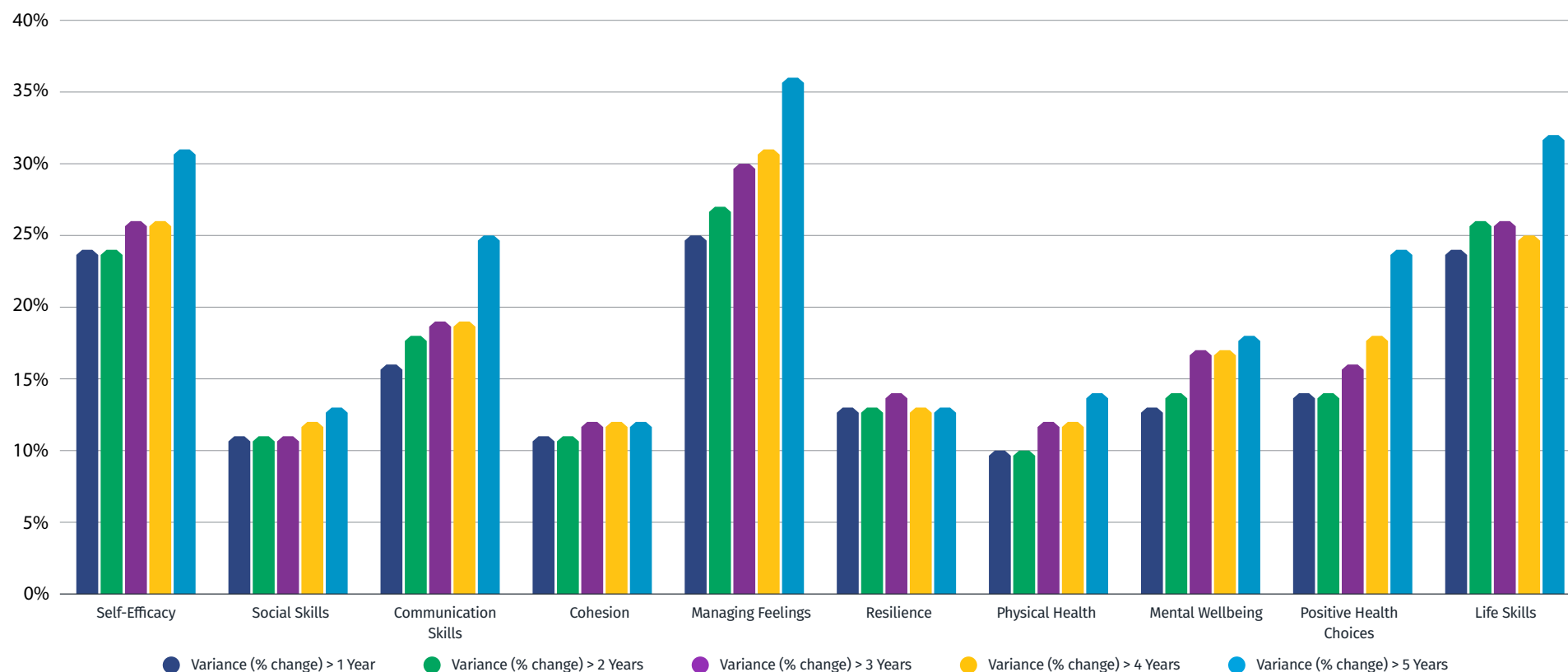
The longitudinal picture shows a general upward trend of increased impact: the longer a young person engages with a Youth Zone. There is marked impact created in year five in young people's self-efficacy, life and communication

skills, and their ability to manage their feelings and make positive health choices.

As the volume of ME App data increases over the years, we will compare the impact created by Youth Zones with national data and external

research conducted. We will look to identify the impact of significant events, such as Covid, on young people's outcomes and whether engaging with a Youth Zone before or after such events create sustained change in young people.

Impact by length of membership





Atria, Spa Road, Bolton BL1 4AG

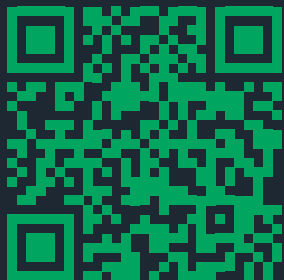
**Tel: 01204 362128**

**Email: [enquiries@onsideyouthzones.org](mailto:enquiries@onsideyouthzones.org)**

[onsideyouthzones.org](https://onsideyouthzones.org)



Registered Charity No: 1125893 Company Registration No: 06591785



Scan for our theory of change document