



# Evaluation of the yOUTH service 2021

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The Brunswick Centre commissioned Eleanor Formby from Sheffield Hallam University and Jo Woodiwiss from the University of Huddersfield to undertake local research and evaluation of the new yOUTH service in Kirklees in 2018. This five-year project, funded by the National Lottery Community Fund, seeks to support lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans (LGBT) young people and their parents or carers on a one-to-one and/or group work basis. The aims of the project are to ensure that:

- LGBT young people have increased voice and influence;
- LGBT young people report happier and healthier relationships and improved emotional health and wellbeing;
- schools will be safer spaces for LGBT young people due to a reduction in bullying and improved anti-bullying policies.

Research and evaluation connected to the project consists of the following elements:

1. Service mapping interviews with staff and related stakeholders to find out about current services and any gaps or needs in provision for LGBT<sup>1</sup> young people (published in 2019)
2. Needs research with LGBT young people via an online survey and follow-up interviews and discussion groups with young people (published in 2019)
3. Yearly impact evaluation with young people, involving online survey and follow-up interviews and discussion groups with young people (reported here and also published in 2020)
4. Final impact evaluation involving online survey methods and follow-up interviews with staff and related stakeholders (due to be completed in 2022).

This third annual report documents findings from recent research activities, i.e., the third round of consultation with young people. This involved the distribution of an online survey to young people accessing the yOUTH service (reported in Chapter 2), and follow-up discussions with service users, either in groups or individually (see Chapter 3). The findings of both of these are brought together in a brief concluding summary (Chapter 4). Despite a global pandemic and associated 'lockdown', the yOUTH service continued to operate, working within Government public health restrictions and guidelines. The evaluation also progressed as planned, albeit remotely as all University and Brunswick Centre staff were home-based at the time. Perhaps inevitably, the pandemic/lockdown featured heavily in data collection, and young people's experiences of these unprecedented times are therefore captured within this report.

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<sup>1</sup> Although we use the term LGBT throughout this report to correspond with the yOUTH service's focus, we made it clear to all young people that the research and evaluation activities were open to those identifying as LGBT+ (i.e., not only those identifying as LGBT but also other gender and sexual minorities as well, such as non-binary, gender-fluid, pansexual, queer, and so on).

## 2. SURVEY OF YOUNG PEOPLE

This evaluation component gathered views on the yOUTH service from young people with experience of accessing it. Survey respondents were recruited through the Brunswick Centre's dissemination of the survey. In previous years, the same survey was used to allow for comparison across the duration of funding. However, due to the pandemic/lockdown a decision was taken to simplify and shorten this survey so as not to overburden young people at a difficult time. In total, 23 people responded to the survey, of which 21 had experience of yOUTH, so it is their results that are reported here (though not everyone answered every question).

### Participants

Most survey participants were aged between 14 and 18 (inclusive), though two also identified as '25 or over'. In terms of gender identity, three identified as female, two as gender non-binary, three as male, and six as trans. In relation to sexual identity, nine identified as bisexual or pansexual, one as gay, and one as heterosexual/'straight'. Everyone said they were white, with one identifying as Buddhist, two as Christian, and the rest either responding 'no religion' or 'prefer not to say'.

### Services and support

Survey respondents were asked what kind of contact they had had with the yOUTH service. The answers are below, indicating that some young people were in touch with the yOUTH service on a one-to-one and/or group basis.

	Yes but only once	Yes but not very often	Yes at least once a week	Yes most days	No never	I'm not sure	Total
I've had contact or support on a one-to-one basis, whether in person (before COVID), over the phone or online	-	-	3	1	3	5	12
I've attended an online group session run by yOUTH	1	2	4	2	1	-	10
Something else (please write in - e.g. college LGBT group)	-	1	1	-	1	-	3

Respondents were then asked what they thought of this contact with the yOUTH service. As the table below demonstrates, nobody thought it was 'not very good' or 'rubbish', with the majority of those who answered responding with 'excellent' or 'good'.

	It was excellent	It was good	It wasn't very good	It was rubbish	I'm not sure	I have no experience of this	Total
I've had contact or support on a one-to-one basis, whether in person (before COVID), over the phone or online	3	4	-	-	2	3	12
I've attended an online group session run by yOUTH	5	4	-	-	-	2	11
Something else (please write in – college LGBT group)	1	-	-	-	-	1	2

When asked to provide more detail on their answers, it was clear that people appreciated the yOUTH service in general, and how it was adapting to providing services during the pandemic. Although relatively brief, the responses hint at the effect the pandemic/lockdown was having on some young people's lives, as well as the ongoing impact of being an LGBT young person:

*"Much better in person, however due to Covid, I think they're doing a wonderful job with online support"*

*"It was great to get to talk to everyone in a group setting again, as well as doing the activities over Zoom which were a lot of fun"*

*"The yOUTH group helped me just be able to express myself more and helped me come out to my parents"*

*"It's helped gain confidence in being yourself, being able to talk to people that understand you [and] gave us a place we can be us without having to think about everything else"*

*"They gave me a sense of security and helped me when things got really tough. I really missed getting to see everyone in person and get to know them properly and*

*play card games and talk in detail about things without a time limit or a faulty Internet connection. I liked talking to people and seeing everyone again”*

*“There’s been both informative and emotional support via phone or video. It’s helpful to keep to some kind of routine, however being with people is better. Right now, this is the best way to support people”*

*“yOUTH helped me handle my social anxiety by getting me one-on-one counselling. The anxiety was crippling me from doing a lot of stuff like going out without panicking about what people say or how I looked and walked but by the end of the meetings I could go out and do stuff and I don’t have near as much panic attacks as I used to. I missed talking to people like I used to before this started, and yOUTH has messaged me a lot which made me feel a little better about it all”.*

Respondents were also asked what information, support, groups, or other activities they would like to see the yOUTH service provide for LGBT young people or their families in Kirklees in the future. Only one person answered this question:

*“With college and the possibility of that happening and changing, maybe study sessions where we can talk and ask questions if we need to about any topic and just talk and chill”.*

This lack of response might itself indicate that young people were happy with what was already available.

### 3. IN-DEPTH DISCUSSIONS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

In-depth elements of the evaluation allowed researchers to explore issues raised in the survey in more detail. Follow-up discussions were held with 22 people: one within an individual telephone interview and 21 within discussion groups (x 4). These group sessions took place as part of existing yOUTH and school/college group meetings. Because of governmental public health restrictions at the time of this data collection (October-December 2020), all group discussions were held online. Not surprisingly, the pandemic/lockdown dominated conversations, and the report therefore gives an insight into the highs and lows of life during this time for LGBT young people. This qualitative data was digitally recorded and then transcribed before being analysed thematically. Those involved in this element of data collection were aged between 11 and 23. Most were living with their families and attending school or college (remotely at the time of data collection).

#### Experiences during the pandemic

The young people we spoke to talked about how they had spent their time during the first period of national lockdown when schools and colleges were closed:

*“I spent that time binge-watching Netflix”*

*“I talked to my friends a lot”.*

As these comments show, whilst some people were relatively isolated during that time, others were able to (remotely) keep in touch with friends. What was often evident was that a significant impact related to the lack of structure and focus to people's days:

*“The first three months I didn't really do anything, I had nothing to do, apart from schoolwork... I literally didn't leave this bed to be honest”*

*“I was literally at home and if I wasn't baking or watching Netflix, I was asleep”*

*“I found it really disorientating and just a real struggle to get from one day to the next, because it was... weird... Because I was in Year 12 when it happened... I'd been able to go out and do fun social things and have people's birthdays and stuff, and then it was like, ha ha, no more! Sat at home by yourself and feel sad about it”*

*“It got a bit lonely. Time stopped being real. Schedules stopped mattering... [I was] up at 5 o'clock in the morning and [then] sleeping through 'til 2 in the afternoon”*

*“It's just, like, a complete loss of routine... It's just gone”*

*“Time isn't real. My sense of time just went out the window”.*

This was not necessarily always a hardship, and in some cases made lockdown life easier and less stressful:

*“I loved it... It was well good... It was just fun, you got to do whatever you want!”*

*“I absolutely loved it at first! ...It’s only just really hit me that I’m not super-happy”*

*“It’s been pretty alright. I’m really, really, introverted so I kind of stay inside anyway”*

*“For me, lockdown... I am a massive introvert; I didn’t really mind the not seeing people thing. That was fine for me... Not seeing people face to face didn’t really bother me... I wasn’t bothered about not seeing people in real life”.*

For others, however, lockdown – and an associated loss of routine – was harder to bear:

*“I was actually pretty lonely because what I’d do is, I’d get up, do schoolwork, stress about schoolwork because I didn’t have a clue what I was doing, then go upstairs... By the time I finished it would be like 9 o’clock at night and all my mates would be doing something else. I would just sit there and watch YouTube and then go to bed. It would be like that every day”*

*“I found it quite boring... whilst I enjoyed just sitting there playing League of Legends all day, that’s not very healthy... My lockdown was boring, kind of lonely”.*

Whilst loneliness, stress related to schoolwork, and boredom were evident, there was also anxiety, for some, about the virus itself (see also Cowie and Myers 2020):

*“You want to go outside and even if you can go outside... there is a high likelihood that I could get ill and possibly die”*

*“When I started hearing more about Covid, I was like, what is this virus? And then it was like, oh. It was a lot for me to take in, it knocked me for six”.*

What was clear in this variety of responses was that young people were, unsurprisingly, comparing lockdown life to what they had before. For those for who this had not been easy, lockdown living could have its advantages:

*“For me, the start of the year was absolutely awful. I lost my grandma... and like I lost most of my friends a little bit before that, so I was already in quite a stressful place. And then I felt like when we actually went into the lockdown, a lot of that stress was able to be removed, because it was like, I don’t have to do my exams and I don’t have to go to that awful school. I can breathe”.*

For others, their personal circumstances made the shift to lockdown living harder to manage:

*“I found it very hard to take in because I’m autistic and my routine... if they change, then I have a meltdown... I found it really hard because I didn’t know when we were going to go back”*

*“I think personally for me because I’m estranged from my family and most of my friends live [elsewhere]... at the start of quarantine I really enjoyed it because I’m the sort of person that enjoys my solitude, but then I think because I’m also quite social*

*I'm realising I accessed a lot of services prior to Covid, and they all stopped. Because I don't have a support network in the sense of a family, I found it quite difficult two months in, which is why I started accessing the Brunswick Centre"*

*"When we come out of it, I'll be 18. I'm spending the last six weeks of my childhood in my house and I'm not going outside, and that's it, and then I'm an adult. It's really daunting and horrible because lockdown ends on my birthday. I am spending the entire remaining portion of my childhood in my bedroom! It's miserable... I'm really depressed over it".*

Even when lockdown was partially lifted, and people were allowed to meet with others outside, practical issues could still form barriers to young people's socialising:

*"I would [meet friends in a park] if not for the weather and I also live in [area] and it's got one bus that comes once an hour... and sometimes it just doesn't show up, so I can't really get places".*

Whilst many of these issues might have also impacted upon cisgender and/or heterosexual young people, some did identify that feeling isolated from other LGBT people was a particular issue for them during lockdown:

*"I'm quite lonely... because all my friends have all their own friends, and I haven't spoken to them for ages and they haven't really spoken to me and I don't really have anyone else I can relate to. I do have one friend but there's a lot of misunderstanding between us because we're in different positions"*

*"I don't have anyone in my actual life or my family that I can really relate to or is going through... all the same things that I [am]"*

*"As a trans person I sometimes feel quite isolated even within groups of other LGBT people... I don't really know what anyone can do about that... To my knowledge, I've never met another trans person".*

### Experiences of school and college

Although the pandemic/lockdown and the yOUTH service dominated discussions, there was some talk of school life as an LGBT young person, both before and during the pandemic:

*"School said that they needed parental permission for names and stuff. That got to me a bit. I wasn't allowed to be referred to by my actual name. I had to go by my old name until my parents actually said yes... [Now] college, unless I'm with friends, is the only place that I really get to hear my name out loud and correct pronouns used... College life can be a bit easier"*

*"My high school was quite homophobic... Anyone who kind of came out was kind of picked on for it"*

*“My high school in general was just an extremely hostile environment. I’d heard of this other trans person in the year above me and I saw him passing [by] a few times. I maybe saw him passing three times and two of those times, at the same time, he was having some horrible comment or horrible question. It felt generally extremely hostile and I would not have advised anyone especially a trans person to come out at my old high school”*

*“I feel like a lot of [teachers]... they’ll hear a comment, and someone will say, ‘oh you can’t say that or stop saying that’, but the majority of the people that say those comments just end up getting away with it anyway. So, there’s no point in anyone trying to stand up to them because nothing really ever happens... By not saying anything, they [teachers] are not directly encouraging it, but they’re not exactly stopping them either. When they’re on about do you want a preferred name on the register, some teachers will be like, ‘well, it’s like technically your legal name, so you can’t’, but that just makes the student feel even more uncomfortable”*

*“I don’t feel like teachers understand the impact of negative comments because they’re not the ones having to go through it... I think the inaction of staff kind of encourages students as well to just be nasty”*

These experiences echo previous data from Kirklees (Formby and Woodiwiss 2019, 2020) and nationally (Formby forthcoming), indicating that LGBT young people do not always find their schooling environments supportive. During lockdown specifically, remote learning had been difficult for some, with these experiences supporting other research with (not only LGBT) young people during the pandemic (Day et al 2020):

*“Lack of physical contact... was terrible. That was dreadful. Lack of hearing other people’s voices. The lessons and stuff we did, it was like they’d set us a task and then leave us to it... But then we went back to college and did remote work and they’d do calls, and a teacher would sit and talk and then you could sit and reply... It’s nice to hear someone’s voice, it’s nice to see someone’s face when they speak”.*

*“It was just college work which was kind of the main thing, it got really hard for me... mostly because of the pressure from college, because I don’t work well at all at home. I hate remote learning. I can’t do it. It sucks”.*

People we spoke to also talked about their wishes for the future for LGBT young people, involving improved provision for young people and the staff who work with them, once again echoing other LGBT young people’s desires reported elsewhere (Formby forthcoming):

*“Better education, like in general, and sex education as well”*

*“Yeah, that’s a major issue”*

*“I think that they need to teach people because... it [school] didn’t feel like a safe space... My friend wanted the school to use his preferred name on the register, but they just constantly kept deadnaming him... [and] the students used to, like, yell his deadname at him and yell slurs and stuff. It was awful”.*

## Family life

There was also some discussion of relationships with(in) families:

*“My dad and my mum completely are against me being transgender... They stick with [my] old names... when it comes down to arguments, she [mum] immediately goes back to the old name because she knows it will hurt me”.*

As this person explained, experiences such as this were harder during the lockdown (see also Batty 2020, Day et al 2020):

*“Because you’re trapped in the house... Which I would refer to as full of trauma. Can’t go outside, stuck with people, and arguments happen, which bring up more trauma”.*

Such experiences during lockdown made remote contact with the yOUTH service even more important.

## Experiences of the yOUTH service

Given the context of the pandemic, and sometimes unhappy experiences of education and/or family, the yOUTH service was a significant feature in the lives of the young LGBT people we spoke to. Although everyone appeared to understand and appreciate yOUTH moving their service provision online during the pandemic/lockdown, this did not mean it was necessarily in everyone’s comfort zone. The young people clearly had differing feelings about spending time on Zoom (which was the platform used for yOUTH); whilst some found it hard and had struggled to adapt, others preferred it to face-to-face delivery:

*“It’s just really difficult socialising through technology because I’m the sort of person that I like human interaction and like sitting down and meeting someone. It’s just different, socialising through Zoom... before Covid I wasn’t on social media as much as perhaps other people... but because of Covid, because we’re all interacting through technology and through the internet, I guess it encouraged me more to go onto my phone and onto the internet and use Zoom and things... But I still find it so kind of difficult going onto Zoom sometimes. I almost feel trapped because I’m anxious about using technology but it’s the only way of communicating right now... because I live on my own and I almost feel isolated... If I don’t use technology, then I wouldn’t be able to talk with anyone... For the first two months I stopped all contact... but then my mental health started to get worse and I was like, ‘OK, it’s not helping me being completely isolated so I’m going to have to somehow get used to or cope with [it]’... because it’s better to maybe have some form of contact than none”*

*“As a personal thing, I absolutely hate going online for stuff. I hate it. But obviously we’ve not really had any other [choice] so I’ve kind of had to deal with it”*

*“I think people just prefer socialising with people face to face because I think on the computer you don’t... you’re seeing them through the internet and it doesn’t feel as [if] you’re closely communicating as when you’re with them in real... obviously we trust you adults because you’re trusted adults but with other people, you’re like, what the hell, who am I talking to? ...It’s horrible. It’s totally ripped me apart”*

*“I prefer to be on Zoom than in person because if I need to, like, totally have a break, I can just turn the camera off for a bit... I feel safer on Zoom, if that makes sense”.*

The above comment focuses on the issue of camera use during online communication, and young people had varying views on this, with some finding it difficult to see themselves on screen (see also YouthLink Scotland 2020):

*“Personally, I would want to hide my face, so I understand other people wanting to hide theirs, but... I like seeing who I’m talking to, and you get a feel for the person, I guess... I just want to know a little bit more about someone or, like, even just seeing them might make me feel a bit more comfortable”*

*“You have to have your video on if you’re going [to the yOUTH group]... and I know a lot of people aren’t comfortable with that, but it’s for safeguarding reasons”.*

For some, online sessions were easier because they already had existing relationships with other group members; for others, it meant they could avoid the potentially intimidating entrance to the Huddersfield in-person group:

*“I’ve known them a while, so it made it quite easy to come onto something like this”*

*“I always tended to walk in in the middle of the pronoun circle so it was always silent, and you could hear if the door shut when I was there. It was very nerve-wracking. Nerve-wracking every time I walked down there... It was always a bit too much. I enjoyed it, though, once I settled in... It was just that one moment of walking in was horrible”.*

Others also commented that online sessions were less ‘chaotic’ and quieter than the in-person Huddersfield-based sessions, which for some was positive. Although online sessions were not everyone’s first choice, it was clear that young people appreciated the yOUTH provision being offered:

*“I think we’ve got a good balance of things”*

*“I quite like how... it’s kind of shifted to be more structured, almost, but... not being too structured... it’s still, like, quite free-flowing at the same time, which is nice”*

*“I think they’ve done a good job... I still get the texts and invites to online stuff... I think they’re running a pretty good ship”*

*“They try to make it as fun as they can and do whatever they can online. For example, one of the leaders... set up an online escape room puzzle. We all went*

*onto this Zoom call and tried to complete it... you're still escaping, but not like in person. Stuff like that. That's really nice... We do proper other stuff like bingo, escape room, there was a drama group on a Thursday, but I don't know what happened to that".*

This evidence suggests that both the regularity and variety of online yOUTH provision had been valued, especially where the regular Wednesday night session did not appeal to everyone:

*"I personally don't go to the Wednesday ones. Too big, too many people... Because they all know each other, I don't really talk to anyone. I'm just really quiet in the corner, I'm just there, I don't feel involved or anything... Personally... I'd like more... activities that you all have to get involved in and get hands-on with... I just find talking to people hard".*

The yOUTH staff were described in very positive terms:

*"[They are] absolutely amazing... They're really approachable and kind"*

*"They're also really good at being there for the parents and adults of people, because obviously not all parents are supportive of LGBTQI+ [people]. Mine can be a good example of that... The trans group... parents can go to that as well... I think that's really nice. Everything can get explained, and they can talk to other parents and other people about their own experiences and stuff. It's really good"*

*"At the smaller group there is a youth worker who actually did go to the main big group before they became a yOUTH worker. They are also transgender, so I can relate to them a lot, and I think having people like that as part of the team really helps".*

The involvement of yOUTH staff in local school and college-based groups was also acknowledged:

*"He [yOUTH staff member] adds a bit of direction to it. I feel like he doesn't have to be there all the time for us to function, because now we're like an established group, but I think, especially back in the beginning and stuff, when he came in every other week or so, and he's provided a bit of direction to the group and then now that we're established, we can function without him. But he was really good for setting us on a bit of a course, about what the group was for and what it was about and stuff".*

There was only one issue of concern within the group:

*"There's one person in particular recently, like really recently, that decided to mispronoun and deadname someone because they got angry at them. That's what worries me a little bit with that group... Everybody has problems with this one person... It gets to me a little bit. It's the kind of stuff that puts me off from going sometimes... Stuff like that really annoys me".*

Although it was mostly group work that the young people were most vocal about, one-to-one work was also mentioned:

*“It is very important, because a lot of people struggle and need time one to one with someone”.*

### Peer support

Interestingly, there was also evidence of, for at least some young people, significant levels of peer support (via social media) that had emerged out of an existing group with yOUTH input. This had begun to play an important part in some people’s lives, particularly during lockdown:

*“The original purpose was as a lockdown substitute but... it’s kind of evolved into this friendship group chat because I think over lockdown... obviously it was our only form of communication with people, basically. We all became a lot closer because we were just talking to each other and basically nobody else... We all make a lot of inside jokes and have become a lot closer through the group chat”*

*“We’ve got a group [Instagram] chat. It’s the longest lasting group chat in history, because they usually die after a couple of months, but it’s been going for almost a year now, and everyone is still active in it and we all still talk and stuff... group chat going from first thing you do when you wake ‘til the last thing I do before I go to bed – all hours, we’re always talking... a big social group, it’s very nice... We all became a lot closer than we anticipated so it became like... our little friendship group really”*

*“At first it was kind of like, aagghh, there’s all these people, it’s scary, but it’s turned into a big random family of people who you can be comfortable with and you can talk about anything with. So, it’s quite nice, it’s a little support system we’ve got going”*

*“There is a pandemic, and it was inevitable that at least some of us were going to know people who were affected, and it was nice with the group chat to be able to put it in there... It was nice to go in there and have people who you could talk to, who were also our age, because when you’re talking to your parents and stuff, they see it from their view”*

*“We have constant communication, 24 hours a day... We all became a lot closer through the group chat. If we just saw each other once a week and then saw a few people here and there, it would be a lot different, but we get a chance to talk about things and we get a chance to plan for what we actually want to say to each other [in person]... oh, I want to show you this or I want to do this or this”*

*“The group chat just kept the interaction levels where they needed to be. I feel like maybe if it wasn’t there, I might have gone a bit insane”.*

For the people involved in this group chat, it was thought to have fed into subsequent in-person contact, as well as (partially) address the lack of routine that lockdown had created:

*“We had a lot more inside jokes to bring back to the actual in-person stuff because we’re all texting all the time and it runs from morning to night, so when we see each other in person it ends up with a lot of bringing back stuff that we’ve talked about in the group chat. Or when group ends and when we’ve got to go to lesson, we then finish conversations we had in group in the group chat, if people have more to say”*

*“It was nice to have each other, at the very least because... at all hours someone would be in texting in the group chat”*

*“It [the group chat] can be funny, but it can get really serious as well. We have a lot of very in-depth depressing discussions a lot of the time, especially over lockdown when we were all going through it. We have a lot of fun, a lot of jokes, a lot of running stuff, and then we can get a bit depressing when the mood calls for it... It’s one of the things that really kept me going over the first lockdown, because I had a horrible time, terrible, and if it wasn’t for this group chat, I don’t really know what I would have done because it was like... so many people to talk to at once, but everyone was going through the same thing but also had something to say... I like to think I helped at least one other person, the same way that they all helped me”*

*“In the group chat we have a lot of debates, especially on LGBT stuff. It does get quite heated... It will get really tense and we’ll have differing opinions... It’s a nice way to get your opinions out, just by talking to people, and learn, [it’s] nice to learn”.*

However, as this comment shows, the group chat worked alongside the staff-supported group, not instead of it:

*“I feel like if we didn’t have the group chat, the physical group itself wouldn’t be as good... It’s like they enrich each other really. I don’t think one without the other would have been nearly as good as it is, but the group is made better through the group chat, and then the group chat is made better through the group”.*

This group chat was not the only source of support young people had benefitted from online, which speaks to the potentially positive impact of social media and the internet in some young people’s lives, contradicting a common adult focus on only the negative (Formby 2019, Formby and Donovan 2020):

*“I was part of some online groups before [the pandemic]. I was part of the Mermaids youth forums... and I have a group of really close friends that I met on there”.*

There were also other examples of particularly supportive relationships developing out of yOUTH-linked contact:

*“We support each other all the time, constantly. If I’m not feeling too great one day or if they’re not feeling too great one day, we’ll talk to each other about it and make each other feel a lot better and a lot more comfortable, even if it’s like using the right name”.*

## The impact of yOUTH involvement

As the above section suggested, the existence of yOUTH, in general, had a large impact on the young people involved:

*“[Zoom] has kind of helped me deal with my stress a lot... I feel happy that I feel included”*

*“It [the group] made all the difference in the world”*

*“Being able to access this group and meeting [yOUTH staff member] and everyone has been a really big thing for me because I’m not one to talk to people, so without finding this group I think I’d still be completely alone and in a much worse space than I was, well I am... I’m really grateful for this group”*

*“It’s really helped because I’ve met other people that are really kind and have been really helpful and supportive”*

*“It gives me people that understand me and get me... It’s nice to have [that]”*

*“They made me feel a lot more comfortable and I felt a lot safer... I think it was the idea of getting to know more people like myself and feel comfortable and like I’m in a big family... It felt like that, even through all of the anxiety... Going to that group really, really, helped me with my social skills as well. And everybody was accepting and loving and kind”.*

Once again, this was sometimes specifically related to providing a young person with some sense of routine where it was lacking elsewhere:

*“It gave me some structure... I’ve got friends in different countries and different time zones, so sometimes I talk to people online, but it [this group] is better because it kind of stopped me from staying up until 5am. I don’t want to be on Eastern Standard Time... With things like the Zoom calls... I was actually on... GMT”.*

A minority of participants discussed the Dewsbury group in particular. Although its location and smaller size could be advantageous for some, especially those more nervous about attending a larger group, others were more drawn to the (larger) Huddersfield-based group:

*“[The] smaller group [is] not as far away, I don’t have to catch the train to get there, I can just get a parent to drop me off... and the place where it’s at is actually quite comfy. They’ve got like specifically coloured rooms – one of them is really blue and the other one is really orange. It’s really nice and comfortable. I think that really helps, especially walking into that for the first time”*

*“The Dewsbury group are a lot younger but in the Huddersfield group I feel like there are people who are at uni or slightly older so I would find it easier to maybe build up the connection with people or start a discussion”.*

When asked to imagine life without yOUTH, young people reported:

*“[It would be] a lot more stressful*

*“I might have gone insane”.*

When asked to explain what appealed about the yOUTH service, young people often talked about meeting other LGBT young people and how this facilitates a sense of confidence and belonging, echoing previous work with (not only young) LGBT people (Formby 2019):

*“The reason why I joined group in the first place, I’ve always been a lot more confident in myself around people that are LGBT ... I felt the fact that we are LGBT and... being confident I guess in our identities... That does make it easier for me personally to connect with them, because I feel more confident in myself. I feel like I can open up without being judged”*

*“The fact that we’re all LGBT, even though it isn’t the whole basis of the friendship and it’s not the whole reason I’m friends, it’s like common ground. And it’s a nice way for us to bond... It’s good that we’re all LGBT because we can connect”*

*“I feel like there’s a lot of inside jokes and experience that come with queer stuff and we can all connect about stuff that maybe our cis[gender] het[erosexual] friends wouldn’t necessarily get”*

*“I wanted to find people like me”.*

Other young people focussed on the yOUTH service facilitating a safe (physical or online) space for young people, which mirrors other evidence on the importance of LGBT-specific youth services (Formby 2013, 2015, Formby and Donovan 2020, Juetten and O’Loan 2007):

*“I see the entire thing as like our little safe space... [If] you want to talk about something... then there’s at least one person there who gets you, and if not gets you, then they’ll listen”.*

## 4. CONCLUSION

In this chapter we summarise key findings from this stage of the evaluation. Overall, it was clear – and unsurprising – that living through a pandemic was difficult for most of the young people involved in this stage of the ongoing yOUTH service evaluation. Perhaps most noticeable was the lack of routine or structured time, and loneliness, that young people reported. However, there was a silver lining for some, such as those who found in-person socialising difficult, or those who found school life particularly hard, and thus welcomed not having to attend when schools were closed due to government restrictions.

Whilst our previous evaluation reports have shown that yOUTH is an appreciated service during 'normal' life, where LGBT young people often face challenges in school and/or at home (Formby and Woodiwiss 2019, 2020), this appreciation has increased over the last year. The variety and frequency of yOUTH provision gave young people an important element of structure to their days (for some, it was literally one of the few things worth getting out of bed for), and importantly offered opportunities for social communication within this. This echoes similar findings from LGBT Youth Scotland during this time period (YouthLink Scotland 2020), who have suggested that their digital youth work reduced isolation, improved wellbeing, aided personal growth (such as confidence), and increased resilience. It is therefore clear that the yOUTH service has been facilitating what scholarship suggests is good practice. That is, as Long and Evans (2020) have argued, it is important at this time to facilitate a sense of safety and connectedness, including through setting routines to help structure the day, using social media, and helping to manage anxiety.

The yOUTH service offer of group work and one-to-one support was obviously valued, with young people praising staff members, and articulating how important it was for them to meet with other LGBT young people who they felt were 'like them' and could thus enable mutual understanding, and a sense of safety (see also Formby 2019). It is worth noting, though, that most young people involved in our evaluation were white, which we believe reflects the make-up of the majority of service participants at present. Given the diversity of the Kirklees population, however, it would be beneficial if the service, and thus the evaluation, included a wider range of participants in future. Our understanding is that the yOUTH service are aware of this, and currently endeavouring to improve their engagement with a broader section of young people.

This report has shown that, at times, yOUTH input can result in significant levels of peer support among young people, though it is difficult to gauge how much this was specifically related to the pandemic/lockdown, and thus may not occur to the same degree at other times. Nevertheless, it is clear that yOUTH has a direct impact upon young LGBT people's friendships, and often on a more positive sense of self. The service therefore continues to meet its aims of improving LGBT young people's emotional health and wellbeing. This is particularly important in light of recent research (the 'queerantime study') which indicates that younger LGBT people had markedly higher levels of stress and depressive symptoms during the pandemic than older LGBT people (Kneale and Bécares 2020). In these circumstances, it is important that the yOUTH service is enabled to continue and flourish for the benefit of young LGBT people in Kirklees.

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