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**Investigating Young People's Reflections on  
Wellbeing, Care, and Constraint in a Scottish Youth  
Work Setting**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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## **Abstract**

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified existing social and economic inequalities across Scotland, deepening poverty, environmental neglect, mental health challenges, and pressures on public services. These conditions disproportionately affected young people in under-resourced communities. This thesis examines how young people understand and experience wellbeing in this context, and how relational spaces, including youth work and this study, shaped opportunities for reflection, agency, and imagining change. Situated within a community-based youth work setting, the study draws on participatory visual methodology. Six young people took part in a photovoice project, using photography and group dialogue to explore their everyday lives, relationships, and environments. Their contributions were co-curated into a public exhibition and later discussed in semi-structured interviews. Fourteen local stakeholders who attended the exhibition provided written reflections, offering additional perspectives on the relational and structural conditions shaping youth wellbeing. The analysis draws on a theoretical framework centred on Empowerment Theory and Feminist Ethics of Care, with Critical Pedagogy providing a contextual lens for understanding reflection and structural awareness.

The findings show that young people experienced wellbeing as shaped by feelings of safety, connection, and recognition, as well as by structural factors of poverty, stigma, environmental neglect, and limited access to services. Participants valued spaces where they could reflect and feel listened to, but expressed frustration when opportunities for voice were not followed by visible action, highlighting the emotional demands of participation in constrained systems. Youth work spaces offered trusted environments that supported connection and emotional wellbeing, while also having limited capacity to influence wider structural inequalities. This thesis argues that youth wellbeing is shaped at the intersection of relational care, structural inequality, and opportunities for critical reflection. It offers a context-specific account of how youth work and participatory research can support wellbeing and agency, while recognising the limits of these approaches without sustained structural change.

**Keywords:** Youth wellbeing; youth work; youth voice, structural inequality; agency; photovoice

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## **Author's Declaration**

I declare that, except where explicit reference is made to the contribution of others, this dissertation is the result of my own work and has not been submitted for any other degree at the University of Glasgow or any other institution.

Printed Name: Haley Sneed

Signature:

## Definitions/Abbreviations

- **Agency:** The capacity of individuals, particularly young people in this study, to make sense of their lives, express preferences, and act within the constraints and possibilities of their social worlds. Agency is understood as relational and socially embedded, shaped by emotional, structural, and interpersonal conditions rather than as purely autonomous or individual action (Coburn, 2011; Doherty & de St Croix, 2024; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014).
- **CLD (Community Learning and Development):** In Scotland, CLD is a professional field concerned with social justice, lifelong learning, and community capacity, encompassing adult learning, youth work, and community development. CLD seeks to address inequality through relational and educational practices, though its scope and impact are shaped by wider structural and policy contexts (CLD Standards Council Scotland, 2025; Scottish Government, 2012).
- **COVID-19:** A global pandemic caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus, first identified in 2019. The pandemic significantly disrupted education, mental health, youth services, and community support systems, particularly in under-resourced contexts, intensifying existing inequalities affecting young people (Bynner et al., 2020; YouthLink Scotland, 2021).
- **Critical Consciousness:** A concept associated with Freirean pedagogy that refers to recognising and naming social, political, and economic conditions and their effects on everyday life. In this study, critical consciousness is used as interpretive language rather than an assumed participant outcome to describe moments when young people reflected on lived realities and identified structural influences on wellbeing (Freire, 2000).
- **Critical Pedagogy:** An approach associated with Freire (2000) that frames learning as dialogic and attentive to power, inequality, and lived experience. In this study, Critical Pedagogy functions as a contextual, secondary lens, informing how reflection and dialogue are understood, rather than as a primary analytic framework or prescriptive model of change.

- **Empowerment:** A relational and context-dependent process through which individuals and groups may develop confidence, voice, and a sense of possibility. In this study, empowerment is explored cautiously as something that may be supported through relational conditions and reflective opportunities, rather than as a guaranteed outcome of participation (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981, 1984).
- **Empowerment Theory:** A theoretical framework concerned with how people gain influence over matters affecting their lives through processes such as participation, reflection, and relational support. In this study, Empowerment Theory informed analysis of how youth work and research contexts shaped opportunities for expression and confidence, while remaining constrained by wider structural conditions (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000).
- **Feminist Ethics of Care:** A body of feminist theory that emphasises the moral, relational, and political dimensions of care, attending to power, interdependence, identity, and intersectionality. This study draws on a Feminist Ethics of Care to explore how wellbeing, participation, and emotional labour are shaped by overlapping systems such as class, gender, and age, particularly within youth work and research relationships (Arinder, 2022; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993).
- **Meaning-Making:** The process by which individuals interpret their experiences and construct personal and collective understandings of their lives and contexts. In this study, meaning-making refers to how young people reflected on their wellbeing, relationships, and structural barriers, through visual, dialogic, and relational processes (Freire, 2000; Wang & Burris, 1997).
- **Mental Health:** A dimension of wellbeing encompassing emotional and psychological experiences, including stress, anxiety, grief, and the capacity to engage with everyday life (World Health Organization, 2001, 2022). In this thesis, mental health is discussed through young people's own reflections rather than the clinical assessment frameworks
- **Participatory Research:** An approach to inquiry that seeks to involve participants in shaping aspects of the research process and outcomes.

In this study, participatory research refers to the use of visual and dialogic methods to support reflection and expression, while recognising the limits of participation within institutional and structural constraints (Checkoway, 2011; Wang & Burris, 1997).

- **Photovoice:** A qualitative visual method in which participants use photography and group discussion to document and reflect on aspects of their lives. In this study, photovoice was used as a reflective and expressive tool to support discussion and meaning-making, culminating in a co-curated exhibition (Wang & Burris, 1997).
- **Post-COVID-19 / Pandemic Recovery:** The social, economic, and institutional context following the acute phase of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study situates youth wellbeing within ongoing conditions of inequality intensified by the pandemic (Bynner et al., 2020).
- **Relational Practice:** An approach within youth work and qualitative research that centres trust, care, sustained relationships, and emotional safety. In this study, relational practice shaped the conditions under which young people felt able to reflect and share experiences, without assuming particular outcomes (Coburn, 2011; Gormally & Coburn, 2014).
- **Stakeholders:** Individuals or groups with a role or interest in supporting youth wellbeing (Wong et al., 2010; Zeldin et al., 2013), including youth workers, family members, community practitioners, and policymakers. In this study, stakeholders contributed written reflections in response to a community exhibition, offering perspectives on youth wellbeing and structural conditions.
- **Structural Change / Structural Reform:** Efforts aimed at systemic conditions, such as austerity, disinvestment, or exclusionary policies, which contribute to inequality. This thesis distinguishes between relational or participatory support and the deeper structural changes required to address root causes of disadvantage (Evans, 2007; Tisdall, 2016).
- **Structural Inequality / Structural Barriers:** Enduring social, economic, and political conditions that limit opportunities for wellbeing, including poverty, racism, ableism, and territorial stigma. These

barriers are explored as both material and symbolic constraints shaping young people's everyday lives (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Crenshaw, 1991; Wacquant, 2008).

- **Tokenism:** The superficial or symbolic involvement of young people in consultation or decision-making without meaningful influence or accountability. In this study, tokenism is used as an analytical concept to critique gaps between voice, recognition, and action (Checkoway, 2011; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009).
- **Wellbeing:** A holistic and context-dependent concept encompassing emotional, social, mental, and physical dimensions of life. This study defines wellbeing through young people's own language and experiences, and analyses it as relational, structural, and context-dependent (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Rose, 2021).
- **Young People (YP):** Individuals aged 12-25, in line with Scottish youth work policy and the developmental transitions associated with adolescence and early adulthood (YouthLink Scotland, 2021).
- **Youth Work:** A relational practice situated within Scotland's CLD framework, grounded in informal education and voluntary engagement (Coburn & Gormally, 2019; Ord, 2016). In this thesis, youth work provided the contextual setting for relationships and reflection, but is analytically distinguished from the research process and its methods.

# Chapter 1 - Introduction

## 1.1 - Overview

Young people's wellbeing has emerged as a central concern in policy, practice, and research (Bynner et al., 2020; Hagell, 2021). This attention reflects growing recognition that wellbeing is shaped, not only by individual factors, but by social, economic, and structural conditions, including poverty, marginalisation, and environmental neglect, and unequal access to services (Bynner et al., 2020; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). At the same time, dominant responses to youth wellbeing often continue to emphasise resilience, self-regulation, and individual responsibility, frequently positioning young people as both vulnerable and accountable for managing adversity and their own recovery (de St Croix & Doherty, 2023; Hammond et al., 2022). These tensions are particularly evident in under-resourced communities, where young people must navigate intersecting forms of inequality, including housing precarity, environmental neglect, racism, stigma, and the long-term effects of austerity (Scottish Government, 2023; YouthLink Scotland, 2020).

In Scotland, these structural pressures have previously existed but were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which disrupted education, social connection, and community-based access to support, including youth services (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2021; Viner et al., 2022). While a growing body of research and policy has sought to measure the effects of these disruptions, much of this work has prioritised outcomes and deficits rather than young people's own understandings of their lives, relationships, and sources of support (Batsleer et al., 2021). Less attention has been given to how young people make sense of wellbeing within their everyday contexts, or to how they interpret the role of relational spaces, such as youth work, in shaping their experiences and sense of possibility.

This study responds to these gaps by exploring how young people in one Scottish community-based youth work setting understand and articulate wellbeing, reflect on the challenges they face, and express their aspirations for change.

Rather than treating wellbeing as a fixed or clinical category, the study approaches it as a relational, situated, and contested concept, grounded in young people's lived experiences of place, relationships, care, and constraint. In doing so, it foregrounds questions of power, voice, and agency, asking how young people experience being listened to, what forms of support feel meaningful to them, and what limits they encounter in translating reflection into action.

The research was situated within an established youth work setting and incorporated creative, visual, and dialogic methods to support young people in exploring and sharing their perspectives. These activities created a focused, time-limited space for reflection that differed from everyday youth work practice, enabling young people to collectively examine issues they identified as important. Their contributions were further explored through individual interviews and co-curated into a public exhibition, which engaged local stakeholders, including youth workers, family members, community practitioners, and a local politician, in dialogue around youth wellbeing and structural conditions.

The study is informed primarily by Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000), and a Feminist Ethics of Care (Arinder, 2022; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993), which together form the core analytical framework for interpreting young people's experiences of wellbeing and agency. Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000) is used in a contextual and secondary way, offering background concepts related to reflection, dialogue, and structural awareness rather than serving as a central analytic lens. This framework conceptualises wellbeing as relational and political, shaped by systems of care, power, and inequality, rather than as an individual attribute. Youth work is positioned as the relational context within which young people's experiences were explored, rather than as a uniform solution to structural harm.

By centring young people's perspectives, this thesis contributes to ongoing debates about youth wellbeing, participation, and relational practice. It

highlights tensions between care and constraint, voice and impact, and the possibilities and limits of community-based support in contexts shaped by structural inequality. The chapters that follow examine how young people articulate what matters to them, how adults respond, and what it might mean to take young people's reflections seriously in a post-pandemic Scotland.

## **1.2 - Statement of the Problem**

Despite increased attention to youth wellbeing, dominant models of wellbeing continue to privilege psychological and behavioural frameworks that emphasise individual coping, adjustment, and resilience (Hammond et al., 2022; Prilleltensky, 2008). Such approaches risk obscuring the structural conditions that shape young people's lives and positioning distress or disengagement as personal failure rather than as a response to inequality. Young people facing poverty, housing instability, service fragmentation, and discrimination are often expected to adapt to circumstances over which they have little control, while the political and material roots of these challenges remain insufficiently addressed (Wexler & Eglinton, 2024).

This disconnect highlights the need for more expansive approaches to wellbeing that attend to power, context, and collective responsibility. Emerging studies have begun to explore young people's own accounts of mental health challenges, disrupted education, and unmet support needs following COVID-19 (Holt-White et al., 2023; Newlove-Delgado et al., 2023). However, much of this work has focused on clinical or educational settings, with limited attention to community-based contexts or to young people's interpretations of relational support outside of formal institutions. Scottish-based research that centres young people's voices within youth work settings, and examines how they understand wellbeing, agency, and constraint, remains relatively limited.

In Scotland, youth work has a rich tradition of relational practice, voluntary participation, and informal education (Coburn & Gormally, 2019; Ord, 2016). Yet empirical research often prioritises evidencing outcomes or defending the value of youth work, rather than critically engaging with how young people experience these spaces, including their limitations. There is a particular lack of research

that foregrounds young people's reflections on what youth work can and cannot offer in contexts shaped by austerity, precarity, and rising expectations around participation and voice.

The study addresses these gaps by examining how young people understand and experience wellbeing after COVID-19, how they reflect on their agency within a youth work context, and how local stakeholders respond to their insights. Creative, visual, and dialogic activities were used to support collective reflection and meaning-making, emphasising process rather than predefined outcomes (Aldridge, 2016; Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). In doing so, the study advances a relational, situated, and politically aware account of youth wellbeing that takes seriously both the constraints young people navigate and the possibilities they articulate.

### **1.3 - Research Questions**

The research questions guiding this study emerged in response to the gaps, debates, and tensions identified in the literature review ([Chapter 2](#)). The literature highlights that youth wellbeing is not a fixed or purely individual state, but a relational, situated, and structurally mediated process (Bynner et al., 2020; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). Structural inequalities, such as poverty, service fragmentation, and educational precarity, profoundly shape young people's experiences of wellbeing, especially after the COVID-19 pandemic (Hammond et al., 2022; Scottish Government, 2023). However, few studies have examined how young people themselves define and reflect on wellbeing in their terms and contexts. Additionally, youth work has been widely recognised as a relational and supportive practice space, yet is increasingly constrained by instrumental policy demands and funding pressures (Coburn & Gormally, 2019; de St Croix & Doherty, 2023). This issue raises questions about how young people actually experience youth work spaces, and what kinds of relationships and conditions enable (or limit) wellbeing and agency within them. While youth voice and participation are policy priorities, research has highlighted the limitations of tokenistic models of engagement and stressed the importance of understanding how young people interpret their experiences and construct meaning in their

own lives (Bessant, 2020; Cahill & Dadvand, 2018). Finally, the role of adult stakeholders in supporting youth wellbeing, particularly in localised, resource-constrained contexts, remains underexplored. Together, these concerns inform the study's research questions:

1. How do young people understand, reflect on, and experience wellbeing within the context of their everyday lives?
2. What challenges and structural barriers do young people identify as influencing their wellbeing?
3. What role do youth work spaces play in shaping young people's wellbeing and sense of agency?
4. How do local stakeholders understand their roles in supporting young people's wellbeing and navigating structural challenges?

#### **1.4 - Structure of the Thesis**

This thesis is structured to provide a clear and coherent progression from the research questions to the findings, analysis, and implications. It explores how young people understand and experience wellbeing within a community-based youth work setting in post-pandemic Scotland, considering how relational, reflective, and structural dimensions shape their lives and opportunities for agency.

- **Chapter 1 - Introduction:**

Establishes the context for the study by outlining the research context, rationale, and aims. It defines the core focus on youth wellbeing and agency, situated within a community-based youth work setting. The chapter introduces the research questions and explains how they emerged from the literature, positioning the study as a response to underexplored issues of structural inequality, relational support, and youth voice.

- **Chapter 2 - Literature Review:**

Reviews key literature on youth wellbeing, youth work, and youth participation. It identifies conceptual and policy tensions, including the dominance of individualised and resilience-focused framings and the

neglect of structural and relational dimensions. The chapter distinguishes between participation in youth work and participation in research, highlighting the need to explore how young people articulate wellbeing and navigate support systems in spaces shaped by care and constraint.

- **Chapter 3 - Theoretical Framework:**

Presents the study's theoretical framework, which draws primarily on Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995) and a Feminist Ethics of Care (Arinder, 2022; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993). These two strands form the core analytical foundation of the study. Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000) is used in a contextual and secondary way, offering background concepts related to reflection and structural awareness rather than operating as a central analytic lens. The chapter conceptualises wellbeing as relational and political, and agency as shaped by relational, emotional, and structural conditions.

- **Chapter 4 - Methodology:**

Describes the research design and methodological approach, including creative and discussion-based activities such as photovoice, group dialogue, and a public exhibition. The chapter explains the rationale for these methods as tools to support young people's voices and create reflective, dialogical spaces. It addresses ethical considerations, the researcher's positionality, and the engagement of both youth participants and local stakeholders in shaping and responding to the research process.

- **Chapters 5-7 - Findings:**

Presents the study's findings across three core themes, drawing on the perspectives of both young people and local stakeholders:

1. Youth-centred insights into the meaning and experience of wellbeing.
2. The structural, environmental, and relational factors influencing those experiences.
3. Young people's reflections on the spaces and supports that enable them to feel heard, build confidence, and consider possibilities for change.

Stakeholder reflections, including those from youth workers, family members, community practitioners, and a local politician, offer additional insight into how young people's wellbeing is understood, supported, and constrained within community contexts. These chapters centre young people's voices and those of the adults who work alongside them, highlighting relational dynamics and systemic challenges.

- **Chapter 8 - Discussion:**

Interprets the findings through the theoretical framework, exploring the possibilities and limits of relational spaces, including youth work and participatory research, in supporting wellbeing and agency. It also situates the findings concerning the literature and provides a structured response to the study's research questions.

- **Chapter 9 - Conclusion:**

Summarises the research's key contributions to knowledge and practice. It discusses the methodological and contextual limitations of the study and discusses implications for youth work, reflective practice, and policy. The chapter concludes with recommendations for creating relational spaces that support care, critique, and youth voice in meaningful ways, especially in the face of ongoing structural challenges.

## Chapter 2 - Literature Review

### 2.1 - Introduction

‘Youth wellbeing’ is a multidimensional concept that includes physical, emotional, social, and mental health dimensions, as well as a sense of connection, purpose, and the capacity to navigate challenges (Bryant et al., 2015). The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted these dimensions, compounding existing socio-economic inequalities and introducing new stressors that impacted young people’s education, mental health, employment prospects, and relationships (Bynner et al., 2020; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019; Scottish Government, 2021). Lockdowns, social isolation, school closures, and heightened uncertainty contributed to increased anxiety and emotional distress among young people (Racine et al., 2021; YoungMinds, 2021). Although the acute phase of the pandemic has passed, many of its challenges are having enduring effects on young people’s wellbeing, especially for young people already facing structural disadvantage (Scottish Government, 2023; YouthLink Scotland, 2023). Emerging post-pandemic research continues to highlight mental health concerns, social disconnection, and widening inequality, indicating that the conditions shaping young people’s wellbeing are deeply embedded and ongoing (Hammond et al., 2022; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). Despite these concerns, much early pandemic-related research centred on adult populations, with young people’s perspectives often marginalised in both academic and policy discourse (Guessoum et al., 2020; Suhail et al., 2020). More recent studies, such as the ones by Holt-White et al. (2023) and Newlove-Delgado et al. (2023), have begun to address this gap, providing valuable information about young people’s experiences of mental health challenges, disrupted education, and unmet support needs in England.

Youth organisations such as Youth Scotland (2020), YouthLink Scotland (2020), and UK Youth (2021) have emphasised the important role of youth work in supporting young people during the pandemic and in its aftermath. Youth work continues to adapt to emerging challenges, offering relationship-based support that prioritises care, empowerment, and non-formal learning (Das, 2024; Elsen & Ord, 2023; Frontier Economics & UK Youth, 2022; Ní Charraighe & Reynolds,

2024; Reynolds & Ní Charraighe, 2022; YouthLink Scotland & Northern Star, 2022). However, academic research on post-pandemic youth experiences remains limited, particularly within community-based youth work settings in Scotland. While emerging studies like Holt-White et al. (2023) and Newlove-Delgado et al. (2023) provide insight into young people's mental health, educational disruption, and support needs in England, few explore how young people themselves reflect on these experiences within relational, informal support spaces. Scholars such as Hammond et al. (2022) and de St Croix and Doherty (2023) emphasise the importance of research that centres youth voice in the context of growing inequality and austerity. This gap highlights the need for more in-depth research into how young people reflect on wellbeing, agency, and support within community-based youth work settings in post-pandemic Scotland.

The chapter situates the study within the literature on youth wellbeing, the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role of youth work in Scotland. It traces how the research questions emerged through critical engagement with this work and identifies the conceptual and empirical gaps the study seeks to address. The chapter first examines how wellbeing has been conceptualised in youth research, highlighting the structural, relational, and emotional aspects of young people's lives (Bynner et al., 2020; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). It then explores the key challenges facing young people, including poverty, housing insecurity, environmental degradation, and gaps in service provision, and considers how these have been framed within academic and policy literature (Hagell, 2021; Scottish Government, 2023). The chapter also reviews youth work literature, analysing both its contributions and tensions, especially in relation to practice under austerity and changing policy demands (Coburn & Gormally, 2019; Elsen & Ord, 2023). Finally, it turns to literature on youth participation and stakeholder perspectives, with particular attention to how participatory research has been used to surface youth voice and critique systems of marginalisation (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Cook-Sather, 2007; Wexler, 2011).

Throughout the chapter, key tensions, gaps, and unresolved debates are identified, particularly around the structural framing of wellbeing, the role of community-based supports, and how youth voice is enabled or constrained.

These insights inform the development of the study's research questions, which aim to explore how young people understand wellbeing, reflect on their agency in constrained environments, and describe the kinds of support and spaces they want in a post-pandemic context. While Chapter 3 sets out the study's theoretical grounding, this chapter provides the empirical and conceptual context. It proceeds as follows: first, it offers a working definition of wellbeing for the thesis. It then reviews literature on the challenges shaping young people's lives, the role of youth work in supporting wellbeing, and the significance of youth voice and participation. The chapter concludes with a synthesis of the core gaps and tensions that led to the formulation of the study's research questions.

Throughout the thesis, the term young people refers to individuals aged 12-25, in line with Scottish youth work policy. This definition reflects the diverse and non-linear transitions of adolescence and early adulthood. The choice of language also signals a commitment to understanding wellbeing through social, political, and relational dimensions, rather than solely developmental or clinical lenses.

## **2.2 - Youth Wellbeing: A Complex and Contested Concept**

Youth wellbeing is widely recognised as a complex concept encompassing physical, emotional, social, and psychological dimensions of young people's lives (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2016). However, what constitutes wellbeing, and how it should be understood, measured, and supported, remains contested across academic, policy, and practice contexts. Traditional definitions often prioritise individual health, happiness, or life satisfaction (Dodge et al., 2012), but contemporary youth research has increasingly argued that wellbeing must be understood relationally and structurally. This means recognising that young people's wellbeing is shaped by personal experiences and wider social, economic, and environmental conditions (Bynner et al., 2020; Cheng & Furnham, 2013; Guevara et al., 2021; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024).

Adolescence and early adulthood are critical periods for identity formation and a sense of belonging (Sancassiani et al., 2015; Sawyer et al., 2018). These processes are deeply influenced by family dynamics, educational and economic opportunity, community relationships, and structural inequalities (Patton et al., 2016; Viner et al., 2022). Disruptions during these formative years, including poverty, housing insecurity, exposure to discrimination, and exclusion from services, can have lasting consequences for wellbeing (Bynner et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic intensified many of these pressures, particularly in already marginalised communities, exacerbating both immediate distress and longer-term instability (Hammond et al., 2022; YouthLink Scotland, 2023).

A range of wellbeing models attempt to capture the complexity of youth wellbeing by integrating subjective experiences with objective indicators. For example, Pollard and Lee (2003) emphasise both individual evaluations of life satisfaction and access to support, including school, a safe place to live, and the healthcare they need. Rath and Harter's (2010) five-dimensional model, including purpose, social connection, financial stability, physical health, and community belonging, emphasises the relational and contextual nature of wellbeing (OECD, 2021). While these models offer useful starting points, critical scholars caution that such frameworks often obscure the effects of structural inequality by universalising or individualising the concept of wellbeing (Bynner et al., 2020; Prilleltensky, 2008; Wacquant, 2016).

An integrated, situated approach to youth wellbeing frames it as a dynamic, relational, and contextually embedded process (Patton et al., 2016; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). Rather than focusing solely on internal emotional states or external risk factors, it understands wellbeing as an interplay between young people's feelings, interpersonal relationships, and the environments and systems they inhabit. It recognises young people as meaning-makers and agents who interpret, navigate, and at times resist the conditions shaping their lives. The framing of this approach deliberately moves away from deficit- or resilience-based discourses and foregrounds young people's situated experiences, critical reflections, and practices of care and connection. Accordingly, this thesis defines youth wellbeing through three interrelated dimensions:

- **Relational:** Wellbeing is rooted in young people's experiences of connection, trust, and belonging within relationships and communities (Pollard & Lee, 2003; Rath & Harter, 2010).
- **Structural:** Socio-economic inequality, systemic exclusion, and environmental degradation shape access to resources and opportunities, constraining wellbeing (Bynner et al., 2020; Prilleltensky, 2008).
- **Agentic:** The capacity to reflect, express voice, and act critically, even within constraint, is central to young people's sense of wellbeing and agency (Freire, 2000; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024).

### 2.3 - Challenges Shaping Youth Experiences and Their Impact on Wellbeing

This section critically examines the existing literature on the social, economic, and environmental situations that shape youth wellbeing. It reviews how poverty, inequality, disrupted education, and limited access to support have continued to have an effect on young people after COVID-19 (Hamilton et al., 2024; Learning and Work Institute, 2023; Leavey et al., 2020; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2020; Yuan et al., 2022). Rather than isolating these issues, this discussion highlights their interrelated nature, showing how they compound to create cumulative disadvantage. By identifying gaps and unresolved tensions in the literature, particularly around how young people interpret these challenges, the section lays the groundwork for the research questions in this study. It emphasises the need to centre lived experience within community-based contexts.

Existing literature documents how socio-economic conditions constrain young people's access to education, employment, and mental health support (Gould, 2006; Graham, 2024; Hawke et al., 2021a; Hawke et al., 2021b; Lund et al., 2018; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019, 2021; Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2020). Young people facing socio-economic disadvantage are disproportionately affected by housing insecurity, environmental neglect, underfunded schools, and resource scarcity, all of which contribute to heightened social isolation and

emotional distress (Bynner et al., 2020; Montero-Marin et al., 2023; Reiss, 2013; Reiss et al., 2019; Usher et al., 2020; Wright et al., 2021; Zeldin et al., 2013). The digital divide has further exacerbated these inequalities, limiting educational access and social participation, especially during COVID-19 lockdowns (Leach et al., 2020; Yuan et al., 2022). The pandemic significantly deepened these disparities, with young people in lower-income households experiencing disproportionate impacts (Hamilton et al., 2024; Learning and Work Institute, 2023; Marmot et al., 2020; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2020; Yuan et al., 2022). Financial insecurity, disrupted schooling, and limited availability of mental health support have all contributed to intensified stress and anxiety (Learning and Work Institute, 2023). Evidence points to a widening attainment gap and a drop in young people's confidence in their educational and career futures (Hamilton et al., 2024; Learning and Work Institute, 2023; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2020; Yuan et al., 2022). These pressures are compounded within families, where economic stress and parental burnout have contributed to increased emotional strain and disrupted support networks (Iob et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2020; Public Health Scotland, 2023; Scottish Government, 2023). Given the widespread impact of these disruptions, further research is needed to explore how young people understand and navigate these challenges, particularly within community-based settings.

In the Scottish context, structural disadvantage remains a key determinant of wellbeing, limiting access to support networks and increasing susceptibility to marginalisation (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2019, 2021; Evans-Lacko et al., 2024; Hamilton et al., 2024). Economic precarity, lack of vocational pathways, and limited employment opportunities contribute to financial stress and exacerbate mental health challenges (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2021; Vallejo-Slocker et al., 2020; Viner et al., 2022; Yuan et al., 2022). These conditions can reinforce cycles of inequality and disempowerment, restricting young people's access to opportunities for personal and professional development (Bynner et al., 2020; Coburn, 2011; Lai et al., 2019). However, much of the literature foregrounds macro-level analysis or statistical trends, with fewer studies attending to how young people themselves interpret and respond to these constraints in their everyday lives. This gap highlights the

importance of research that centres young people's understandings of wellbeing ([RQ1](#)) and how they navigate the intersecting structural barriers they face ([RQ2](#)).

Scholars such as Bynner et al. (2020) and Wexler and Eglinton (2024) call for a deeper recognition of wellbeing as both relational and materially constrained. Structural inequalities, including poverty, racism, digital exclusion, and environmental degradation, limit tangible opportunities and shape young people's sense of belonging, agency, and capacity to imagine alternative futures (Hammond et al., 2022; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). In this sense, wellbeing is not simply a psychological or internal state, but also a socio-political process negotiated within specific environments (Bourdieu, 1986; Prilleltensky, 2008). Social and cultural capital is particularly relevant, emphasising that unequal access to networks, resources, and symbolic recognition shapes both outcomes and lived experiences of wellbeing (Bourdieu, 1986; Wacquant, 2016).

These dynamics were made particularly visible during the pandemic, which exposed and intensified systemic inequalities (Aldridge, 2016; Bynner et al., 2020; Hammond et al., 2022; Panchal et al., 2023). One clear example is the digital divide, which hindered educational participation and contributed to social isolation and disconnection (Leach et al., 2020; van Deursen, 2020). Scholars such as Prilleltensky (2008) argue that promoting youth wellbeing requires an integrated response, one that addresses both individual capacities and the structural conditions that limit them. Programmes that build emotional regulation and personal agency are important, but insufficient if not paired with systemic interventions addressing inequality in housing, education, employment, and health (Havers et al., 2024; Kirkbride et al., 2024).

Alongside these structural factors, family relationships have a profound impact on young people's wellbeing. Studies suggest that supportive family environments that foster emotional stability and open communication contribute to wellbeing, enabling young people to navigate challenges more effectively (Australian Institute of Family Studies, 2021; Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Kerr et al., 2012; Luthar, 2006; Martinez-Yarza et al., 2024; McKnight, 2010; Orte et al.,

2019). Strong family ties have been associated with greater life satisfaction and reduced emotional distress, largely due to the security and guidance they provide during periods of adversity (Antonucci & Jackson, 1987; Chen & Feeley, 2014; Guo, 2018). Conversely, research indicates that dysfunctional family dynamics, including conflict, neglect, or economic strain, can significantly impact young people's mental health, increasing their risk of anxiety, depression, and social withdrawal (Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 2005; Kong et al., 2024; Reiss, 2013; Reiss et al., 2019; Totsika et al., 2021; Usher et al., 2020). While these studies highlight key trends, they do not always capture how young people actively understand their familial relationships or negotiate challenges within them. Further research into these lived experiences can deepen the understanding of how young people manage family-related stressors and seek external support.

Financial stress has been shown to play a critical role in shaping family wellbeing, contributing to parental burnout, emotional strain, and reduced capacity to provide consistent support, all of which have been linked to negative outcomes for young people (Conger et al., 2010; Hale et al., 2015; Thompson, 2021; Stapley et al., 2021; Tsuchiya et al., 2020). These pressures intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, with increased unemployment, instability, and parental mental health struggles exacerbating conflict and distress in already vulnerable households (Fegert et al., 2020; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2021; Wang et al., 2020). Alongside disrupted education and reduced access to services, these challenges deepened mental health inequalities, particularly for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds (Evans-Lacko et al., 2024; Pigaiani et al., 2020). Yet much of the research to date has focused on quantitative indicators, with fewer studies capturing how young people themselves understand and navigate mental health and emotional wellbeing under these conditions.

Resilience is frequently cited as a key protective factor, yet critical scholars caution against frameworks that locate resilience solely in the individual (Bottrell, 2009; de St Croix & Doherty, 2023; Ungar, 2008, 2011, 2016). Focusing too heavily on personal adaptability risks obscuring the structural injustices that

underpin distress. Youth work has been identified as a potential buffer, offering trusted relationships, informal support, and opportunities for expression (Coussée et al., 2009; Harris-Rimmer & Sawyer, 2016). However, the effectiveness of youth work depends on its ability to respond to systemic issues as well as individual needs. As WHO (2022) and de St Croix and Doherty (2023) emphasise, relational interventions must be backed by structural investment and policy reform to have a lasting impact.

Together, the literature emphasises the urgent need for research that foregrounds young people's lived experiences, perspectives, and meaning-making processes. Understanding how young people interpret and navigate the difficulties in their lives, within families, communities, and broader systems, is essential for developing support that is both relationally grounded and structurally responsive. These concerns underpin the rationale for this study and inform its next focus: how youth work is positioned to support wellbeing in post-pandemic Scotland.

## **2.4 - Scottish Youth Work and Wellbeing**

In Scotland, youth work is situated within the broader professional field of Community Learning and Development (CLD), which also includes adult learning and community development. While youth work functions as a distinct practice in many international contexts, in Scotland, it is institutionally located within the CLD framework, a policy and practice landscape grounded in principles of social justice, democratic participation, and community empowerment (CLD Standards Council, 2025; HMSO, 1964; Scottish Government, 2012). Within this framework, youth work is commonly conceptualised as a relational, informal practice centred on engaging with young people, through which personal development, social connection, and civic agency are fostered (Coburn, 2011; Ord, 2016; YouthLink Scotland, 2021).

This study positions youth work as a distinct and meaningful practice, shaped by its institutional location within CLD, yet operating according to its own

pedagogical logics and values. Following Ord (2016), youth work is defined by its pedagogical values, particularly its emphasis on informal education, critical dialogue, and relational practice. These values position youth work as a relational and educative practice that supports young people's wellbeing by creating spaces of trust, belonging, and reflection. Coburn and Gormally (2019) further emphasise youth work's capacity to nurture critical consciousness by holding space to support young people in reflecting on their sense of self, lived experiences, and future goals within supportive, community-rooted relationships.

In many communities, particularly those experiencing multiple forms of disadvantage, youth work offers a vital counterpoint to deficit-based or punitive interventions. It operates outside formal schooling and statutory services, often providing consistent, low-threshold support to young people navigating complex structural pressures (de St Croix & Doherty, 2023; Ní Charraighe & Reynolds, 2024). However, the policy and funding landscape surrounding youth work in Scotland has placed increasing pressure on the relational model. Outcome-based commissioning, austerity measures, and narrow performance metrics have constrained the flexibility and values-driven ethos of youth work practice (Elsen & Ord, 2023; Shaw, 2013; Tett, 2006). Practitioners often find themselves caught between the need to meet externally imposed targets and their commitment to youth-led, process-oriented work. These tensions raise important questions about how youth work spaces are experienced by young people, and whether they continue to support the critical, reflective, and relational practices that underpin wellbeing and agency.

This study is concerned with precisely these questions ([RQ1 and RQ3](#)). It explores how youth work is perceived and experienced by young people themselves in their lives, especially in the context of the post-COVID-19 landscape, when existing inequalities were amplified, and traditional forms of support were disrupted. While youth work is frequently described as empowering, relational, or inclusive, few studies critically examine how these values are experienced, interpreted, or challenged by young people within real-world contexts.

These questions became even more pressing during the COVID-19 pandemic, which reshaped the landscape of youth work and intensified both the need for and the fragility of its core relational practices. As existing inequalities deepened and traditional forms of support were disrupted, youth work's capacity to remain responsive, relational, and values-driven was both tested and illuminated.

#### **2.4.1 - The Impact of COVID-19 on Youth Work**

The COVID-19 pandemic significantly disrupted youth work practice in Scotland, while also highlighting its adaptability, local embeddedness, and continued relevance (Devine et al., 2021; Meade, 2020; Nouman, 2023; Scottish Government & COSLA, 2021; YouthLink Scotland, 2020). As lockdowns and restrictions were introduced, many youth workers mobilised quickly to offer support tailored to local needs, distributing food and hygiene supplies, maintaining contact with isolated young people, and providing informal education and emotional reassurance through phone calls, doorstep visits, and digital platforms (Scottish Government & COSLA, 2021; YouthLink Scotland, 2020). These efforts demonstrated the relational nature of youth work and its capacity to respond flexibly during crises, even amid limited resources (Devine et al., 2021; Vaillancourt et al., 2021).

However, the pandemic also intensified pre-existing structural pressures facing the sector. The shift to digital youth work, while necessary, exposed and exacerbated digital exclusion among young people without access to stable internet, appropriate devices, or private space (Hammond et al., 2022; OECD, 2021). While online tools enabled some youth organisations to maintain engagement, others reported difficulties sustaining meaningful connections, particularly with the most marginalised young people (Davies, 2021; Gormally et al., 2020; YouthLink Scotland, 2021). Scholars note that although digital approaches can extend access, they cannot fully replicate the in-person, dialogical, and place-based dimensions that underpin youth work's effectiveness (de St Croix & Doherty, 2023).

During the pandemic, youth workers increasingly found themselves providing emotional and practical support beyond their traditional remit, often without the training, supervision, or structural backing available in statutory services (Erwin & Thompson, 2021; YouthLink Scotland, 2021). While youth work has always contributed to young people's wellbeing (Barry et al., 2013), these new demands revealed the risks of informal services being positioned as substitutes for professional mental health provision, without the corresponding resources, recognition, or policy support (Ní Charraige & Reynolds, 2024).

Additionally, many youth workers were drawn into state-led crisis responses, including public health messaging, distributing essentials, and coordinating emergency support (Education Scotland, 2021; Hill+Knowlton Strategies, 2020). These roles, while crucial, raised concerns about the application of youth work, where the sector is used to patch systemic gaps rather than empowered to pursue its core purpose of informal education, care, and critical engagement (de St Croix & Doherty, 2023). Practitioners reported feeling conflicted between their professional values and the top-down demands of crisis management (CLD Standards Council, 2021; Devine et al., 2021), echoing longstanding critiques of how youth work has been shaped by marketised, outcome-driven governance (MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014; Shaw, 2013).

At the same time, these shifts in practice created new dynamics that young people had to interpret and navigate. The evolving role of youth work during the pandemic, marked by both creativity and constraint, was experienced in highly localised and uneven ways. These perspectives are essential to evaluating youth work's evolving role, particularly in relation to the structural and relational dimensions of wellbeing ([RQ1 and RQ3](#)). As de St Croix and Doherty (2023) highlight, youth work's relational, flexible, and place-based ethos continued to offer vital support to many young people, even under constrained conditions. The pandemic revealed what youth work can do during a crisis and what it needs to thrive beyond one, including sustainable funding, policy autonomy, and recognition of its distinctive role in fostering wellbeing through trust-based

relationships and community-rooted practice. The following section turns to the pedagogical foundations of youth work and considers its evolving role in Scotland today.

#### **2.4.2 - Youth Work in Scotland**

Youth work in Scotland is situated within the broader field of Community Learning and Development (CLD), which also encompasses adult learning and community development. The CLD framework differs from other parts of the UK, where youth work often functions as a standalone sector (CLD Standards Council Scotland, 2024; Sercombe et al., 2014). Within CLD, youth work focuses on the personal, social, and educational aspects of young people, particularly those experiencing marginalisation or disadvantage (CLD Standards Council Scotland, 2025; Scottish Government, 2018). It is rooted in informal education and relational practice, often taking place in community-based settings where young people can build trust, explore identity, and navigate social challenges (Coburn, 2011; Jeffs & Smith, 2010; Ord, 2009, 2012; YouthLink Scotland, 2021).

Youth work resists easy categorisation, but several core values underpin its practice. These include relational trust, equity, mutual respect, critical dialogue, and a commitment to youth voice and agency (Coburn & Gormally, 2019; Davies, 2005; de St Croix & Doherty, 2023). These values are operationalised across diverse contexts, from open-access drop-ins to targeted, issue-based projects, and are often expressed through flexible, youth-centred approaches that respond to the needs and interests of those participating (Jeffs & Smith, 2010). Belonging, care, and wellbeing are increasingly recognised as central to youth work. Coburn (2011) conceptualises youth spaces as relational buffers that provide safety, connection, and identity affirmation. de St Croix and Doherty (2023) build on this by arguing that youth work can cultivate collective agency and critical engagement when conditions allow, aligning with emerging perspectives that frame youth work as an everyday pedagogy grounded in care, dialogue, and relational practice, qualities that this study explores through young people's reflections on support, connection, and change (Gormally et al., 2020; Ord, 2016). However, the nature and purpose of youth work remain

contested. While some accounts emphasise youth work's informal, youth-led ethos, others point to increasing professionalisation and instrumentalisation driven by policy and funding frameworks (Davies, 2013; de St Croix, 2016).

A key concern in the literature is the impact of neoliberal governance on the values and practices of youth work. Scholars highlight how pressure to demonstrate measurable outcomes has shifted emphasis toward short-term interventions, undermining youth work's long-term, process-driven orientation (MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014; Shaw, 2008, 2013). These shifts risk diluting youth work's critical potential and repositioning it as a compensatory service rather than a space for relational learning and political engagement (Coburn & Gormally, 2019; de St Croix, 2016). Digitalisation has introduced further complexity. While digital platforms have expanded access and maintained contact during the pandemic, they also risk exacerbating exclusion for young people without reliable internet, devices, or private space (Hammond et al., 2022; Raphael et al., 2020). Scholars question whether digital formats can reproduce the embodied, affective depth of in-person youth work, noting that trust and relational safety are often harder to cultivate online (Gormally et al., 2020).

In this increasingly precarious environment, youth work continues to navigate tensions between its values and external constraints. Doherty and de St Croix (2024) introduce the concept of 'social haunting' to describe how histories of austerity, disinvestment, and structural violence linger within youth work practice. Through the lens of social haunting, youth work is viewed both as a space of possibility and a site of struggle, where practitioners work in solidarity with young people while contending with diminishing resources, precarious funding, and policy pressures. Within this context, youth work in Scotland remains a significant space for fostering wellbeing, connection, and youth voice. While not a solution to structural inequality, it offers critical insight into how young people find support, express concerns, and forge moments of agency in difficult circumstances. This study builds on such insights by examining how young people themselves articulate the role of youth work in supporting their wellbeing, and how they navigate the tensions between support, constraint, and

voice within these spaces ([RQ1 and RQ3](#)). The next section explores these connections further by focusing on youth work's contributions to supporting wellbeing.

### **2.4.3 - Youth Work and Wellbeing: Navigating Challenges and Opportunities**

The relationship between youth work and wellbeing is increasingly recognised, though often difficult to quantify through conventional measures (Elsen & Ord, 2023). Research highlights that youth work can offer spaces in which young people feel seen, supported, and respected. These environments cultivate feelings of inclusion, connectedness, identity development, and relational safety (de St Croix & Doherty, 2023). Coburn (2011) conceptualises youth work as a 'relational buffer' that helps young people navigate structural inequality through consistent interpersonal support. These environments often offer low-threshold, community-based engagement, which can play a protective role, particularly when other institutions such as education, healthcare, or family are fragmented or inaccessible (Gormally et al., 2020; O'Sullivan et al., 2021). This study examines how such values are experienced and negotiated by young people themselves within a community-based youth work setting.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, youth workers took on heightened emotional labour, often acting as informal first responders to young people's mental health needs without adequate training, supervision, or institutional support (Erwin & Thompson, 2021; Rose, 2021; YouthLink Scotland, 2021). While youth work has long supported wellbeing through relational practice (Barry et al., 2013; Patton et al., 2016), the intensification of need exposed the limits of expecting youth workers to act as substitutes for under-resourced mental health services. Elsen and Ord (2023) argue that youth work offers an alternative framing of mental health, one rooted in care, trust, and a rejection of deficit-based or biomedical narratives, enabling a broader understanding of emotional wellbeing as situated within young people's social and structural contexts. Additionally, the research emphasises that youth workers are increasingly relied upon to provide early intervention, safe space, and non-judgmental support, especially in areas of deprivation where other services are absent (Barry et al., 2013; Ní Charraighe &

Reynolds, 2024). These roles are often enacted with care and creativity, yet without equivalent investment in training, infrastructure, or systemic recognition (Rose, 2021). Scholars continue to highlight the need for sustainable connections between youth work and formal care systems, rather than increasing reliance on youth workers alone (Batsleer & Davies, 2010; de St Croix & Doherty, 2023).

Youth work's embeddedness in local communities enables a level of responsiveness and proximity to young people's lived realities that statutory systems often lack (de St Croix & Doherty, 2023; Stansfield et al., 2020). Community-based youth work can offer relational continuity and cultural relevance, particularly in the context of post-pandemic recovery, which intensified disconnection and isolation for many young people (Vaillancourt et al., 2021; YouthLink Scotland, 2021). These place-based approaches are vital for understanding how young people construct meaning and seek wellbeing in contexts of structural constraint.

However, tensions remain around how youth work's contributions to wellbeing are defined, evaluated, and supported. The sector is increasingly shaped by funding frameworks that demand short-term, measurable outcomes (Doherty & de St Croix, 2024). These frameworks often fail to capture the relational, long-term, and transformative aspects of youth work, privileging narrow behavioural or economic indicators of success. Coburn and Gormally (2019) argue that such approaches marginalise the emotional, political, and social dimensions of youth work and risk repositioning it as a mechanism of compliance rather than critical engagement. Davies (2013) and Shaw and Crowther (2017) similarly warn that under the pressures of professionalisation and performance management, youth work can lose its capacity to nurture agency and challenge systemic injustice. Moreover, the broader forces shaping young people's lives, such as austerity, housing insecurity, institutional racism, and unequal access to education, continue to present persistent structural challenges (Cooper, 2018; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014). The concept of 'social haunting' (Doherty & de St Croix, 2024) captures how these histories of trauma, disinvestment, and neglect remain

present in youth work practice and the lives of young people, limiting what is possible even in the most well-intentioned settings.

This study explores how young people reflect on wellbeing, support, and agency during and after the COVID-19 pandemic ([RQ1 and RQ3](#)). It focuses on how young people themselves interpret the role of youth work in their lives, what it enables, what it constrains, and how its values are experienced in practice.

## **2.5 - Youth Voice and Meaning-Making**

Youth voice refers to the meaningful inclusion of young people in shaping the decisions, narratives, and structures that affect their lives. It goes beyond consultation or feedback to demand influence, safety, and accountability within youth participation processes (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006; Grover, 2004; Kirby, 2004; Kirby et al., 2003; Lundy, 2007; Wright et al., 2024). These principles are central to rights-based frameworks, such as Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which recognises the right of children to express their opinions and for those opinions to be meaningfully considered in matters impacting their lives. In policy contexts such as Scotland's National Youth Work Strategy 2020-2025 (YouthLink Scotland, 2020), youth voice is framed as both a moral and legal imperative, frequently positioned as essential to participatory democracy, empowerment, and social inclusion (Ginwright & Cammarota, 2002; Hart, 1992; Wright et al., 2022).

Despite the rhetorical support of youth voice, in practice, it is often shaped by persistent power imbalances. Research consistently highlights how youth participation mechanisms, including youth councils, advisory boards, or student voice initiatives, can become symbolic rather than substantive, offering spaces for input without real influence (Bovill et al., 2020; Crowley, 2015; MacLachlan et al., 2024). Adult control over agendas, framing, and decision-making can limit young people's contributions to pre-scripted forms of engagement. These dynamics risk rendering participation symbolic, extractive, or even disciplinary,

particularly when structural follow-through or shared control is absent (Bessant, 2020; Wilson et al., 2007). These critiques raise questions about who gets to participate, under what conditions, and to what effect. Much of the youth voice literature focuses on civically engaged or institutionally confident young people, often overlooking the structural and emotional barriers that shape participation for those experiencing poverty, exclusion, or discrimination (Bessant, 2020; Hardin et al., 2022; Zeldin et al., 2013). Material insecurity, stigma, adult gatekeeping, and limited access to social and cultural capital influence whose voices are amplified and whose are silenced, and how they are interpreted or acted upon (Lansdown, 2011; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009). These critiques highlight the need to approach youth voice not as a universally empowering process, but as a situated and contingent practice shaped by relationships, context, and material conditions. When participation is relational, well-supported, and inclusive, it can foster confidence, belonging, and improved wellbeing (Larkins, 2019; Larkins et al., 2014; McCabe et al., 2023; Pittman et al., 2007; Punch, 2002; Ramey et al., 2017; Rutten et al., 2013; Zeldin et al., 2013). However, these outcomes are not automatic. Without trust, continuity, and responsiveness, participation can become disillusioning or burdensome, especially for young people navigating exclusion or precarity (Aldridge, 2016; Lansdown, 2011).

Youth activism represents another form of youth voice, often framed as more autonomous and politically visible. Fridays for Future, the Period Poverty Campaign in Scotland, and other youth-driven movements demonstrate how young people can shape public discourse and policy, while also fostering identity, purpose, and solidarity (Haugseth & Smeplass, 2023; Integrate UK, 2025; Kirshner, 2007; Loader et al., 2014; Pickard, 2019; RECLAIM, 2025; Scottish Government, 2022; Thunberg, 2019; Wong et al., 2010; Young Scot, 2018). However, these spaces are not equally accessible. Young people facing intersecting marginalisations, including racialised, working-class, disabled, criminalised, or care-experienced youth, often encounter additional emotional and material barriers to activism (Zhang, 2022). These can include burnout, exposure to surveillance, or experiences of being ignored, silenced, or co-opted (Fisher & Nasrin, 2021; Huttunen, 2021; O'Brien et al., 2018).

This study engages with these dynamics through meaning-making. The term ‘meaning-making’ captures how young people actively interpret and give significance to the events, relationships, and environments that shape their lives (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). This understanding of youth voice shifts focus from formal participation mechanisms to how young people narrate, negotiate, and make sense of their everyday lives within a youth work setting shaped by trust, care, and relational practice (Bessant, 2020; Coburn, 2011; Ozer, 2016).

This study explores how young people articulate their realities when given space, tools, and support to do so on their own terms, aligning with calls for research that centres young people’s interpretive agency, particularly those navigating structural disadvantage (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). Youth voice in this study is treated as an evolving and relational practice of meaning-making that unfolds in specific social, emotional, and institutional conditions. This orientation directly informs [RQ1 and RQ3](#), which explore how young people experience and reflect on wellbeing and support within a community-based youth work setting. By attending to how young people construct and communicate meaning, the study contributes to a growing literature that views youth voice as contextual, dialogical, and reflective of broader power relations (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Ozer, 2016; Tisdall, 2016). These dynamics are also connected to [RQ2](#), which examines the structural barriers young people face and how their exclusion from decision-making, recognition, and influence reproduces broader patterns of marginalisation.

## **2.6 - Stakeholder Perspectives on Supporting Youth Wellbeing**

Promoting youth wellbeing is a shared responsibility that spans multiple sectors and professions, involving policymakers, youth workers, formal educators, healthcare providers, community leaders, and families. These stakeholders play distinct but interconnected roles in shaping the systems, relationships, and supports that impact young people’s lives (Wong et al., 2010; Zeldin et al., 2013). Within youth work contexts, stakeholders often function as intermediaries

between young people and broader institutional or policy landscapes, influencing how programmes are designed, resourced, and delivered (Wong et al., 2010). Especially in the aftermath of COVID-19, a multi-stakeholder approach grounded in collaboration, care, and contextual understanding is vital for supporting inclusive and responsible wellbeing systems (Hagell, 2021; YouthLink Scotland, 2021).

However, stakeholders often operate within significant constraints. Austerity, budget cuts, and rising demand for services have reshaped the landscape of youth provision across Scotland and beyond (Davies, 2024; Hernandez, 2021; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014). Many organisations are required to prioritise short-term, outcome-driven interventions, despite consensus that long-term, relational approaches are more effective in promoting youth wellbeing (de St Croix, 2016; Unison, 2016). These pressures are especially acute in communities marked by multiple forms of disadvantage, where limited access to mental health care, housing insecurity, and educational inequality converge to strain both young people and services (Featherstone et al., 2018). Neoliberal governance models, characterised by audit cultures, performance metrics, and cost-efficiency, exacerbate these tensions, often at the expense of the flexibility, care, and creativity that relational practice requires (de St Croix, 2022; Shaw & Crowther, 2017). Many youth professionals experience an ongoing dissonance between their values, rooted in empowerment, social justice, and informality, and the instrumental demands imposed by policy frameworks (Davies, 2024; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014)

The dominance of adult-led decision-making continues to pose a significant barrier. Despite growing commitments to co-production with young people, many stakeholder-led programmes retain hierarchical structures in which they have little say over the services that affect them (Checkoway & Gutiérrez, 2006; Hamilton et al., 2024). Programmes are often top-down in nature, designed *for* rather than *with* young people, and rarely allocate time or resources to building the trust and capacity needed for genuine collaboration. Coussée et al. (2010) caution that without deliberate efforts to redistribute power and build trust, programmes risk reproducing dynamics of exclusion rather than fostering

empowerment. For young people who are already marginalised by poverty, racism, ableism, or other structural inequalities, these dynamics can deepen mistrust and disengagement from services (Bessant, 2020; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009).

However, there is growing evidence that collaborative, community-rooted approaches can create more accessible and effective support systems (Bentivegna et al., 2023; Henry et al., 2024). Cross-sector partnerships involving youth workers, educators, and health professionals can offer more holistic care that reflects the complex realities of young people's lives (Ewan et al., 2016; Luthar, 2006). Youth workers often serve as trusted adults embedded within communities, providing emotional, social, and practical support, especially when formal systems are experienced as inaccessible or punitive (Coburn, 2011; Tisdall, 2013). Their roles frequently extend beyond service delivery, encompassing identity development, advocacy, and informal mentoring (Coussée et al., 2012).

Relational trust and cultural competence are foundational to these roles. Batsleer (2008) emphasises that when young people feel heard and understood, they are more likely to engage meaningfully with support systems. This idea of relational trust is particularly important in the context of mental health, where institutional distrust and social stigma have been shown to inhibit help-seeking behaviours. (Bentivegna et al., 2023; Henry et al., 2024). Community-based stakeholders can act as bridges, offering care while also facilitating access to more formal interventions. Moreover, when young people are included in co-design processes or shared decision-making, services become more responsive, effective, and empowering (Lee et al., 2022; Zeldin et al., 2013). These approaches can foster youth agency and belonging, but only when supported by time, resources, and genuine accountability. As Cook-Sather (2007) and Aldridge (2016) argue, youth involvement without structural backing risks becoming tokenistic and may reinforce the very inequalities it seeks to address.

This study contributes to these debates by exploring how local stakeholders understand their roles in supporting youth wellbeing and navigating structural challenges (RQ4). It does so within a Scottish youth work setting shaped by both relational values and institutional pressures. While this section has focused on broader conceptual literature, the specific perspectives of stakeholder participants, including youth workers, family members, community practitioners, and policymakers, are outlined in [Section 4.5](#). By foregrounding these accounts, the study highlights how relational and structural dynamics intersect in shaping the systems of support surrounding young people. It contributes to wider discussions on how joined-up, context-sensitive, and youth-informed approaches might better support wellbeing, especially during periods of heightened precarity, such as the aftermath of COVID-19.

## 2.7 - Research Questions

Emerging from the literature, the research questions reflect both established debates and gaps in knowledge that warrant further exploration. The review highlighted that youth wellbeing is shaped through the dynamic interaction of personal, social, and systemic influences, including poverty, exclusion, digital inequality, and fragmented service landscapes, which affect young people's everyday lives (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2016; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). It also emphasised the potential of youth work as a relational, community-based space of support (Coburn, 2011; de St Croix & Doherty, 2023), while noting the limited youth-centred research exploring how young people themselves interpret and experience these spaces, particularly after the pandemic (Hammond et al., 2022; YouthLink Scotland, 2021).

Alongside these insights, the literature on youth voice and participation raised critical questions around inclusion, power, and meaning-making in youth work contexts. While youth participation is widely advocated in policy and practice, many young people, especially those facing structural disadvantage, encounter barriers to being heard, recognised, and included in decisions that affect them (Aldridge, 2016; Bessant, 2020; Tisdall, 2016). The review also explored the perspectives of local stakeholders, who play a key role in supporting youth

wellbeing but often operate within constrained institutional environments marked by austerity, managerialism, and limited capacity (Davies, 2024; Hamilton et al., 2024).

In response to these intersecting debates, this study is guided by the following research questions (RQs):

- 1. How do young people understand, reflect on, and experience wellbeing within the context of their everyday lives?**
  - a. This question addresses the need for youth-centred understandings of wellbeing that go beyond individualised or deficit-based models.
- 2. What challenges and structural barriers do young people identify as influencing their wellbeing?**
  - a. This responds to evidence of systemic inequalities and the impact of socio-economic pressures, particularly in a post-pandemic context.
- 3. What role do youth work spaces play in shaping young people's wellbeing and sense of agency?**
  - a. This explores the pedagogical and relational dimensions of youth work and the conditions under which these spaces are experienced as meaningful or limiting.
- 4. How do local stakeholders understand their roles in supporting young people's wellbeing and navigating structural challenges?**
  - a. This examines the views and practices of youth workers, community practitioners, and others working to support young people in complex policy and service environments.

Together, these research questions provide a layered framework for exploring how wellbeing is defined, nurtured, and experienced within the interactions between young people and those who support them. The following chapters build on the foundation laid in this chapter, outlining the study's theoretical framework, methodological approach, and the narratives generated through youth and stakeholder engagement.

## 2.8 - Conclusion of the Literature Review

The literature review has examined four interrelated areas that inform the focus of this study: youth wellbeing, youth work, youth voice and meaning-making, and stakeholder perspectives. It has traced how relational, emotional, and structural conditions influence the trajectories of young people's lives and how they encounter support, situating the need for this research within broader academic and policy debates. Across these domains, the review identifies both the possibilities for care, agency, and connection, as well as the persistent constraints posed by inequality, disempowerment, and under-resourced systems.

Youth wellbeing is recognised as a multidimensional and socially embedded concept, shaped by personal experience, relationships, and wider structural conditions (Ben-Arieh et al., 2014; Patton et al., 2016; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). While recent scholarship increasingly calls for more holistic and contextualised approaches to understanding wellbeing (Bynner et al., 2020), there remains a need for research grounded in the lived realities of young people, especially those facing disadvantage. In response, this study addresses this gap by centring youth perspectives on wellbeing as experienced in everyday life (see RQ1 and RQ2).

Youth work emerged as a key space through which wellbeing may be supported. Defined by its relational ethos, voluntary participation, and pedagogical flexibility, youth work has the potential to create environments of trust, reflection, and support (Coburn, 2011; de St Croix & Doherty, 2023; Ord, 2016). Yet its capacity to do so is shaped by ongoing structural pressures, including funding insecurity, outcome-driven governance, and emotional demands on practitioners (MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014; Shaw & Crowther, 2017). This study contributes to this conversation by exploring how young people themselves describe and interpret their experiences of youth work, including what practices and conditions feel supportive or limiting, and how these relate to wider structural challenges (RQ3).

Youth voice and meaning-making were discussed as central to how young people navigate and narrate their experiences. While participation is widely promoted, scholars caution against assumptions that it is inherently empowering, particularly when shaped by adult-led structures or constrained by inequity (Bessant, 2020; Tisdall, 2016). This study approaches youth voice as a situated, relational process of meaning-making: the ways in which young people construct understanding from lived experience, articulate what matters to them, and reflect on support, constraint, and agency within the spaces they inhabit (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Wexler & Eglinton, 2024). It considers how youth work settings may support or hinder these reflective processes (RQ1 and RQ3).

Stakeholder perspectives, though less frequently centred in youth wellbeing research, are critical for understanding how systems of care are shaped and enacted. Youth workers, community practitioners, family members, and others play a vital role in supporting young people, often while navigating competing demands and limited resources (Davies, 2024; Wong et al., 2010). This study engages with these perspectives to better understand how support is conceptualised and practised, and how stakeholder insights align with or diverge from those of young people (RQ4). The specific roles and relationships of stakeholder participants are discussed further in Section 4.5.

In summary, this review identifies four key areas that frame the study's research questions:

1. The need for youth-centred, qualitative research that explores how young people define and experience wellbeing in the context of their everyday lives (RQ1 and RQ2).
2. A deeper understanding of youth work as a relational space, including the conditions that support or constrain its contribution to wellbeing and agency (RQ3).
3. An approach to youth voice that foregrounds young people's meaning-making practices within informal and relational settings (RQ1 and RQ3).

4. An exploration of stakeholder roles in supporting youth wellbeing, with attention to policy constraints, intergenerational dynamics, and opportunities for more collaborative and reflective practice (RQ4).

These concerns collectively inform the study's focus on the lived, relational, and structural dimensions of youth wellbeing in post-COVID-19 Scotland. The research provides context-specific insights into how young people and key stakeholders navigate support, reflect on what matters to them, and envision more just and caring approaches to wellbeing. The chapters that follow build on this foundation, outlining the study's theoretical framework, research design, and the narratives co-constructed with young people and stakeholders in one community-based youth work setting. Rather than prescribing solutions, the study seeks to honour young people's reflections and highlight the conditions needed to support them.

## Chapter 3 - Theoretical Framework

### 3.1 - Introduction

The theoretical framework employed in this study is informed by a combination of Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000), Feminist Ethics of Care (Collins, 2000; Cook-Sather, 2007; Crenshaw, 1991; Hochschild, 1983; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993), and selected insights from Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000). Together, these perspectives support a relational and context-sensitive analysis of how young people understand and experience wellbeing, articulate agency, and navigate structural constraints within a youth work setting in post-COVID-19 Scotland.

Rather than operating as a tightly integrated or prescriptive theoretical model, this framework functions as a sensitising and interpretive resource (Hoonard et al., 2008), offering information that helped highlight young people's accounts of their everyday lives. The study did not seek to test or apply these theories in a deterministic way. Instead, they are used to support a critical, context-sensitive interpretation of how young people make meaning of wellbeing, support, and constraint within their specific social, relational, and structural contexts. Meaning-making, in this study, refers to the interpretive processes through which young people reflect on their lives, navigate challenges, and construct understanding from their experiences.

The framework was developed reflexively and iteratively, in dialogue with the data generated through the research process. Feminist Ethics of Care (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993) and Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000) provided the primary analytical grounding, foregrounding relationality, voice, emotional labour, and structural power. Freire's (2000) work is drawn on more selectively, offering a broader critical backdrop for understanding how young people recognise and name inequality, rather than serving as a central pedagogical or methodological framework.

While participatory research methods informed aspects of the study design, participation itself is not positioned as a core object of analysis. The theoretical commitments outlined here align with participatory values such as voice, dialogue, and relational engagement, particularly within Feminist Ethics of Care (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993). This study uses Critical Pedagogy to support an interpretive reading of young people's narratives and stakeholder accounts, attending to how wellbeing and agency are shaped by care, constraint, and structural inequality.

Together, these perspectives provide a critical foundation for understanding how young people describe wellbeing (RQ1), identify structural barriers (RQ2), and reflect on the role of youth work in shaping their lives (RQ3). They also guide the analysis of stakeholder narratives, offering tools to examine how professionals understand their roles, constraints, and relationships with young people (RQ4). By centring relational practice, structural context, and lived experience, this theoretical framework supports a nuanced interpretation of how youth wellbeing is navigated and made meaningful within a youth work context shaped by inequality, care, and limited institutional support.

### **3.2 - Critical Pedagogy**

Critical Pedagogy provides an important contextual foundation for this study, offering a framework for understanding how power, inequality, and social conditions shape everyday experience. Rooted in critical theory, Critical Pedagogy seeks to interrogate dominant social structures and challenge forms of oppression that are reproduced through education, policy, and social institutions (Blake & Masschelein, 2003; DePoy & Gitlin, 2016; Freire, 2000). It positions lived experience as a legitimate source of knowledge and emphasises dialogue, reflection, and praxis as means of engaging critically with the conditions that shape people's lives.

This study draws on a broad understanding of Critical Pedagogy as a dialogical and relational orientation rather than a prescriptive model of practice. Across

educational, community, and informal learning contexts, Critical Pedagogy has been used to foreground marginalised voices, question assumptions, and support collective inquiry into social injustice (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Giroux, 2011; hooks, 1984). Central to this tradition is the rejection of one-way knowledge transmission in favour of dialogue, where meaning is co-constructed, and participants are recognised as knowledgeable actors within their own social contexts.

Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) is a key reference point within this tradition. Freire conceptualised education as an inherently political process and argued that dialogue and critical reflection enable individuals and communities to recognise and challenge the structural forces shaping their lives. His critique of 'banking' models of education and his advocacy for 'problem-posing' approaches emphasise participation, reflection, and mutual learning. Freire's notion of praxis, understood as the integration of reflection and action, highlights the importance of linking critical awareness to engagement with social conditions rather than treating reflection as an end.

Freire's ideas have been influential within youth work and informal education, particularly through their alignment with voluntarism, relational practice, and informal learning (Batsleer, 2008; Coburn, 2011; Jeffs & Smith, 2010). Youth work has often been conceptualised as a space where young people can reflect on their experiences, build critical awareness, and explore their positioning within wider social and political contexts. These overlaps make Critical Pedagogy a useful conceptual lens for situating this study within broader traditions of relational and critical practice, without assuming that such spaces are inherently transformative.

Within this study, Critical Pedagogy contributes primarily as a structural and interpretive frame. It offers conceptual tools for understanding how young people may come to recognise social constraints, articulate critique, and situate their experiences within wider systems of power. In particular, the concept of critical consciousness is useful for thinking about how individuals identify and

interpret inequality and marginalisation (Diemer et al., 2016; Freire, 2000). Diemer et al. (2016) conceptualise critical consciousness as comprising three interrelated dimensions: critical reflection, critical motivation, and critical action. While this framework is not operationalised as a developmental model in this study, it provides a useful language for situating reflection, agency, and constraint within broader social structures.

Critical Pedagogy has, however, been subject to sustained critique. One key concern relates to Freire's (2000) tendency toward binary framings of 'oppressor' and 'oppressed', which some scholars argue risks oversimplifying complex and intersecting forms of power (Avoseh, 2009; Weiler, 1991, 2001). Feminist and intersectional scholars have highlighted that social positioning is shaped by multiple, overlapping structures such as class, gender, age, and race, and that these cannot be fully captured through singular or dichotomous categories (Crenshaw, 1991). Further critiques point to Critical Pedagogy's limited engagement with affect, embodiment, and emotional labour. Ellsworth (1989) and hooks (1984) argue that an emphasis on rational dialogue and critical reflection may obscure the emotional and relational dimensions of learning and participation. This critique is particularly salient in relational and informal contexts, such as youth work, where care, trust, and emotional responsibility are central features of everyday practice. Scholars have also questioned assumptions that critical reflection will necessarily lead to transformative action. Biesta (2013) and Giroux (2011) caution that without supportive institutional and structural conditions, Critical Pedagogy may place disproportionate responsibility on individuals to enact change, while leaving broader systems unchallenged. This raises important questions about the limits of pedagogy and participation within constrained policy and funding environments.

Together, these critiques indicate that Critical Pedagogy offers a useful contextual lens rather than a central analytic framework for this study. Here, it is used in a limited and peripheral way to provide language for situating young people's reflections within wider structures of power, without assuming linear processes of critical development or transformation. The core theoretical

framing of the study is instead drawn from Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000) and Feminist Ethics of Care (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993), which guide the analysis of agency, relationality, and the emotional and structural conditions shaping youth wellbeing.

### **3.3 - Empowerment Theory**

Through the lens of Empowerment Theory, it becomes possible to explore how young people's experiences of power and agency relate to their overall wellbeing. It bridges individual and relational experiences with broader structural and political contexts (Rappaport, 1981, 1984; Zimmerman, 2000), making it particularly relevant to this study. This research examines how young people in a youth work setting reflect on wellbeing, negotiate structural constraints, and describe their capacity to act, connect, or imagine change within post-COVID-19 Scotland. This section outlines the theoretical foundations of Empowerment Theory, explains its relevance to youth work and wellbeing, and clarifies how it informs the analytical approach adopted in this study.

Power is a contested and multifaceted concept. Classical definitions often frame it as 'power over' others (Lukes, 1974; Weber, 1946), but critical theorists such as Foucault (1980) describe power as relational and embedded in everyday practices and institutions. This more diffuse understanding is particularly relevant to youth work, where practitioners operate at the intersection of relational care and institutional constraint. Scholars such as Cooper et al. (2015) and Coburn and Gormally (2017) argue for the importance of making power visible in youth work, emphasising that even well-meaning interventions can reinforce disempowerment if they overlook systemic inequalities or reproduce adult authority.

VeneKlasen and Miller's (2002) typology, 'power over,' 'power with,' 'power to,' and 'power within,' offers a practical framework for examining how power is experienced and expressed by young people. 'Power within' reflects self-

confidence and internal awareness; ‘power to’ refers to the capacity to act; and ‘power with’ speaks to collective forms of agency and solidarity. This framework aligns with the study’s attention to how young people reflect on their wellbeing, articulate barriers, and express different forms of agency in everyday life (see RQ1-RQ3). While Freire’s work provides a broader structural context for understanding the relationship between reflection and action, Empowerment Theory offers a more directly applicable analytical language for examining how awareness, agency, and constraint are navigated within youth work settings.

Building on this, Zimmerman (2000) distinguishes between empowering processes, such as opportunities for participation, reflection, and relational connection, and empowered outcomes, including increased confidence, efficacy, or engagement. This distinction allows the study to explore how young people describe their experiences without presuming that empowerment has occurred. Bandura’s (1997) concept of collective efficacy, shared belief in group capacity, further supports analysis of how relational youth work spaces may foster a sense of possibility and belonging. In this context, empowerment is understood as both a personal and collective process, shaped by relationships, resources, and structural conditions (Rowlands, 1995; Swift & Levin, 1987). ‘Power to’ is a central interpretive concept, referring to how young people describe their ability to act in the world and imagine different futures (VeneKlasen & Miller, 2002). Within youth work, cultivating capacity often involves dialogical, trust-based practices rather than fixed programme outcomes (Ord, 2014).

Nonetheless, critiques of Empowerment Theory remain crucial. Hart’s (1992) ladder of participation illustrates how youth engagement can appear genuine while offering little real influence. Lam and Kwong (2014) caution that poorly implemented empowerment efforts may raise expectations without structural backing, potentially leading to disillusionment. Ball (2012) and Evans (2007) argue that narrow or individualised models of empowerment can obscure systemic inequalities by focusing on personal resilience over political change. Ord & Davies (2022) similarly emphasise that youth work must retain its role as a site of political and critical education, rather than adapting uncritically to outcome-driven governance or policy agendas.

In this study, Empowerment Theory is used to interpret the data in three interconnected ways:

### **1. Empowering Processes**

Youth work practices are examined as potential mechanisms for supporting young people's reflection, confidence, and relational connection.

### **2. Empowered Outcomes**

The study explores how participants describe changes in their awareness, motivation, or sense of agency, while remaining attentive to complexity, ambivalence, and contradiction.

### **3. Structural Contexts**

Empowerment is analysed in relation to the broader socio-political and institutional conditions that shape what is possible. Drawing on Gaventa (2006) and Prilleltensky (2008), the study considers how empowerment is enabled or constrained by the availability of resources, recognition, and structural change.

This study explores the specific conditions under which young people reflect on agency, wellbeing, and support, and how they describe the possibilities, tensions, or contradictions that emerge in youth work settings. This application of Empowerment Theory contributes most directly to RQ3, while also intersecting with RQ1 and RQ2 by illuminating how relational practices and structural contexts shape young people's understandings of power, constraint, and the capacity to act in their everyday lives.

## **3.4 - Feminist Ethics of Care**

A Feminist Ethics of Care provides the specific feminist lens through which this study interprets young people's experiences. While feminist theory encompasses a wide and diverse intellectual field, including liberal, radical, post-structural, materialist, and queer feminist approaches, this study draws particularly on the Feminist Ethics of Care tradition. This strand of feminist thought foregrounds

relationality, interdependence, emotional labour, and the moral and political significance of care (Arinder, 2022; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993). It does not seek to offer a comprehensive engagement with all feminist theory, but mobilises a specific conceptual toolkit that aids analysis of how care, power, and inequality shape young people's wellbeing and sense of agency.

At its core, a Feminist Ethics of Care challenges abstract, individualised, or rationalist models of ethics by emphasising care as a socially distributed practice shaped by unequal responsibility and unequal recognition (Hochschild, 1983; Tronto, 1993). This approach is particularly suited to youth work contexts, where relationships, trust, and emotional labour form the basis of support. In this study, a Feminist Ethics of Care offers an analytical lens for understanding how young people, often navigating intersecting inequalities of class, gender, race, age, and place, experience care as both sustaining and constrained.

Although rooted within broader feminist critiques of power and inequality (Burton, 1985), a Feminist Ethics of Care draws specifically on lineages that highlight how care is devalued under patriarchal and capitalist systems. Early feminist theorists such as Engels (1884) and Hochschild (1983) exposed how domestic and caring labour has been historically feminised, privatised, and rendered invisible. Later developments, particularly Black feminist scholarship, expanded the analysis of care to highlight how race, gender, class, sexuality, and community shape who is expected to care, who receives care, and under what conditions (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991). The concept of intersectionality, coined by Crenshaw (1991), is therefore central to the analytic use of care ethics in this study, enabling attention to how structural inequalities shape young people's lives and their access to support.

Within youth work, a Feminist Ethics of Care provides conceptual tools for analysing the relational and emotional labour undertaken by practitioners. Scholars such as Hochschild (1983) and Tronto (1993) emphasise that care involves sustained attentiveness, responsiveness, and relational accountability, often enacted within contexts of institutional constraint. These dynamics are

particularly relevant in community-based youth work settings, where practitioners operate within under-resourced systems while seeking to create conditions of trust, safety, and recognition. In this study, a Feminist Ethics of Care informs analysis of how relational spaces are co-created and maintained, and how care functions as both support and subtle resistance to systemic neglect.

Feminist epistemologies further underpin this framework by validating lived experience as a legitimate and generative form of knowledge (Cook-Sather, 2007; hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2007). This orientation stands in contrast to positivist paradigms that prioritise distance and objectivity. Thinkers such as hooks (1984, 2003) and Cook-Sather (2007) inform this study's approach to youth voice as situated, relational, and meaning-making, rather than as data points to be interpreted from above. Concepts such as socially lived theorising and voice-as-translation support an analytical stance that treats young people as knowledge holders whose reflections highlight both the emotional and structural dimensions of wellbeing (Cook-Sather, 2007; Kang et al., 2007).

A key contribution of Feminist Ethics of Care is its distinction between symbolic inclusion and structural change. Fraser (1990), for instance, highlights the need to distinguish between recognition (being seen and heard) and redistribution (access to power and material resources). This distinction informs how the study analyses youth work as both a site of meaningful relational support and a space constrained by wider structural conditions. Similarly, Connell's (2005) work on masculinities illustrates how institutional cultures can reproduce inequities that shape young people's wellbeing across gender lines.

In this study, a Feminist Ethics of Care is applied analytically in three key ways:

### **1. Intersectionality as a Lens**

Informed by Black feminist and critical race scholarship (Collins, 2000; Crenshaw, 1991), intersectionality is used to examine how overlapping systems of power, such as age, race, class, and gender, shape young

people's access to care, support, and wellbeing. This lens supports a more nuanced analysis of how identities are lived and negotiated in context.

## **2. Relational Dynamics and Emotional Labour**

Care ethics foreground the emotional and relational labour of youth work (Hochschild, 1983; Tronto, 1993). This lens is central to analysing how trust, belonging, and relational safety are cultivated in under-resourced community spaces.

## **3. Lived Experience and Youth Voice**

Feminist epistemologies (Cook-Sather, 2007; hooks, 1984) shape the study's approach to youth voice as relational, political, and situated. Young people's narratives illuminate the emotional and structural dimensions of their wellbeing.

In the discussion of findings, Feminist Ethics of Care supports a critical reading of youth work as a space where care and constraint co-exist, and where relational practice can create openings for reflection even in the absence of structural transformation. By drawing specifically on Feminist Ethics of Care, rather than feminist theory in general, the study can attend closely to how care, power, emotional labour, and inequality intersect in shaping young people's wellbeing and agency. This framework complements Empowerment Theory (Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000) and provides a relational, justice-oriented foundation for interpreting the study's findings. The following section synthesises how these theoretical perspectives interact to inform the overall analytical framework.

### **3.5 - Synthesis of Theoretical Framework**

This study's theoretical framework draws primarily on Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000) and a Feminist Ethics of Care (Arinder, 2022; Cook-Sather, 2007; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2007; Tronto, 1993), with Critical Pedagogy

contributing a contextual and secondary interpretive lens (Freire, 2000). These perspectives are not treated as a unified tradition, nor are they applied evenly across the analysis. Instead, Empowerment Theory and care ethics form the central analytic frame, while Critical Pedagogy provides a background conceptual language for situating young people's reflections within wider structures of power (see Figure 3.1).

Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000) provides a limited structural and interpretive backdrop. It offers conceptual tools for understanding how social, political, and economic conditions shape lived experience, and how individuals may come to recognise and reflect on these conditions through dialogue. In this study, its role is peripheral rather than central: it supports contextual interpretation of how young people situate their experiences within wider systems of constraint, without guiding the analytic process or offering a prescriptive model of change.

Empowerment Theory builds on this structural framing by offering a framework for understanding how agency, efficacy, and participation may be developed or constrained across personal, relational, and community levels (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). It supports analysis of how young people experience confidence, voice, and participation, and how these are shaped by relational support, opportunities for engagement, and institutional conditions. Importantly, Empowerment Theory enables attention to both enabling and constraining factors, recognising that agency is uneven, situated, and contingent rather than guaranteed. (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981).

A Feminist Ethics of Care, by contrast, brings a specifically relational, intersectional, and emotional analytic dimension to the framework. Rather than drawing on feminist theory broadly, this study focuses on the care-ethics lineage that foregrounds interdependence, emotional labour, and the distribution of care and responsibility within unequal social contexts (Hochschild, 1983; Tronto, 1993). This perspective enhances the framework by attending to how relationships, identity, and structural inequalities shape experiences of

wellbeing and support. Intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991) is a central aspect of this strand, enabling analysis of how age, gender, race, class, and place intersect in young people's accounts.

Figure 3.1 organises the framework across five layers. Layer 1 distinguishes the two primary frameworks (Empowerment Theory; Feminist Ethics of Care) from Critical Pedagogy as a contextual interpretive lens. Layer 2 summarises relationships: there is a primary intersection between Empowerment Theory and Care Ethics around questions of agency, recognition, relational support, and the ways structural inequalities shape capacity and possibility; in contrast, there are only selective overlaps between Critical Pedagogy and the primary frameworks (reflection, dialogue, structural awareness). Care Ethics also extends structural concerns by foregrounding emotional labour, relational accountability, and intersectional identity.

Building on these relationships, Layer 3 shows four mid-level analytical themes used to interpret the study's findings:

- **Power and Empowerment:** primarily informed by Empowerment Theory; Critical Pedagogy provides contextual language.
- **Participation and Agency:** jointly informed by Empowerment Theory and Feminist Ethics of Care.
- **Social Change and Collective Action:** draws on all three strands, with Critical Pedagogy used lightly.
- **Relational Dynamics and Emotional Labour:** rooted mainly in Feminist Ethics of Care.

As analysis progressed, these themes were synthesised into three overarching discussion themes (Figure 3.1, Layer 4)

- **Structural Barriers to Wellbeing:** Feminist Ethics of Care with contextual contributions from Critical Pedagogy.
- **Relational Dimensions of Wellbeing:** Feminist Ethics of Care.

- **Participatory Pathways to Empowerment:** Empowerment Theory and Feminist Ethics of Care, with Critical Pedagogy used selectively.

Finally, Layer 5 notes that the framework evolved reflexively alongside the analysis: theoretical emphases were revisited to remain aligned with the research context and participatory methods. The figure represents this as a process note rather than as directional arrows. Together, these elements support an analytical approach that treats agency, wellbeing, and social change as interdependent rather than discrete categories, while maintaining a clear weighting: Empowerment Theory and Feminist Ethics of Care are central, and Critical Pedagogy is contextual.

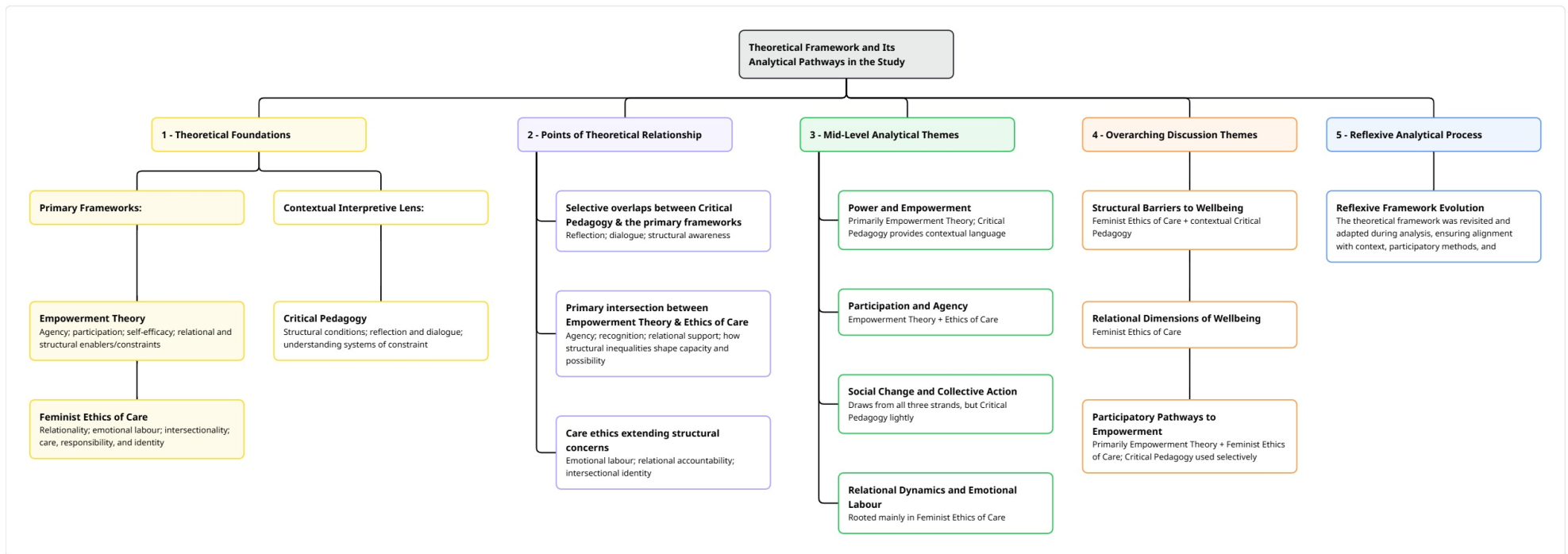


Figure 3.1: Theoretical Framework and Its Analytical Pathways in the Study

## Chapter 4 - Methodology

### 4.1 - Introduction

The previous chapter outlined the theoretical framework guiding this study, which draws primarily on Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000) and Feminist Ethics of Care (Arinder, 2022; Cook-Sather, 2007; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2007; Tronto, 1993). These two strands form the core analytic foundation for the study. Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000) is used in a contextual and secondary way, offering background concepts related to reflection, dialogue, and structural awareness rather than operating as a central analytical lens. Together, these perspectives informed the methodological orientation of the study and shaped how the research was designed, facilitated, and later interpreted. They provided a lens for attending to power, relationality, and context when creating spaces for young people to reflect on wellbeing and everyday experience, without prescribing specific outcomes.

This chapter sets out the study's methodology, outlining the research paradigm and methods used to explore the research questions and generate youth-centred, context-sensitive insights. It begins by situating the study within a critical interpretivist paradigm that emphasises power, reflexivity, and the co-construction of knowledge. This methodological approach centres marginalised perspectives and engages with the contexts of the societal and systemic conditions that impact youth experiences. The research design employed creative, youth-centred methods informed by participatory principles to support critical reflection and storytelling. These methods were selected because they aligned with the study's aim to create space for meaning-making and collaborative knowledge production with young people. While the research took place within a youth work setting, the methodological approach is distinct from youth work practice itself. Youth work in Scotland is grounded in informal education and values of participation and care, providing a supportive context for this study. Here, participatory visual methods were used as research tools to explore how young people reflect on wellbeing, agency, and support in their own

words and images. Participation frameworks such as Biggs (1989) and Hart (1992) guided the relational design of the study and are discussed later in this chapter.

The research questions guiding this study are as follows:

1. How do young people understand, reflect on, and experience wellbeing within the context of their everyday lives?
2. What challenges and structural barriers do young people identify as influencing their wellbeing?
3. What role do youth work spaces play in shaping young people's wellbeing and sense of agency?
4. How do local stakeholders understand their roles in supporting young people's wellbeing and navigating structural challenges?

These questions reflect a critical and youth-centred focus on wellbeing as a relational and socially embedded process. The study explores how young people themselves interpret youth work's role in shaping their experiences of support, agency, and constraint. To facilitate reflective and dialogical engagement, the study used creative, youth-centred research methods informed by participatory principles. These methods were designed to support co-produced insight and to foreground young people's perspectives, while recognising the broader structural conditions that shape, and often limit, their lives.

## **4.2 - Research Paradigm**

In educational research, a research paradigm refers to the philosophical framework that shapes how a researcher understands reality (ontology), the nature of knowledge (epistemology), and the approaches taken to investigate social phenomena (methodology) (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Howell, 2013; Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017; Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). It informs how research is designed, conducted, and interpreted. This study is grounded in a critical interpretivist paradigm, which combines the interpretivist concern with understanding meaning and lived experience with a critical awareness of the social, political, and structural conditions that shape those meanings (Crotty, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Guba & Lincoln, 1989).

A critical interpretivist paradigm recognises that knowledge is socially constructed, context-dependent, and embedded in relations of power (Berger, 2015; Fosnot, 2005; Howell, 2013). Reality is viewed as multiple and negotiated, produced through ongoing social interaction, dialogue, and lived experience (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Crotty, 2003; Hesse-Biber, 2017). This aligns with Guba and Lincoln's (1989) view that inquiry is co-constructed and relational, emphasising the interpretive processes through which participants make meaning of their worlds. The critical dimension extends this by recognising, following Freire (2000), that understanding experience also requires engaging with the power relations and structural forces that shape it. Within this orientation, interpretation attends to both the meaning-making and the structural contexts in which experiences are situated. Critique enters at the level of analysis, rather than being assumed as an outcome of participation (Howell, 2013; Lincoln et al., 2018; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

This paradigm positions knowledge as co-created, rather than discovered, privileging dialogue, reflexivity, and collaboration as the means of constructing understanding (Cahill, 2007; Hsu et al., 2023; Kemmis, 2012; Ryan, 2018; Weber, 1994). Researchers are not neutral observers but active participants in shaping knowledge through their relationships, values, and positionalities (Crotty, 2003; Denzin & Lincoln, 2018; Williams, 2024). As a practitioner-researcher embedded within the youth work context, the researcher adopted a reflexive stance throughout the study, acknowledging that proximity to the field brought both insight and ethical complexity. Reflexive practices such as journaling, peer debriefing, and participant feedback were used to address potential power imbalances and to promote accountability and transparency within the research process (Kemmis, 2012; Ryan, 2018; Weber, 1994).

Within a critical interpretivist paradigm, participatory and constructivist principles function as methodological expressions of its core values rather than as paradigms in their own right. The paradigm's focus on co-construction, reflexivity, and social transformation aligns closely with participatory

approaches that value collaboration, critical subjectivity, and relational inquiry (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Lincoln et al., 2018; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). In this study, these principles informed the design and implementation of creative visual and dialogic tools, such as photovoice and photo-elicitation, to support young people's reflection and collective interpretation (Howell, 2013; Wang & Burris, 1997). These methods were selected not only for their accessibility but because they reflect the paradigm's emphasis on meaning-making through relational dialogue and visual storytelling.

Frameworks such as Biggs' (1989) typology of participation and Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation were used to conceptualise the evolving nature of participation across the project. These frameworks supported an understanding of participation as dynamic and negotiated, ranging from contractual to collaborative and, at times, collegiate, depending on young people's interests and availability. These forms of engagement were situated within an ethic of care (Hesse-Biber, 2017; Howell, 2013) that recognised the influence of structural and relational factors on what was possible within the project. While the study aimed to foster co-production where feasible, it also acknowledged the limits imposed by structural inequality and institutional context (Bergold & Thomas, 2012; Cooke & Kothari, 2001; Lam & Kwong, 2014).

Critical interpretivism also requires confronting these tensions of power and participation. As Bergold and Thomas (2012) note, power within participatory approaches can never be eliminated, only negotiated. This study, therefore, recognised that not all participants engaged equally and that some decisions remained shaped by external structures. Efforts to address such imbalances included transparent communication, iterative consent, and participant feedback at multiple stages (Kellett, 2010, 2011). These practices reflected the paradigm's reflexive commitment to relational accountability and to producing knowledge *with* rather than *about* young people (Kemmis, 2012; Reason & Bradbury, 2008).

In summary, this study is grounded in a critical interpretivist paradigm that values situated knowledge, reflexivity, and critical engagement with power. It integrates interpretivist attention to lived experience with critical awareness of social structure, expressed methodologically through participatory, dialogic, and visual approaches. This orientation supports the study's aim to co-construct knowledge with young people that is contextually grounded, relationally attuned, and oriented toward critical reflection and social change. The following section outlines the research design and methods used to enact these principles in practice.

### **4.3 - Research Design**

Building on a participatory visual framework, this study employed four complementary qualitative methods, including photovoice, photo-elicitation, semi-structured interviews, and stakeholder questionnaires, to explore how young people understand wellbeing, agency, and structural constraint in post-COVID-19 Scotland. Each method offered a distinct but connected means of examining how young people represent, discuss, and interpret their lived experiences, while also engaging adults in reflecting on these perspectives. The combined approach produced a multi-layered, relationally grounded dataset that captured both youth and stakeholder viewpoints. All methods, procedures, and session structures are described in detail in [Section 4.7](#).

The design reflects a critical interpretivist paradigm, positioning young people as active meaning-makers rather than subjects of study. Participatory visual approaches such as photovoice and photo-elicitation were chosen because they enable collaborative inquiry and the articulation of complex experiences that may not be easily expressed through words alone (Banks, 2012; Lorenz & Kolb, 2009; Reid et al., 2018; Richards, 2011). These methods align with feminist and Freirean traditions that emphasise dialogue, lived experience, and collective reflection (Cook-Sather, 2007; Freire, 2000; hooks, 1984). Semi-structured interviews and stakeholder questionnaires complemented these techniques by providing opportunities for individual reflection and external interpretation, supporting triangulation across different perspectives (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

This participatory visual design centred young people’s voices while maintaining a clear distinction between research and youth work practice. Although the project was situated within a youth work setting, the research process was separate from everyday provision: participation was voluntary, time-limited, and focused on critical inquiry rather than service delivery. This separation ensured ethical integrity while allowing the study to examine how youth work environments shape wellbeing and agency.

Figure 4.1 maps the iterative research process and illustrates how these methods were layered to generate and interpret data.

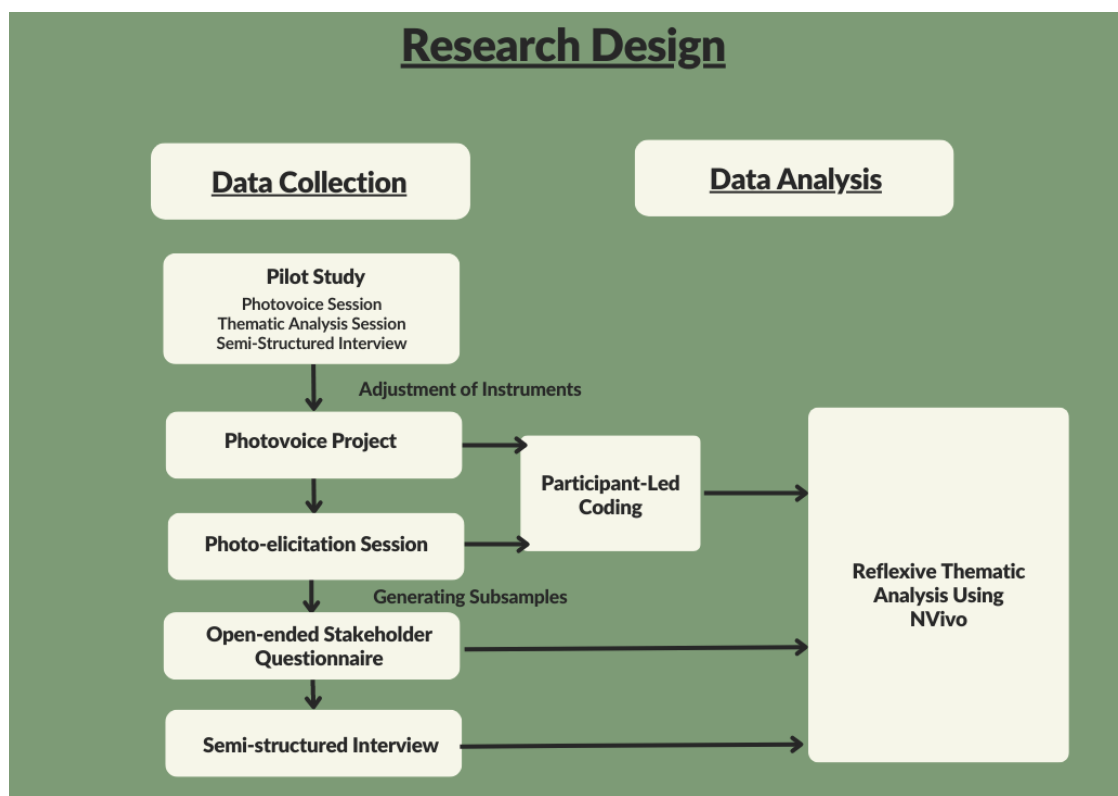


Figure 4.1: Research Design

Although the study shares features with action research, it is not framed as such. The research questions were developed by the researcher, and young people were not involved in project design. However, their active role in data production, interpretation, and meaning-making reflects a participatory-

informed ethos. This approach recognises that while young people's insights shaped the study's outcomes, structural and design constraints still limited the degree of co-production possible.

#### **4.4 - Positionality and Reflexivity**

This study is situated within a practitioner-researcher framework, recognising the researcher's dual role as both a youth worker and academic in this context. Conducting research in a familiar environment required continuous attention to the dual role I occupied: as a trusted adult in the community and as an academic engaged in critical inquiry. This positionality offered distinctive insights while demanding reflexive awareness of power, interpretation, and accountability (Coburn & Gormally, 2019; Howell, 2013). Reflexivity, participatory ethics, and youth-centred methodologies were central to ensuring young people were not treated as passive subjects but as collaborators and co-creators of meaning throughout the research process (Camarota & Fine, 2008; Kemmis, 2012; Livingstone & Third, 2017; Lomax, 2015; Tisdall, 2016; Weber, 1994).

Practitioner research demands ongoing awareness of how pre-existing relationships may shape the research environment (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007). In this study, familiarity between the researcher and participants, established through youth work, helped build trust and openness but also required sensitivity to potential dynamics of influence and obligation (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992; Fielding, 2004). Fielding (2001) notes that young people may hesitate to express dissent when they perceive the adult researcher as an ally or authority figure. To address this, the study employed a reflexive approach grounded in co-constructed decision-making, open-ended questioning, and participant-led meaning-making. These strategies aimed to ensure that young people's insights emerged from their own experiences rather than being shaped by researcher expectations (Campbell & Groundwater-Smith, 2007; Cook-Sather, 2007; Lundy, 2007).

A critical interpretivist paradigm acknowledges that knowledge is co-constructed through relationships and shaped by the positionality of everyone involved (Crotty, 2003; Guba & Lincoln, 1989). Rather than striving for neutrality, I approached reflexivity as an ethical and methodological commitment, consistent with Feminist Ethics of Care that emphasise relational responsibility and attentiveness (Arinder, 2022; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993). My experience as a youth worker provided contextual understanding and trust but also risked over-familiarity or assumptions about shared meaning. Following Finlay (2002) and Kemmis (2012), I engaged in reflexive journaling, peer debriefing, and supervisory discussion to examine how my background, values, and relationships influenced the research process and interpretation of data.

Reflexivity functioned as an iterative practice rather than a discrete phase. Field notes captured emotional tone, body language, and relational nuance to make visible the social context of knowledge production (Cornwall & Jewkes, 1995; Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). These records were revisited during analysis to explore how my interactions with participants informed emerging interpretations. As Weber (1994) and Ryan (2018) suggest, acknowledging the researcher's presence enhances rather than undermines rigour by revealing the interpretive lens through which meaning is produced.

Working within a community-based youth work space also required navigating the intersection of care and power. Trust, central to participatory and youth work practice (Coburn, 2011; Ord, 2016), can both enable openness and obscure asymmetries. I remained attentive to how familiarity might generate expectations, emotional labour, or perceived obligation. Drawing on Freire (2000) and hooks (1984), dialogue was approached as a relational process shaped by care, trust, and asymmetrical roles, rather than as an equal or neutral exchange. Ongoing reflexivity was required to attend to expectations, emotional labour, and the boundaries between youth work practice and research participation (Packard, 2008). Reflexive discussions with supervisors and colleagues supported ethical decision-making, ensuring that research relationships were guided by respect, transparency, and voluntary engagement

in line with institutional ethics and youth-work values (CLD Standards Council, 2025).

Positionality was approached as an asset when managed reflexively and ethically. By recognising the entanglement of care, power, and interpretation, the study upheld a practice of ethical reflexivity aligned with both Critical Pedagogy and feminist care ethics (Freire, 2000; Tronto, 1993). This stance informed all aspects of the research, from data collection to analysis, ensuring that young people's perspectives were engaged with relationally, respectfully, and with critical awareness.

#### **4.5 - Sample**

This section outlines the study's participants and setting, including recruitment strategies for young people and local stakeholders. The research was conducted at a youth project in Glasgow, Scotland, run by a local charity. The project supports young people aged 8 to 25 and provides a voluntary drop-in facility primarily accessed by individuals from surrounding communities. Youth work sessions are divided into two core age groups: 8-11 and 12-19. The 8-11 sessions prioritise play, early engagement, and family support, laying the groundwork for continued participation. The 12-19 group, which is the focus of this study, meets four evenings a week and provides a youth-centred space where young people can engage voluntarily in social, recreational, and developmental activities.

The 12-19 sessions aim to promote healthy relationships, emotional wellbeing, and life skills development. Activities include group discussions, workshops, creative sessions, and physical activities, many of which are co-designed with young people. Central to this approach is a commitment to autonomy and trust, enabling young people to shape their experiences in ways that feel safe and affirming. Several participants had longstanding relationships with the youth project and with each other, which fostered trust and openness throughout the research process. In addition to these core sessions, the youth project also offers a voluntary employability programme for young people aged 16-25, which

provides support with CV development, college applications, and employment readiness. However, involvement in this programme was not a criterion for inclusion in the study.

In line with the participatory ethos of the study, the recruitment process combined three qualitative sampling strategies:

- **Convenience sampling** was used to initially engage young people who regularly attended the youth project and expressed interest in the study. This approach is common in youth work-based research, where the sample is drawn from those who are most accessible (Creswell, 2012).
- **Snowball sampling** followed, allowing participants to recommend peers whom they felt would be interested and comfortable in the project. This method is particularly useful for building trust and cohesion in peer-based research groups (Noy, 2008).
- **Purposive sampling** was also applied to ensure that participants represented a range of ages, genders, and engagement levels within the youth project, focusing on those with lived experience relevant to the study's research questions (Palinkas et al., 2015).

The study initially aimed to engage around 20 young people aged 12-18 who were already connected to the youth project. Recruitment for the photovoice project began with convenience sampling (Creswell, 2012), identifying those who regularly attended the 12-19 sessions and expressed interest in taking part. Snowball sampling (Noy, 2008) was then used to build a cohesive peer group by inviting recommendations from initial participants. Six young people completed the full photovoice process. While this number was smaller than originally anticipated, small sample sizes are common in participatory visual research, where emphasis is placed on depth, co-construction, and iterative reflection (Catalani & Minkler, 2010). The smaller group size supported collaborative analysis and relationship-based dialogue throughout the project. Following the photovoice process, all six participants took part in semi-structured interviews. These provided opportunities to reflect on their experiences of the research, their perspectives on wellbeing and empowerment, and their engagement within the youth work setting. Table 4.1 summarises the demographic characteristics of

the six youth participants, all of whom were active members of the youth project prior to the study.

**Table 4.1:** Youth Participant Demographic Information

<b>Pseudonym</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Gender</b>
Coco	16	Female
Gean	16	Female
Lei	16	Male
Lalo	15	Female
Rosie	15	Female
Lauren	12	Female

The sample was predominantly female (five out of six participants), ranging in age from 12 to 16. Pseudonyms were selected by participants to protect anonymity. The existing friendships and group dynamics among participants fostered trust and a collaborative spirit throughout the research process.

Stakeholders were engaged through a public photovoice exhibition, which served as both a dissemination platform and a space for dialogue. Fourteen stakeholders completed a qualitative questionnaire at the exhibition, reflecting on the young people’s messages, their own roles in the community, and how they might better support youth wellbeing. Youth participants played a central role in stakeholder recruitment. They were invited to identify individuals through purposive sampling (Palinkas et al., 2015), who they believed should attend the exhibition and listen to their perspectives. This youth-led approach aligned with the study’s participatory values and ensured that stakeholder engagement was grounded in young people’s priorities. Stakeholders were selected based on their professional roles or personal involvement in supporting young people’s wellbeing. These included youth workers, community workers, family members, and a local politician. Although stakeholder responses provided valuable contextual insight and helped triangulate findings, the study’s primary analytical focus remained on young people’s accounts. For clarity in the findings and analysis chapters, stakeholders were assigned pseudonyms reflecting their roles, as shown in Table 4.2

**Table 4.2: Stakeholder Participant Overview**

<b>Pseudonym / Code</b>	<b>Stakeholder Type</b>	<b>Role / Affiliation</b>	<b>Stake in Youth Wellbeing</b>
Youth Worker 1	Youth Worker	Employed at a local youth project	Daily support and long-term engagement
Youth Worker 2	Youth Worker	Employed at a local youth project	Delivers programmes and one-to-one support
Youth Worker 3	Youth Worker	Formerly employed at a local youth project	Ongoing informal relationships
Youth Worker 4	Youth Worker	Employed at a local youth project	Project leadership and funding development
Youth Worker 5	Youth Worker	Employed at local youth project	Informal support and activity facilitation
Youth Worker 6	Youth Worker	Employed at local youth project	Mentorship and programme planning
Youth Worker 7	Youth Worker	External collaborator	Inter-agency liaison and referrals
Youth Worker 8	Youth Worker	Trainee / volunteer	Peer-level support and learning
Community Worker 1	Community Worker	Local charity	Community capacity building
Community Worker 2	Community Worker	School-linked worker	Educational transitions and

			youth mental health
Family Member 1	Family Member	Parent of participant	Emotional and practical support
Family Member 2	Family Member	Relative of participant	Community advocacy and informal care
Family Member 3	Family Member	Parent of participant	Support in accessing youth services
Local Politician 1	Politician	Councillor for the area	Youth services funding and local policy

This structure allows for nuanced integration of stakeholder voices into later analysis, for example, highlighting tensions between institutional and informal support, or contrasting perspectives between youth workers and family members.

The sample for this study was small and context-specific, comprising young people already engaged in a youth work setting. Participation was voluntary and flexible, consistent with the core values of youth work and participatory research. While not designed to be representative, the sample offers rich, in-depth insights into young people’s experiences of wellbeing and agency in the wake of COVID-19. The inclusion of stakeholder perspectives adds contextual depth and supports triangulation, without shifting the analytical emphasis away from young people’s voices.

The next section outlines the data collection process and the iterative, participatory methods used to support young people’s engagement throughout the research.

## 4.6 - Pilot Study

The pilot study was a key preparatory phase in refining the research instruments to ensure they aligned with the study's critical interpretivist paradigm. Pilot studies provide researchers with the opportunity to test the clarity, relevance, ethical appropriateness, and methodological suitability of research methods before full-scale implementation (Turner, 2010). In this study, the pilot was also used to explore how participatory visual methods could be implemented in a way that centres young people's agency, voices, and wellbeing. Four young people in Scotland, aged 18 to 21, were recruited via convenience sampling (Creswell, 2012) for the pilot. Although they were not connected to the youth project at the heart of the main study, their prior engagement with youth work and lived experiences of structural inequality made them well-suited to provide feedback on the accessibility and ethics of the proposed methods. Their slightly older age allowed for a more reflective, evaluative engagement with the research design.

The pilot included three components mirroring the main study: a photovoice group session, a participant-led thematic analysis session, and semi-structured interviews. Each method was assessed for methodological robustness and for its inclusivity, accessibility, and alignment with participatory values. The pilot was treated as a test of tools and a collaborative and reflexive process. As Howell (2013) notes, participatory research must remain flexible and responsive, with pilot work providing space to trial, critique, and recalibrate co-creative methods.

Reflexivity was central to the pilot, particularly considering the researcher's dual role as practitioner and academic. As a result, key strategies, such as open-ended questioning, participant-led discussion, and shared decision-making, were tested and refined to help ensure that adult authority would not be inadvertently reinforced (Cook-Sather, 2007; Tisdall, 2016).

One of the most significant outcomes of the pilot was the simplification and clarification of the research instruments. Early versions of photovoice prompts

and interview questions proved overly abstract or complex, causing confusion or disengagement. In response, revisions prioritised accessible, youth-friendly language and grounded, open-ended questions. This was especially important given the younger age range (12-16) and varying levels of literacy, confidence, and comfort with reflective dialogue among participants in the main study. Additional optional prompts were also developed to gently guide conversations while maintaining participant autonomy and avoiding directive questioning.

The participant-led thematic analysis session was a particularly valuable element of the pilot. Participants analysed their own and each other's images, offering interpretations, identifying emerging patterns, and suggesting priorities for action. This affirmed that young people, when provided with appropriate tools and support, are capable analysts of their own lives (Mannay et al., 2017; Wang & Burris, 1997). Based on the pilot, the analytical processes in the main study were adapted to offer greater opportunities for youth participants to shape the identification and discussion of emerging themes. The pilot also strengthened the study's ethical reflexivity. Participatory research calls for ethical practice that extends beyond procedural checklists, emphasising situated, relational care (Letherby, 2003; Prilleltensky, 2008). A key lesson from the pilot was that visual methods like photovoice can surface sensitive or emotionally charged topics. In response, consent processes were revised to become more iterative and dialogic, with regular check-ins and clear opt-out points embedded throughout the main study. Participants were also provided with written and verbal guidance on ethical photography practices, including how to avoid capturing identifiable images of others without consent, and encouraged to choose which images they felt comfortable sharing. These practices were informed by visual research ethics literature (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001) and aimed to uphold young people's autonomy and control over their contributions. The pilot further illuminated the blurred boundaries that can arise in practitioner-led research. Although the pilot participants were not involved in the main youth project, the process reinforced the importance of clearly communicating the distinction between research and youth work. In the main study, this informed more explicit framing of research

activities as voluntary, confidential, and separate from youth work programming or relationships.

While often viewed as preliminary, the pilot study generated crucial insights that strengthened the alignment between the study's theoretical commitments and methodological practice. It helped ensure that research instruments were co-created, accessible, and ethically responsive, and that the research environment would support participant-led analysis and reflection. Although pilot studies are often criticised for limited generalisability (Howell, 2013), within a critical interpretivist paradigm, their value lies not in replication, but in responsiveness to participants, context, and the evolving dynamics of the research process.

In conclusion, the pilot study significantly informed the design, ethics, and participatory integrity of the main study. It supported the development of inclusive and youth-centred methods, reinforced the importance of reflexivity in practitioner research, and created space for young people to help shape the tools used to explore their own wellbeing and lived experiences. The next section outlines the data collection process used in the main study, including key adaptations informed by the pilot.

#### **4.7 - Data Collection**

This section outlines the data collection methods used in this study, which included photovoice and photo-elicitation sessions, a youth-led photo exhibition with an open-ended stakeholder questionnaire, and semi-structured interviews. These methods generated a multi-layered dataset capturing young people's perspectives and stakeholders' responses to them.

Consistent with the study's critical-interpretivist, youth-centred orientation, data collection was designed to be flexible and relational, prioritising accessibility, ethical responsiveness, and attention to lived experience. Visual approaches (photovoice and photo-elicitation) enabled shared meaning-making

around experiences not easily articulated in words, while interviews and stakeholder questionnaires added depth and external interpretation (Banks, 2012; Cook-Sather, 2007; Freire, 2000; hooks, 1984; Lorenz & Kolb, 2009). The subsections that follow describe each component in turn and the sequencing between them, as well as the triangulation across sources (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011).

To support diverse forms of expression and reflection, the study integrated the following methods:

- **Photovoice:**  
The central method of the study, photovoice, enabled six young people (ages 12-16) to take photographs representing their experiences of wellbeing. Rooted in Freirean pedagogy and feminist methodology, photovoice positions participants as experts in their own lives, creating opportunities for shared reflection and dialogue around everyday experiences (Nykiforuk et al., 2011; Wang & Burris, 1997). Participants met over multiple sessions to share and discuss their images, co-constructing meaning through facilitated conversation.
- **Photo-Elicitation:**  
For participants less confident with photography, photo-elicitation offered an alternative entry point into dialogue through pre-selected visual prompts. This method promoted accessibility and emotional safety, encouraging reflective discussion without requiring participants to produce their own images (Harper, 2002; Schwartz, 1989).
- **Semi-Structured Interviews:**  
Conducted after the photovoice sessions and exhibition, interviews allowed participants to reflect privately on their wellbeing, their involvement in the project, and their views on change. This method offered flexibility and depth, complementing the more collaborative group-based discussions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009).
- **Open-Ended Stakeholder Questionnaire:**  
Fourteen adult stakeholders, including youth workers, community leaders, and local politicians, responded to a reflective questionnaire following a public exhibition of the photovoice work. Prompts invited reactions to the

photographs and narratives, perceptions of the issues raised (e.g. mental health, inequality, support systems), and suggestions for improving support. The asynchronous format supported thoughtful, less socially pressured responses and provided insight into how young people's contributions were interpreted by adults in positions of influence.

While participatory visual methods can support agency and critical reflection, they are not inherently emancipatory. As Gaventa (2006) and Rancière (1991) caution, visibility does not equal power. The risks of tokenism, particularly in research with marginalised groups, are well documented (Ball, 2012; Hart, 1992). This study responded to these concerns through iterative reflexivity (Finlay, 2002), participant-led discussions, and feedback mechanisms. Reflexivity was embedded in the researcher's practice and in participant processes, where young people were invited to reflect on the meanings of their images and how they hoped others would respond. Visual ethics and emotional safety were prioritised throughout (Heath et al., 2009; Wiles et al., 2008). Participants received training on informed consent, anonymity, and the ethical use of images, and ongoing consent checks were built into sessions. No photographs featuring identifiable individuals were shared without explicit consent, and participants retained control over which images and narratives were included in the final exhibition or excluded altogether.

A central component of photovoice is its orientation toward dialogue and potential influence (Wang & Burris, 1997). This study culminated in a community exhibition where participants' photographs and narratives were displayed for peers, youth workers, and stakeholders. Stakeholders engaged with the work and provided reflections via the open-ended questionnaire. This created a moment of visibility and recognition, while also allowing the study to gather stakeholder interpretations of youth wellbeing and potential action for change.

To enhance the rigour of the study, methodological triangulation was employed (Denzin & Lincoln, 2011). Each method contributed distinct but complementary insights:

- Photovoice enabled youth-led storytelling and critical reflection.
- Photo-elicitation offered an inclusive, image-based route to dialogue.
- Interviews deepened individual perspectives.
- Stakeholder questionnaires captured external interpretation and institutional context.

#### 4.7.1 - Photovoice and Photo-elicitation Sessions

The research process began with an initial recruitment session where young people were introduced to the study and provided with detailed information about its aims, structure, and expectations. This was followed by two one-hour introductory photovoice sessions designed to build rapport, establish shared understandings of key concepts like wellbeing and empowerment, and introduce participants to the reflective ethos of the study. A session guide was developed to support the consistency and facilitation (see [Appendix 1](#)). Participants were given consent forms to take home, with time to consider their involvement and, where necessary, seek parental or guardian approval. Consent was deliberately not obtained immediately, in line with youth work and participatory ethics, to ensure that participation was fully informed and voluntary (Jeffs & Smith, 2010).

These sessions also included foundational training on the photovoice method, covering:

- Ethical photography and informed consent (Wang & Redwood-Jones, 2001).
- The role of visual research methods in research (Harper, 2002).
- Participant expectations and responsibilities.
- Safety and privacy considerations.
- Photography as a tool for reflection and storytelling.

Participants were asked, “What comes to mind when you hear the word wellbeing?” Their responses ranged from mental health, communication, and sleep to everyday frustrations such as dog mess and the lack of bins. These were

grouped into three youth-defined dimensions of wellbeing: feeling Comfortable, Healthy, and Happy (CHH). This CHH framework became a foundational concept within the project, offering a youth-led definition of wellbeing that challenged adult-centric constructs (Crivello et al., 2009; Statham & Chase, 2010). It guided both data collection and analysis, reinforcing the project's commitment to co-produced, context-specific understandings.

Using this shared framework, the participants and researcher collaboratively developed the core photovoice prompts (Sneed, 2025):

1. What is positive for my wellbeing?
2. What is negative for my wellbeing?
3. How can youth work support my wellbeing?
4. How has COVID-19 impacted my wellbeing?

Additional guiding questions encouraged deeper reflection on relationships, community, and structural conditions:

- What places or activities give you a sense of empowerment?
- What challenges do you face, and how do they show up in your everyday environment?
- What supports your wellbeing in your community?

Participants then took photographs in their local areas in response to these prompts.

Three follow-up photovoice sessions provided space for participants to share and reflect on their images. Group discussions were facilitated using the SHOWeD framework (Wallerstein & Bernstein, 1988; Wang & Burris, 1997), which supports critical engagement through the following questions:

- What do you **See** here?
- What is really **Happening**?
- How does this relate to **Our** lives?

- Why does this situation exist?
- What can we Do about it?

Participants also wrote short photo narratives, adding personal context and drawing attention to key issues and concerns. These sessions encouraged peer-led dialogue and supported a shift from individual experiences to broader social reflection. As Foster-Fishman et al. (2010) suggest, such processes can foster critical consciousness when supported by open, youth-led conversation.

Despite high levels of engagement, several challenges emerged. Some participants found it difficult to take photos between sessions, often due to time pressures or competing commitments. In response, the group co-designed a photo-elicitation session. Based on participant prompts, the researcher curated a photo bank to support further reflection on topics such as housing, school stress, safety, and the environment. This approach preserved participant ownership while enhancing accessibility. Accessibility also required careful attention. One participant, due to a disability, found the session pace overwhelming. To support her ongoing involvement, she was provided with advance materials and offered one-to-one debriefs, ensuring she could engage in a way that protected her wellbeing. These adjustments reflected inclusive research practices (Mysyuk & Huisman, 2020; Wass et al., 2019).

Group dynamics also shaped participation. Some young people were immediately vocal, while others were more hesitant. To support more equitable dialogue, small group activities and structured turn-taking were introduced, following facilitation strategies highlighted by Cook-Sather (2007) and Tisdall (2016). Thematic content, including discussions of bullying, poverty, and mental health, was often emotionally charged. In response, each session included wellbeing check-ins, optional debriefs, and signposting to appropriate support services, ensuring emotional safety remained a priority (Aldridge, 2016; Heath et al., 2009). Technical issues also emerged. Some participants felt unsure about their digital photography skills or were self-conscious about their output. To address this, disposable cameras were offered alongside basic tutorials in composition

and lighting. These supports aimed to build confidence and ensure that creative participation was not limited by technological access or skill level.

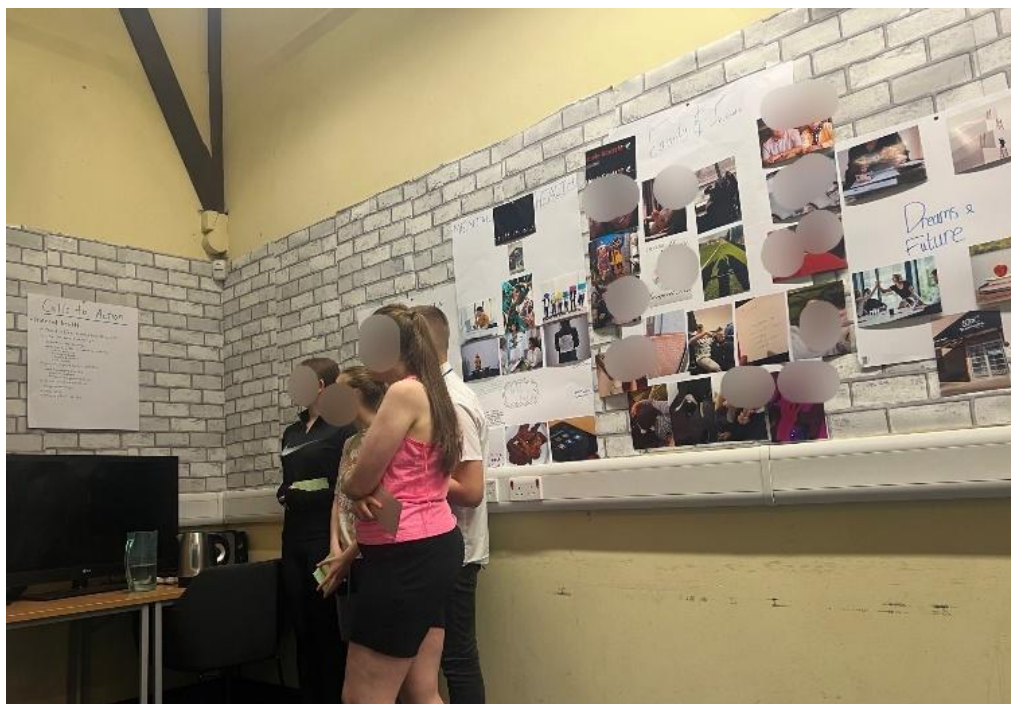
In summary, the photovoice and photo-elicitation sessions formed the methodological core of this study. Although challenges around time, access, and emotional intensity required continuous adaptation, the process remained rooted in youth-led decision-making, ethical reflexivity, and care. These methods generated rich, co-constructed insight into young people's experiences of wellbeing and structural constraint within a post-COVID-19 youth work setting.

#### **4.7.2 - Exhibition and Stakeholder Questionnaire**

A central aim of photovoice is to communicate lived experiences to those in positions of influence and to create space for dialogue that may support change (Wang & Burris, 1997). In this study, the Youth Photovoice Exhibition marked both the culmination of the visual data collection process and a key participatory moment of youth-led engagement. It created an opportunity for young people to present their insights in public forums and engage in dialogue with community stakeholders, resonating with Freire's (2000) emphasis on reflection and dialogue, while recognising that opportunities for action were shaped by broader structural constraints.

The exhibition was co-designed by the six youth participants, who led decisions about its tone, content, framing, and format. They selected which photographs and narratives to include, created thematic posters based on collaboratively generated codes, and curated the space in an informal, gallery-style layout that reflected their personalities and priorities. This level of involvement upheld the participatory principle of co-production (Cook-Sather, 2007; Cornwall, 2008), ensuring that young people retained ownership over how their work was shared and interpreted. Participants also developed and delivered a 15-minute group presentation introducing the research, discussing key images, and articulating collaboratively developed calls to action. This move from personal reflection

offered a moment where young people publicly articulated perspectives they had developed through the project, enabling young people to narrate their experiences, name structural challenges, and speak directly to local stakeholders, creating space for dialogue and response within the limits of the project context (Freire, 2000; Larkins, 2019). Figure 4.2 illustrates the youth presentation at the event.



**Figure 4.2:** Youth Participants Presenting Their Data at the Youth Photovoice Exhibition

The event was attended by 20 local stakeholders, including youth workers, community workers, a local politician, family members, and peers. Following the exhibition, 14 stakeholders completed open-ended questionnaires designed to capture their responses to the young people’s contributions and gather views on the wider conditions shaping youth wellbeing. The stakeholder questionnaire included prompts such as (see [Appendix 2](#)) (Sneed, 2025):

- What barriers do you think young people face in achieving their goals within this community?
- How do you see youth work addressing these challenges?
- What changes could be made at an institutional level to better support young people’s wellbeing?

These questions encouraged stakeholder reflection on both the content of the exhibition and the broader social, institutional, and policy conditions influencing young people's lives.

While the exhibition offered a valuable space for youth voice and visibility, it did not immediately lead to policy or practice changes. This aligns with critiques of participatory approaches that caution against assuming such activities can drive structural change on their own, especially when broader systems of power remain resistant or unchanged (Coburn & Gormally, 2017; Cooke & Kothari, 2001). As Gaventa (2006) and Ball (2012) highlight, structural power is often diffuse and difficult to disrupt, even in well-facilitated spaces that prioritise voice. Nonetheless, the exhibition represented a meaningful shift from researcher-led dissemination to youth-led engagement. Participants determined what was shared, how it was framed, and with whom. Ethical concerns around privacy and control were addressed through sustained consent practices: all decisions regarding image use, anonymisation, and framing were participant-led and revisited throughout the process.

In sum, the Youth Photovoice Exhibition functioned both as a dissemination event and a dialogical space for public engagement. While stakeholder responses revealed the limitations of institutional responsiveness, the exhibition demonstrated the value of creating spaces that centre youth perspectives and supporting reflective, relational engagement. The insights generated through the exhibition and stakeholder feedback informed the final stages of analysis, particularly in interpreting how youth voice may illuminate lived experiences and draw attention to structural conditions that shape young people's lives.

#### **4.7.3- Semi-Structured Interviews**

Following the photovoice and photo-elicitation sessions and the Youth Photovoice Exhibition, each youth participant was invited to take part in a semi-structured qualitative interview. These interviews created a one-to-one space for private reflection, allowing participants to explore their experiences of the project, their wellbeing priorities, and their evolving views on agency,

participation, and change. All six youth participants chose to participate, with interviews ranging from 9 to 22 minutes, depending on individual comfort, communication style, and engagement.

The semi-structured format enabled a consistent thematic focus while allowing participants to guide the conversation in ways that felt relevant and meaningful to them (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). Interviews were shaped by open-ended prompts designed to invite reflection without imposing a fixed agenda. Sample questions included (see [Appendix 3](#)) (Sneed, 2025):

- What do you think are the major influences on young people’s wellbeing?
- What are your top priorities when it comes to wellbeing?
- Can you tell me about how COVID-19 has impacted your wellbeing and whether there have been any long-term effects?
- Can you tell me about a time when youth work supported your wellbeing?
- Can you tell me about a time when youth work could have better supported your wellbeing?
- Can you tell me more about what this photograph represents in your life?
- How do you think the community or systems around you shape your experiences?
- What would you change if you had the power to address these challenges?
- Please explain how your experience of participation has changed throughout the project.
- How prepared do you feel to take action to address the priorities you have identified?
- What do you feel you have gained from participating in this project?

These interviews were not simply used to collect supplementary data but formed part of the participatory and dialogical ethos of the study. They allowed young people to express their views more freely, revisit earlier reflections, and elaborate on topics discussed in group settings. The one-to-one context often encouraged deeper storytelling, enabling participants to articulate personal insights and explore how they interpreted wellbeing, youth work, and their own role in navigating structural challenges.

Not all participants engaged with interviews in the same way. Some, who had been confident in group discussions, were more hesitant in private settings, while others found the one-to-one format more comfortable. Interview prompts were adapted as needed to accommodate different communication styles, attention spans, and preferences. This flexibility reflected the understanding that participation and voice are relational, evolving, and influenced by multiple factors, including confidence, rapport, and emotional safety.

To extend the study's commitment to sustained engagement, a follow-up consultation was conducted approximately one year after project completion. Participants were invited to reflect on any lasting impacts of the research and to share updated views on wellbeing, community, and agency. This follow-up was designed to be low-pressure and accessible: participants could respond via text or voice message, with the option to engage in their own time. Prompts included:

- Can you tell me about your experiences of youth work?
- Can you tell me about your experience participating in the study last year?
- What do you think is your role in your life and community as a young person?
- What are your current thoughts on creating change in your community?

While not all participants responded to this phase, it offered an opportunity for continuity and reflection beyond the formal end of data collection. Including this re-consultation reinforced the study's understanding of participation as a relational and ongoing process rather than a time-limited event (Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). It also reflected Freirean commitments to critical dialogue that continues over time and supports a deeper connection between research and lived experience (Freire, 2000; Wang & Burris, 1997).

In summary, the interviews and follow-up consultation deepened the study's insight into how young people interpret and narrate their experiences. They extended the study's focus on relational, reflective engagement beyond group dialogue, provided space for more individualised reflection, and contributed to a

fuller understanding of how young people experience support, constraint, and possibility in their everyday lives. These methods helped illustrate how youth perspectives can evolve through and beyond the research process, offering valuable insight into the relational and temporal dynamics of wellbeing and change.

#### **4.7.4 - Integrating Reflections on the Research Process**

As part of the participatory-informed design of this study, young people were invited to reflect on their participation at three key stages: the beginning, middle, and end of the project. These structured reflection points, captured through short written 'participation stories', were included to support ethical and dialogical practice and to embed feedback loops into the research process. In line with Lundy's (2007) framework for meaningful participation and wider participatory literature (Cook-Sather, 2007; Tisdall, 2016), feedback and iterative reflection are seen as essential to ensuring that participation is not tokenistic but reciprocal and responsive. These reflections provided space for participants to consider how they were engaging with the research, what they were learning, and how the process was affecting them over time.

Rooted in Freirean and feminist approaches to critical and relational research (Cook-Sather, 2007; Freire, 2000), these reflections functioned as tools for care, dialogue, and mutual accountability. They encouraged young people to critically engage with the research context, including its methods, relationships, and emotional dynamics, and to articulate their evolving roles within the project. This practice reflected a commitment to relational accountability and responsiveness (Letherby, 2003; Tisdall, 2016), particularly in a context where the researcher held dual roles as facilitator and youth worker.

Throughout the study, participants shared narrative reflections on what it meant to engage in a dedicated space for collective dialogue and creative expression. These reflections offered insight into how young people made sense of their experiences of voice, confidence, and connection, central concerns of this thesis. Rather than treating these accounts as universal outcomes of the

research process, they are understood as situated stories of meaning-making shaped by relationships, support, and structural conditions. For this reason, a dedicated section of the findings ([Section 7.3](#)) draws on these accounts to explore how young people described the value and limits of having space to reflect together within the context of their everyday lives.

By integrating these reflections into the analysis, the study aims to honour young people's interpretations of their involvement while remaining attentive to the limits of what can be claimed. It is hoped that their accounts help illustrate the relational, reflexive, and contextual dimensions of participation, supporting the thesis's focus on youth wellbeing as a process shaped by connection, care, and critical engagement (Cahill & Dadvand, 2018; Reason & Bradbury, 2008). Reflection was intended to operate as an ethical practice and a generative site for knowledge co-production.

#### **4.7.5 - Comprehensive Research Materials**

This study generated a layered and multi-faceted dataset through visual and dialogic methods. The materials reflect young people's lived experiences, collaborative meaning-making, and evolving engagement throughout the research process. Consistent with the study's ethical and youth-centred commitments, young people retained agency over what was shared publicly, and all data handling was approached with care, reflexivity, and transparency. The research materials include a wide range of visual, narrative, and written artefacts:

- **Photographs** taken by youth participants during the photovoice process ([Appendix 10](#)).
- **Photo stories** created using the SHOWeD framework, offering contextual and reflective insights into selected images (archived, available upon request).
- **Exhibition narrations**, collaboratively written by participants to accompany the Youth Photovoice Exhibition (archived, available upon request).

- **Artefacts of group work**, including flipcharts, prompt lists, participant-led codes, and exhibition planning materials (selected samples included in [Appendix 11](#)).
- **Written participation stories** collected at three reflection points, beginning, midpoint, and end of the project (archived, available upon request).
- **Transcribed group discussions**, capturing critical dialogue during photovoice and photo-elicitation sessions (excerpts provided in [Appendix 12](#)).
- **Open-ended stakeholder questionnaires** completed at the exhibition (archived, available upon request).
- **Semi-structured interview transcripts** from all six youth participants (excerpts included in [Appendix 13](#)).

These materials were included to illustrate the depth and diversity of participant engagement while upholding ethical standards around anonymity and confidentiality. Representative samples and excerpts have been selected to demonstrate the youth-centred research process and analytical approach rather than present the full dataset in its entirety. Full datasets are securely stored in accordance with approved protocols and are available for audit or future reference, subject to appropriate permissions.

Table 4.3 summarises the number of photographs contributed by each youth participant and those selected for public exhibition. All selections were made by participants themselves, based on individual reflection and collective dialogue. This process exemplifies Freirean (2000) principles of critical reflection, self-representation, and agency. Table 4.4 outlines the range of other research materials curated for inclusion.

**Table 4.3: Number of Photos Contributed Per Participant**

Participant	Photovoice Photos	Photos Shared at Exhibition
Coco	8	5

Gean	6	4
Lalo	5	4
Lauren	1	1
Lei	5	4
Rosie	13	4
<b>Total</b>	<b>38</b>	<b>22</b>

**Table 4.4:** Additional Research Materials (Selected Samples Included in Appendices)

Research Material	Quantity	Appendix
Artefacts of Group Work	16	11 (sample)
Transcripts of Group Sessions	6	12 (excerpts)
Semi-Structured Interviews	6	13 (excerpts)

This multi-layered dataset offers a strong foundation for the analysis that follows. It reflects the study’s commitment to relational ethics, youth-centred inquiry, and co-constructed knowledge. By integrating diverse forms of expression, including image, dialogue, and narrative, the study acknowledges and engages with the nuanced and multifaceted nature of young people’s lived experiences and the participatory principles that informed the study’s design.

#### 4.8 - Ethical Considerations

Ethical considerations were central to every stage of this study, particularly given the focus on young people’s wellbeing, the use of youth-centred, reflective methods, and the researcher’s dual role as a practitioner within the youth work setting. As Somekh et al. (2005) note, ethical dilemmas in social research often emerge through power dynamics, positionality, and the relationships between researchers and participants. In response, this study prioritised care, transparency, and reflexivity, embedding ethics throughout the design, implementation, and dissemination of the research.

Institutional ethical approval was granted by the College of Social Sciences Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow. Ethical safeguards were designed

in line with university policy, GDPR, and participatory research ethics. Although situated within a youth work organisation, the study was intentionally designed and conducted as a distinct research project, not an extension of youth work practice. While both youth work and this study valued participation and care, their purposes differed: youth work focuses on personal and social development, whereas this research focused on exploring experiences and generating shared insight. Youth work values informed the context, but the ethical framework guiding this study was rooted in principles of participatory and critical inquiry.

Before data collection began, formal permission was obtained from the Head of Operations at the youth organisation. Young people and their parents or guardians received plain-language information sheets and consent forms outlining the purpose of the study, participant rights, and the voluntary nature of involvement. These were tailored to each audience: young people (Appendices [4](#) and [6](#)), parents/guardians (Appendix [7](#)), and stakeholders (Appendices [5](#) and [8](#)). A privacy notice and photography guidance supported informed decision-making about visual data (Appendix [9](#)). Recognising the relational dynamics of youth work, consent was not sought immediately. Forms were taken home and discussed with families, and participation was presented as entirely voluntary, with regular reminders that young people could withdraw at any time (Christensen & Prout, 2002; Fielding, 2001; Gallagher et al., 2010; Lundy, 2007). This approach aimed to mitigate implicit pressure that may arise when a trusted youth worker is also the researcher.

Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout. All identifiable data were anonymised using participant-chosen pseudonyms. Audio files, transcripts, and photographs were securely stored on encrypted, password-protected devices. For visual data, ongoing consent was sought before sharing, and young people had full control over whether their images were exhibited, withdrawn, or anonymised. While confidentiality could not be guaranteed in group sessions, this was made explicit from the outset. These decisions reflected a commitment to ethical representation, participant control, and ongoing consent, consistent with the study's relational and participatory orientation.

Given the emotional and structural topics under discussion, such as mental health, grief, poverty, and post-COVID-19 experiences, the research was designed to be trauma-informed. Sessions took place in familiar, youth-friendly spaces during regular drop-in hours, with access to trusted youth workers.

Additional supports included:

- The option to skip questions, pause, or withdraw at any time.
- Emotional check-ins during and after sessions.
- Signposting to mental health resources.
- Access to a trained counsellor through the youth organisation.

For example, one participant became upset during a group discussion on bereavement. He was given space and support without pressure to continue. Later, in a one-to-one conversation, he reflected on the experience and accepted follow-up resources. This instance reinforced the need to balance opportunities for expression with relational care and aftercare (Aldridge, 2016; Heath et al., 2009).

The researcher's dual role as practitioner and researcher required ongoing reflexivity (Ryan, 2018; Weber, 1994). While this positioning helped build trust and contextual understanding, it also risked blurring boundaries between support and inquiry. Reflections were documented through field notes and analytic memos and processed through academic supervision and personal counselling. The study maintained a clear distinction between youth work and research throughout, clarifying the epistemological grounding of the work as critical, youth-centred inquiry rather than programme evaluation or service delivery.

Participation in the study was designed to be flexible and responsive. Drawing on Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation and Biggs' (1989) typology, the research aimed to move beyond tokenism by involving participants in shaping the focus of discussions, refining prompts, generating data, contributing to analysis, and co-

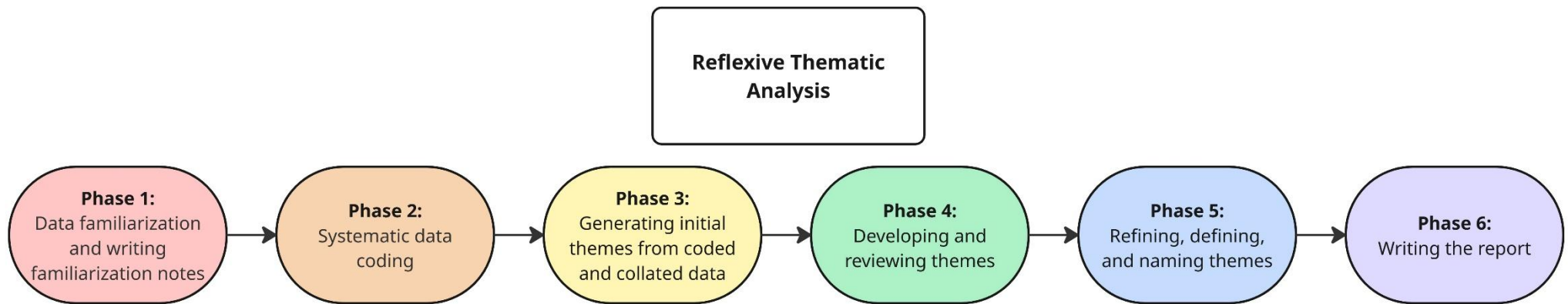
leading dissemination. While the initial research questions were developed by the researcher, young people helped define the thematic direction of the study and determine how key issues were explored and shared. This flexibility allowed participants to engage in ways that aligned with their confidence, availability, and interest, supporting ethical, voluntary, and meaningful involvement (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). A deliberate ethical and methodological decision was made to retain participants' original language, including slang, dialects, and profanity, within transcripts and findings. This choice reflected a commitment to honour young people's voices on their own terms and avoid adult-centric erasure of meaning and emotion (Bagnoli, 2009; Christensen & James, 2008). This ethical framework underpinned all stages of the study, including the collaborative generation, handling, and analysis of data. The following section outlines the study's analytical approach and how youth voices and youth-centred principles were embedded in the interpretation of findings.

## 4.9 - Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data from the photovoice process, group discussions, photo stories, open-ended stakeholder questionnaires, and semi-structured interviews were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, supported by NVivo 12 software (QSR International, 2020). NVivo facilitated the organisation of a large and layered dataset, the development of coding hierarchies, and the visual mapping of themes and relationships (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2020) six-phase model for reflexive thematic analysis (Figure 4.3). This approach aligns with the study's constructivist, feminist, and youth-centred underpinnings, offering a flexible and relational mode of interpretation that centres lived experience while acknowledging the researcher's active role in meaning-making.

The process began with immersive data familiarisation, including transcription, close reading of transcripts, reviewing photo stories and visual materials, and writing preliminary memos. This stage involved active engagement with the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006), allowing the researcher to begin noting patterns, contradictions, and emerging points of interest. During this phase, a reflexive thematic analysis workshop was conducted with youth participants. They revisited their photographs, photo stories, and session transcripts, identifying the ideas they saw as most important. This approach helped embed youth perspectives early in the analytic process and reflects a commitment to shared interpretation and valuing participant insight (Cook-Sather, 2007; Tisdall, 2016).

In the second phase, coding was carried out inductively, drawing from both explicit (semantic) and underlying (latent) meanings. Participants contributed directly to the coding of visual data through a collaborative session using sticky notes and discussion. They generated initial categories, including Mental Health, Family and Friends, Poor Lifestyle and Environment, Dreams and the Future, and Nature. These youth-defined codes informed the broader analytic framework, which the researcher then expanded and applied across all data sources using NVivo. A total of 118 initial codes were generated during this stage, and interpretive decisions were documented in ongoing analytic memos.



**Figure 4.3:** Reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2020)



Figure 4.4: Thematic Analysis Session 1

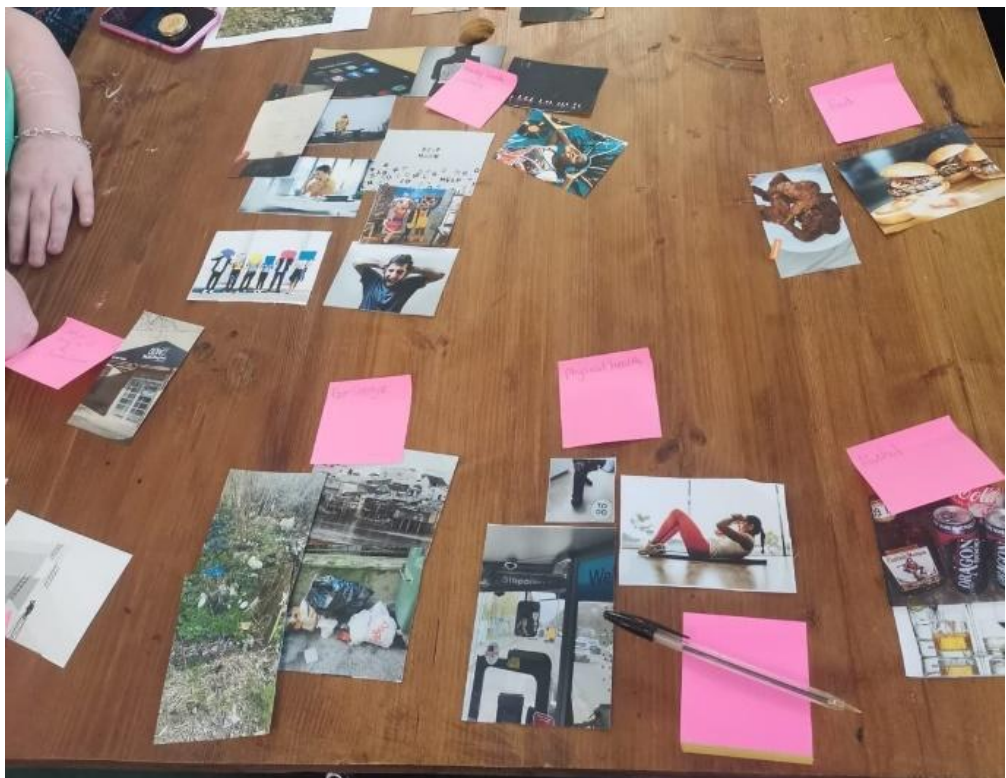


Figure 4.5: Thematic Analysis Session 2

In the third phase, codes were reviewed, interpreted, and clustered into potential themes and sub-themes. This stage, led by the researcher, built on participants' earlier contributions and was informed by both youth-generated categories and patterns identified across the wider dataset. Drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2020) understanding that themes are constructed rather than simply discovered, the analysis aimed to reflect shared concerns while also identifying deeper connections within and across experiences. Participant language and framings were retained where possible to ground the themes in their perspectives, even as interpretive synthesis was carried out by the researcher.

In the fourth phase, themes were reviewed for internal coherence, distinction, and analytic rigour. Extracts were revisited and cross-checked across data sources. Some initial themes (e.g. Community Involvement) were merged into broader categories (e.g. Understanding and Supporting Youth Wellbeing), while others (e.g. Trust in Authority) were removed due to limited data support. This iterative refinement ensured the thematic framework remained closely tied to participant contributions while providing conceptual clarity. The researcher also reflected on emergent findings and considered how these developments might inform or extend the final themes.

Phase five involved defining and naming the final themes and constructing a thematic map (Figure 4.6). Three overarching analytical themes were developed to guide the presentation of findings in Chapters 5-7:

1. **Navigating Adversity** - explores how young people experience and respond to challenges, including mental health pressures, inequality, and the impacts of COVID-19.
2. **The Role of Relationships** - highlights the importance of family, peer, and youth worker relationships in shaping wellbeing and providing care and support.

3. **Youth Participation, Voice, and Everyday Change** - examines young people's evolving engagement in the research and in their communities, with a focus on voice, agency, and collective action.

These themes form the analytical spine of the findings and discussion chapters. The third theme was particularly significant in highlighting how reflective spaces within the research contributed to ongoing community engagement.

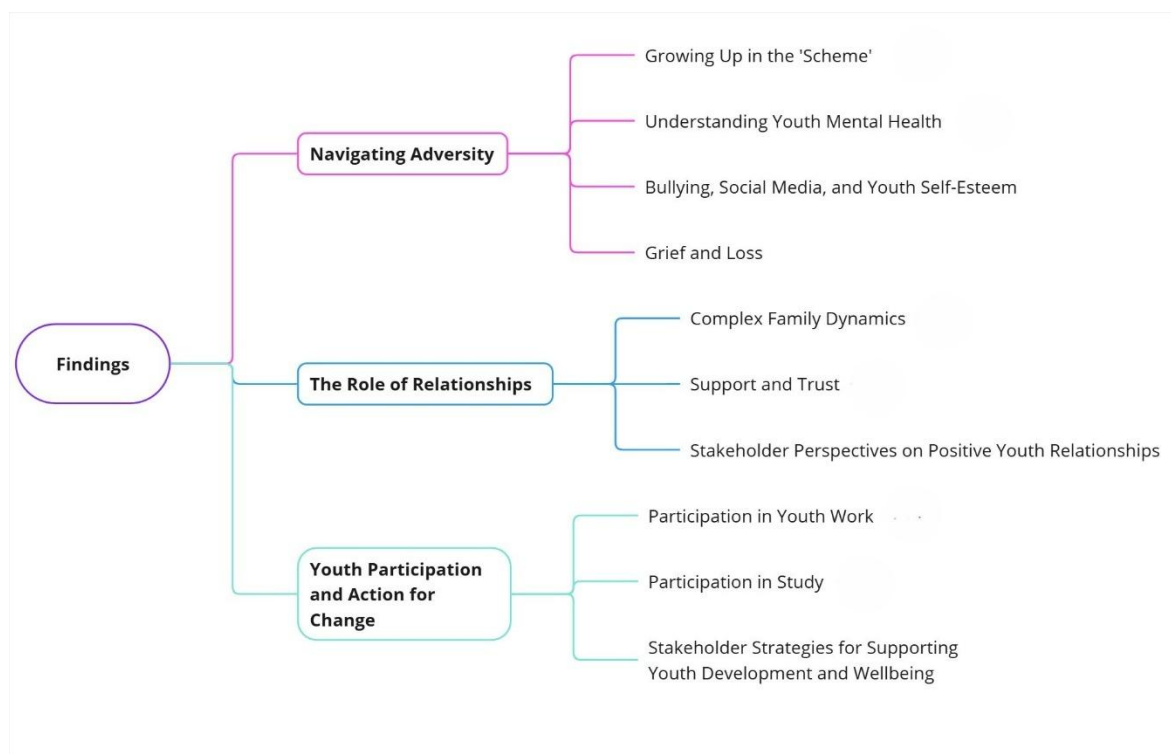


Figure 4.6: Final thematic map

In the final phase, themes were integrated into the structure and writing of the findings and discussion chapters. Illustrative quotes were selected to highlight young people's voices and to anchor the analysis in lived experience. Participant narratives were linked to the research questions and critically situated within the study's theoretical framework, drawing on Freirean pedagogy, Feminist Ethics of Care, and Empowerment Theory. Reflexivity was embedded throughout, with close attention to the researcher's dual role and its implications for interpretation and power. The use of participant-led coding

sessions and collaborative workshops supported the study's broader aim to foreground youth perspectives while practising epistemic humility.

[Chapter 5](#), [Chapter 6](#), and [Chapter 7](#) present the findings aligned with these analytical themes, prioritising participant voice and experiential depth. Young people's words are presented with minimal interpretation, offering a grounded, narrative account of their perspectives on wellbeing, structural constraints, and possibilities for change, without imposing external framings or assumed outcomes. The discussion chapter ([Chapter 8](#)) then engages these findings in dialogue with theoretical literature, offering a critical synthesis that situates youth perspectives within broader social and scholarly contexts.

## Chapter 5 - Findings - Navigating Adversity

### 5.1 - Introduction

Chapter 5, [Chapter 6](#), and [Chapter 7](#) present the findings of this study, grounded in young people's reflections, visual narratives, and dialogue. The presentation of findings in this thesis follows a structure designed to prioritise participant voice while also supporting analytical clarity. Each of the three findings chapters (Chapters 5-7) presents youth and stakeholder perspectives thematically, with a strong emphasis on storytelling, quotes, and contextual narrative. To maintain the integrity of the voices represented, the findings sections are descriptive and intentionally avoid heavy academic referencing or theoretical interpretation. At the end of each findings chapter, a preliminary discussion section is included to summarise key patterns and offer initial reflections on their significance. These sections act as a bridge between participants' voices and the more detailed theoretical and analytical engagement that follows. The final discussion chapter ([Chapter 8](#)) brings the findings together, situating them within the broader theoretical, methodological, and policy contexts.

As described in [Section 4.7.1](#), the youth participants – Coco (16), Gean (16), Lei (16), Lalo (15), Rosie (15), and Lauren (12) – engaged in a collaborative word association activity to define what wellbeing meant to them. They described wellbeing as being "comfortable, healthy, and happy" (CHH), foregrounding the importance of everyday experiences, relationships, and emotional safety in shaping how they felt in their lives. This shared framework was more than a starting point for discussion; it shaped how participants engaged with the research prompts, interpreted their photographs, and reflected on their environments throughout the project.

This understanding informed the organisation of the findings. Wellbeing, as articulated by the young people, was not understood as a singular or isolated state but as something deeply shaped by their social, environmental, and relational worlds. In response, the findings are presented across three chapters that reflect the layered and interconnected dimensions of their experiences:

- **Chapter 5** explores the everyday challenges and structural barriers young people were navigating in the aftermath of COVID-19, highlighting environmental stressors, personal struggles, and systemic inequalities that shaped their sense of comfort and stability.
- **Chapter 6** examines the role of interpersonal relationships with family, peers, and trusted adults in providing support, creating conflict, and fostering emotional growth. These relationships were central to how participants experienced health and happiness within their communities.
- **Chapter 7** focuses on young people’s reflections on action, agency, and participation, including how engaging in the study created space for them to consider their sense of voice, confidence, and belonging. This chapter also incorporates stakeholder perspectives, situating young people’s reflections within broader systems of support, policy, and youth work practice, and explores how opportunities for dialogue and expression enabled them to describe and reflect on their experiences in their own terms.

This three-chapter structure reflects both the way participants themselves framed wellbeing, as shaped by environmental, relational, and personal factors, and the study’s commitment to supporting youth-led reflection. Across Chapters 5 and 6, photographs taken by participants are included to amplify their voices and provide visual insight into how they understood and navigated wellbeing. All photographs used in the findings chapters are also presented in full in [Appendix 10](#) for transparency.

The chapter is structured thematically as follows: [Section 5.2](#) explores environmental and community-based challenges, including issues such as litter, poor housing, boredom, and local stigma. The meaning of the term ‘scheme’, as used by participants, is discussed to offer insight into how place, identity, and structural marginalisation intersect. Stakeholder reflections are included to highlight adult perceptions of the community and its role in shaping youth wellbeing. [Section 5.3](#) focuses on youth mental health, examining how young people made sense of their emotions, described experiences of self-harm and suicidal thoughts, and coped with social anxiety following COVID-19 lockdowns.

Their reflections reveal how mental health and wellbeing were understood as intertwined. Stakeholder responses are included to explore efforts to create safer, more responsive spaces and identify areas for further support and training. [Section 5.4](#) addresses in-person bullying, social media pressures, and their impact on youth self-esteem. Participants described how teasing, body shaming, and online harassment contributed to long-term emotional impacts and shaped how they viewed themselves. Their reflections highlight the complex and gendered pressures of appearance, visibility, and digital life. [Section 5.5](#) explores grief and loss as participants reflected on bereavement, emotional processing, and the complexities of mourning, particularly during the pandemic. Their accounts revealed the emotional weight of losing loved ones and the layered nature of grief, shaped by isolation, unresolved tension, and a need for connection. [Section 5.6](#) summarises the key findings of the chapter. [Section 5.7](#) offers a mini discussion that begins to connect these findings with the study's theoretical and analytical framework, laying the groundwork for the broader analysis in Chapter 8.

Throughout the chapter, the aim is not to generalise all young people or youth work contexts but to present the experiences of this specific group in their own words, situated within the particular social, emotional, and structural realities they identified. The voices of these participants are presented as central, not illustrative of a broader group, but reflective of their own lived experiences. The findings reflect young people's own definitions of wellbeing, what it means to feel comfortable, healthy, and happy (CHH), as expressed during the photovoice and photo-elicitation sessions. While youth work was occasionally referenced by participants, this chapter centres young people's reflections on their community, environment, and everyday lives. The focus remains on their lived experiences and perceptions, shared in their words and grounded in the specific contexts they described.

## **5.2 - Growing Up in the Scheme**

This section presents findings on the environmental and social challenges described by the youth participants as part of their everyday lives in the

scheme. In Scotland, a 'scheme' refers to a local authority housing estate. However, the term also carries emotional and social weight, often associated with stigma, marginalisation or feelings of neglect. All youth participants in this study live in the same scheme in Glasgow. Across the photovoice sessions, the young people shared stories and photographs reflecting their dissatisfaction with their area and the emotional impact this had on them. They described visible neglect, physical decay, and social tensions that shaped their daily realities and influenced how they felt about where they lived. Coco summed up her feelings with a strong expression of dislike:

Living here in the scheme is trappy. I hate it. Everywhere you look, it's just grey and falling apart. It feels like no one cares if we're even here.  
(Coco)

Coco's words suggest that she sees her surroundings as dull, neglected, and messy. She describes the scheme as physically grey and in disrepair, which contributes to a sense of lifelessness and abandonment. Her use of language conveys her perception of the area as unpleasant or run-down. Coco also expresses a deeper feeling that extends beyond the physical environment; she suggests that those responsible for maintaining or improving the community do not care about the people living there, including herself and others.

Lei also shared how living in the scheme makes her feel:

Embarrassed to live here. Even if you see the problems, what are you supposed to do about it? It's not like anyone's listening to us. It's like we're invisible to the people who could make a difference. (Lei)

Lei describes a strong sense of shame linked to her home environment. She mentions noticing visible problems but not knowing how to fix them, pointing to a feeling of helplessness. Her words suggest that she and others like her feel ignored or overlooked, even when they speak up or try to bring attention to the issues. Her quote reflects both embarrassment and frustration at the lack of response from those in power.

Lalo shared his thoughts in a way that reflected exhaustion with the situation:

They tell us just to keep going, but how can you when everything around you is broken? It's hard to feel good about yourself... It's hard to feel well when everything around you...is falling apart. (Lalo)

From Lalo's perspective, being surrounded by physical and social deterioration affects how he sees his community and how he feels about himself. He questions the expectation to "keep going" when nothing around him feels stable or cared for. For him, wellbeing isn't just about mindset, but it is about living in a place that reflects value and possibility. Similarly, Gean expressed a shared sense of struggle:

It feels like we're all just trying to get by, but everything around us makes it harder. (Gean)

Gean's quote echoes Lalo's sentiment. She emphasises the effort it takes just to get through each day and suggests that instead of support, the environment itself becomes another obstacle. Her words point to a common experience among the group: that the physical and social conditions of the scheme weigh heavily on their wellbeing and daily life.

The young people went on to elaborate further on specific concerns in their community, which are explored in the following sub-sections: littering (5.2.1), poor living conditions (5.2.2), and boredom and lack of opportunity (5.2.3).

### **5.2.1 - The Weight of Litter**

One of the most frequently discussed topics in the photovoice sessions was litter. The young people repeatedly raised concerns about how rubbish affected both the appearance of their community and their own wellbeing. Lauren was direct when asked what affected her in her community:

There's rubbish everywhere. (Lauren)

Lauren's brief response points to a strong awareness of the widespread presence of litter. Her words reflect the scale of the issue, suggesting that it's everywhere, making it hard to avoid or ignore.

Coco brought a photo (Figure 5.1) of litter in her community and explained why she took it:

This is a picture of rubbish. I took this photo as it is bad for my wellbeing as it just makes the community look terrible and horrible. (Coco)



**Figure 5.1:** Coco’s photo of litter in her community

Coco links the litter directly to her wellbeing, describing how it worsens her emotional state and contributes to a negative view of her neighbourhood. Her strong language suggests the issue is deeply personal and distressing.

The discussion of Coco’s photo led to a broader conversation. Lei shared how she saw litter as affecting more than just the way things look:

...the rubbish, that’s not really good for the environment...if you’re surrounded by rubbish that isn’t exactly good for you. It’s just dirty... Obviously, you can’t really get your proper needs met. (Lei)

Lei speaks about the environment as something that can either support or harm people. She suggests that being “surrounded” by rubbish isn’t just unpleasant; it

also affects the basic quality of life. The final part of her quote could refer to things like safety, health, and feeling comfortable in your surroundings.

Coco also reflected on how the way people dispose of rubbish contributes to the problem:

It's the fact that they'll set it beside the...bin...and then foxes get in it, and it just makes it look ten times worse...It's actually embarrassing. Like, stop being a lazy bastard and put away your own bins... It's bad for the environment...you get all the people that...love animals just that extra wee bit. I see those people in my community littering all of the time. They care about animals, but they don't care about the environment here. (Coco)

Coco is frustrated that people don't take care to dispose of their rubbish properly. She describes how leaving rubbish beside bins creates more mess, especially when animals like foxes tear it open. She finds this embarrassing and expresses anger that people who claim to care about animals still litter in her community. Her words suggest a feeling of being let down by those around her. Lalo responded to Coco's comment:

They really don't. The people with animals down the street just fling their rubbish about and blame it on us, the young people. (Lalo)

Lalo reinforces Coco's point and adds that young people are often blamed for the litter, even though it's caused by others. His frustration suggests that being unfairly blamed adds to the burden they already feel living in a messy environment. Coco continued:

...that's going to impact anybody's...mental health or wellbeing because you're having...a pure lecture for something you didn't do. (Coco)

Coco describes how being blamed affects her emotionally. She emphasises the unfairness of it and the frustration of getting told off for something that isn't her fault. This adds a social dimension to the impact of litter, not just the rubbish itself, but how adults or others in the community treat young people because of it.

In a separate moment, Coco explained how just seeing the litter can change her mood:

Like, I could have a smile on my face and see that, and it will put me down in the dumps... sometimes I feel as if that's actually where I live... in that bush with all that rubbish. Because it's everywhere, regardless of where you go. (Coco)

Here, Coco describes a strong emotional reaction to seeing litter. Even if she's feeling good, the sight of rubbish brings her down. She uses imagery to show how closely she associates herself with the environment around her. The repetition of "everywhere" reinforces that this isn't a one-off problem, it's part of her daily life.

These reflections show how litter is not simply seen as an environmental nuisance, it becomes something that affects how young people feel about themselves, their neighbours, and their place in the world. The presence of rubbish in their surroundings is deeply tied to their sense of wellbeing, contributing to feelings of frustration, embarrassment, and sadness. Across their words, there is a clear sense that the physical condition of their community shapes how they experience daily life and how they think others see them. For many of the participants, the litter serves as a constant, visible reminder of being overlooked. The following section builds on this by exploring the condition of housing and public spaces and how living in poor conditions further affects young people's wellbeing.

### **5.2.2 - Living in Poor Conditions**

The youth participants described poor housing conditions and visibly deteriorating public spaces as central to how they experience their local community. When Lauren was asked what impacted her in her community, she immediately pointed to the condition of the environment around her:

Probably, like, the state of the schemes and that. Why are our parks so broken when other areas are so nice? Living here makes you feel like you don't matter. (Lauren)

Lauren describes broken parks and a lack of care in her local environment. She contrasts her experience with other, better-maintained areas. Her reflection suggests that these differences affect how she feels about living in her scheme; she says it makes her feel like she doesn't matter. This sense of disrepair and neglect was echoed in a photo-elicitation session, where a photo (Figure 5.2) of a council flat prompted strong reactions. When Lalo saw the image, he said:

Shithole [area name]. (Lalo)



**Figure 5.2:** Photo-elicitation photo of council housing

Lalo's response is brief and blunt. His word choice conveys a powerful emotional reaction and gives a glimpse into how he sees the place where he lives. There is no elaboration, just a single word, loaded with meaning. Lei also responded to the photo:

...obviously, that environment looks like it can't be good to live in, so it can impact your lifestyle.... I mean, if you're not getting a proper roof over your head or like gas and electric, you can't keep warm, can't really eat properly if you've got nothing to heat it up with. And then when it rains or when it's cold, that's not going to keep you warm. (Lei)

Lei reflects in more detail on what poor housing actually means in day-to-day life. She lists the basics, shelter, heat, and food, and connects them to the condition of the housing. Her words show a practical awareness of what happens

when these needs aren't met. She's not just talking about discomfort; she's talking about survival.

When asked to describe what poor living conditions meant to her, Gean gave this response:

[area name]. It suffers from poor living conditions, poor housing, and a poor lifestyle. The broken parks, boarded-up shops, and rubbish everywhere, it just makes you feel worthless. (Gean)

Gean names her area as a place that represents poor conditions. She describes the housing and the wider environment, shops, parks, and public spaces. She says that these surroundings make her feel worthless. Her words connect the condition of the area with how she feels about herself, showing how closely the two are linked in her mind.

Together, these reflections reveal the depth of feeling the participants have about the condition of their environment. They describe places that are broken, cold, and neglected. They talk about unfairness, seeing other areas receive more care or investment. They express how this affects them emotionally, leaving them feeling ignored, frustrated, and, at times, diminished. The following section explores how these living conditions, paired with a lack of opportunities and things to do, contribute to the participants' experiences of boredom and frustration.

### **5.2.3 - Boredom and Frustration**

Alongside concerns about environmental conditions and housing, the youth participants described their area as a place where there is very little to do. Feelings of boredom and frustration were common, particularly in connection to the lack of opportunity and activities available to them. These reflections show how the absence of positive outlets or experiences impacts their day-to-day lives and shapes how they feel about growing up in their community. When asked about her attitudes toward the area, Lauren answered quickly and directly:

Firstly, living here is shite. There's nothing to do, that's why we drink...  
(Lauren)

Lauren's response is blunt and to the point. She links the lack of things to do with drinking, something that came up elsewhere in the data as a common behaviour among young people in the area. Her comment conveys frustration with a place that doesn't offer enough to keep people engaged or excited. She went on to talk about how this affects other young people in the community:

...as for the neds, there's nothing for them to do either, so they're always getting into bother, fighting with other schemes, carrying lockbacks [knives], doing drugs, and drinking. (Lauren)

In a Scottish context, 'ned' is often used as a slang term for 'Non-Educated Delinquent.' However, it is worth noting that the term has negative connotations and can be considered derogatory. It is typically used to describe someone who behaves in a disruptive manner and is often associated with stereotypes of young people involved in petty crime or anti-social behaviour. Lauren uses a familiar term, 'neds', to refer to other young people. She connects their behaviour to the boredom and lack of direction she sees around her. In her view, young people get into trouble because there's nothing better for them to do.

Coco described how she and Gean try to cope with the boredom by leaving the area altogether:

It's just boring...me and Gean's been like everywhere in Glasgow. Just because we can't stay in [area name] for that long. (Coco)

Coco and Gean use the bus to explore other parts of the city. Coco says they cannot be in their area too long, it's not just boring, it feels difficult to be there for an extended time. Going elsewhere seems to offer a break from the atmosphere of the scheme. Lei echoed this feeling when she talked about what it's like to live in the area:

We don't like to stay here because there's nothing here. No fun, no jobs, no place to enjoy nature, no opportunity. It's terrible and horrible. I'm getting older...and am starting to think about what I'm going to do with

my life and thinking about having to do it in [area name] is terrifying.  
How am I meant to support myself here? (Lei)

Lei lists what's missing from the area, fun, jobs, and access to green space, and calls the place "terrible and horrible." She connects this directly to her future, saying that the thought of having to build her life in the same area is frightening. Her question captures both her frustration and her anxiety about what lies ahead.

These reflections build a clear picture of how boredom and frustration shape the participants' experiences in their community. They describe a place that feels limiting, where the lack of opportunity pushes some young people toward risky behaviours and leaves others feeling stuck, restless, or afraid of what their future might look like if nothing changes. These accounts reflect how the absence of comfort and opportunity in their environment undermines the participants' sense of happiness and hope, key components of the CHH framework they developed to describe wellbeing. The next section presents stakeholder perspectives on the role of the local community, providing insight into how adults in the area view and respond to these concerns.

#### **5.2.4 - Stakeholder Insights on the Role and Influence of the Local Community**

In addition to the experiences shared by the young people, several adult stakeholders reflected on how they perceive the local community and its impact on youth wellbeing. In this study, 'stakeholders' refer to adults who have a role in supporting young people's wellbeing within the local area, including youth workers, community practitioners, family members, and a local politician. Many of them spoke with concern and empathy, recognising the weight of the issues that young people are navigating. These reflections provide an additional layer of understanding as adults working in, living in, or representing the area share their observations and hopes for change.

Community Worker 2 commented on the depth of insight the young people brought to discussions about their surroundings:

I was impressed with the insight on how the community can affect them, their families, and their lives. (Community Worker 2)

They recognised how clearly the young people had articulated the connection between their environment and their wellbeing, acknowledging that the issues affecting the scheme extend into homes, families, and daily life. Their comment reflects a recognition that young people are not just observing problems but are living within them, day to day. Youth Worker 2 also reflected on how the issues in the community weigh heavily on young people:

I felt that young people's experiences of their community and the world around them are impacted very heavily by issues that some may overlook as being mainly found in other pockets of the community... While perhaps not impacting young people directly in all instances, it weighs heavily on those who live with these issues or in communities where they are present. (Youth Worker 2)

They noted that even when young people are not directly involved in a specific issue, the presence of that issue in their environment still has an impact. This draws attention to the broader atmosphere of tension or hardship that young people are exposed to simply by living in the area. Youth Worker 3 further highlighted how aware the young people are of these external pressures:

They seem really aware of external influences on their wellbeing, which they shouldn't have to worry about at their age, especially around housing conditions. (Youth Worker 3)

This reflection emphasises that young people are carrying responsibilities and concerns that should not fall so heavily on them, especially when it comes to conditions shaped by adult systems and institutional neglect.

Some stakeholders also described ways they hope to support positive change in the community. For example, Local Politician 1 reflected ongoing efforts to improve the area:

As a councillor, always working to tidy up and improve our local area so it is better. (Local Politician 1)

This comment points to attempts to address issues like litter and broken infrastructure, aligning with the concerns young people raised. Other stakeholders imagined new initiatives, particularly community events that could foster connection and support wellbeing. Youth Worker 6 offered a succinct suggestion:

Community events to promote wellbeing. (Youth Worker 6)

Youth Worker 4 expanded on this idea:

There could be events or fundraisers where everyone comes together to support the young people with their goals. Such as bake sales, etc., to raise money for good causes or trips. (Youth Worker 4)

These reflections highlight a desire to create more opportunities for young people through grassroots efforts, though such activities remain proposals rather than formal plans. Youth Worker 3 proposed a community picnic as a way to reduce isolation and build connection:

Community picnic: It would be great for the young people to meet more of their community as poor mental health can be isolating, and social opportunities might help with this. (Youth Worker 3)

Importantly, Youth Worker 7 emphasised the value of working with young people to bring these ideas to life:

Work in conjunction with the young people to enable this [a community picnic]. (Youth Worker 7)

This suggestion reflects a participatory ethic, moving beyond top-down planning and toward co-production, where young people play an active role in shaping what support looks like.

Finally, Local Politician 1 concluded with a statement that framed the community as a shared responsibility:

This is the area we all call home, and it's important we all work to improve it. (Local Politician 1)

Their comment reinforces the idea that collective action, across generations and roles, is essential to meaningful change.

While not all stakeholders provided detailed reflections or proposed solutions, those who did expressed concern for young people's wellbeing and shared a range of ideas for how the local environment might better support them. While many of these suggestions were aspirational and not yet implemented, they reflect a desire to foster greater connection, visibility, and care within the community. The next section shifts focus from environmental and community issues to youth mental health, exploring how young people experience and understand mental wellbeing in their lives.

### **5.3 - Understanding Youth Mental Health**

This section explores how the youth participants talked about and made sense of mental health in their everyday lives. The study draws on the World Health Organization's (WHO, 2001, 2022) definition of mental health as:

...a state of mental wellbeing that enables people to cope with the stresses of life, realise their abilities, learn well and work well, and contribute to their community. (WHO, 2022)

However, the young people who took part in this study did not refer to clinical or academic definitions when speaking about mental health. Instead, their understanding emerged from lived experiences, emotional challenges, and conversations with others. This section presents the language and perspectives they used to describe mental health, offering insight into what it means to them and how they experience it in their lives.

The following sub-sections explore their reflections on self-harm and suicidal thoughts, the lasting impacts of social anxiety following COVID-19 lockdowns, and their wider understandings of coping and resilience. These accounts are presented with care, and each quote reflects experiences that were shared voluntarily, in the presence of trusted adults, and with follow-up support in place.

### 5.3.1 - Self-Harm, Suicidal Thoughts, and the Impact of Mental Health

Across photovoice sessions and thematic analysis workshops, several participants spoke directly about their experiences of mental health struggles, including self-harm and suicidal thoughts. These were emotionally difficult conversations, and their willingness to share them reflected the trust and safety established within the research setting. The following quotes illustrate how they described these challenges, often with striking clarity and honesty.

During one of the workshops, Lei provided a direct definition of self-harm in her own words:

Self-harm is where someone purposefully hurts themselves. For example, cutting, starving, burning the skin, and hair pulling. Self-harm is a very serious thing to deal with. It impacts your mental health so much. (Lei)

Lei's explanation shows awareness of the different forms self-harm can take. She describes it as intentional and serious and recognises its deep emotional impact. Her words suggest that this is something she has thought about carefully, possibly through experience or discussion with others.

Lalo also spoke about self-harm in connection to declining mental health:

...if it [mental health] got even worse, some people, like myself and many others I know, turn to self-harm. (Lalo)

Lalo links worsening mental health to self-harm, speaking with a matter-of-fact tone. He includes himself among those who have experienced this, suggesting it is something personal and shared within his social circle. His statement points to a sense of commonality and recognition of self-harm as a coping mechanism in difficult times.

In another moment of reflection, Lei elaborated on the types of thoughts that can arise during periods of distress:

...you could think of things you don't like, things that could hurt...like self-harm or...wanting to kill yourself...So that's not exactly positive. (Lei)

Lei's description is fragmented, with pauses and hesitations that convey how difficult it can be to speak about these topics. Her words highlight how unwanted or intrusive thoughts can emerge during periods of low mental health, even if they are not acted upon. Her understatement, "not exactly positive", hints at the discomfort and emotional weight behind such experiences.

Coco also reflected on how harmful thoughts can emerge in private, particularly when alone:

...you could be sitting in your bed... [thinking] I want to...do something stupid...I mean...cutting or...think that the world would be better off without me. Even if I don't want to act on any of those things, they're in my head. (Coco)

Coco describes an internal battle, moments when distressing thoughts appear even if she does not intend to act on them. Her phrasing, such as "do something stupid," may reflect a tendency to soften or downplay the severity of the thoughts, even while acknowledging their presence. Her quote reveals the loneliness and emotional toll of carrying these thoughts silently.

Together, these reflections from Lei, Lalo, and Coco offer powerful insight into how young people experience mental health struggles. They speak about self-harm and suicidal ideation not as abstract concepts but as real, personal, and ongoing challenges. Their words demonstrate how mental health affects their day-to-day lives and sense of self, particularly during moments of isolation, pressure, or disconnection. While the tone of these accounts is serious and sometimes painful, they also reflect the participants' courage in naming difficult experiences, and their trust in the research process as a space to do so safely.

### 5.3.2 - The Emergence of Social Anxiety After COVID-19 Isolation

Several participants described how the isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic had lasting effects on their confidence, routines, and ability to participate in social life. For some, this contributed to the emergence or worsening of social anxiety. Their reflections below illustrate how these experiences unfolded and how they continue to shape their everyday lives.

Rosie spoke about how her habits changed during and after the pandemic:

I wouldn't really go out of my house during and after COVID... Because I can usually not bother with too many people. (Rosie)

Rosie describes a reluctance to engage with others, both during lockdown and after restrictions were lifted. Her phrasing is casual but suggests a deeper discomfort, that social settings had become tiring or overwhelming. Her comment implies that the shift in routine during the pandemic made re-engaging with social life more difficult.

Coco shared a more detailed account of the emotional and physical disconnection she felt:

...during COVID, we were kept in for literally ages...and then when we were allowed out, it took a hell of a lot to get me out of that house... Like the farthest I could go was my back garden... It felt as if the whole world had changed, as if I was on Mars or...I was a mad alien... But I think it was because I was stuck in because I don't really socialise with anybody in my house, so I would just lock myself in my room for the whole of quarantine... (Coco)

Coco describes how prolonged isolation impacted her ability to return to daily life. Her use of metaphor conveys how unfamiliar the outside world felt after lockdown. She also highlights a sense of internal isolation, staying mostly in her room with limited social interaction even within her household.

In another reflection, Coco explained how the effects of lockdown extended well beyond the official restrictions:

...even though quarantine was like a year ago...I still struggle to leave my house... I can't be around more than like six people at a time. If I do, then I start to get pure anxious and get like the cold sweats and all that... So that's impacted me quite a lot because it's a bit of a struggle when I've got like family events or whatever to go to because I can't go to them. (Coco)

Here, she details the physical symptoms that accompany her anxiety, such as cold sweats, and describes how this shapes her ability to take part in everyday activities. Her account reflects how the psychological impacts of lockdown continue to influence her social life, even long after the public health restrictions ended.

These reflections show that for some participants, the pandemic had enduring effects on social confidence and wellbeing. The return to public life was not a simple transition but a challenging and emotionally complex process. These insights provide important context for understanding how broader societal disruptions intersect with young people's individual experiences of mental health.

### **5.3.3 - Understanding and Coping with Mental Health**

This section explores how young people understand mental health and the strategies they use to manage emotional and psychological challenges. Across the sessions, participants frequently used the terms mental health and wellbeing together, indicating that they viewed the two as closely linked and shaped by everyday life.

In a photovoice session, Coco reflected on the changing nature of mental health:

Mental health comes in waves. (Coco)

Her metaphor captures the sense of unpredictability and fluctuation, and how mental health can shift from day to day. Coco also described how external stressors, such as being unfairly blamed, affected her mental state:

...that's going to impact anybody's...mental health and wellbeing because you're having...a pure lecture for something you didn't do. (Coco)

Rosie and Gean similarly used the combined phrase mental health and wellbeing, suggesting an intuitive understanding of their emotional and psychological health as part of a broader whole:

I would say the mental health and wellbeing theme. (Rosie)

And that can definitely affect your mental health and wellbeing in negative ways. (Gean)

Alongside these reflections, participants discussed how they cope when things become overwhelming. Some described withdrawing from others as a way to manage emotional distress. Coco explained:

Sometimes, when I go through a rough patch. Like, I tell my friends that I'm busy... I've got my excuses not to see them because whenever I go through a rough patch, I'm not on my phone... I don't get out my bed. (Coco)

Coco described needing space and silence when struggling. During those times, staying in bed and avoiding contact became her way of dealing with it. Lalo also spoke about pulling away from others when his mental health was poor:

...if you've got terrible mental health, you just cut everybody off, and you just stop talking to everybody. But if you sort of got a good mental health, you don't cut anybody off. (Lalo)

His words reflect how changes in mental health can shape how he connects or disconnects from people around him. Rosie described avoiding people and support:

...the family support worker, that never helped because I just wouldn't go, and then my counselling, I just wouldn't go either. (Rosie)

Rosie's account shows how seeking help can feel impossible during periods of poor mental health. Not going at all was her way of managing things on her own terms.

Other participants described more active or restorative forms of coping. Lei spoke about the importance of taking breaks:

...instead of rushing to get to where you want... You could be...taking breaks in between because it could be a lot...especially like school or work... Take like breaks and days off for yourself...it's giving your brain and mental health the break it needs... (Lei)

She explained how these breaks help her protect her mental energy and manage pressure. She added:

I like to take days for my mental health instead of just going on with it, and then it gets worse and worse... I'll have self-care days because sometimes I'll be in my room rotting in my bed for like three days straight... (Lei)

Lei was honest about how hard things can get. For her, self-care isn't always tidy or uplifting; it's also about recognising when things are slipping and choosing to stop and rest. Coco also described her self-care routine:

Skincare...a bath bomb bath...candles lit. Nice fluffy jammies and just chill in bed with snacks to watch a film. (Coco)

Lei shared similar rituals of comfort:

...I'd go for a bath and...use all my nice stuff...or I'll go for my shower, I'll clean up my room, I'll do all my skincare, I'll do my hair, and do everything. (Lei)

Both Coco and Lei described how these moments, even small ones, helped them care for themselves and feel a little better.

Music also played a significant role in supporting mental wellbeing. Lauren shared:

I think music helps people with depression. It helps clear my mind.  
(Lauren)

For Lauren, music was something that created space from overwhelming thoughts. Lei echoed this idea:

Music can help you sometimes, like take your mind off doing self-harm or actually committing [suicide]... (Lei)

Lei described music as a way to interrupt harmful thoughts. Coco offered a vivid account of how music lifts her mood:

...if you listen to music, it might take your mind off it [self-harm and suicide] because you're kind of in your feels with the music... I don't like crying, so sometimes I just start picking up the sweeping brush... I'm just singing and dancing like I'm in Annie. And then my mind is totally free.  
(Coco)

Some participants also spoke about alcohol to manage distress, particularly social anxiety. While not all of them turned to alcohol, those who did were open about how and why. These accounts are not included to promote or endorse substance use but to highlight the complex ways young people seek relief. Coco said:

Trying to forget bad thoughts... I'm relying on drink to leave the house.  
(Coco)

This photo (Figure 5.3) captured that feeling:



**Figure 5.3:** Coco's photo depicting alcohol

Coco's statement points to a deeper issue where alcohol provides temporary relief from her anxiety, but she acknowledges a reliance on it to navigate her social environment. Coco elaborated on how alcohol changes her mental state:

I was struggling...and at the time when I had...alcohol in me...my thoughts just...left me. (Coco)

For Coco, alcohol was something that temporarily pushed the bad thoughts away. She added:

I could feel somebody else because I've got that alcohol in me. (Coco)

This suggests that drinking made her feel like a different version of herself, one that wasn't weighed down in the same way.

Lalo shared a similar experience:

...if you're pished in a bush, you're not depressed. The anxiety goes away because you're sleeping in a bush...It's like a wee cure. (Lalo)

His tone was partly humorous, but the quote reflects something real about how alcohol can feel like a temporary relief from emotional pressure. His description also points to a sense of escape that overrides fear or caution; sleeping outside while intoxicated is not described as risky, but as oddly comforting. For Lalo, being drunk in a bush isn't just about numbing anxiety; it's a kind of reset, where the usual pressures are momentarily suspended.

These accounts reveal the diverse ways in which young people understand and respond to mental health challenges. Some turn inward; others seek comfort through music, routines, or humour. For a few, alcohol has become a coping mechanism, reflecting broader concerns about access, stigma, and emotional isolation. Through their words, participants offer a nuanced picture of how they navigate the ups and downs of mental health, often with creativity, resilience, and self-awareness, even in the face of limited support.

### 5.3.4 - Stakeholder Perspectives on Supporting Youth Mental Health

This section focuses on how stakeholders responded to the young people's reflections on mental health, highlighting their thoughts on how they might better support youth wellbeing. Many stakeholders expressed being moved by the depth and honesty shared by participants. Youth Worker 4 noted:

I was moved by the way the young people expressed the pros and cons of what affects their mental health in their lives and community. (Youth Worker 4)

This statement recognises the young people's nuanced reflections, which captured both the challenges and sources of support in their lives. The emotional impact of hearing young people speak so openly was echoed by Youth Worker 6, who reflected:

The young people were very aware of issues that can negatively affect their mental health, but also very aware of what can help their mental health and wellbeing. (Youth Worker 6)

This comment highlights a recognition of young people as active agents who are critically reflecting on their mental health and the contexts that shape it.

Several stakeholders noted a generational shift in how mental health is discussed. Family Member 2 shared:

Mental health was a subject that was never spoken of and recognised throughout my growth. (Family Member 2)

This reflection highlighted how differently mental health was approached in the past, and how the openness of today's young people stands in contrast. For some, this openness prompted a desire to create more opportunities for dialogue. Family Member 3 wrote:

Help them talk more openly about their mental health. (Family Member 3)

Similarly, Youth Worker 5 described wanting to support informal conversations:

I will engage young people in more conversations about mental health over a cup of tea/coffee. (Youth Worker 5)

The importance of safe, welcoming spaces came through strongly. Youth Worker 7 emphasised:

Continue to provide an environment for young people to be able to express themselves and have a safe space to discuss mental health, as well as signposting them to relevant services. (Youth Worker 7)

This comment highlights both the emotional tone of the setting and the need for clear pathways to support. Youth Worker 2 similarly stressed the value of community-based services:

Continue to promote local assets as areas where young people can access safe and non-judgemental support from youth workers and professionals. (Youth Worker 2)

Some stakeholders reflected on the importance of self-awareness and continuous learning. Family Member 1 wrote:

Be more aware of the challenges young people face today. (Family Member 1)

This comment expresses a personal commitment to staying informed and being more responsive to the lived realities of young people. Community Worker 2 noted:

Seek guidance on youth health services available (Community Worker 2)

Professional development and training were also seen as necessary for providing appropriate support. Youth Worker 4 suggested:

...youth workers in the community could do courses on mental health awareness to be able to adequately support the young people. (Youth Worker 4)

Others proposed specific areas for deeper learning. Youth Worker 5 stated:

I will learn more about self-harm and how to engage in conversation with a young person in relation to their self-harm. (Youth Worker 5)

Youth Worker 7 added:

Undertake up to date training and educate young people on the negative effects of cyberbullying. (Youth Worker 7)

Some stakeholders also expressed an interest in creative or therapeutic approaches. Youth Worker 3 shared:

I will research art therapy ideas (Youth Worker 3)

While not all stakeholders provided detailed responses or specific plans, those who did shared a range of reflections that demonstrate care, attentiveness, and a willingness to learn. Many of the ideas expressed were aspirational rather than implemented, reflecting hopes for future action rather than current practice.

Collectively, these responses show that stakeholders were listening closely to young people's concerns and beginning to consider how they might respond. Whether through dialogue, training, or creative engagement, they expressed a desire to support youth wellbeing in ways that are safe, informed, and grounded in trust. The next section explores how bullying, social media, and self-esteem intersect with young people's experiences of mental health and wellbeing.

#### **5.4 - Bullying, Social Media, and Youth Self-Esteem**

This section explores how both in-person bullying and social media experiences have shaped the self-esteem of the youth participants.

Some participants described direct experiences of bullying in school, often centred on appearance. Coco reflected on how persistent teasing affected her wellbeing and behaviour:

I got bullied S1 to S3... all of it about my weight...or my ginger hair... I cried in my mum's arms, telling her that I had to start going to the gym or I wasn't leaving the house. Like that's the point that it got to. I stopped going to school because of it, and I still barely go to school to this day.  
(Coco)

Coco's account illustrates how bullying led to a significant decline in her confidence and sense of safety, ultimately causing her to withdraw from school. Lei described how a single teasing comment had long-term effects on her behaviour:

Like a boy in S1...used to pick on my teeth and call me toothless, right?... And ever since then...I just kind of started hiding my teeth, like, I'd laugh like this [with a hand covering her mouth] or eating I'll do that [covers mouth] or cover it with a face mask. It's like small comments that turn into like these big things. Like, it's still a habit to this day... (Lei)

Lei's reflection reveals how small, seemingly casual remarks can embed themselves in young people's self-image. Her behaviour, covering her mouth when laughing or eating, became an enduring habit, illustrating how 'small comments can turn into big things.' Bullying was not limited to peers at school. Rosie shared that some of the most painful teasing came from her own family:

They...take the piss out of me...they would do it because of my problems, and that makes me feel even bad for having them. Even though it's not my fault, but I feel like it's my fault. (Rosie)

Rosie's words point to the harm caused when neurodivergence becomes a target for mockery.

Participants also discussed direct forms of cyberbullying, while others described the emotional toll of comparison and visibility. Lalo used a vivid metaphor:

Social media is like a mental health magnet. It attracts all of the bad stuff, and it clings to you...social media can make it [mental health] bad. (Lalo)

During a photo-elicitation session, Lalo chose an image of social media apps (Figure 5.4) and elaborated:

This photo reminds me of negative things like cyberbullying and body image. While social media can be positive, the negatives sometimes outweigh them. It's like a friend and an enemy. This is bad for my wellbeing because it is hard to get away from, as social media is such a big part of our lives nowadays. (Lalo)



**Figure 5.4:** Photo depicting social media apps on a phone

Lalo acknowledged the dual nature of social media and emphasised how difficult it is to escape from its influence.

Lei described a similar tension:

Sometimes it's the only way to stay connected, but it also makes you feel worse about yourself...you could get bullied online...and that could be quite negative... You could be wanting to post something, but...what if they point out this or that or just full-on slag me for no reason? (Lei)

Lei also recalled witnessing an incident online that deeply affected her:

I was on TikTok last night, and I saw a girl. She's...overweight...and she was just doing a TikTok dance...all the comments on it was so mean. They were horrible...comments like... 'You need to buy two tickets for yourself'. (Lei)

Even though the comments weren't directed at her, Lei was disturbed by the level of harshness.

Participants also spoke about how social media sets unrealistic beauty standards that affect self-perception. Lei explained:

...there's a lot of people that will look at a picture and be like, oh, I wish I was like that, but I have this wrong with me and have that. They'll sit there and look at the photo and point out every single thing that's wrong with them when they can be something normal, like hip dips or like stretch marks or acne...all these unrealistic beauty standards, it just hits young people quite a lot because you could be looking on Instagram one day and you could be feeling good about yourself...then next thing you know, you're seeing all these models who... don't have any body hair. They've got a perfect tan, perfect teeth, clear skin, and you're just like, oh, I wish I looked like that. (Lei)

Lei highlighted how quickly confidence can be undone by idealised images. Lalo added that this pressure intensified during the pandemic:

Seeing everyone's perfect lives on Instagram just made me feel more alone during lockdown. (Lalo)

Coco reflected on the influence of celebrity culture:

Some people...might look at themselves (sic) and be like, maybe...I need to fix the way I look... In social media as well... Look at celebrities. They put filters on and get...plastic surgery, and then people like us would look at it and be like, I really want to look like them, but they're paying thousands of pounds to look the way they look... And then I've not got that much money, and it just puts you down in the dump. (Coco)

Coco's words point to the gap between celebrity appearances and everyday reality. She described the frustration of wanting to meet a standard that's only possible with money, filters, and surgery and how that comparison can feel disheartening.

The participants described a persistent current of judgment that impacted them, including teasing at school, jokes at home, or images on social media. The following section explores how the young people experienced grief and loss.

## 5.5 - Grief and Loss

This section explores the youth participants' experiences of grief and loss, one of the most recurring and emotionally significant themes throughout the study. Several young people brought photos of loved ones they had lost, using these images to reflect on the emotional weight they continue to carry. Their stories offer insight into how loss has shaped their sense of self, their relationships, and their overall wellbeing. These reflections were shared through conversation, photographs, and photo-elicitation, and are presented here in the young people's own words to honour the emotional and relational complexity of their experiences.

In one photovoice session, Gean spoke about losing her grandfather:

...my grandad...he died with lung cancer... This is a negative point because I couldn't say bye to him before he passed. (Gean)

Gean described the added pain of not being able to say goodbye. The loss itself was difficult, but the absence of closure left her with lingering sadness. She went on to explain the emotional toll this experience had on her:

I've been through a lot because when my grandad passed away, I've been put down. I couldn't even hug my friends after I'd lost him. I had to deal with it all alone.

Gean's words reflect how her grief was compounded by isolation. At a time when she needed support, she felt unable to access comfort from others. She described feeling "put down," suggesting how grief drained her emotionally and left her struggling without the physical connection and reassurance of others around her.

Rosie also spoke about the emotional impact of loss. Referring to a photo she brought in, she shared:

This photo...reminds me of my family and friends that have been very ill or died in the past. This is negative for my wellbeing because it makes me sad. (Rosie)

Rosie's photo was a reminder of multiple losses, and she described how remembering them brings sadness. Her words reveal how grief remains present, even when it is not being actively talked about. The emotional residue of those losses still lingers and affects her wellbeing.

Lalo shared a deeply personal reflection about losing his grandmother. Before talking about the photo of her memorial, he said:

Get the tissues ready. (Lalo)

He then described what it felt like after she died:

But when she died, you actually realised that they'll never be there again. You'll never be able to phone them, never be able to have a message with them, never be able to stay with them. And when I realised that, that actually broke my heart. And then I started crying day after day after day after day after day after day, then never told anybody. (Lalo)

Lalo's description reveals the moment he realised she was really gone and that her presence would never return. He listed the things he could no longer do with her, like phone or message her, capturing the everyday losses that follow a death. He also shared how he grieved privately, crying for days without telling anyone.

Coco spoke about the death of her uncle; someone she described not just as a family member but as a central figure in her life. She explained:

He wasn't just an uncle to me. Never once was he blood, right? But he stood in...he's the only male I had in my life...my dad didn't care about me...

He was like the father figure for me. He was actually everything.

And then when I lost him, it made me realise, like, who's going to be my dad now?...

I would always just call him uncle, but he knew that I looked up to him, like the way somebody would look up to their dad or whatever.

But then, when he left, it was just like my world came crumbling down. So, I genuinely felt as if I had no one. (Coco)

Coco described how her uncle filled the role of a father figure, offering support and care that she didn't receive from her biological father. His death left her with sadness and a deep sense of loss and disconnection. She described the moment as one where her world "came crumbling down," capturing the magnitude of his absence in her life.

During a photovoice session, Coco shared a photo of her call log from the days following her uncle's death (Figure 5.5). She explained what happened:

...getting these random calls off his number when he was already away scared me...

And then...when I answered one of the calls...it was like just someone breathing down the phone to me...

I was like, he's dead. Who's got his phone?...

I worried for, like, three days straight constantly because they were constantly phoning...

Because then people will think he's alive when I went and seen his dead body...

For like, four days, I didn't eat, I didn't sleep, I didn't anything. I just sat in my room like, what the fuck is going on? (Coco)



Figure 5.5: Coco's photo of her call log

Coco described the confusion and fear she felt when someone started calling her from her uncle's phone after he had died. Hearing breathing on the other end of the line added to her anxiety. She explained how this experience made her question what was real, especially after seeing her uncle's body herself. For days, she didn't eat or sleep; she just sat in her room, overwhelmed.

Coco also shared that before her uncle died, they had argued. She continues to carry guilt about their last interaction:

Because I feel like it's my fault, even though I know it's not, I just feel like it is.

Because if I had made a different action from what I did that day, he could possibly still be here with us....

Again, I will forever feel like this is my fault...

He phoned and asked for money to get a taxi up to the house. And I told him, no, he can fuck off and hung up the phone on him.

He came up to the house... And I didn't open the door. (Coco)

Coco remembered the final moments of their relationship in vivid detail. Even though she knows it wasn't her fault, her words show how powerfully the guilt lingered.

Across these stories, the young people described how grief affects them through sadness, isolation, guilt, and confusion. For some, grief was made harder by the COVID-19 pandemic, which created distance from friends and disrupted chances for closure. For others, the grief they experienced became tangled with other challenges in their lives.

The next section summarises the key findings of this chapter.

## 5.6 - Summary of Findings

This chapter began by exploring the theme of Growing Up in the Scheme, where youth participants described their experiences of living in a local authority housing estate in Glasgow. They reflected on issues such as littering, poor housing, and a lack of opportunity, expressing frustration, embarrassment, and a strong sense of being overlooked. The emotional impact of growing up in a visibly neglected environment shaped how they saw themselves, their futures, and their place in the community. Alongside these reflections, stakeholders acknowledged the challenges young people face and shared ideas, often aspirational, for how local support structures and collective action might improve wellbeing.

The chapter then turned to youth mental health, sharing participants' own language and interpretations of what mental health means in their everyday lives. Many used the terms 'mental health' and 'wellbeing' interchangeably, reflecting how deeply intertwined these concepts are for them. Participants shared powerful accounts of self-harm, suicidal thoughts, and emotional struggles, as well as the lingering effects of isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some described the emergence of social anxiety and ongoing discomfort with group settings. A wide range of coping strategies were described, from withdrawal and self-care routines to music and, for some, the use of alcohol to manage overwhelming feelings. Stakeholders reflected on the importance of safe spaces, open dialogue, and ongoing training, highlighting their commitment to supporting young people's mental health with care and responsiveness.

The theme of bullying, social media, and self-esteem followed, illustrating how both in-person and online interactions influence how young people view themselves. Participants spoke about being teased for their appearance, family dynamics, or neurodivergence, experiences that left lasting emotional impacts. They described the pressures of social media, where constant comparison and the threat of judgment made them feel anxious or inadequate. Some avoided

posting altogether, while others recounted the emotional toll of witnessing cruelty online, even when not directly targeted.

The final theme in this chapter focused on grief and loss, a deeply felt and recurring topic throughout the research. More than half of the participants spoke about losing someone close to them, including grandparents, aunts, and uncles. These stories were often marked by sadness, guilt, and emotional isolation, especially when goodbyes were missed or relationships were unresolved. For some, the experience of grief was compounded by trauma or made more difficult by the disconnection and uncertainty of the pandemic. These reflections revealed the emotional complexity of mourning at a young age and underscored the need for connection, care, and opportunities to process loss.

These findings present a rich and grounded picture of the emotional, relational, and structural dimensions shaping young people's wellbeing. Across the themes, the participants described the world as they experience it, offering insight into the ways they navigate adversity, respond to challenges, and seek comfort and connection. Their voices remain central throughout, not as illustrations but as the primary lens through which these issues are understood. The next chapter explores the role of relationships in shaping wellbeing, before the thesis moves into broader analysis and theoretical discussion in Chapter 8.

## **5.7 - Preliminary Discussion**

Chapter 5 explored how young people experience and make sense of wellbeing within the structural, emotional, and relational contexts of their everyday lives. Across themes such as place-based marginalisation, mental health, bullying and self-esteem, and grief and loss, participants described wellbeing as deeply relational and inseparable from material and social conditions. Their accounts highlight how environmental neglect, poverty, stigma, and social exclusion constrain young people's sense of safety, value, and possibility (Aldridge, 2016; Bynner et al., 2020; Wacquant, 2008).

Participants' reflections challenged individualised and resilience-focused models of wellbeing, instead aligning with relational and structural understandings (Hammond et al., 2022; Prilleltensky, 2008). While supportive relationships with family, peers, and youth workers offered moments of care and belonging, these were often fragile and shaped by wider systemic pressures. Beginning to interpret these findings through the study's integrated theoretical framework, including Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981), Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000), and Feminist Ethics of Care, relationality, and intersectionality (Arinder, 2022; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993) highlights how young people's struggles reflect broader dynamics of power, inequality, and emotional labour. These frameworks help situate personal accounts within collective and political contexts, emphasising that empowerment and wellbeing require relational support and structural change.

Chapter 5 offers more than a catalogue of challenges: it demonstrates how young people navigate intersecting systems of marginalisation while seeking recognition and connection. The next chapter builds on these insights by focusing more closely on the relational dimensions of wellbeing and the role of family, peer, and youth work relationships in shaping young people's sense of safety and belonging.

## Chapter 6 - Findings - The Role of Relationships

### 6.1 - Introduction

The previous chapter presented findings that explored the challenges young people face in the aftermath of COVID-19, including the impact of environmental neglect, mental health struggles, and experiences of social exclusion. Building on these findings, this chapter turns to the role of relationships in shaping young people's lives, both as sources of support and as sites of tension, conflict, and change. Relationships emerged throughout the study as central to how young people understand and experience wellbeing. This reflects wider research that identifies meaningful, trusting relationships with family, peers, and supportive adults as critical protective factors in the development of young people's wellbeing (Luthar, 2006; Noble & McGrath, 2011, 2012).

This chapter presents the findings thematically, with each section focusing on different dimensions of relational life and how support and trust shape young people's experiences of wellbeing: [Section 6.2](#) explores the complexity of familial dynamics, including accounts of alcohol use, violence, emotional conflict, and instability. Participants reflected on how these challenges were intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to heightened stress and relational breakdowns. While some young people described significant distress and withdrawal, others highlighted moments of care and mutual support, particularly with grandparents, siblings, or extended family members. [Section 6.3](#) examines how young people navigate trust and support across a range of relationships, including family members, friends, youth workers, and counsellors. These accounts reveal how trust is built, tested, and sometimes withheld, depending on the consistency, empathy, and safety perceived within each relationship. Young people described how relational support enabled emotional openness, while its absence often led to the development of a 'hidden self', a strategy of emotional concealment used to avoid vulnerability or burdening others.

[Section 6.4](#) explores stakeholder perspectives on the importance of positive relationships in supporting youth wellbeing. Youth workers, family members, and community practitioners discussed the emotional weight of relational work and the structural challenges they face in offering consistent care. Their insights reinforce the significance of trust, presence, and role modelling. [Section 6.5](#) summarises the key findings. [Section 6.6](#) reflects on the findings' implications for understanding youth wellbeing. It begins to situate the chapter's insights within the study's broader research questions and theoretical framing. Further analysis is developed in Chapter 8.

## **6.2 - Complex Family Dynamics**

This section explores the difficult and often emotionally complex family dynamics described by youth participants, particularly in relation to alcohol use, conflict, and violence. These accounts are included in hopes of amplifying young people's voices and experiences of navigating relational challenges in the context of home.

### **6.2.1 - Alcohol Use and Violence**

Many of the young people described alcohol as a visible and often disruptive force in their home lives. Rosie reflected on how this shaped her everyday environment:

...she just had people at the house drinking all the time... (Rosie)

Rosie later explained how this atmosphere led to changes in her living arrangements and education, showing how alcohol use intersected with instability across different areas of life.

Gean described the long-term effects of her mother's alcohol and drug use during pregnancy:

See, when I say my mum's an arsehole, she's an arsehole. She drank and did drugs when she was pregnant, and it's changed my brain, and this is

the reason my eyes are the way they are as well... She's put me through a lot of shit. When I say a lot, it's been a lot. (Gean)

Gean's account connects physical, emotional, and developmental impacts. Her language and tone were angry as she described how parental substance use shaped her relationship with her body, her identity, and her trust in caregivers.

Other participants approached the topic with detachment or humour, suggesting a level of normalisation. For example, Lalo joked:

So, if you want to get somebody in to do a talk about alcohol, just get my alcy (sic) uncle (Lalo)

Lauren reflected on witnessing health deterioration due to alcohol:

...it could make you unwell because my gran was drinking, and then she got put in the hospital with dementia from drink. (Lauren)

For Lauren, alcohol is linked with serious physical consequences. Similarly, Coco shared the traumatic story of her uncle's death, describing how he had been sitting with his head back, "sleeping," when he began to choke on his own vomit. The person who was with him that night, also very intoxicated and known to Coco, mistook the sounds for snoring and did not intervene. Coco recalled:

...he was just sitting with his head back... and it sounded like he was snoring when he was actually choking on his own sick at that moment in time...

He could have been saved if she would have done something instead of just sat there continuously drinking. (Coco)

Coco's account conveys the deep pain and sense of loss she associates with this event. Her words highlight how profoundly this experience has stayed with her and the way she describes the possibility of his life being saved.

The participants also described alcohol as a trigger for aggression and fear. Lauren observed:

Some people cannot handle their drink and get nasty or violent. This is bad for my wellbeing. (Lauren)

This quote accompanied a photo of alcohol (Figure 6.1), showing how its presence was associated with emotional harm and unpredictable behaviour.



Figure 6.1: Lauren's photo depicting alcohol

Rosie described avoiding home when drinking occurred:

When I went out, I'd stay out at least until she'd [her mum] get back home because there was people drinking and then every time you try to go home, they wouldn't let us. They were sitting there threatening us in our own home and all that. (Rosie)

Her experience of being locked out or threatened illustrates how alcohol created unsafe or volatile environments, prompting her to remove herself for protection.

Coco described taking on a protective role:

My auntie wanted me to open the door. I said, no, he's got some sort of drink in him, and your three kids are here. Like, I'm physically not letting him in this house. (Coco)

This is a moment of decision. Coco is being asked to do something, and she refuses. Her words show a clear concern for the safety of others in the house,

especially children, and a belief that someone who has been drinking poses a risk. She also talked described cycles of violence and reconciliation:

He was an absolute arsehole, right? Me and him actual, like, fist fought (sic) and everything, hitting each other with scissors... Me and him could have put each other in hospital, but as soon as we got out of the hospital, we'd be best pals again. (Coco)

Here, Coco describes a cycle of physical violence followed by closeness. Her words describe how the serious fights were followed by reconciliation, and that this pattern was part of their relationship. Finally, Coco reflected more broadly:

...domestics...like they could get abused...at home. (Coco)

When asked to clarify, she elaborated:

Physical. Verbal. Because that can impact somebody a lot and make their head think that everybody's going to be like that. (Coco)

These two quotes show Coco naming different kinds of abuse, physical and verbal, and explaining how they can shape a person's mindset.

These reflections paint a powerful picture of how alcohol and violence were embedded in the everyday lives of some participants. These were not exceptional events but recurring experiences that influenced how they understood safety, care, and relationships at home.

### **6.2.2 - Family Tensions: Heightened Conflict and Instability During the Pandemic**

This section explores how youth participants experienced familial conflict and instability, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rosie shared how her living arrangements changed suddenly due to her mother's mental health struggles:

...before I moved up here, I had a lot going on, and my mum wasn't keeping well...then I moved, which was a big step. There was a lot

happening. I didn't know where I was going, and I ended up going to live with my gran. I didn't know what school I was going to... (Rosie)

Later, she reflected how these dynamics affected her internally:

I feel like it's my fault when my family argues. (Rosie)

Rosie reveals a sense of self-blame and internalises the responsibility for familial conflict.

Coco also described ongoing conflict with her mother, intensified by daily stress:

Me and my mum, our bond is just not great... It's...mostly the hard day at work, or I've had a bad day at school, and then we'll clash automatically... Like she could slam the door like, 'I'm so done with this cunt.' Then come back and be like, 'Hi Coco, you okay?' I'll be like, huh, what just happened? (Coco)

The sudden shift between hostility and casual conversation left Coco confused and emotionally unsettled.

Gean similarly described how being stuck indoors during lockdown contributed to daily arguments:

...we couldn't get out of the house. Every day we started fighting and arguing... (Gean)

She suggested that the lack of space and freedom during lockdown made daily interactions more difficult. Coco echoed this experience, describing a house full of tension:

I think that's what every household was like because we were stuck in all the time and were just like, pure nagging at each other's neck. Like me and my brother were ready to strangle each other every day of our life. I'm surprised I'm not in a mental asylum. (Coco)

Her humorous exaggeration highlights just how relentless the conflict felt. For many participants, close quarters and heightened stress amplified everyday tensions.

Lalo reflected on how the pandemic fundamentally changed his relationship with his mother:

Well, for start, I thought COVID... was going to be over in, like, two weeks. But so did everybody... And we all thought, fuck it. We're just going to be in the house for two weeks instead of two years... stuck with the people that you thought you loved but now you just hate...

I'm beginning to think that it's impacted them [his relationships] in a bad way... Because me and mum before COVID, we hardly ever argued. And during COVID and after COVID, we argue all the time. (Lalo)

Lalo talked about how the extended time indoors, which he initially thought would be brief, caused significant strain in his family. He noted how his relationship with his mum changed over the course of the pandemic, going from peaceful to argumentative, and he linked this change to the prolonged time they spent together under stressful circumstances.

Beyond conflict, the young people also described the broader emotional disruption caused by the pandemic. Rosie described it as chaotic:

...during COVID, like a lot has happened in my life... and there's been like changes. We didn't expect it was going to happen, so it happened at all the one time, and it was all... chaotic. (Rosie)

Rosie reflected on how the pandemic brought about rapid and unexpected changes in her life, which felt overwhelming and hard to process.

Lei shared how the disruption affected her daily routine and mental wellbeing:

For me, in lockdown... I really didn't do anything but just eat and eat and eat and sleep and sleep... I'd be sleeping during the day and up all night. It was horrible... I felt lockdown just kind of impacted a lot of people. Like the way they look or the way they feel, the way they think... (Lei)

Lei described a change in her routine that left her feeling unmotivated and disconnected. She went on to express concern about the possibility of another lockdown:

...if I had to go for another lockdown again, I don't think I'd be able to survive, if I'm being honest...knowing how it was the first time around and the adjustments that I had to make throughout that. (Lei)

Lei spoke about the emotional toll of the first lockdown and her fear of having to go through it again. She reflected on how difficult it was to adjust the first time and doubted her ability to manage it again.

As a result of the increased tension, many of the youth participants adopted coping strategies such as avoidance and withdrawal. Gean shared:

I sat in my room, and he sat in his room. And we just didn't do anything, and we didn't talk. (Gean)

Gean described how she and her brother chose to separate themselves from one another to avoid further conflict. Coco also used withdrawal as a regular strategy:

...when I'm in the house, I usually just sit in my room. I don't communicate with them. (Coco)

She noted that isolating herself in her room was a common response to tension. Similarly, Lalo said:

I do that on a daily basis. Well, whenever I'm pissed at somebody. (Lalo)

Lalo referred to avoidance as something he did frequently, especially when he was upset with others. For Lei, this strategy was connected to managing her emotions and preventing herself from reacting in ways she might later regret:

I'd like to just be alone if something bad happened, especially if I'm angry at someone. Like, I don't want to be around anybody because I'll end up saying stuff I don't want to say. (Lei)

She elaborated further:

...if I know there's something that's going to annoy me or make me feel uncomfortable or something like that, I take a step back. (Lei)

Lei described her process of taking a step back to avoid emotional escalation.

The participants described how the pandemic intensified familial tensions and destabilised everyday routines. For many young people, the home became a site of conflict rather than comfort. In response, they developed coping mechanisms to navigate the stress, often by limiting interactions, retreating to their rooms, or distancing themselves emotionally.

The next section explores how young people understand and navigate support and trust within their relationships, including those with family, friends, and supportive adults.

### **6.3 - Support and Trust**

Throughout the study, it became evident that support and trust are critical elements in the youth participants' relationships. While distinct concepts, support and trust are deeply interconnected, with trust often forming the foundation for emotional and practical support. This section explores how these dynamics play out across various types of relationships within families, friendships, youth work, and counselling and how the absence of trust and support can lead some young people to retreat inward or conceal parts of themselves.

#### **6.3.1 - Family**

The youth participants shared a range of perspectives, showing that family can offer both refuge and strain, sometimes at the same time. Coco spoke appreciatively about the emotional and practical support she receives from extended family:

...you know that you always have a family member that you can speak to, whether you speak to them on a daily basis or you go a month without

speaking to them... This is good for my wellbeing because it goes to show that you always have someone no matter what. Having a support system is really important. (Coco)

She also described her younger brother's presence:

I personally think [he] is quite good for my wellbeing... Sometimes, when I go through a rough patch... [he] would come into my room and sit with me just to make sure that I was okay...just to give me that wee bit of company... Even though he's younger than me, he's still like a good support. (Coco)

These small moments of care, like simply sitting together, were valued by Coco as meaningful signs of support. Similarly, Lei described how her family helps her stay steady during hard times:

When things get hard, my family keeps me grounded. (Lei)

Rosie reflected on her aunt's support:

This reminds me of how my auntie was there for me through COVID-19, and even now, she is always here with me. This is good for my wellbeing. Having someone in your life to support you in hard times is important. (Rosie)

Rosie's words convey a sense of stability and presence, where support over time becomes a foundation for wellbeing. Gean also acknowledged how her grandmother played a vital role in her life, particularly during hard periods:

I've had my nana... She's helped me a lot, and she's helped my wellbeing. (Gean)

Gean also described caring for her grandmother:

...me and Coco made her about five cups of tea just so we could take care of her. I got an ice packet from the fridge and put it on her ankle too. (Gean)

For others, trust was an essential part of what made these relationships supportive. Lei reflected on the openness she shares with her mum:

I tell my mum everything. Like, me and her have that kind of relationship. I can tell her everything and anything. (Lei)

This level of trust enabled Lei to communicate openly. Gean similarly noted how trust in her sibling relationship brings her happiness:

It makes me feel...happy because we can trust each other. (Gean)

Trust also emerged as important in Lalo's reflection, where he discussed how trusted family members could offer a listening ear and shared understanding:

Some family...you can talk to them about all your problems, and they wouldn't tell a single soul. And some family members that you tell...might have went through the same thing or they might still be going through the same thing. (Lalo)

However, not all participants felt supported by their families. For some, the absence of care or trust created emotional strain. Lalo shared:

...it can be quite good...having somebody there that you love and that they love you...but...it's shit if you don't have anybody there. (Lalo)

Coco echoed this feeling, noting how the absence of support could amplify negative emotions:

Because sometimes if you feel like you have no one, it will bring you down more and more. (Coco)

Gean reflected on the challenges of relying on just one family member, her grandmother, especially when both of them were struggling:

...it's difficult if you're hurting, yourself, or sick around the same time, then there's nobody else there. (Gean)

Rosie also described moments where she felt unsupported, particularly when her mother failed to intervene in disrespectful behaviour from others:

...Like she didn't care, but she was just letting people take the mick... the piss... (Rosie)

In sum, this section illustrates the varied emotional landscapes of family life. Where trust and support were present, they served as protective anchors, offering grounding, comfort, and relief. But when these relational foundations were fragile or lacking, participants described emotional withdrawal, disappointment, and loneliness. The next section explores how similar dynamics of trust, vulnerability, and care also played out in young people's peer relationships.

### 6.3.2 - Friends

This section explores how the youth participants experience support and trust within their friendships and how these relationships shape their wellbeing.

Gean described her best friend as a constant presence in her life:

...if you don't want to talk to your parents or teachers, you can talk to your best friend... She's been there for me since day one. My friends are the only ones who really get me. (Gean)

Coco reflected similarly on the emotional safety and unconditional care she felt in her friendships:

...I know regardless of what would happen, whatever stupid decisions I were to make, like no matter what, I'll always have people that I can speak to about anything without feeling like they're going to judge me or go behind my back with it all... It's like they bring the spark out of me. (Coco)

Coco's language conveys how foundational these friendships were to her sense of identity and being able to feel supported.

This support within friendship became particularly important when participants struggled with their mental health. Coco described a time when she tried to withdraw from others, only to be met with loyalty:

When you're talking about mental health, whether it's good or bad...that's when you realise who your true friends are. Because...sometimes you'll

shut people off... But... I've tried to shut Gean and Lalo off. They've both simply turned around and told me, Coco... I'm not going anywhere. (Coco)

Rosie described Gean's encouragement:

When I first came here, the only person I knew is Gean... I think that it's just helped me grow and spread my wings a bit... I can't thank that lassie enough, like she brought me here tonight. She kept telling me, Rosie, you're coming tonight. You're going to that meeting tonight. And I'm like, no, my mental health feels bad. And she just helped me get out of the house. (Rosie)

Gean offered emotional encouragement and gently pushed Rosie to re-engage with the outside world when her mental health made it difficult to do so. For other participants, friendship was defined by shared rituals and small, joyful moments. Lei reflected on these everyday experiences:

...bonding with each other...taking pictures, or having sleepovers, or...munchy nights. (Lei)

Lei also described her own role as a source of support for others:

Because I like to help other people. Like if my friends need help with something or need somewhere to stay, I'm here... Or if they needed me to go with them to a doctor's appointment or hospital, I'll go with them if their mum and dad can't go. (Lei)

Lalo shared a similar view:

We always have friends that will be there for us, and we need to be there for them... Because no matter what your friends are going through you support them. (Lalo)

However, these relationships were not without vulnerability. Several participants described how broken trust or uncertainty about others' intentions made it difficult to open up. Coco reflected:

See, that's the thing...in here, obviously, I can trust they two, I can trust you two... But me and this girl have fallen out at the moment. So, see, if

she was here, I wouldn't have opened up as much as I think I have in the last like five minutes... (Coco)

Lalo also commented on how betrayal can damage even the strongest bonds:

I guess because you know you can trust them, and if you know that you can trust them, that bond can never be broken—until they do something (Lalo)

He added:

...you need to trust your best pals... Because trust goes a long way, especially when there's snakes... There's people...that...break your trust. (Lalo)

The imagery of “snakes” evokes the sharpness of betrayal, a reminder that friendships are not always safe spaces. Lauren, too, spoke about the emotional pain of losing a close connection:

I felt completely lost when my best friend just stopped talking to me. (Lauren)

Her statement describes how disorienting it can feel when a close bond suddenly disappears.

Coco described the fear of misjudging others and the anxiety that follows vulnerability:

...at that moment in time, when you are...out with your friends...you'll be enjoying it. But then what will you do if your friends are fake? You're going to be shitting yourself, thinking, I've told them these things... (Coco)

Coco's comment exposes the internal tension between wanting to trust and fearing betrayal. To protect herself, she's become more selective in who she confides in:

...always have a smaller circle than a bigger one. If you have a big circle, it's just going to be fake. (Coco)

These reflections show that friendship was central to the participants' sense of wellbeing. When grounded in trust and mutual care, friendships became sites of strength, healing, and joy. But these same relationships could also provoke anxiety, pain, and withdrawal when trust was broken or uncertain.

### 6.3.3 - Youth Work

This section focuses on how youth participants reflected on their relationships with youth workers within the specific context of the local youth project where this research was based.

Coco, for example, reflected on how the local youth project setting offered an alternative when other support felt unavailable:

... [the local youth project] ...is good for my wellbeing as there is always someone to talk to when you don't feel like speaking to family or friends. It's also a safe and caring place. (Coco)

For Coco, the youth project provided a space where she could talk openly and feel emotionally safe. She elaborated on this sense of continuity during times of withdrawal:

... there's been sometimes when I've been in a dark patch or whatever, I've not left the house, not been on my phone. But if I go along to [my local youth project], I'm getting to see you, and I know that I can speak to you. (Coco)

Lalo expressed similar sentiments about the importance of having a space away from family pressures:

I love my family, but sometimes it's just too much. The arguments, the pressure, it makes me feel like I'm drowning. That's why I love my youth workers. I can go and just not worry about that shite, you know? (Lalo)

Lalo framed this youth work space as a place where he could let go of external pressures and feel more at ease. He also valued the way youth workers listened without imposing advice:

Because for a start, we know we can talk about our problems... My youth worker is the only person who listens without telling me what to do.

(Lalo)

Lei spoke about the significance of informal one-to-one conversations:

I feel like one-on-ones, talking to someone, seeing how they are, how are things going... I feel like that makes it a lot better, you know, just talking to someone... (Lei)

For Lei, these conversations serve as meaningful check-ins. She also noted how the tone of these conversations made it easier to open up:

I could talk to you about it and tell you about it... You can just kind of talk to them like they're your pal. (Lei)

For Lauren, the youth club stood out as a space:

The youth club is the only place where I feel like I can just be myself. No one judges me, and I know they actually care about what I'm going through. (Lauren)

Here, she described the youth space as a space of authenticity. Rosie, too, appreciated the attentiveness of her youth worker, particularly when things were difficult at home:

When things got bad at home, my youth worker was the only one who noticed and asked if I was okay. They helped me find a way to cope. (Rosie)

In addition to emotional support, the youth space also facilitated social interaction. Lauren commented on its social value:

It's good to hang with your friends in a safe place. (Lauren)

Lei added:

...it's just somewhere for us to go and bond again. (Lei)

For Lei, the youth space helped to rebuild and strengthen peer relationships. Lalo appreciated the way it brought different people together:

...you end up talking to people that you don't normally talk to. (Lalo)

This quote reveals how the participant's youth project helped expand their circles and develop new friendships. Coco explained how casual social contact helped reduce her anxiety and challenge negative assumptions:

It's just a new way of meeting new people... It's a space for everybody... So, it's good because then you all go, and even if you don't become friends, you can still say hi to them in the street... So then, that would help people's mental health sometimes because some people might be like, I'm not leaving the house because they don't like me, like overthinking it. Then when they go there, that's when you realise you can say hi to them all. None of them really do have a problem. (Coco)

Several participants also emphasised the importance of confidentiality in building trust. Coco noted:

I'm getting to see you, and I know that I can speak to you without feeling like, oh, they're going to go tell people. (Coco)

Lalo made a similar point:

Because for a start, we know we can talk about our problems, and we know it won't get shared with anybody else. So, there's confidentiality there. (Lalo)

The following section explores how participants experienced trust and support in the context of counselling and therapeutic services.

#### **6.3.4 - Counselling**

This section explores the youth participants' experiences with counselling, highlighting the relational qualities that shaped their perceptions of support and trust.

Lei offered a positive example of school-based counselling:

I went for my anxiety...she made me feel more confident...to speak up... I don't really like talking to new people at first...I'm pure shy... But as the... appointments went on, we spent more quality time together... I was talking to her like she was one of my friends. I felt supported. (Lei)

Initially hesitant and shy, Lei described how the relationship with her counsellor shifted gradually through sustained connection. Over time, she felt safe enough to share openly, likening the dynamic to that of a close friendship.

Other participants, however, described more difficult encounters. Coco was blunt in her assessment:

Counselling is useless. (Coco)

Rosie echoed this disappointment:

...they've had a lot to try to support me, and no one that has helped.  
(Rosie)

She further explained:

They were a nightmare for telling me how I feel, so I just keep it to myself... (Rosie)

Instead of being listened to, she felt talked over; her emotions named and interpreted by others rather than honoured.

Lalo expressed a more philosophical scepticism, raising questions about whether counselling aligns with the realities of adolescence:

Well, see, if you think about it...most teenagers...they're just finding out who they are and what they like... Sometimes, people go to therapy for it, and sometimes, they don't think it works... (Lalo)

This tension becomes more acute when young people feel their autonomy is compromised, as Lalo noted with concern about school-based services:

...they tell the school everything, you can't trust them. (Lalo)

Confidentiality, or the perceived lack of it, emerged as a major barrier to trust. Similarly, Coco recalled a counselling session shortly after her uncle died, she shared:

...there was one time I was in counselling, and it was not long after my uncle passed.... I was speaking to her about it, and I ended up crying... she went, I'll be back in a minute, and I was like, okay... And then she brought my mum into the room. See, if I wanted to speak to my mum, I wouldn't be here. You're meant to help me, not show my mum that I'm in tears. There's no trust there. (Coco)

This breach of confidentiality in a moment of intense vulnerability left Coco feeling exposed and betrayed.

In this section, Lei's experience demonstrates how, when nurtured with care and consistency, counselling can become a space for healing. In contrast, the stories of Coco, Rosie, and Lalo reveal how poor communication, lack of confidentiality, or rigid structures can have the opposite effect.

### **6.3.5 - The Hidden Self: The Impact of a Lack of Support and Trust**

This section explores how the absence of support and trust in the youth participants' relationships influenced their wellbeing and sense of self. When relational safety feels out of reach, many young people described withdrawing emotionally, concealing their true feelings, and developing a "hidden self" as a form of protection.

Lalo articulated the exhaustion that can follow a breakdown of trust in a relationship:

I mean, sometimes the flame goes out, and then you try and spark it, and you fucking realise the lighter's broke. (Lalo)

Alongside this experience of broken trust, several participants described how they coped by hiding their emotions. Lalo used the metaphor of a mask to describe this performance:

We always have a mask on... (Lalo)

He also described the presence of an internal “shadow”:

Some people...say there’s a shadow of their self... (Lalo).

Lalo further illustrated the cost of this concealment:

Sometimes, people cry themselves to sleep...and they put on a fake smile just to let everybody think that they're okay when they're not. (Lalo)

He explained why so many young people, including himself, keep things inside:

I think it's better to talk about your feelings, whereas somebody like me, I just prefer to keep them closed off... Sometimes, people can feel ashamed because they feel...terrible. They don't want anybody worrying about them, so they hide themselves. We have this hidden self. And that is exactly like me. (Lalo)

Lei offered a parallel reflection, noting that the impulse to hide emotions is common among her peer group:

...some of my friends like to put a mask on, like they don't actually open up and hide themselves. I can't really say anything. I do the same with my friends. (Lei)

Still, the participants also described how moments of trust allowed these protective walls to soften. Lalo shared:

...when you're with that one group of friends you trust, you can take it off. (Lalo)

The following section turns to the perspectives of stakeholders, exploring how youth workers, family members, and community practitioners view their role in fostering environments where trust, care, and connection can flourish.

## 6.4 - Stakeholder Perspectives on Positive Youth Relationships

This section explores stakeholder reflections on the importance of positive, trusting relationships in young people's lives. While the specifics of each account vary, many stakeholders spoke to the emotional and practical value of connection within families, youth work settings, and broader community contexts. Their insights offer a glimpse into how adult supporters understand their roles in fostering safe, caring environments where young people feel held, heard, and less alone.

Youth Worker 2 articulated a central thread running through many of the participants' narratives:

The overarching theme is the impact of positive relationships with adults in the community, either family or youth club. (Youth Worker 2)

Several stakeholders emphasised that when relationships within the family were strained, connections with youth workers or other trusted adults became particularly significant. Community Worker 2 reflected:

It was powerful to hear them speak about role models in their lives, like family members and how the people in the community, like youth workers, can be a safe go-to point if they feel they cannot speak about things at home. (Community Worker 2)

When home did not feel like a safe or responsive space, some young people turned to youth workers as alternative sources of trust and care.

At the same time, stakeholders acknowledged the limits placed on familial support by external pressures. Family Member 2 reflected:

It's not that we don't care, we just don't always have the time or energy to support them in the way we'd want to. (Family Member 2).

Youth Worker 4 further emphasised how these relationships acted as buffers during periods of stress:

...I noticed that...youth work and healthy family and friend connections seemed to relieve the stress and pressures of the negative forces around them... (Youth Worker 4)

The theme of trust was especially prominent. Family Member 2 explained:

Trust is so important Youth work is about building trust. Without that trust, we can't even begin to help young people navigate the challenges they're facing. (Family Member 2)

This comment situates trust as a necessary condition for meaningful engagement. Youth Worker 4 echoed this view:

Having a good support system and someone to go to appeared to me to be one of the top ways young people feel safe, seen, and heard. (Youth Worker 4)

Here, the relational qualities of safety and attentiveness are understood as central to wellbeing.

At the same time, stakeholders reflected on the practical constraints that limit their ability to offer consistent support. Youth Worker 8 noted:

We're often the ones holding things together for these youngsters, especially when their families can't. But it's hard to do that without the resources we need. (Youth Worker 8)

Stakeholders also shared practical insights about how they create environments where trust and openness can grow. Community Worker 2 explained:

Give a safe environment to learn and discuss more about life's challenges. (Community Worker 2)

Family Member 3 offered a more personal example of how trust is maintained through everyday openness:

Keep talking openly about drinking alcohol. The teenagers know my place is a safe space. (Family Member 3)

By modelling openness and normalising conversations around difficult topics, this stakeholder reinforces their home as a place of trust.

The next chapter builds on these findings by exploring how young people experience participation, power, and decision-making, and the extent to which they feel heard and included in youth work, school, and community settings.

## **6.5 - Summary**

This chapter has explored how young people experience trust and support across their relationships, with family members, friends, youth workers, and counsellors, and how these relational dynamics shape their sense of safety, identity, and wellbeing. Drawing on participants' personal reflections and stakeholder insights, the findings highlight that relationships are not static; they can serve as sources of care and consistency or become sites of tension, conflict, and withdrawal. Trust, when present, enabled connection and openness. When absent or undermined, young people often retreated emotionally, concealing parts of themselves to protect against further hurt.

The chapter began by examining complex family dynamics, particularly the impact of alcohol use, conflict, and instability. Several participants described emotionally volatile or unsafe home environments, where drinking and violence created fear and tension. These experiences were often intensified during the COVID-19 lockdowns, as prolonged confinement amplified household conflict and disrupted routines. In response, many young people adopted coping strategies such as isolation or emotional withdrawal. At the same time, some participants described moments of support, comfort, and reciprocity within family life, especially from grandparents, siblings, or extended kin. These relationships offered glimpses of stability amid wider turbulence.

Friendships were described as powerful sources of emotional support, loyalty, and mutual care. Participants spoke of friends who helped them feel understood and encouraged, particularly when other relationships felt inaccessible. These bonds often provided a sense of belonging and emotional safety during periods of personal difficulty. However, trust within friendships was not taken for granted. Several participants described the pain of broken trust or betrayal and shared strategies for emotional protection, including limiting their social circles or withholding vulnerability in group settings.

Youth work settings emerged as spaces where young people felt listened to, understood, and accepted without judgment. Participants described informal conversations with youth workers as meaningful sources of care, especially when home or school environments felt unsafe. The confidentiality, consistency, and relatability of youth workers helped foster relationships grounded in trust. Youth spaces also supported peer connection, reduced isolation, and helped alleviate social anxiety by offering neutral environments where small interactions could rebuild confidence. While these reflections are context-specific, they highlight how trusted relationships in youth work can offer emotional grounding during difficult times.

By contrast, experiences of counselling varied widely. Some young people, like Lei, described counselling as supportive, particularly when the relationship developed gradually and felt safe. Others expressed disillusionment and mistrust, citing perceived breaches of confidentiality, emotional invalidation, or interactions that felt impersonal or directive. These negative experiences often led participants to disengage or shut down. The findings suggest that counselling can be beneficial, but only when grounded in trust, empathy, and respect for young people's autonomy and boundaries.

Across these relational contexts, the concept of a 'hidden self' surfaced as a powerful metaphor. Participants described masking their emotions, concealing distress, or avoiding vulnerability, often as a protective response to environments where they didn't feel emotionally safe. Some shared that this

behaviour was widespread among their peers, even in close friendships. While concealment was often self-protective, it also contributed to feelings of isolation. Still, participants noted that in rare, trusted relationships, they felt able to remove the mask and express themselves more fully.

Stakeholders reinforced many of these insights. They recognised the emotional importance of positive relationships, particularly in contexts where young people faced instability, isolation, or socio-economic stress. Trust was consistently described as the foundation of meaningful support. Stakeholders acknowledged their own emotional labour in sustaining these relationships, especially when family supports were limited and systemic resources stretched. While they expressed commitment to relational work, they also pointed to the structural barriers that hinder sustained support.

The following chapter builds on these reflections by exploring how young people experience voice, participation, and power across the everyday spaces of their lives.

## **6.6 - Preliminary Discussion**

Chapter 6 examined the relational dimensions of youth wellbeing, showing how care, trust, and support shaped experiences within families, friendships, youth work, and counselling. While relationships often offered crucial emotional safety, their potential was constrained by structural pressures such as poverty, social stigma, and institutional neglect (Crenshaw, 1991; Ord, 2016).

Family relationships were described as both stabilising and strained, shaped by financial stress and unmet needs that eroded connection (Conger et al., 2010; Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). Participants often internalised responsibility for conflict, reflecting hooks' (1984) critique of unequal emotional labour shaped by age, gender, and class. Friendships provided vital spaces for empathy and identity development (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995) but were fragile, with broken trust compounding emotional vulnerability (Holland & Tiggemann, 2016;

Tronto, 1993). Feminist perspectives highlight how structural barriers undermine young people's capacity to sustain supportive peer networks (Leach et al., 2020).

Youth work offered valued relational support and belonging, aligning with Freire's (2000) dialogical relationships and Ord's (2016) pedagogy of process. However, limited resources and policy constraints restricted youth workers' capacity to sustain care (de St Croix, 2016; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014). Counselling experiences were mixed, underscoring the need for trauma-informed, youth-centred practice grounded in transparency and trust (Luthar, 2006; Ridley et al., 2020).

The concept of the "hidden self" illustrated young people's self-protection and the emotional labour of concealing vulnerability, echoing Freire's (2000) notion of internalised oppression. Moments of trust, especially in friendships and youth work, allowed some to "remove the mask," affirming care as both relational and political (hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993).

Together, these findings affirm that wellbeing is not an individual trait but a relational process embedded in power and structural constraints. Empowerment Theory, Critical Pedagogy, and Feminist Ethics of Care illuminate how agency and connection are co-produced yet limited by broader inequalities. As [Chapter 8](#) explores, supporting youth wellbeing requires approaches that integrate relational trust with structural transformation.

## Chapter 7 - Findings - Youth Participation, Voice, and Everyday Action

### 7.1 - Introduction

The previous chapter presented findings on how trust and support shape young people's experiences of wellbeing across different relational contexts. It showed how consistent, caring relationships can foster emotional safety, while the absence of trust often led to withdrawal or concealment. This chapter presents findings on how young people described their experiences of participation, both in youth work settings and in the research process. It considers how these experiences created space for them to reflect on their sense of belonging, confidence, and possibilities for acting in their everyday lives. While the forms of participation varied, many participants shared what it felt like to be listened to, to contribute, and to imagine change within their communities. The chapter explores how these experiences were made meaningful or challenging, and how relational, material, and structural conditions shaped what was possible.

Youth participation is widely promoted as a route to empowerment and community engagement (Ozer and Douglas, 2012; Powers and Tiffany, 2006), yet scholars have warned of its limitations when power imbalances and structural constraints go unexamined (Cook-Sather, 2007; Lam & Kwong, 2014). This chapter engages with these tensions by examining how participation was experienced by young people in this specific context as a relational and situated process, and how it related to their wellbeing, recognition, and everyday agency. One part of the chapter draws on young people's reflections on their involvement in this research. While evaluating research methods was not a core aim of the study, several young people shared how taking part created opportunities to think critically, share stories, and connect with others. As outlined in [Section 4.7.4](#), these reflections were included as part of an ethical and dialogical approach to support feedback loops and participant-led meaning-making, and are presented here as situated insights rather than generalisable outcomes.

The chapter is structured as follows: [Section 7.2](#) explores young people's experiences of youth work spaces as sites of connection, growth, and recognition, alongside stakeholder reflections on the role and limits of youth work. [Section 7.3](#) focuses on their reflections on participating in this research, including how the process created space for them to consider their confidence, critical awareness, and relationships with others. [Section 7.4](#) presents stakeholder strategies for supporting youth wellbeing, with attention to co-creation, consistency, and resource constraints. [Section 7.5](#) summarises the chapter's key findings. [Section 7.6](#) begins to connect these findings to the broader theoretical and empirical literature in preparation for the discussion in [Chapter 8](#).

## **7.2 - Youth Work as a Relational Space**

This section presents findings on how young people experienced youth work spaces before and during the course of this research project. Across their reflections, youth work emerged as a context in which participants felt recognised, supported, and able to explore their identities and aspirations. These accounts focus on how young people described their involvement in a particular youth project, highlighting moments of personal growth, social connection, and emotional safety. While situated within the specific setting of this study, the findings offer insight into the relational qualities that shaped participants' experiences, including trust, consistency, inclusion, and affirmation. The chapter also attends to the limitations of youth work, as described by participants and stakeholders, particularly in relation to the structural constraints and resource pressures that shaped what was possible within the space.

### **7.2.1 - Relational Support, Growth, and Purpose in Youth Work**

Across the dataset, youth work settings were described as emotionally supportive and socially enriching. Participants reflected on how these spaces helped them build confidence, access opportunities, and feel more visible in their everyday lives.

Lei described the wide-ranging support she received through youth work:

My experience with youth work has been wonderful... Youth work has been really, really good for me and other people. Like in terms of relationships, job stuff, training, and just general happiness. (Lei)

Others also spoke about youth work as something that helped them feel they had a purpose. Rosie noted:

I feel like I have a purpose. (Rosie)

Gean stated:

Now, I have a purpose and goals to work towards. (Gean)

These statements reflect how youth work offered a stabilising presence, creating space to explore identity, develop goals, and imagine alternative futures. For Lei, this also included a basic but important function:

It's [youth work] getting us out of the house, and it's something that consumes our time... It's opened quite a lot of new doors for me. (Lei)

This sentiment was especially relevant in a context where boredom and isolation were recurring themes across participant reflections. Gean described youth work as something that helped her move forward:

Youth work has made my life so much better...it's put me in a better position in life. I feel like they have helped me figure out who I am and what I want. (Gean)

This reflection shows how youth work, when sustained and consistent, can support young people in exploring identity and imagining alternative futures.

Youth work also created space for experimentation and informed decision making. Coco appreciated the practical value of this support:

... [my local youth project] is positive for my wellbeing as they have an employability programme to help people find jobs. (Coco)

She added:

...at first, I thought I wanted to do childcare, so if I didn't have the group, like my hair and beauty course, I would still have childcare in my head. Then I'd go to college and do it, and then I wouldn't like it. Then I'd have to start all over again... (Coco)

Participants consistently spoke about youth work as a space where they felt recognised. Lei shared:

I feel very valued... It makes us feel important. (Lei)

Rosie reflected on how her experiences shifted after becoming part of a youth project:

Youth work has changed my life. Before I came to [my youth project], I did not belong anywhere. (Rosie)

She added:

...here [at my youth project], people see me more clearly, and they know I have autism and mental health problems, but it doesn't seem to matter (Rosie)

At the same time, several participants highlighted limitations. Lauren reflected on the gap between dialogue and change:

We mostly just talk about what's happening in our lives, not about what causes it or how to change it. (Lauren)

Rosie made a similar point:

We talk about our problems, but not about how to change them. (Rosie)

Participants also spoke about practical barriers to access. Lauren explained:

I want to join more sessions, but I had to look after my little brother most days. It's hard when your family needs you more. (Lauren)

Coco also noted:

Even just getting to the youth club was hard sometimes. If I didn't have bus money, I couldn't go. (Coco)

Finally, some participants expressed frustration when their involvement did not lead to tangible outcomes. Lei shared:

We talked about what needed to change, but nothing happened. It felt like all our work was for nothing. (Lei)

Lalo echoed this:

They told us our voices matter, but it feels like things move so slowly. By the time anything happens, sometimes we forget, or we've already given up. (Lalo)

Together, these findings show that youth work, as experienced by participants during this research project, offered important forms of recognition, care, and purpose. At the same time, participants also identified limits, both practical and structural, that shaped what youth work could realistically provide.

### **7.2.2 - Stakeholder Views on Supporting Youth Through Youth Work**

This section explores how local stakeholders, including youth workers, family members, and community practitioners, reflected on the significance of youth work in young people's lives. Their accounts emphasised the role of youth work as a space for emotional support, personal growth, and connection, while also pointing to the structural limitations that shaped what youth workers could realistically offer.

Several stakeholders described youth work as a context in which young people built confidence, formed relationships, and developed. Youth Worker 8 reflected:

I was compelled by the positive discussions focusing on [the youth project] office, like the way they could speak comfortably to youth workers and how much they've grown because of youth work. (Youth Worker 8)

These kinds of relationships were seen as central to how young people navigated challenges and transitions. Family Member 1 stated:

The impact of [the youth project] on their lives was clear. (Family Member 1)

These comments reinforced how youth work spaces were perceived as sites of trust, stability, and belonging, particularly when other forms of support were inconsistent or absent.

However, stakeholders also acknowledged the challenges of sustaining this work over time, especially in the face of limited resources and increasing demand. Youth Worker 8 expressed frustration at the disconnect between supporting young people day-to-day and pushing for wider change:

We try to amplify their voices, but without structural support, it feels like we're hitting a wall. We can support young people day-to-day, but without structural reforms, we're just putting out fires.

We try to help with things like travel, but it doesn't solve the bigger problems. These kids are dealing with so much more than we can address in a few hours a week. (Youth Worker 8)

Youth workers consistently pointed to a widening gap between what they were expected to deliver and the resources available to them. Youth Worker 2 captured this tension:

We're expected to do so much with so little, filling the gaps for families, support mental health, and even advocate for policy changes, all while our funding is under constant threat. (Youth Worker 2)

The emotional toll of navigating this gap was also evident. Youth Worker 4 spoke about how young people often placed their hopes for change in youth workers, even when the broader systems made it difficult to deliver:

The young people see us as the ones who can make everything better, but we're constantly battling a system that keeps them, and us, stuck. (Youth Worker 4)

Similarly, Youth Worker 7 described the limits of what could be achieved under conditions of constant urgency:

We want to empower them to make a difference, but the structures in place don't allow for it. We're firefighting, not creating lasting change. (Youth Worker 7)

These reflections were situated within wider concerns about austerity and underfunding. Youth Worker 2 explicitly referenced the broader context in which this work was taking place:

Youth work in Scotland operates within the constraints of chronic underfunding, exacerbated by austerity policies that have reduced public investment in social services while expecting third-sector organisations to fill these gaps. (Youth Worker 2)

This quote captures how funding cuts and policy shifts have shaped the wider environment in which youth work operates, placing pressure on workers to fill gaps left by other services. Community Worker 2 shared how these systemic issues affected young people and practitioners themselves:

It's hard to feel like the young people, or us youth workers, are making a difference when everything in the local community and the kids' lives feels broken. That's hard to feel like you're making meaningful change. (Community Worker 2)

Despite these challenges, stakeholders remained committed to creating accessible and youth-centred environments. Several offered practical ideas for how to support wellbeing and reduce social pressures. Youth Worker 4 suggested:

...the youth organisation could arrange weekend trips such as camping to get the young people out of their environment and into nature, away from alcohol, social media, and unhealthy tendencies. (Youth Worker 4)

Others focused on the need to sustain safe, informal spaces for connection and care. Youth Worker 2 reflected:

Promote youth clubs and other youth spaces as hubs where young people can feel safe in and help build responses to their needs. (Youth Worker 2)

Youth Worker 8 added:

Continue providing an open and welcoming office space where young people feel comfortable working and learning at their own pace. (Youth Worker 8)

These reflections illustrate a shared understanding that while youth work cannot resolve all the social and structural challenges young people face, it can provide continuity, care, and trusted relationships. Stakeholders viewed these relational dynamics not as a substitute for systemic change but as a crucial foundation from which young people could navigate their lives with greater confidence and connection.

The next section explores how, within the context of this research, young people reflected on their experiences of participation, including how the process created space for them to consider their perspectives, connections, and hopes for change.

### **7.3 - Reflections on Participating in the Research**

While participation in the research process was not the central focus of this study, several young people reflected on how engaging in the project created space for them to consider their confidence, relationships, and ideas about change. These reflections are presented here as narrative insights into how participation functioned as a relational and reflective experience, connected to broader themes of voice, recognition, and agency. For some, this process offered opportunities to connect with others, articulate their ideas, and feel heard. Their accounts are situated within the everyday relational contexts that shaped the project, particularly the trust, care, and continuity found in youth work spaces where the research took place.

Rosie described what it meant to have this space to reflect:

... this research made me realise what I could say and why it mattered.  
(Rosie)

Her words highlight how the research created a space that invited critical reflection, supported expression, and affirmed the value of her voice. While many reflections on participation were informed by young people's broader experiences within youth work and community contexts, this section focuses on what young people chose to reflect on when offered dedicated time and space. As outlined in [Section 4.7.4](#), these reflections emerged through intentional feedback loops built into the research design to support ethical, participant-led meaning-making (Lundy, 2007).

The following two subsections explore key themes that emerged from participants' reflections:

1. Reflections on Youth Roles and Community Action
2. Personal Growth Through Reflection, Storytelling, and Connection

These themes illustrate what young people prioritised and found meaningful to discuss when given focused space for collective and personal reflection. While youth work can and often does support similar conversations, these findings re-enforce that providing more opportunities for this type of reflective dialogue may further support young people's sense of agency and connection.

### **7.3.1 - Reflections on Youth Roles and Community Action**

This section explores how some young people described their reflections on community engagement during and after their involvement in the research process. These accounts are included as expressions of what young people chose to reflect on when given space to discuss their roles, relationships, and responsibilities within their communities. They illustrate the topics and aspirations that felt most meaningful to them.

Several participants described a growing interest in contributing to change, often through small, everyday actions. Coco, for example, explained:

I am definitely more...motivated to make change in my community. (Coco)

Her words suggest that being invited to share and reflect on her experiences helped her articulate a sense of purpose. Gean similarly noted:

Being part of this research made me feel like my voice matters, that I can actually make a difference. I want to do something about it (Gean)

For Gean, having her perspectives taken seriously encouraged her to express her hope for greater community involvement. Lei described her vision for community improvement:

...my goal is to change the community, you know, make it a better place for everybody, actually make it enjoyable. (Lei)

Some participants shared how they saw their roles as young people in their communities, reflecting a sense of informal responsibility or care. Lei shared:

I just feel like my role as a young person in the community is wanting to see change. (Lei)

Rosie similarly described her everyday efforts to support others:

I feel as though it's to keep people safe and just make sure no nonsense happens...

I think my role is by being the person in between the adults and the other young people to help sort stuff out. (Rosie)

Participants also shared small examples of action that emerged during this period. Coco recounted:

...me and all my wee cousins ended up going litter picking and cleaned like the whole of the back and the front and the whole street... (Coco)

While not an outcome planned by the study, this activity reflected her growing interest in community care. Gean described:

Us young people that did this study, we created a group, and we're working towards change. (Gean)

This group became a space for sharing ideas and continuing community-focused conversations. Lei appreciated being consulted:

I actually think it's incredible because we have all these people asking personally for us, for our opinions and our feedback and our thoughts.  
(Lei)

Gean felt similarly affirmed:

...being listened to and people hearing our voices to see what our ideas are... It made me feel valued and I felt like my opinions mattered. (Gean)

Despite this sense of motivation, participants also recognised the challenges of creating change. Gean reflected:

I think it's hard to make big change. (Gean)

Lalo and Rosie pointed to structural barriers:

Everything costs money and see, if we want to make change, we would need loads of money. (Lalo)

But I don't think I, by myself, would be the one to do it [make change].  
(Rosie)

Their reflections show a desire to improve their communities and a growing awareness of the material and collective effort required.

Participants also used the space and time to question how they were perceived by adults and authority figures. Rosie shared:

They treat me like I'm a volcano about to erupt, and they don't want to deal with me. (Rosie)

Lei shared broader frustrations on community stereotypes:

...a lot of people think that young people have nothing ahead of them or to contribute. They think that they just go get stoned or drunk or end up in really bad situations. It's like people think because we're young and from here, we don't matter. (Lei)

She highlighted how stereotypes unfairly portray young people as irresponsible or lacking potential. Gean expressed similar frustrations:

Where I live, young people are viewed terribly, and they shouldn't be... I hate the way people view us young people. (Gean)

Despite these perceptions, participants expressed a desire to shift public narratives and to be seen differently. Lei shared:

To get the word out there that there are young people with a head on their shoulders that actually want to do better...that there are young people that have a voice. (Lei)

Gean added:

Hopefully that can change little by little with things that we do to prove them wrong. (Gean).

These reflections highlight types of conversations the young people valued when offered a supportive, reflective space. They used this opportunity to explore their roles, challenge deficit-based narratives, and express hopes for community action in their own words. The next section turns to how this reflective space also supported personal and interpersonal exploration.

### **7.3.2 - Personal Growth Through Reflection, Storytelling, and Connection**

This section examines how, when offered dedicated space for reflection, some young people described shifts in how they saw themselves, related to others, and expressed their experiences. These accounts illustrate what participants chose to share and emphasise when invited to reflect collectively.

Many participants spoke about subtle changes in their self-perception. Coco described a moment of leadership and surprise at her own initiative:

That is something I would never normally think of myself doing... But it was actually my idea to start it (Coco)

Coco's words highlight a sense of agency she felt able to articulate during the project. Gean similarly reflected:

I never thought I would be a part of something like that. (Gean)

Rosie also expressed surprise:

I did things I never thought I could or would do in the project. (Rosie)

These reflections show how space for expression and experimentation encouraged participants to feel pride in trying new things and to explore their capabilities.

Some young people described how creative tools, such as photography, prompted new ways of seeing their environments. Gean shared:

Taking photos of my neighbourhood made me realise how much we're ignored. It's not just me, it's the whole community. (Gean)

Rosie and Lei also reflected on this space, prompting internal questioning:

It was a good push for me... It's made me...think...twice. (Rosie)

It really pushed me out of my comfort zone. I've grown from it. (Lei)

Coco added:

It motivates me to go out and just see like the outdoor world. I want more. (Coco)

Several participants spoke about confidence and communication. Lei shared her sense of growth:

I would never have thought four years ago that I would be in this position... I'm more proud of myself because of how far I've come with it. (Lei)

Coco described feeling more prepared to support her community:

I personally think that I am prepared to help the community... I have some skills... my communication skills could help. (Coco)

Gean noted a new comfort with presenting:

Presenting in front of people that I don't know. (Gean)

These comments illustrate how participants used the space to reflect on their evolving skills and growing confidence.

Crucially, participants emphasised connection and solidarity. Coco reflected on the importance of shared experience:

Getting to speak with other young people...it was so important to me, and I felt like we became a team. (Coco)

Her words suggest that working alongside peers was enjoyable and emotionally meaningful, a shift from isolation to shared purpose. Lei noted:

I feel like I've just learned a bit about everybody...I think it was really good for us to bond like that. (Lei)

We have each other's backs. The support system within the group has been important for everyone. (Lei)

For Lei, the group became a space of emotional safety and care, where openness was met with support rather than judgment. Lalo echoed this:

I feel like this project has just brought us a little bit closer together. (Lalo)

Gean added:

We are here for each other. (Gean)

Rosie described the depth of support:

There's a lot of support from everyone involved. (Rosie)

These reflections highlight how creating space for shared storytelling and dialogue can foster a sense of belonging and collective care.

Several participants described the emotional safety that emerged, enabling vulnerability and openness. Lei noted:

Everybody was vulnerable at some point...telling some part of their story...  
It done us good to kind of talk about this stuff...especially with another  
adult there, someone we trust. (Lei)

Gean appreciated feeling free to share without judgment:

It helped me say my thoughts out loud without getting pure laughed at.  
(Gean)

Lalo described the benefit of speaking openly:

I feel like we've all gained a little bit of positive mental health because  
we've talked about things that we don't normally talk about. (Lalo)

For him, simply having space to speak openly was beneficial, helping release thoughts that might otherwise remain unspoken. Rosie shared the lasting emotional significance:

Working on the project together has created a lot of shared memories.  
(Rosie)

These accounts illustrate the kinds of connection, emotional release, and mutual support that the young people prioritised and valued when given reflective space, and they show how the participants made meaning together within this specific context. The next section turns to stakeholder strategies for supporting youth wellbeing, highlighting how practitioners and community members described their approaches to care, co-creation, and resource challenges.

#### **7.4 - Stakeholder Strategies for Supporting Youth Wellbeing**

This section explores how a range of stakeholders, including youth workers, community workers, family members, and a local politician, described their strategies for supporting young people's wellbeing. As outlined in [Chapter 4](#), each stakeholder held a distinct role in relation to the young people who

participated in this study. Their perspectives offer insight into the varied and often overlapping relational and structural supports shaping young people's experiences in community settings. Across these accounts, three interconnected commitments emerged: enabling young people to act on their ideas, maintaining consistent spaces for support, and fostering intergenerational and interprofessional collaboration.

Some stakeholders emphasised the importance of helping young people translate ideas into action. Local Politician 1 reflected:

Their actions are all things that, if we work together, we can make a reality. (Local Politician 1)

This comment suggests a belief in the potential of youth-led initiatives, particularly when supported collaboratively. They also described plans for more routine engagement:

Hold routine and regular youth advice surgeries to listen to how I can best support. (Local Politician 1)

Similarly, Youth Worker 6 shared:

Ensure YP's voices are being heard and work with them to make sure things like [the] community picnic become a reality. (Youth Worker 6)

These examples reflect a commitment to enabling young people's contributions and supporting their ideas in tangible ways.

Other stakeholders focused on helping young people pursue personal goals.

Family Member 3 shared:

Help them research and source the information needed to get them closer to their own goals. (Family Member 3)

This approach centres young people's agency, with adults positioned as facilitators rather than decision-makers. Youth Worker 2 discussed developing programming collaboratively around mental health:

Work with our staff team and youth committee to build a programme around mental health. (Youth Worker 2)

This reflects an effort to ensure support is co-produced and responsive to young people's priorities.

Community collaboration also featured prominently. Local Politician 1 described working across networks:

How can I work with other elected members and coordinate community networks to make the actions a reality. (Local Politician 1)

Family Member 1 suggested small but concrete forms of support:

Perhaps support youth workers to organise a family/community picnic. (Family Member 1)

Support [local youth project] where possible by sharing my skills and attending youth events. (Family Member 1)

While modest, these contributions reflect a broader ethic of collective care, in which support for young people extends beyond professional roles to include community members and families.

While some stakeholders described new initiatives, many also emphasised the value of consistency. Local Politician 1 noted:

As a councillor always working to tidy up and improve our local area so it's better. (Local Politician 1)

Others focused on emotionally safe spaces. Family Member 3 shared:

Keep talking openly about drinking alcohol. The teenagers know my place is a safe space. (Family Member 3)

Community Worker 2 added:

Continue to have discussions on this subject when appropriate to support YP [young people] to have a safe and healthier attitude towards drugs. (Community Worker 2)

These examples highlight the importance of ongoing, non-judgemental support and presence in young people's lives.

Many stakeholders also spoke about sustaining established youth services. Community Worker 1 noted:

Continue to provide services and a safe place for young people to come along and offload, and also be able to access referrals as and when required. (Community Worker 1)

Youth Worker 7 echoed this, with a focus on mental health:

Continue to provide an environment for young people to be able to express themselves and have a safe space to discuss mental health, as well as signposting them to relevant services. (Youth Worker 7)

Others emphasised connecting young people to wider networks. Youth Worker 8 noted:

Continue linking young people in with Youth Health Service. (Youth Worker 8)

Youth Worker 2 added:

Continue to promote local assets as areas where young people can access safe and non-judgmental support from youth workers and professionals. (Youth Worker 2)

These comments highlight that supporting wellbeing involves both new initiatives and preserving trusted, established spaces and relationships.

Overall, these accounts show that while stakeholders operate within different systems and maintain varying degrees of proximity to young people, many share a commitment to consistency, collaboration, and care. Their contributions reflect both the limitations of current structures and a determination to support young people within these constraints. Rather than presenting a prescriptive model, these reflections illustrate situated strategies and everyday efforts that help sustain young people's wellbeing and sense of possibility.

The following chapter draws these findings together in relation to broader theoretical and practical questions around youth wellbeing, agency, and community-based support.

## **7.5 - Summary**

Chapter 7 explored how young people reflected on their experiences of participation across different contexts, including youth work settings and this research process. It also examined how stakeholders described their approaches to supporting youth wellbeing. These reflections offer insight into and reinforce how relational, dialogical, and practical forms of engagement can create space for young people to express themselves, feel connected, and reflect on their roles within their communities, while also revealing the limitations and pressures that shape these experiences.

The first section considered how young people described their involvement in youth work. Participants spoke about youth work as a space for recognition, social connection, and informal learning. They described how trusted relationships with youth workers supported emotional wellbeing and helped build a sense of purpose and belonging. Youth work was also valued for providing opportunities through employability programmes, group trips, and everyday conversations. However, participants also pointed to challenges, including barriers to access, caring responsibilities, and a gap between dialogue and broader structural action.

The chapter then turned to young people's reflections on participating in this research. Although this was not the primary focus of the study, several participants described how the research process created space for them to reflect on their experiences, express ideas, and connect with others. Some participants shared that having dedicated time and supportive space to explore and share their perspectives helped them feel more confident in voicing their views and more aware of their own and others' stories. Their reflections

highlighted moments of critical awareness, emotional expression, and peer support. These accounts offer situated insights into what young people choose to emphasise and explore when provided with a dedicated reflective space.

Some young people also described small actions or intentions toward local change, including everyday acts of care, community clean-ups, and participation in local planning discussions, alongside a desire to challenge public perceptions of young people and advocate for more supportive environments. At the same time, many recognised the limits of individual action in the face of structural barriers, such as poverty, stigma, and underinvestment. Their reflections combined motivation with realism and often emphasised the value of collective approaches to change.

In the final section, stakeholders shared their approaches to supporting youth wellbeing. These included maintaining open dialogue, providing consistent and welcoming spaces, and co-creating opportunities with young people. Stakeholders acknowledged both the strengths of youth work and its ongoing challenges, particularly in the context of limited resources and service fragmentation. Their reflections demonstrated a commitment to relational practice, collaboration, and continuity, while recognising the structural conditions that shape what is possible.

This chapter has highlighted and reinforced how participation, whether in youth work, research, or local initiatives, can create spaces for young people to feel seen, heard, and connected. It also recognises that these experiences are deeply shaped by wider structural and relational conditions. The following chapter situates these findings within the broader literature and theoretical framing, examining the tensions, opportunities, and implications they raise for understanding youth wellbeing and participation in context.

## 7.6 - Preliminary Discussion

Chapter 7 examined how young people and stakeholders reflected on their experiences of participation in two interconnected contexts: youth work settings and this research process. In youth work, participation was described as relational and voluntary, grounded in trusted relationships and everyday activities (Coburn, 2011; Ord, 2016). Participation in the research process was described as creating space for self-expression, shared reflection, and collective exploration of experiences and perspectives (Freire, 2000; Wang & Burris, 1997).

Youth work was valued as a space of care, trust, and consistency, where young people felt able to express themselves without judgment and experience meaningful connections. Participants emphasised the importance of supportive relationships with youth workers and peers, which contributed to their sense of belonging and emotional safety. At the same time, some described challenges, such as barriers to access, caring responsibilities, and a gap between dialogue and wider structural change (Cooper, 2018). These reflections suggest that while youth work offered crucial relational support, its ability to address systemic issues was constrained by broader social, policy, and resource factors.

The research process created a dedicated space for young people to reflect on personal and community experiences, share concerns, and consider their own ideas about change. Some participants described feeling more confident to express themselves and articulate their views after engaging in discussions and preparing for the exhibition (Aldridge, 2016). These accounts illustrate what young people prioritised and valued when given focused time and supportive conditions for dialogue. Several participants also shared frustrations when ideas did not translate into visible action, reflecting ongoing tensions between voice and structural responsiveness (Freire, 2000; Lam & Kwong, 2014).

Stakeholders described their own approaches to supporting young people, highlighting efforts to maintain open dialogue, provide consistent spaces, and

collaborate across community networks. Many recognised the constraints of working within under-resourced systems and emphasised the importance of collective responsibility, long-term commitment, and intersectoral collaboration (MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014). Despite these challenges, young people valued being included in decision-making and described feeling more respected and connected when their contributions were taken seriously (Gaventa, 2006).

Overall, Chapter 7 reinforces that both youth work and the additional reflective space created during the study offered opportunities where young people felt listened to and supported. When built on trust and strong relationships, these experiences created opportunities for reflection, connection, and shared meaning-making (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981). At the same time, participants' reflections emphasised that participation alone cannot overcome structural barriers, pointing to the need for systems that move beyond listening towards sharing power and enabling meaningful, sustained change. The following chapter explores these dynamics further in relation to the study's integrated theoretical framework.

## Chapter 8 - Discussion

### 8.1 - Introduction

This chapter draws together the findings presented in Chapters [5](#), [6](#), and [7](#) interpreting them through the lens of the study's theoretical framework, which centres on Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981) and Feminist Ethics of Care, relationality, and intersectionality (Arinder, 2022; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993). Freire's (2000) work on Critical Pedagogy provides a broader structural and political context for understanding participation, dialogue, and the relationship between reflection and action, but does not operate as a primary analytical lens. Together, these perspectives support a relational and structural interpretation of young people's experiences of wellbeing, agency, and constraint within youth work settings.

While the findings chapters provided narrative and thematic insights into young people's everyday lives, this chapter moves beyond description to offer a theoretically informed interpretation of those accounts. It explores how young people's experiences of care, constraint, voice, and visibility were shaped by intersecting relational, environmental, and structural factors. In doing so, the discussion attends to the emotional, embodied, and political dimensions of wellbeing, highlighting how these were negotiated within families, peer networks, youth work spaces, and the wider social contexts in which young people live.

The structure of the chapter is as follows: [Section 8.2](#) provides a summary of the key findings across the empirical chapters, emphasising the interconnected relational, structural, and emotional dynamics that shape young people's wellbeing and sense of agency. [Section 8.3](#) applies the theoretical framework to interpret the findings through four cross-cutting analytical themes: Power and Empowerment; Participation and Agency; Relational Dynamics and Emotional Labour; and Social Change and Collective Action. Section 8.3.1 focuses on structural barriers to wellbeing. Section 8.3.2 explores the relational dimensions of wellbeing. Section 8.3.3 considers relational and reflective pathways to

empowerment. [Section 8.4](#) revisits the research questions to assess how the study has responded to its aim of exploring youth wellbeing and possibilities for change within a youth work setting in post-COVID-19 Scotland. [Section 8.5](#) offers critical reflections on the strengths and limitations of the theoretical framework, the analytical process, and the wider implications of the discussion.

The aim of this chapter is to interpret the findings and critically reflect on what they suggest about the conditions under which young people experience and express wellbeing, agency, and connection. By reading the findings through a structural and relational lens attentive to care, power, and participation, this chapter contributes to ongoing conversations about how youth work, reflective practices, and community-based inquiry can support young people's lives in context-specific and meaningful ways. This is especially important in contexts shaped by precarity, austerity, and post-pandemic recovery, where opportunities for sustained youth voice, relational support, and collective reflection are often constrained but deeply needed.

#### Research questions revisited in Section 8.4

1. How do young people understand, reflect on, and experience wellbeing within the context of their everyday lives?
2. What challenges and structural barriers do young people identify as influencing their wellbeing?
3. What role do youth work spaces play in shaping young people's wellbeing and sense of agency?
4. How do local stakeholders understand their roles in supporting young people's wellbeing and navigating structural challenges?

## **8.2 - Summary of the Findings**

The findings across the three empirical chapters illustrate how young people's experiences of wellbeing are shaped by a dynamic interplay of personal, relational, and structural factors. In Chapter 5, young people described wellbeing as inseparable from the conditions of their everyday lives. Experiences

of care, grief, mental health challenges, and bullying all emerged as significant influences. Family life emerged as both a source of support and a site of stress, providing stability in some cases but also placing young people in roles marked by emotional labour and unmet need. The disruptions of COVID-19 further intensified these pressures. Peer relationships offered belonging and empathy but were also fragile, often affected by conflict, stigma, and social exclusion.

In Chapter 6, the findings focused on the emotional significance of relationships, particularly trust, loyalty, and care, in shaping young people's wellbeing. While youth work relationships featured prominently as sources of non-judgmental support and consistency, participants also reflected deeply on friendships and peer dynamics. Trust and emotional safety were repeatedly described as core needs, often emerging through shared experiences and mutual vulnerability. At the same time, several participants spoke about the emotional toll of being let down, judged, or excluded, especially by friends, family members, or adults in authority. These accounts showed how experiences of recognition and betrayal could profoundly shape young people's confidence, identity, and sense of belonging. Youth work was valued for offering an alternative space of care, yet it existed within a wider relational landscape shaped by precarity, stigma, and the lingering effects of the pandemic.

Chapter 7 explored participation, drawing on young people's reflections on their involvement in youth work and in this study's research process. While evaluating the research process was not a primary aim, some participants described how having a dedicated space to reflect and share contributed to shifts in how they expressed themselves and related to peers. It also prompted them to consider their roles in the community. The photovoice method provided an opportunity for storytelling, collective discussion, and exploring ideas for change. Some young people shared examples of small actions they felt motivated to try, such as organising litter picks or supporting peers. Others expressed doubts about their capacity to create change alone, highlighting the emotional and structural limits of individual action and the importance of collective support.

Throughout the findings, stakeholder perspectives provided additional insight into the conditions surrounding youth work and youth support. Youth workers, community members, family members, and a local politician acknowledged the value of co-creating opportunities with young people but also pointed to the strain of working within under-resourced systems. Their reflections emphasised the importance of consistency, collaboration, and care, while also recognising the wider structural constraints that shape what is possible.

These findings suggest that young people's wellbeing and sense of agency are not the result of isolated interventions but are continuously shaped through relationships, emotional experiences, and systemic conditions. They highlight the significance of being seen, heard, and supported, not as abstract ideals, but as everyday experiences that shape how young people understand themselves and their place in the world. The following sections now interpret these dynamics through the study's theoretical framework, identifying cross-cutting themes that connect lived experience to broader processes of power, care, and possibility.

### **8.3 - Interpretation of the Findings**

This section interprets the findings presented in Chapters 5, 6, and 7 through the study's theoretical framework (see Figure 3.1 in [Section 3.5](#)), which draws primarily on Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000) and a Feminist Ethics of Care with attention to relationality, emotional labour, and intersectionality (Arinder, 2022; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993). Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000) provides a contextual, secondary interpretive lens, offering background concepts for reflection, dialogue, and structural critique; it does not function as a primary analytic theory. Together, these perspectives facilitate a relational and structural interpretation of how young people experience wellbeing, agency, and inequality within their everyday lives.

The research took place within a community-based youth work setting and included a participatory research component. Youth work spaces shaped many of the relationships, routines, and forms of support that participants described, providing ongoing, trusted contexts for informal support, connection, and care. The research process provided a focused, time-limited space for young people to explore and share perspectives on topics they identified as important to their wellbeing and lives. This reflective space operated alongside, rather than within, everyday youth work provision and was only possible because of the temporary, resourced nature of this research study. This was a privilege not typically available within the ongoing demands and constraints of routine youth work practice. This chapter considers how these two contexts intersected and complemented one another in practice, each creating different opportunities for reflection, expression, and meaning-making.

Across these settings, young people described experiences shaped by broader structural conditions, including poverty, grief, exclusion, stigma, and service fragmentation. Their accounts reflected moments of recognition and critical reflection, as well as frustrations, doubts, and awareness of the limits of individual and collective action. Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000) provides a contextual language for understanding how reflection and dialogue can facilitate awareness of social conditions, even when transformative action was constrained. Empowerment Theory extends this by emphasising that agency and self-efficacy are shaped by relational support, meaningful roles, and enabling structures (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). A Feminist Ethics of Care illuminates the emotional and relational labour involved in navigating precarity, seeking safety, and sustaining relationships (hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993).

Figure 3.1 summarises how the theoretical strands relate to one another and to the analytical themes used in the study. In line with this:

- Empowerment Theory guided the interpretation of themes linked to agency, participation, and self-efficacy, particularly when examining how young people understood influence, opportunity, and constraint.

- Feminist Ethics of Care informed analysis of relational dynamics, emotional labour, and intersectionality, highlighting how wellbeing and support were shaped within families, peer networks, and youth work spaces.
- Critical Pedagogy offered contextual interpretive language for reflection, dialogue, and awareness of structural inequality, but was not used as a core analytical theory.

Reflecting the structure of Figure 3.1, four mid-level analytical themes shaped interpretation across Chapters 5-7:

1. Power and Empowerment
2. Participation and Agency
3. Relational Dynamics and Emotional Labour
4. Social Change and Collective Action

These themes were developed iteratively through coding and theory-informed discussion and were refined in response to patterns and tensions within the data. For example, the intensity of caregiving roles and the fragility of peer trust led to deeper engagement with emotional labour, intersectionality, and relational inequality (Crenshaw, 1991; Tronto, 1993). Participants' reflections on participation and influence raised questions about the limits of empowerment where material resources, long-term support, and institutional responsiveness are constrained (Checkoway, 2011; Lam & Kwong, 2014).

Consistent with Figure 3.1, the discussion that follows is organised into three focal areas that synthesise the mid-level themes:

- **Section 8.3.1 - Structural Barriers to Wellbeing:**
  - Examining how young people experience systemic challenges such as poverty, stigma, service fragmentation, and community neglect, drawing primarily on Empowerment Theory and Feminist Ethics of Care, with contextual language about structural awareness from Critical Pedagogy.
- **Section 8.3.2 - Relational Dimensions of Wellbeing:**

- Exploring how relationships with family, peers, and youth workers shape identity, care, belonging and emotional labour, grounded in a Feminist Ethics of Care and supported by insights from Empowerment Theory.
- **Section 8.3.3 - Relational and Reflective Pathways to Empowerment:**
  - Integrating all four analytical themes to consider how relational and reflective spaces, including youth work and the research process, supported agency, confidence, and collective voice, while acknowledging the structural and emotional constraints participants navigated.

Throughout these sections, interpretation remains close to young people’s language, perspectives, and experiences, with theory used to illuminate, rather than overstate, the relational and structural conditions shaping wellbeing and agency.

### **8.3.1 - Structural Barriers to Wellbeing**

This section interprets the findings through Power and Empowerment and Relational Dynamics and Emotional Labour (see [Figure 3.1](#)), drawing primarily on Empowerment Theory and Feminist Ethics of Care, with Critical Pedagogy providing contextual language about structural awareness. These theories are used to examine how young people in this study encountered structural inequality in their everyday lives. The findings illustrate how disinvestment, poverty, and social marginalisation shaped participants’ environments and sense of self, while simultaneously constraining the capacity of practitioners and stakeholders to respond. Structural conditions were experienced not as abstract forces, but as tangible features of place, relationships, and daily life, with direct consequences for wellbeing and for how agency was perceived and pursued.

Participants described their neighbourhoods as neglected and forgotten, marked by broken infrastructure, visible decay, and limited public investment. Lei reflected, “It’s like we’re invisible to the people who could make a difference,” illustrating how young people internalised a sense of abandonment and exclusion. Coco echoed this: “Everywhere you look, it’s just grey and falling

apart. It feels like no one cares if we're even here.” These reflections align with Wacquant’s (2008) concept of spatialised stigma, where environmental degradation communicates systemic disregard and reinforces social marginalisation. Such conditions shaped not only young people’s material surroundings but also their emotional wellbeing and sense of worth.

From an Empowerment Theory perspective, these environments restrict both psychological and social opportunity, limiting young people’s capacity to imagine alternative futures or perceive meaningful pathways for influence (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995). Participants’ reflections suggested that awareness of inequality was often accompanied by feelings of frustration or resignation, rather than a sense of agency. Doherty and de St Croix’s (2024) notion of social haunting is also relevant here, as the legacy of austerity, service withdrawal, and policy-driven disinvestment continues to shape young people’s lives long after specific interventions have ended. Exposure to long-term neglect, including social, emotional, and spatial, can exacerbate feelings of anxiety, isolation, and diminished self-worth (Bynner et al., 2020; Loades et al., 2020; O’Sullivan et al., 2021; Reiss, 2013; Sampson & Raudenbush, 2004). Gean’s reflection captures this clearly: “The broken parks, boarded-up shops, and garbage everywhere, it just makes you feel worthless.”

Stakeholders, including youth workers, community workers, and local politicians, recognised the pressures young people faced and pointed to the structural constraints on their own practice and capacity to respond. Youth Worker 7 shared: “We’re expected to do so much with so little, filling the gaps for families, supporting mental health, and even advocating for policy changes, all while our funding is under constant threat.” These reflections demonstrate how practitioners operate within systems shaped by austerity, short-term funding cycles, and fragmentation. Empowerment Theory emphasises that agency is mediated by access to supportive relationships, decision-making power, and enabling environments (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981). While youth workers offered crucial relational support, their ability to facilitate wider change was often constrained by precarious funding, narrow outcome

frameworks, and policy environments that prioritised short-term solutions over long-term investment (Aldridge, 2016; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014).

These tensions are evident within Scotland's Community Learning and Development (CLD) sector. While CLD principles emphasise collective empowerment and social justice (CLD Standards Council, 2025; Scottish Government, 2012), scholars such as Shaw (2008), Tett (2006), and Doherty and de St Croix (2021, 2024) note that performance pressures and governance arrangements frequently limit their transformative potential. Several stakeholders echoed this concern. Local Politician 1 spoke about trying to "hold routine youth advice surgeries" and improve the area, but acknowledged the need for broader systemic coordination. Youth Worker 9 reflected: "It's hard to feel like the young people, or us youth workers, are making a difference when everything in the community and the kids' lives feels broken."

A Feminist Ethics of Care deepens this analysis by situating these experiences within intersecting systems of inequality. Socio-economic disadvantage, geographic marginalisation, and generational poverty do not operate in isolation but compound each other, intensifying exclusion and reducing young people's capacity to participate meaningfully (Crenshaw, 1991). The emotional labour of navigating these conditions, often silently carried by young people and practitioners alike, emphasises the need for recognition and structural redress (Arinder, 2022; hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993).

Although this research created space for participants to share their stories and reflect collectively, the findings reinforce that reflection alone is insufficient. Lei's comment captures this: "Even if you see the problems, what are you supposed to do about it? It's not like anyone's listening to us." Without institutional responsiveness and sustained investment, opportunities for reflection risk reinforcing feelings of frustration or powerlessness, rather than enabling change (Evans, 2007; Lundy & McEvoy, 2012; Tisdall, 2016). Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000) provides contextual language for understanding this gap between awareness and action.

Overall, this section demonstrates that structural inequality, emotional experience, and agency are deeply interconnected. While relational and reflective spaces provide essential support and recognition, they cannot, alone, address systemic injustice. Supporting young people's wellbeing and sense of agency, therefore, requires not only care-focused practice, but sustained political and structural commitment.

The next section examines how relationships with family, peers, and youth workers shaped young people's wellbeing, identity, and sense of belonging within these constrained contexts.

### **8.3.2 - Relational Dimensions of Wellbeing**

This section draws on Relational Dynamics and Emotional Labour and Participation and Agency (Figure 3.1), guided primarily by a Feminist Ethics of Care, with support from Empowerment Theory. These theories are used to examine how young people's wellbeing and sense of agency were shaped through their relationships with family, peers, and youth workers. These relationships offered support, belonging, and recognition, while also serving as sites of responsibility, vulnerability, and emotional labour. Importantly, relational experiences were inseparable from the wider structural conditions in which young people and their families were situated.

Many participants identified family relationships as a source of emotional grounding. Lei shared, "When things get hard, my family keeps me grounded," reflecting how familial care could buffer external pressures. From an empowerment perspective (Zimmerman, 2000), such support helps build self-efficacy, especially in challenging contexts. In line with Care Ethics, emotional support is not separable from the structural conditions shaping family life (Tronto, 1993). Luthar (2006) and Noble & McGrath (2012) similarly emphasise the protective role of emotionally cohesive family relationships. However, families were also described as sites of tension, shaped by conflict, financial

strain, and unmet needs. Rosie's comment, "I feel like it's my fault when my family argues," illustrates how young people can internalise responsibility for dynamics shaped by structural hardship. Research suggests that economic stress undermines family cohesion and increases emotional vulnerability (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Conger et al., 2010). A Feminist Ethics of Care is particularly useful here, highlighting how emotional labour is often unevenly distributed in families, with young people, especially girls, taking on caregiving or mediating roles in ways that are rarely recognised (hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993). Freire's (2000) concept of internalised oppression/constraint, used as a contextual frame, also illuminates how structural disadvantage shapes family life and young people's self-perceptions. Stakeholders acknowledged these challenges. Family Member 2 shared: "It's not that we don't care, we just don't always have the time or energy to support them in the way we'd want to." This aligns with Bradbury-Jones and Taylor's (2015) argument that structural inequalities erode families' capacity to provide consistent care. Ewan et al. (2016) argue that family-focused programmes must address both emotional and material needs in collaborative, context-sensitive ways.

Peer relationships emerged as central to young people's sense of belonging and understanding. Gean described: "My friends are the only ones who really get me," highlighting the emotional importance of shared experience and mutual recognition. For some, friendships provided validation not available elsewhere. Letkiewicz et al. (2023) and O'Sullivan et al. (2021) note the protective role of peer support, especially during periods of disruption such as the COVID-19 pandemic. A Care Ethics lens clarifies how emotional labour is distributed within peer networks, particularly under precarity (hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993). However, these relationships were also described as fragile and emotionally demanding. Lauren shared: "I felt completely lost when my best friend just stopped talking to me," capturing how young people can be deeply affected by relational rupture. Lalo's metaphor, "Sometimes the flame goes out... and you realise the lighter's broke," reflects the exhaustion of trying to maintain connections when trust breaks down, and there is no reciprocity. These dynamics align with Holland and Tiggemann's (2016) framing of relationships as double-edged: potential sources of strength, but also emotional vulnerability. A

Feminist Ethics of Care helps illuminate how emotional labour is managed within peer relationships, particularly in contexts of precarity, where young people balance their own needs with the demands of supporting others (hooks, 1984; Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993).

Youth work spaces were described as offering a distinct form of relational support. Participants consistently highlighted the importance of being listened to, respected, and supported. Lalo's comment, "My youth worker is the only person who listens without telling me what to do," captures the importance of voluntary, non-judgmental support. These findings resonate with Coburn's (2011) work on the value of informal, trust-based relationships in youth work, especially for young people experiencing marginalisation. Stakeholders also emphasised the role of trust and continuity. Family Member 2 noted: "Youth work is about building trust. Without that, we can't even begin to help young people navigate the challenges they're facing." Empowerment Theory (Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000) emphasises that environments built on mutual respect and consistent support are critical for fostering self-belief.

However, both participants and stakeholders recognised the limits of relational work in the absence of structural support. Youth Worker 8 reflected: "We're often the ones holding things together... but it's hard to do that without the resources we need." This tension is well documented within youth work literature, where care-focused practice is frequently undervalued and constrained by austerity and outcome-driven governance (Doherty & de St Croix, 2024; MacLeod and Emejulu, 2014; Ord, 2016).

Participants also expressed a desire for relational spaces that moved beyond individual support toward collective reflection and action. Rosie's comment: "We talk about our problems, but not about how to change them," highlights this aspiration. This echoes Freire's (2000) warning that reflection without action can become a form of containment. Feminist Ethics of Care (Arinder, 2022; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993) cautions against relational practices that prioritise care without addressing structural conditions. Youth Worker 8

described this tension: “We try to amplify their voices, but without structural support, it feels like we’re hitting a wall.” As de St Croix & Doherty (2023) argue, while youth work holds transformative potential, it often operates within systems that limit its reach. Stakeholders described supporting youth-led committees and similar initiatives but highlighted the need for sustained investment and institutional backing. Coburn and Gormally (2019) argue that relational care and structural engagement must be linked if youth work is to fully support young people’s sense of agency and belonging.

In summary:

- Family relationships offered care and stability, but were shaped by structural stress.
- Peer relationships provide validation, belonging, and solidarity but were fragile and marked by significant emotional labour.
- Youth work created trusted spaces for support, yet was constrained by systemic pressures.
- Stakeholders were deeply committed to young people’s wellbeing but constrained by under-resourced systems and competing pressures.

Relational support is central to young people’s wellbeing. However, its impact remains uneven without wider structural changes to realise its full potential.

The next section builds on this analysis by examining how young people engaged with different relational and reflective spaces, including youth work and the research project, to consider their roles, share their ideas, and reflect on possibilities for contributing to change.

### **8.3.3 - Relational and Reflective Pathways to Empowerment**

This section brings together all four mid-level themes to examine how young people navigated pathways to empowerment through the different supportive and reflective spaces. These pathways were shaped by relationships, trust, and

the availability of time and resources, and were consistently constrained by broader structural conditions.

Youth work provided a relational foundation built on trust, consistency, and informal support. Participants described youth workers as caring and approachable, creating spaces where they felt safe and heard. Lalo's reflection, "My youth worker is the only person who listens without telling me what to do", captures the importance of this relational approach. Such environments align with Empowerment Theory's emphasis on contexts that nurture self-efficacy and belonging (Rappaport, 1981; Zimmerman, 2000), and with youth work scholarship that highlights the value of dialogic, relational practice (Coburn, 2011). These supportive relationships helped young people feel valued, especially during times of external instability, such as the COVID-19 pandemic (Ní Charraighe & Reynolds, 2024; YouthLink Scotland, 2021).

Alongside these ongoing relationships, the research project created a temporary, dedicated space for collective reflection and creative engagement. This space was supported by additional time and resources not typically available within everyday youth work practice due to systemic and resource constraints. Importantly, this was not because youth work lacks the capacity for deeper reflection, but because of the broader pressures that shape what is practically possible. Participants described how this enabled them to step back from immediate pressures and reflect more deeply on shared concerns. Gean shared: "Taking photos of my neighbourhood made me realise how much we're ignored. It's not just me, it's the whole community." Lalo similarly reflected: "Being part of this research made me feel like my voice matters, that I can actually make a difference." These moments illustrate the value of sustained reflective space for developing shared understanding and confidence. While Freire's (2000) concept of critical consciousness provides a useful contextual frame for understanding these processes, Empowerment Theory (Zimmerman, 2000) more directly explains how confidence and agency emerged through supportive relationships and meaningful engagement.

However, both participants and stakeholders highlighted the difficulty of sustaining such spaces. Youth Worker 4 reflected: “The young people see us as the ones who can make everything better, but we’re constantly battling a system that keeps them, and us, stuck.” Feminist Ethics of Care helps to surface the emotional labour involved in holding these spaces together, often without adequate recognition or support (Arinder, 2022; Tronto, 1993). This tension echoes critiques in the youth work literature, which highlight how relational and care-focused practices are often constrained by policy environments that prioritise measurable outputs and short-term outcomes over long-term relational investment (de St Croix & Doherty, 2023; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014; Ord, 2016). Participants valued opportunities to reflect and imagine change, but also recognised the structural barriers that limited follow-through. As Freire (2000) reminds us, reflection and care must be accompanied by opportunities for action; otherwise, spaces risk containing rather than transforming young people’s aspirations.

The findings reinforce that young people want more space and time to explore what matters to them, to connect with peers and trusted adults, and to think about change. Rosie captured this dynamic: “Youth work gave me the confidence to speak, but this research made me realise what I could say and why it mattered.” Her reflection highlights how different supportive spaces can build on one another. Coburn and Gormally’s (2019) idea of a ‘nexus’ between care and critical engagement is helpful here, illustrating how relational support and reflective practices can reinforce each other, rather than operate in isolation, even within constrained systems. Creating space for voice involves inviting expression and ensuring care, collective responsibility, and material support (Crenshaw, 1991; Kang et al., 2017). Empowerment Theory further reminds us that self-efficacy and agency are deeply contingent on the presence of enabling structures and consistent relational support (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000).

Across these experiences:

- Youth work created vital foundations of trust and belonging.

- Dedicated reflective spaces, made possible by extra time and resources, offered focused opportunities for collective reflection, dialogue, and creative expression.
- Both types of spaces were deeply shaped by wider structural conditions and resource limitations.
- Young people described a strong desire for more space and time to reflect, connect, and imagine change together, while also recognising the structural and resource pressures that limit these opportunities.

These insights point to the importance of investing in relational and reflective practices as part of supporting youth wellbeing and agency, alongside broader structural commitments that enable these practices to flourish and be sustained (Gormally & Coburn, 2017; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009; Tisdall, 2016).

The following section revisits the study's research questions, drawing these insights together to reflect on their implications for youth work, participatory practice, and future approaches to supporting young people in post-pandemic Scotland.

#### **8.4 - Addressing the Research Questions**

This section reflects on how the study responded to its central aim: to explore how young people understand and experience wellbeing, and what supports or constrains their agency within a post-COVID-19 Scottish youth work context. Drawing primarily on Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981) and Feminist Ethics of Care, including relationality, emotional labour, and intersectionality (Arinder, 2022; Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993), the discussion reflects on how each research question was addressed. Freire's (2000) work provides a broader structural backdrop for understanding how young people articulated awareness of inequality, but does not operate as a primary analytic theory.

**RQ1: How do young people understand, reflect on, and experience wellbeing within the context of their everyday lives?**

Young people described wellbeing as deeply relational, contextual, and shaped through everyday interactions rather than as an individual or internal state. Their accounts emphasised emotional safety, connection, and care, often grounded in relationships with family, friends, and trusted adults, as central to how wellbeing was understood and experienced. This aligns with a Feminist Ethics of Care, which conceptualises wellbeing as emerging through relational practices and interdependence rather than personal resilience (hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993).

Empowerment Theory further illuminates how relational support underpins confidence, self-efficacy, and a sense of possibility (Zimmerman, 2000). At the same time, young people demonstrated a clear awareness of how structural conditions shaped and constrained their wellbeing. Poverty, environmental neglect, stigma, and disinvestment were described not only as material challenges but as symbolic signals of exclusion that affected how young people felt about themselves and their communities. These experiences resonate with Wacquant's (2008) concept of advanced marginality and spatialised stigma, highlighting the emotional consequences of long-term structural neglect.

While Freire's (2000) notion of critical consciousness provides useful language for understanding how young people named and reflected on injustice, the findings suggest that this awareness was shaped through lived experience rather than formal pedagogical processes. Together, these insights challenge individualised or resilience-based narratives of wellbeing and instead emphasise the entanglement of relational, emotional, and structural dimensions (Bottrell, 2009; de St Croix & Doherty, 2023; Ungar, 2008, 2011, 2016).

Other dimensions of wellbeing, such as cultural identity, physical health, or spirituality, were less prominent in participants' accounts. This likely reflects the local context and the relational focus of both youth work practice and the

research process during periods of COVID-19 disruption. Overall, the findings show that young people's understandings of wellbeing were shaped by intersecting personal, relational, and structural factors.

**RQ2: What challenges and structural barriers do young people identify as influencing their wellbeing?**

Participants identified a range of structural barriers impacting their everyday lives, including poverty, deteriorating neighbourhood conditions, underfunded services, and limited opportunities. These conditions were experienced as material deprivation and as symbolic messages of exclusion and invisibility. Lei's reflection, "It's like we're invisible to the people who could make a difference", illustrates how environmental neglect communicates broader societal disregard. Such accounts reflect spatialised stigma and the emotional consequences of long-term disinvestment (Wacquant, 2008).

From a Feminist Ethics of Care perspective, these structural barriers were inseparable from relational experiences. Economic insecurity and service withdrawal intensified emotional strain within families and peer networks, often redistributing emotional labour onto young people themselves (Arinder, 2022; Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Kang et al., 2017). Participants described managing not only their own distress, but also the emotional needs of others, highlighting how care responsibilities are unevenly distributed under conditions of scarcity.

The findings also echo critiques of neoliberal youth policy that frame wellbeing as a matter of individual resilience rather than collective responsibility (de St Croix et al., 2018; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014; Shaw, 2013). While the research space supported reflection and articulation of these challenges, it also surfaced frustration when critical awareness was not accompanied by visible change. This reflects Evans' (2007) warning that awareness alone cannot substitute for structural action or sustained institutional support.

**RQ3: What role do youth work spaces play in shaping young people's wellbeing and sense of agency?**

Youth work emerged as a vital source of relational support and stability within young people's lives. Young people described youth workers as approachable, trustworthy adults who created safe, welcoming spaces characterised by consistency, care, and respect, enabling feelings of safety and recognition, Lalo's comment, "My youth worker is the only person who listens without telling me what to do," reflects the relational ethos of youth work grounded in care and mutual respect (Coburn, 2011; Ord, 2016).

From an empowerment perspective, these relationships supported confidence, emotional expression, and a sense of agency (Zimmerman, 2000). However, the findings also revealed clear limits to what youth work could offer in the absence of structural support. Underfunding, policy pressures, and outcome-driven frameworks constrained opportunities for sustained critical engagement or collective action (Batsleer et al., 2021; Doherty & de St Croix, 2024). Stakeholders described "holding things together" under pressure, reflecting broader tensions identified in the literature (MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014).

While youth work functioned as an important site of care and dialogue, its capacity to sustain critical or collective action was shaped by external pressures, reinforcing longstanding tensions between youth work's pedagogical values and policy expectations (Coburn, 2011; Ord, 2016). Participants valued youth work as a space for being seen and supported, but some expressed a desire for more time and opportunity to explore wider social change. This reinforces arguments that youth work's relational strengths are most effective when supported by adequate resources and institutional commitment (Gormally & Coburn, 2017).

**RQ4: How do local stakeholders understand their roles in supporting young people's wellbeing and navigating structural challenges?**

Stakeholders saw their roles as deeply relational but also structurally constrained. Youth workers, family members, community workers, and a local politician expressed strong commitment to supporting young people, while simultaneously navigating precarious funding, bureaucratic targets, and fragmented services. Youth Worker 7's reflection that they were "expected to do so much with so little" captured the emotional and practical pressures they faced. Their reflections revealed the moral and emotional labour involved in trying to uphold care-oriented practices under conditions of austerity and precarity (Batsleer et al., 2020; Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015). Rather than positioning themselves as agents of transformation, stakeholders frequently acknowledged the risk of overpromising and the importance of transparency. This reinforces critiques of participation that place responsibility on individuals while leaving structural conditions unchanged (Coburn & Gormally, 2019).

Together, the findings show that young people's wellbeing and agency are shaped through complex interactions between relational care, reflective space, and structural constraint. Youth work and this research created meaningful opportunities for connection, dialogue, and recognition, but their transformative potential remained contingent on sustained institutional and policy support. Rather than proposing a single model or space as a solution, the study highlights the importance of investing in diverse, adequately resourced approaches that enable young people to reflect, connect, and imagine change in ways that feel meaningful to them.

## **8.5 - Critical Reflections on the Theoretical Framework and Discussion**

This study draws on Empowerment Theory and Feminist Ethics of Care as its primary theoretical lenses, with Critical Pedagogy providing a broader structural context rather than a central analytic framework. Together, these perspectives enabled a relational, critical, and context-sensitive interpretation of young people's wellbeing and agency within youth work settings. This section reflects on the insights, tensions, and limitations that emerged from applying this framework.

Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981) was particularly useful in interpreting how supportive relationships with family, peers, and youth workers fostered confidence, self-efficacy, and a sense of agency. However, the findings also reinforced critiques that empowerment risks becoming depoliticised when reduced to individual confidence or coping capacity (Aldridge, 2016). Young people's experiences of agency were consistently shaped and limited by structural conditions, including austerity, service withdrawal, and narrow outcome frameworks (Doherty & de St Croix, 2024; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014). Prilleltensky's (2008) emphasis on multi-level empowerment was therefore particularly relevant, reframing agency as a collective and structural concern rather than an individual attribute.

A Feminist Ethics of Care offered insight into the relational and emotional dimensions of wellbeing. Feminist scholars highlight how care is shaped by unequal distributions of labour, recognition, and power (Kang et al., 2017; Tronto, 1993). In this study, young people frequently described taking on emotional responsibility for others, often without adequate support. Intersectional perspectives (Crenshaw, 1991) further revealed how experiences of class, gender, neurodivergence, grief, and stigma compounded these burdens (Arinder, 2022; hooks, 1984). This lens was essential for avoiding romanticised accounts of relationality and for recognising the emotional costs of care under conditions of structural constraint.

Freire's (2000) Critical Pedagogy contributed a useful structural language for understanding how young people articulated awareness of inequality and injustice. Participants' reflections on disinvestment and exclusion echoed broader analyses of territorial stigmatisation (Wacquant, 2008). However, the study also revealed a key limitation of Critical Pedagogy in constrained contexts. While participants demonstrated critical awareness, this did not consistently translate into opportunities for action. As Lei reflected, "We talked about what needed to change, but nothing happened." This echoes concerns raised by Cook-Sather's (2007) and Evans (2007) that participatory and critical approaches can raise expectations without guaranteeing institutional response.

A further tension emerged in the limits of participatory research. While photovoice supported reflection, storytelling, and shared understanding, the process did not always yield tangible change. This reinforces critiques that participation risks becoming symbolic when it is not embedded within long-term partnerships or supported by mechanisms for accountability (Batsleer et al., 2020; Bowers, 2005; Checkoway, 2011; Coussée et al., 2010; Doherty & de St Croix, 2024; Lee et al., 2022; Percy-Smith, 2021; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009; Zeldin et al., 2013).

The study's use of three intersecting theories enabled a robust, interdisciplinary analysis, but also required careful attention to conceptual boundaries. While Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Rappaport, 1981) and Feminist Ethics of Care (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993) both emphasise relationality, they do so from distinct traditions. The study, therefore, focused on how each framework offered specific insights: Empowerment Theory illuminated the conditions for agency; Feminist Ethics of Care foregrounded relational complexity and emotional politics; and Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000) provided a structural backdrop for understanding inequality, rather than a prescriptive model for change.

Looking ahead, future research could build on this theoretical framework by engaging with adjacent perspectives. For example, feminist prefigurative politics (Kane, 2001; Monticelli, 2022) encourages us to consider how young people can actively practise the values and social relationships they wish to see in the world, such as care, equity, and collective responsibility, through their everyday actions and interactions. This perspective shifts the focus from only demanding change to also embodying change in the present. Similarly, decolonial approaches to youth participation (Smith, 2005, 2013; Swadener & Mutua, 2008) challenge Eurocentric knowledge systems and call for methods that are grounded in local, Indigenous, and historically marginalised ways of knowing, being, and relating. These perspectives offer powerful tools for reimagining what meaningful participation looks like across diverse cultural and political

contexts. In addition, Giddens' (1984) structuration theory may offer a useful complement to these frameworks. It emphasises how individuals are not just shaped by structures such as class, policy, or institutions; they also act upon and reshape these systems through their choices and behaviours. This could be particularly useful in future studies that explore how young people's everyday actions, including those through youth work, contribute to both the reproduction and transformation of structural conditions over time.

In sum, the theoretical framework shaped this study in generative ways. It enabled a grounded, critical, and relational interpretation of young people's experiences, attending to both the structures that limit them and the relationships that sustain them. However, the application of theory also demanded reflexivity: to question assumptions, recognise limitations, and remain open to future development. Youth wellbeing, agency, and empowerment are never static outcomes, but ongoing negotiations within complex, unjust, and dynamic contexts. Theories must be used as flexible tools that are adaptable, relational, and accountable to the lived realities they seek to illuminate. These reflections on theory also resurface a broader tension that has threaded through the thesis: the challenge of sustaining agency, participation, and care beyond the bounded spaces where they initially emerge.

## **8.6 - A Practice-Based Reflection: The Youth Committee**

Together, these reflections highlight a persistent tension running through this thesis: the gap between critical awareness, participatory dialogue, and the availability of sustained pathways for influence and change. While the study has been careful not to overclaim the outcomes of participatory research or youth work, the discussion raises an important question about what happens around, alongside, or after time-limited research encounters. This question is central to RQ3, which asks what role youth work spaces play in shaping young people's wellbeing and sense of agency. The findings indicate that these spaces can foster moments of connection, recognition, and critical insight, yet they also highlight the fragility of these gains when not supported by stable structures of continuity, resourcing, or institutional responsiveness. In other words, youth

work spaces may catalyse agency and wellbeing in the moment, but their longer-term impact is contingent on what exists beyond the boundaries of specific interventions.

It is against this backdrop that the subsequent reflective note on the youth committee is introduced. This reflection sits deliberately at the edges of the formal analytical frame, as the committee emerged after the completion of data collection and was developed independently by several participants in response to issues raised during the study. It is, therefore, not presented as a research outcome nor a direct extension of the findings. However, it is included to offer contextual insight into how some young people sought to navigate the very tensions identified throughout this discussion, particularly the recurring disconnection between participatory dialogue and meaningful, sustained pathways for influence. The committee's emergence provides a practice-based illustration of the structural, political, and ethical challenges involved in sustaining participation beyond time-bound projects, which directly relates to the limits and possibilities of youth work spaces explored in RQ3.

As discussed earlier, young people in this study frequently expressed disillusionment when opportunities for reflection and voice were not matched by institutional responsiveness. The formation of the youth committee can be understood as one response to this frustration: an attempt by several participants to create a more durable space for dialogue, continuity, and recognition beyond the limits of a time-bound participatory project. In this sense, the committee illustrates how young people sought to extend the kinds of agency and relational support they valued within youth work spaces, thereby offering a practice-based example of the opportunities and limits identified in RQ3. Its emergence resonates with Prilleltensky's (2008) call for multi-level approaches to empowerment that move beyond individual or relational gains, and it echoes critiques of participatory initiatives that raise awareness without embedding mechanisms for follow-through or accountability (Evans, 2007; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009).

However, the committee also exposes the enduring structural constraints documented throughout this thesis. Rather than resolving the tensions between participation and influence, it highlights how responsibility for sustaining engagement is often displaced onto young people and local actors, an issue intensified by austerity, service fragmentation, and limited policy alignment (Batsleer et al., 2020; Doherty & de St Croix, 2024). In this way, the committee reflects the structural fragility of youth work spaces themselves: while they can nurture agency and wellbeing in the short term, they cannot substitute for broader institutional and political commitments required for lasting change.

Viewed through a Feminist Ethics of Care lens, the youth committee also raises important questions about care, responsibility, and emotional labour. Youth work spaces often foster meaningful relationships and a sense of mutual care, yet these relational dynamics can inadvertently generate expectations that young people will continue to organise, advocate, and support their communities without corresponding shifts in power, resources, or institutional backing (Arinder, 2022; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993). This perspective highlights the risk of romanticising youth-led engagement while overlooking the emotional and relational costs such labour entails, particularly for young people already navigating intersecting forms of marginalisation. This, again, speaks directly to RQ3: youth work spaces may support wellbeing and agency, but they can also unintentionally reproduce burdens of care and responsibility that exceed what is reasonable or equitable.

For these reasons, the youth committee should be seen as a practice-based illustration of the broader arguments advanced in this thesis. Its emergence reinforces the central claim that meaningful youth participation cannot be sustained through goodwill, motivation, or relational commitment alone. Instead, youth work spaces, and the sense of agency and wellbeing they can foster, require long-term structural investment, institutional accountability, and policy environments that support continuity, care, and shared responsibility. Including this reflection in the discussion, therefore, strengthens the study's critical stance on participation, empowerment, and youth wellbeing within

constrained social and political contexts, while remaining clear about the committee's status outside the formal dataset.

## Chapter 9 - Conclusion

This thesis set out to explore how young people understand and experience wellbeing, and what supports or constrains their agency within a post-COVID-19 Scottish youth work context. Grounded in a youth work setting and incorporating an additional, time-limited, resourced project space for reflection, the study examined how wellbeing is shaped by young people's everyday experiences, the structural conditions they navigate, and the relational environments that support their growth. It also explored the perspectives of stakeholders, including youth workers, family members, community workers, and a local politician, on their roles in supporting young people's wellbeing within systems marked by limited resources and structural constraints.

This final chapter brings the study to a close by synthesising its key findings in relation to the research questions, outlining its original contributions, and identifying theoretical, methodological, and practical implications. It also presents a set of recommendations for youth work, reflective practice, and policy, followed by critical reflections on the research process, limitations, and areas for future work.

### 9.1 - Addressing the Research Questions and Key Findings

This section provides a concise synthesis summary of how the study responded to each research question, drawing on the most salient findings from across the empirical chapters. Rather than revisiting detailed theoretical interpretation (see [Chapter 8](#)), it focuses on what emerged from the data concerning young people's experiences and perspectives.

**RQ1: How do young people understand, reflect on, and experience wellbeing within the context of their everyday lives?**

Young people described wellbeing as relational, emotional, and situated in their everyday life rather than as an individual or internal state. Feeling safe, cared for, and connected to others, particularly family members, friends, and trusted adults, was central to how wellbeing was experienced. Participants valued

spaces where they could speak openly, feel listened to, and be treated with respect. At the same time, young people consistently linked their wellbeing to wider structural conditions. Poverty, stigma, environmental neglect, and limited local opportunities shaped how they felt about themselves, their communities, and their sense of belonging. These conditions influenced access to support and contributed to feelings of invisibility and exclusion. Participants' reflections challenged individualised or resilience-focused models of wellbeing, emphasising the importance of relational care alongside structural investment.

### **RQ2: What challenges and structural barriers do young people identify as influencing their wellbeing?**

Participants identified interconnected challenges, including financial insecurity, poor housing and neighbourhood conditions, underfunded services, and social exclusion. These barriers affected family relationships, emotional wellbeing, and access to mental health and community support. Many described feeling ignored or abandoned by systems intended to support them. Structural constraints were experienced as everyday realities rather than abstract policy issues, shaping how young people navigated daily life. While the COVID-19 pandemic intensified some pressures, many challenges predated the pandemic and reflected longer-term patterns of divestment. Participants expressed frustration that their perspectives were often overlooked in decisions affecting their lives, reinforcing feelings of neglect and marginalisation.

### **RQ3: What role do youth work spaces play in shaping young people's wellbeing and sense of agency?**

Youth work emerged as a vital source of consistent and trusted support. Young people described youth workers as approachable and dependable adults who created safe and welcoming spaces where they felt respected, understood, and valued. These relationships helped young people build confidence, peer connection, and a sense of recognition. However, the study also highlighted the limits of youth work within an under-resourced and outcome-driven environment. Youth workers were often required to respond to complex needs without sufficient time, capacity, or influence to address wider structural

inequalities. While youth work played a crucial role in supporting relational wellbeing and confidence, its potential to engage with systemic change remained constrained by external pressures.

#### **RQ4: How do local stakeholders understand their roles in supporting young people's wellbeing and navigating structural challenges?**

Stakeholders across roles described their work as deeply relational and grounded in a commitment to young people's wellbeing. They emphasised the importance of building trust, listening, and working alongside young people rather than imposing solutions on them. At the same time, they highlighted structural barriers such as limited funding, bureaucratic demands, and fragmented services. Stakeholders acknowledged tensions between their care-oriented values and the constraints of the systems in which they worked. While they could offer immediate support and advocacy, they recognised that broader structural reforms were essential to creating sustainable pathways for young people's wellbeing and agency.

Overall, the findings demonstrate that young people's wellbeing is shaped through the interaction of relational care and structural conditions. Youth work and community spaces play a crucial role in supporting connection and confidence, but their impact is limited when systemic inequalities remain unaddressed. Supporting youth wellbeing, therefore, requires sustained investment, institutional accountability, and long-term commitment to creating conditions in which young people's agency can be meaningfully supported.

## **9.2 - Contribution to Knowledge**

This study makes original contributions to theoretical, empirical, and practice-based debates by critically examining how youth wellbeing, agency, and structural inequality are experienced and navigated within a Scottish youth work context after COVID-19. Working with young people already engaged in local youth work services, the study provides detailed, place-based insights into how wellbeing, care, and constraint are understood in everyday life.

## Theoretical Contributions

The study contributes theoretically by integrating Empowerment Theory (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000) and a Feminist Ethics of Care (Crenshaw, 1991; hooks, 1984; Tronto, 1993), with Critical Pedagogy (Freire, 2000) providing a broader structural backdrop. This synthesis offers a relational-structural understanding of youth wellbeing that foregrounds emotional experience, care, and agency while attending to the material and institutional conditions that shape them.

Empowerment Theory's focus on relational ecosystems (Perkins & Zimmerman, 1995; Zimmerman, 2000) provided a valuable lens for understanding how relationships with youth workers, peers, and family members supported young people's confidence and self-efficacy, while also highlighting the limits of empowerment when structural supports are absent. Agency often emerged as conditional and shaped by both interpersonal support and wider conditions such as funding, service access, and social recognition, rather than framed as an individual attribute (Coburn, 2011; Doherty & de St Croix, 2024; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014).

A Feminist Ethics of Care, particularly through Crenshaw's (1991) intersectionality and hooks' (1984) attention to emotional labour, deepened understanding of how young people's experiences of care, stigma, and wellbeing were shaped by overlapping systems of oppression, including gender expectations, mental health stigma, class-based exclusion, and age-related marginalisation. Participants' accounts of hiding emotions, managing others' expectations, and carrying emotional burdens highlight the cost of unsupported care within these unequal contexts. This framing demonstrates that wellbeing is not only a social or individual matter, but also a political and structural issue, shaped by the distribution of care, responsibility, and recognition across intersecting inequalities. In doing so, this study contributes to feminist youth studies by showing how the emotional and relational dimensions of young

people's lives are inseparable from the wider systems that constrain or enable them.

Together, these perspectives offer an integrated theoretical approach that foregrounds critical awareness, relational support, and structural critique. This synthesis provides a model for analysing youth agency that is sensitive to both emotional and material realities. Future research could build on this by incorporating decolonial, queer, or prefigurative feminist perspectives (Coussée et al., 2010; Monticelli, 2022), which may offer further insights into how young people imagine, enact, and resist dominant systems.

### **Empirical Contributions**

Empirically, this study offers rich, situated insights into young people's lived experiences of wellbeing and agency in a structurally marginalised community. It foregrounds youth voices in describing how conditions such as poverty, disrepair, and service cuts are felt materially and internalised emotionally. Young people's descriptions of feeling invisible or forgotten emphasise the symbolic violence embedded in spatial and institutional neglect (Reiss, 2013; Wacquant, 2008). These findings contribute to existing work on how structural harm intersects with identity, place, and relational self-worth (Bradbury-Jones & Taylor, 2015; Bynner et al., 2020).

The study also offers empirical insight into the emotional and relational dynamics of creating space for young people to share perspectives and consider change. While participants valued opportunities for creative expression and connection, they also described exhaustion and disappointment when their contributions were not matched by institutional responsiveness or material change. This reinforces critiques that highlight the emotional burden of youth engagement when framed as symbolic rather than structurally supported (Batsleer et al., 2021; Lam & Kwong, 2014). The findings contribute to ethical debates on youth engagement by emphasising the importance of sustained support and longer-term commitment beyond single projects.

Finally, the study offers insight into stakeholder experiences in youth work and community settings. It shows how relational care is maintained through moral commitment and emotional labour, even under conditions of precarity and institutional constraint. While youth workers created valuable spaces of trust and connection, their reflections revealed the limits of doing so without systemic backing, highlighting the paradox of being expected to deliver transformation while excluded from decision-making power (Coburn & Gormally, 2019; Shaw & Crowther, 2017).

In sum, this study contributes to knowledge by foregrounding the entangled relational and structural dimensions of youth wellbeing and agency within the context of youth work. Theoretically, it offers an integrated framework combining critical, empowerment, and feminist perspectives. Empirically, it provides rich, place-based insights from young people and stakeholders in post-COVID-19 Scotland. By attending to the emotional, political, and structural tensions that shape these experiences, the study offers critical insight into how relational and reflective practices can contribute to supporting youth wellbeing when embedded within broader, justice-oriented strategies rooted in care, continuity, and collective possibility.

### **9.3 - Implications for Youth Work, Reflective Practice, and Policy**

This study offers important implications for youth work practice, reflective approaches, and policy development in the context of post-COVID-19 Scotland. While each approach holds potential for fostering agency and wellbeing, their capacity to support young people is deeply shaped by broader structural conditions, including poverty, disinvestment, and funding precarity. Addressing these requires multi-layered strategies that combine relational care, opportunities for reflection, and systemic change.

For youth work, the findings affirm its value as a relational and voluntary practice that fosters emotional safety, trust, and belonging (Coburn, 2011;

YouthLink Scotland, 2021). Participants described youth workers as consistent, supportive adults who listened without judgment and created spaces where they felt seen and heard. At the same time, some participants expressed a desire for more opportunities to engage in reflection on wider social issues and possibilities for change, highlighting the potential for youth work to support critical dialogue alongside relational care. This supports critiques by Cooper (2012) and Gormally and Coburn (2017), who argue that youth work's radical potential can be constrained by pressures to conform to outcome-driven or depoliticised models. Strengthening youth work's capacity to engage with structural questions requires adequate resourcing, space for process-oriented work, and support for pedagogical development. Practices such as youth-led inquiries or issue-based forums could be further embedded, provided practitioners have the time and institutional backing to do so (Coburn & Gormally, 2019; Shaw & Crowther, 2017). Without such support, youth workers may be expected to "hold everything together" (Youth Worker 8) while lacking the resources needed to enact broader change.

For reflective practice, the study demonstrates the value of creating additional, resourced spaces where young people can explore shared concerns, express ideas, and develop a sense of collective possibility. In this project, creative and discussion-based activities enabled participants to explore the social and environmental conditions shaping their lives and to share their reflections collectively. While many valued these opportunities for connection and expression, some also described feelings of frustration and disappointment when their ideas were not meaningfully taken up or acted upon by external decision-makers. This supports concerns raised by Lam and Kwong (2014) and Percy-Smith and Thomas (2009) that symbolic reflection can deepen disillusionment when power dynamics remain unchanged. To mitigate this, future reflective approaches should establish clear expectations and design tangible pathways for young people's input to inform practice, policy, or advocacy. For example, some participants suggested youth-led advisory groups or community exhibitions as ways to share their insights more directly with decision-makers. These ideas point to the importance of continuity and building longer-term partnerships rather than one-off activities (Hammond et al., 2022; Zeldin et al., 2013).

For policymakers, the study highlights the urgent need to move beyond performative consultation toward meaningful inclusion of young people in governance processes. The issues raised by participants, including environmental neglect, poverty, and gaps in mental health provision, often stemmed from long-standing structural inequalities. Yet youth voices were rarely translated into concrete change. To address this, participation must be institutionalised in ways that redistribute voice and power, resources, and decision-making authority (Fielding, 2012; Tisdall, 2016).

Based on the findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed to help create conditions that better support young people's wellbeing and agency:

- **Invest in environments and infrastructure that support youth wellbeing**, particularly in under-resourced communities. This includes maintaining green spaces, improving housing, and providing safe, inclusive public places for young people to gather (Bynner et al., 2020; Wacquant, 2008).
- **Integrate youth work into mental health strategies**, recognising the role youth workers play in providing accessible, relational support. This should complement, not replace, formal mental health services (Luthar, 2006; Ridley et al., 2020).
- **Embed youth voice in decision-making structures**, such as through regional youth-led policy boards or participatory budgeting. Participation must be resourced and supported with clear routes to influence, not limited to consultation exercises (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003; Tisdall, 2013).
- **Secure stable, long-term funding for youth work**, enabling practitioners to build trust, engage in reflective practice, and move beyond short-term delivery focused solely on measurable outcomes (Doherty & de St Croix, 2024).

Ultimately, these implications point to the importance of creating or strengthening environments, whether through youth work, reflective spaces, or

policy structures, that enable young people to feel heard, valued, and supported. Rather than proposing a single fixed model or pathway, this study underlines that when adequately resourced and embedded within broader commitments to equity and justice, multiple approaches can work in parallel to strengthen youth wellbeing and agency. Supporting young people to connect, reflect, and imagine change requires not only relational and reflective practice but also structural investment and policy frameworks that prioritise young people's needs and voices.

#### **9.4 - Directions for Future Research**

While this study offers new insights into how young people in Scotland experience wellbeing, agency, and structural constraint within youth work and supported reflective spaces, it also raises important questions for further investigation. The findings reaffirm the value of relational and reflective practices in fostering young people's sense of voice and critical awareness. However, they also expose the limitations of these practices when systemic barriers remain unchanged. Future research could build on this study by deepening both theoretical understanding and practical application across the following areas:

##### **Cultural and Contextual Variations**

This study was grounded in a specific context: a post-pandemic, community-based youth work environment in urban Scotland. While this context offered rich insights, it cannot be assumed to reflect the experiences of young people in other settings. Future research should examine how relational, reflective, and structural dimensions of wellbeing operate in different geographic, cultural, and policy contexts, including rural areas or countries where youth work and youth engagement are situated differently. Comparative studies could explore how young people conceptualise wellbeing and navigate power relations in environments shaped by different welfare systems, cultural norms, or traditions of youth support. Such work would extend this thesis's theoretical framework and support the development of more context-sensitive approaches to youth

practice and policy (Coburn & Gormally, 2019; Crenshaw, 1991; MacLeod & Emejulu, 2014).

### **Longitudinal Impact of Reflective and Participatory Approaches**

This study explored how young people engaged with a time-limited reflective project, describing gains in confidence, peer connection, and critical thinking. However, it remains unclear how these outcomes endure over time. Longitudinal research could explore whether reflective and participatory experiences contribute to sustained engagement with social and political issues or influence young people's trajectories in education, community involvement, or activism. Future studies might also examine how shifting policy, funding, or socio-economic contexts shape the durability of agency and critical awareness developed through these approaches. Such work would provide valuable insights into the long-term potential and limitations of relational and reflective practices in contexts marked by austerity and structural inequality (Doherty & de St Croix, 2024; Percy-Smith & Thomas, 2009).

### **Intersectional Experiences of Marginalisation**

While this study engaged with intersectional theory to understand how structural inequalities shape wellbeing, more focused research is needed to explore the nuanced ways in which race, gender, disability, class, migration status, and sexuality intersect in young people's experiences of agency and empowerment. Future research could design approaches that are explicitly responsive to these layered identities and attentive to inclusion, access, and power dynamics. For example, studies might investigate how disabled or neurodivergent young people experience reflective or creative methods, or how racialised youth navigate belonging and exclusion in predominantly white youth work contexts. It is also crucial to examine power dynamics within youth-led or participatory spaces themselves, recognising that these are not automatically equitable and instead require ongoing reflexivity, inclusivity, and anti-oppressive practice (Checkoway, 2011; Crenshaw, 1991).

By pursuing these future directions, across cultural variation, longitudinal impact, and intersectional experience, researchers can strengthen the relevance, ethical grounding, and transformative potential of youth work and reflective practices. These inquiries can support a shift beyond symbolic participation toward sustained, justice-oriented action rooted in the lived realities of young people and responsive to the structural challenges they face.

### **9.5 - Final Thoughts**

As a practitioner-researcher, my positionality shaped every stage of this project. My embeddedness within youth work practice enabled the development of trust and relational depth with participants, creating conditions for honest and often vulnerable reflections on wellbeing, struggle, and hope. This proximity offered insight into the everyday realities of young people's lives, insight that might not have emerged in a more distanced or extractive research process (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009; England, 1994). At the same time, it demanded ongoing reflexivity. I was not a neutral observer; my interpretations were inevitably shaped by my own values, commitments, and experiences in youth work. Throughout the study, I tried to hold this tension with care, recognising that my closeness to the field could both illuminate and obscure, and that my role was not to speak *for* young people but to facilitate and honour the meanings they made (Berger, 2015).

This research reinforces the central argument that youth wellbeing must be understood as both relational and structural. Young people's accounts made clear that wellbeing was not reducible to an individualised sense of coping or resilience. Instead, it was shaped and constrained by their relationships, environments, and the structural injustices they navigated daily. Within this context, youth work and dedicated reflective spaces created vital opportunities for relational care, critical dialogue, and expression. Yet this study also revealed the limitations of these spaces. As a practitioner deeply committed to youth-led approaches, I felt this contradiction sharply: witnessing moments of transformation and connection, but also moments of frustration and disappointment when meaningful action did not follow. This tension echoes

Freire's (2000) warning that critical consciousness without avenues for collective action can lead to despair rather than empowerment. It is a tension I shared with participants: the frustration of seeing structural problems clearly but feeling unable to shift them alone.

The emotional labour of engaging critically with injustice emerged as a recurring theme for participants, youth workers, and me. Many young people described feeling tired of "being strong," of advocating for change, only to be met with inaction. This study affirmed that youth work and reflective practice must create spaces for collective care, mutual support, and rest. Drawing on Gormally and Coburn's (2017) concept of the nexus, the intersection between relational support and critical engagement, I came to understand this project as a space where care and critique coexisted, yet also collided with the limits of underfunded systems. These experiences highlight the need for practices that expose injustice and attend to its emotional consequences. As Arinder (2022) and hooks (1984) remind us, care is not a soft add-on to political struggle; it is a necessity for those surviving within systems that devalue them.

This research calls for youth work and reflective practices that are not romanticised as transformative in themselves but are understood as part of broader, multi-level strategies for change. Dialogue, voice, and Critical Pedagogy matter deeply, but they are not enough without material resources, policy change, and structural investment. The findings reinforce the importance of collaborative approaches that link youth work, reflective practice, and structural advocacy, all grounded in a politics of care and accountability. Critical theory must be translated into practice as tools for navigating the lived complexities of inequality, austerity, and exclusion.

As I conclude this research, I am left with both hope and caution. The hope lies in the brilliance, creativity, and resistance of the young people who participated. They reimagined their communities, challenged the conditions around them, and asserted their right to be heard. Their insights are a powerful reminder that youth engagement is not just about consultation; it is about co-

creating more just futures. The caution lies in recognising that this work is difficult, ongoing, and often met with resistance. No single intervention, practice, or research project can dismantle the systems that constrain young people's lives. Yet collectively, through sustained dialogue, relational care, and structural commitment, it is possible to create conditions where wellbeing is not a fragile exception, but a supported right.

This thesis is one contribution to that ongoing work. It offers no final answers or neat solutions. Instead, it affirms the need for humility, reflexivity, and long-term commitment to young people, to justice, and to working alongside them to challenge and transform the conditions of their lives.

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## Appendices Introduction

The following appendices include selected research materials co-produced throughout the project. These materials illustrate key elements of the data collection process described in [Chapter 4](#) and reflect the participatory, visual, and dialogic ethos of the study. Appendices 1-9 include key preparatory materials used in the research process, such as session guides, consent forms, and photography guidance. Appendices 10-13 contain selected research outputs, including participant-generated photographs, the photo-elicitation photo bank, group work artefacts, group discussion transcript excerpts, and semi-structured interview excerpts. Materials have been carefully curated to support transparency and ethical accountability while avoiding overexposure of sensitive or identifiable information.

Due to unforeseen access restrictions at the time of submission, some supplementary materials (including full photo stories, exhibition narrations, participation stories, and complete stakeholder questionnaire responses) could not be included. These materials are securely archived and available for audit or future reference upon request, subject to University of Glasgow ethical guidelines and participant consent. The photos (Appendix 10), artefacts of group work (Appendix 11), and transcript excerpts (Appendices 12 and 13) provide representative insight into the participatory and narrative dimensions of the study.

# Appendix 1 - Photovoice Session Guide

## Photovoice Session Guide (approximately 1 hour)

### A LIST OF POSSIBLE THEMES

#### Debriefing and Ground Rules (15 Minutes)

##### 1. Opening Discussion:

- Begin by welcoming participants and setting a comfortable, inclusive tone.
- Ask participants to reflect on their experience of taking photos:
  - How was your experience taking photos?
  - Did you encounter any challenges or concerns during this process?

##### 2. Restating the Prompts:

- Revisit the prompts participants were given to guide their photography:
  - What is positive for my wellbeing?
  - What is negative for my wellbeing?
  - How can youth work support my wellbeing?
  - Has COVID-19 impacted my wellbeing?

##### 3. Photo Selection:

- Ask participants to review the photos they've taken and select one or two they feel are most meaningful or representative to share with the group.

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#### Group Review and Analysis of Chosen Photographs (30 Minutes)

##### 1. Photo Presentations:

- Each participant shares their selected photo(s) one at a time. They contextualise their photo by explaining:

- Why they took it.
- What it represents or means to them.

## 2. Using the SHOWeD Method:

- Encourage participants to reflect on their photo using the following guiding questions:
  - What do you See here?  
Describe the photo as if explaining to someone who cannot see it.
  - What is really Happening here?  
Share the actions, feelings, or situation captured in the photo.
  - How does this relate to Our lives?  
Connect the photo to personal or shared experiences, identifying similarities or differences.
  - Why does this situation, concern, or strength exist?  
Explore the deeper meaning, root causes, or context behind the photo.
  - What can we Do about it?  
Identify possible actions to address challenges or build upon strengths.

## 3. Group Reflections:

- After a participant shares their story, invite other group members to provide their perspectives:
  - What is your reaction to the story and photograph just shared?
  - How do your experiences align with or differ from this perspective?
- Use probing questions to facilitate deeper engagement and mutual understanding.

## 4. Summarising Key Themes:

- Once all participants have shared, summarise the main findings and commonalities that emerged from the group discussion:
    - Highlight recurring themes or shared experiences.
    - Note any unique perspectives or standout ideas.
- 

### **Photo Stories (10 Minutes)**

#### **1. Developing Photo Stories:**

- Ask participants to create a short narrative for the photo(s) they shared during the session. This narrative should summarise their reflections using elements from the SHOWeD method.
- Encourage participants to include:
  - A description of the photo.
  - Why it matters to them.
  - The key message they want others to take away from the photo.
- Provide time for participants to write or summarise their thoughts.

#### **2. Optional Sharing:**

- If time allows, invite participants to share their photo stories with the group for additional discussion and feedback.

# Appendix 2 - Stakeholder Questionnaire

## Stakeholder Questionnaire

### Section 1: About You

1. What position do you hold within the community and in relation to the young people hosting this exhibition?

*(Please select all that apply)*

- Youth Worker
- Community Worker
- Local Politician
- Educator
- Family
- Friend
- Other (please specify):

\_\_\_\_\_

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### Section 2: Reflections on the Exhibition

2. What were your key takeaways from this exhibition?

*(In a few sentences, please describe what stood out to you and how it resonated with you.)*

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### Section 3: Themes and Priorities

3. What three themes or priorities identified by the young people did you find most compelling?

1. \_\_\_\_\_
  2. \_\_\_\_\_
  3. \_\_\_\_\_
- 
- 

#### **Section 4: Your Actionable Responses**

4. For each priority listed in Question 3, please describe an actionable response to how you can address, support, or find solutions to the issue/priority identified:

- **Priority 1:**  
**Actionable Response:**
- 

- **Priority 2:**  
**Actionable Response:**
- 

- **Priority 3:**  
**Actionable Response:**
- 
- 

#### **Section 5: Final Thoughts**

5. Do you have any additional comments or suggestions for supporting the young people's priorities or building on the exhibition's impact?

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**Thank You!**

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire. Your insights and actionable commitments play a vital role in supporting the young people's priorities and fostering meaningful change in our community.

## Appendix 3 - Interview Guide

### Photo-Story and Overall Experience Interview Guide

#### A LIST OF POSSIBLE THEMES

#### Section 1: Photo-Story Discussions (One to Two Photos)

Participants asked to share and reflect on one or two photos they selected during the project. The following prompts guided the discussion:

1. **Tell me about your photo(s):**
  - **What is in the photo?** *(Describe the content of the photo in detail.)*
  - **Why did you choose this photo?** *(Explain what drew you to this image.)*
  - **What does the photo mean to you?** *(Share the emotions or significance tied to this photo.)*
  - **Why is this photo important to this project and for others to see?** *(Reflect on how the photo contributes to the project's goals.)*

#### Section 2: Description of Overall Experience with the Project

Participants encouraged to provide open-ended reflections on their experiences, with the following guiding questions:

1. **What do you think are the major influences on young people's wellbeing?** *(Consider personal, social, and environmental factors.)*
2. **What are your top priorities when it comes to wellbeing?** *(Identify areas or aspects of well-being that matter most to you.)*
3. **How has COVID-19 impacted your wellbeing in the present?** *(Reflect on any ongoing effects of the pandemic on your mental, physical, and social health.)*
4. **With COVID-19 in mind, can you tell me about a time when youth work helped support your wellbeing?** *(Share specific examples or stories.)*

5. **With COVID-19 in mind, can you tell me about a time when youth work failed to support your wellbeing?** *(Reflect on areas for improvement or missed opportunities.)*
6. **How has your experience of participation changed throughout the project?** *(Refer to your participation stories and describe any shifts in confidence, engagement, or understanding.)*
7. **How prepared do you feel to take action to address the priorities you have identified throughout the project?** *(Discuss your confidence, readiness, or support needed to pursue these actions.)*
8. **What do you feel you have gotten out of this project?** *(Reflect on skills, insights, relationships, or personal growth gained through your participation.)*

### **Section 3: Follow-Up Consultation Questions**

This phase aimed to further explore and clarify their perspectives, ensuring a deeper understanding of their experiences and reflections on the study's themes. Participants invited to respond to the following questions via text message or voice message, based on their preference:

1. **Can you tell me about your experiences of youth work?** *(Reflect on how youth work has supported or shaped your experiences.)*
2. **Can you tell me about your experience participating in the study last year?** *(Explore how the study influenced your thoughts, feelings, or actions.)*
3. **Can you tell me about what you think is your role in your life and community as a young person?** *(Discuss your perceptions of your role and responsibilities.)*
4. **Can you tell me about your thoughts on creating change in your community as a young person?** *(Share your views on the possibilities and challenges of making a difference.)*

## **Appendix 4 - Plain Language Statement (Young People)**

**12-15s**

**Project Title:** An Investigation of Young People’s Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Scottish Youth Work in Supporting Wellbeing in the Wake of COVID-19

**Researcher:** Haley Sneed

**Supervisors:** Dr Sinéad Gormally and Dr Lesley Doyle

**Course:** PhD in Education

You are invited to participate in a research project about youth wellbeing, youth work, and COVID-19. A research project is a way to learn more about something. I am doing this project as part of my doctorate studies in education.

Before you decide if you want to take part, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve.

Please read the information on this page carefully and discuss it with your friends, other youth work staff, and your parents/carers if you wish. Ask me if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you want to take part.

I hope this sheet will answer any questions you have about the study.

### **1. What is the purpose of the study?**

This study aims to find out how you think youth work could better support your wellbeing in COVID-19 times. This includes what you think is good for your wellbeing, what is bad for your wellbeing, and how you could work to help change these things.

### **2. Why have I been chosen?**

You are being asked to participate because you are a regular member of the youth project. I believe you can help me answer my questions about wellbeing and youth work in COVID-19 times.

### **3. Do I have to take part?**

You do not have to participate in this study, and if you decide not to, you will still be welcome at the youth project. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let me know, and I will not use any information you have given me in my writing. You won't have to give any reason for why you don't want to continue.

### **4. What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to participate, the project will ask you these questions:

1. How does youth work support your priorities concerning wellbeing?
2. How can youth work better support your priorities concerning wellbeing?
3. How has COVID-19 positively influenced your priorities concerning wellbeing?
4. How has COVID-19 negatively influenced your priorities concerning wellbeing?

The group will then have a choice on how they want to go about answering those questions. The first choice will ask you to take your own photos, while the second choice will ask you to look at photos I have gathered. We will then discuss the pictures as a group. I will ask you some questions about the photos and their meaning. You do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to or discuss any photos you do not want to. You will also be asked to write some short stories, including some about your photos explaining why you took them and what they mean to you, as well as some about your involvement with the project. This project will be done in 1-hour sessions, and we will complete 9 sessions. These sessions will take place at the youth project during regular youth project hours.

At the end of the 9 sessions, one or two of your photos will be included in a 2-hour-long exhibition where your friends, family, and community members can see them. You will get the chance to speak to people about what matters to you and what you think needs to change. After the exhibition, I will ask you questions about your photos and your experiences in the project. With your permission, I will record your answers on a voice recorder so I can listen carefully to what you said. You do not have to answer any questions if you do not want to. This will take 30 to 40 minutes.

I will be finished gathering information by August 2023.

**5. Will the information that I give you in this study be kept confidential?**

I will keep the information in a locked cabinet or a locked file on my computer. Your name will not be mentioned when I write about what I have found. You can choose another name for me to use when I write about what you said. No one else will know which name you have chosen.

However, if I hear anything that makes me worried that you might be in danger of harm during our conversation, I might have to tell other people who need to know about this.

**6. What will happen to the results of this study**

When I have gathered all the information from everyone taking part, I will write about what I have learned in a thesis. A thesis is a long essay I must complete for the course I am studying. The course I am studying is for a Doctorate in Education. With your permission, I would like to use some of your photographs (in electronic or print form), in reports, presentations, publications, and exhibitions arising from the project. The thesis will be read and marked by my research supervisors at university. I will tell you and the other young people who have taken part what I have found out about youth work and wellbeing.

**7. Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been reviewed and agreed upon by the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee at the University of Glasgow.

### **8. Who can I contact for further Information?**

If you have any questions about this study, you can ask me, Haley Sneed (h.sneed.1@research.glasgow.ac.uk),

or my supervisors, Dr Sinéad Gormally (sinead.gormally@glasgow.ac.uk) or Dr Lesley Doyle (lesley.doyle@glasgow.ac.uk),

or the College of Social Sciences Lead for Ethical Review, Dr Susan Batchelor: email socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk

Thank you for reading this.

### **16-18s**

**Project Title:** An Investigation of Young People's Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Scottish Youth Work in Supporting Wellbeing in COVID-19 Times

**Researcher:** Ms Haley Sneed

**Supervisors:** Dr Sinéad Gormally and Dr Lesley Doyle

**Programme:** PhD in Education

You are invited to take part in a research project that I am doing as part of my Doctorate in Education. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you want to take part. Thank you for reading this.

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to understanding how young people's wellbeing, and their ability to take control of it, can be better supported by Scottish youth work, with particular emphasis on experiences in COVID-19 times.

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are a young person between the ages of 12 to 18 who participates in youth work and will be able to provide vital information on your unique experience concerning wellbeing, participation, and COVID-19.

### **Do I have to take part?**

This study is voluntary, and you are not required to participate. Additionally, if you consent, you can leave the study at any time without giving a reason. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let me know, and I will not use any information you have given me in my writing.

### **What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to take part in a Photovoice project where you will explore, interpret, and analyse your experiences on wellbeing, youth work, and COVID-19 through photographs that you take. We will then gather as a group to discuss the photographs and what they mean to you. Alternatively, if the group decides they do not like Photovoice, you will be asked to take part in a photo-elicitation project where you will explore, interpret, and analyse your experiences on wellbeing, youth work, and COVID-19 through photographs that I provide for you. As a group, you will have a choice between the two methods.

You will also be asked to write some short stories about the photos that are most important to you, as well as about your participation throughout the study. This project will end with an exhibition where family, friends, youth workers, community workers, and local politicians can come see the photos that you have

selected. This exhibition offers an opportunity for you to talk about what matters to you and what you think needs to change. This project will take place over 11 hours - 1 hour per session over 9 sessions and a 2-hour session for the exhibition. If willing, after the exhibition, you will also be asked to participate in an interview about your experiences with the Photovoice or photo-elicitation project. This will take approximately 30-40 minutes.

### **Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All personal data collected during the study will be kept strictly confidential and destroyed at the end of the project. However, confidentiality is less assured in a focus group. The small number of participants also means that confidentiality cannot be completely guaranteed.

A pseudonym will identify you, and any information about you will have your name removed so that you cannot be recognised from it.

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases, the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

### **What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results of this study will be published in a Doctorate thesis at the University of Glasgow.

We will use some of your photographs (in electronic or print form) in reports, presentations, publications, and exhibitions arising from the project.

This research will be written as my university thesis and may also be used in journal articles or presented at conferences.

In accordance with the University of Glasgow's Code of Practice, the research data will be retained for 10 years.

### **Who is organising and funding the research?**

There is no funding for this study, and I (Ms Sneed) am organising the study with the help of my supervisors (Dr Gormally and Dr Doyle).

### **Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been reviewed and approved by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee.

### **Contact for Further Information**

*If you have any questions about this study, you can ask me, Ms Sneed (h.sneed.1@research.gla.ac.uk) or my supervisors, Dr Gormally (sinead.gormally@glasgow.ac.uk) or Dr Doyle (lesley.doyle@glasgow.ac.uk).*

**If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you can contact the College of Social Sciences Lead for Ethical Review, Dr Susan Batchelor: email socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk**

Thank you for reading this.

## **Appendix 5 - Plain Language Statement (Stakeholders)**

**Project Title:** An Investigation of Young People's Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Scottish Youth Work in Supporting Wellbeing in COVID-19 Times

**Researcher:** Ms Haley Sneed

**Supervisors:** Dr Sinéad Gormally and Dr Lesley Doyle

**Programme:** PhD in Education

You are invited to take part in a research project that I am doing as part of my Doctorate in Education. Before you decide, it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take the time to read the following information carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you want to take part. Thank you for reading this.

### **What is the purpose of the study?**

The purpose of this study is to contribute to understanding how young people's wellbeing, and their ability to take control of it, can be better supported by Scottish youth work, with particular emphasis on experiences in COVID-19 times.

### **Why have I been chosen?**

You have been chosen to participate in this study because you are a local stakeholder (youth worker, community worker, local politician, researcher, family member, or friend) in the community where the young people in this project reside. You will be able to provide vital information on your thoughts and action plans concerning the priorities identified by the young people.

**Do I have to take part?**

This study is voluntary, and you are not required to participate. Additionally, if you consent, you can leave the study at any time without giving a reason. If, after you have started to take part, you change your mind, just let me know, and I will not use any information you have given me in my writing.

**What will happen to me if I take part?**

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to take a questionnaire where you will record your thoughts, opinions, and potential plans of action concerning the priorities identified by the young people in the exhibition you just attended. The approximate time commitment for completing the questionnaire is 10 minutes.

**Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?**

All personal data collected during the study will be kept strictly confidential and destroyed at the end of the project. However, confidentiality is less assured within a group setting. The small number of participants also means that confidentiality cannot be completely guaranteed.

A pseudonym will identify you, and any information about you will have your name removed so that you cannot be recognised from it.

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases, the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies.

**What will happen to the results of the research study?**

The results of this study will be published in a Doctorate thesis at the University of Glasgow.

This research will be written as my university thesis and may also be used in journal articles or presented at conferences.

In accordance with the University of Glasgow's Code of Practice, the research data will be retained for 10 years.

### **Who is organising and funding the research?**

There is no funding for this study, and I (Ms Sneed) am organising the study with the help of my supervisors (Dr Gormally and Dr Doyle).

### **Who has reviewed the study?**

This study has been reviewed and approved by the School of Education Research Ethics Committee.

### **Contact for Further Information**

*If you have any questions about this study, you can ask me, Ms Sneed (h.sneed.1@research.gla.ac.uk) or my supervisors, Dr Gormally (sinead.gormally@glasgow.ac.uk) or Dr Doyle (lesley.doyle@glasgow.ac.uk).*

**If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you can contact the College of Social Sciences Lead for Ethical Review, Dr Susan Batchelor: email socsci-ethics-lead@glasgow.ac.uk**

Thank you for reading this.

## Appendix 6 - Consent Form (Young People)

**Title of Project:** An Investigation of Young People's Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Scottish Youth Work in Supporting Wellbeing in the Wake of COVID-19

**Name of Researcher:** Ms Haley Sneed

**Name of Supervisors:** Dr Sinéad Gormally and Dr Lesley Doyle

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement/Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
  - Yes       No
  
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
  - Yes       No
  
- I consent to interviews being audio-recorded.
  - Yes       No
  
- I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by a pseudonym.
  - Yes       No
  
- I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my ability to attend the youth project arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.
  - Yes       No

- I acknowledge that all names and other data likely to identify individuals will be de-identified.
  - o Yes  No
  
- I acknowledge that the data will be treated as confidential.
  - o Yes  No
  
- I acknowledge that the data will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research.
  - o Yes  No
  
- I acknowledge that the data, including photographs, may be used in future publications, both in print and online (All images of people's faces will be obscured so they are unrecognisable for any publications).
  - o Yes  No
  
- I agree to waive my copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
  - o Yes  No
  
- I acknowledge that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
  - o Yes  No
  
- I acknowledge that other researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
  - o Yes  No

- I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

o Yes  No

- I agree to take part in this research study.

o Yes  No

Name of Participant .....

Signature ..... Date .....

Name of Researcher .....

Signature ..... Date .....

## Appendix 7 - Consent Form (Parents/Guardians)

**Title of Project:** An Investigation of Young People's Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Scottish Youth Work in Supporting Wellbeing in the Wake of COVID-19

**Name of Researcher:** Ms Haley Sneed

**Name of Supervisors:** Dr Sinéad Gormally and Dr Lesley Doyle

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement/Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
  - Yes       No
  
- I understand that my young person's participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
  - Yes       No
  
- I consent to interviews being audio-recorded.
  - Yes       No
  
- I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by a pseudonym.
  - Yes       No
  
- I acknowledge that there will be no effect on their ability to attend the youth project arising from their participation or non-participation in this research.
  - Yes       No

- I acknowledge that all names and other data likely to identify individuals will be de-identified.
  - o Yes  No
  
- I acknowledge that the data will be treated as confidential.
  - o Yes  No
  
- I acknowledge that the data will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research.
  - o Yes  No
  
- I acknowledge that the data, including photographs, may be used in future publications, both in print and online (All images of people's faces will be obscured so they are unrecognisable for any publications).
  - o Yes  No
  
- I agree to waive any copyright to any data collected as part of this project.
  - o Yes  No
  
- I acknowledge that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
  - o Yes  No
  
- I acknowledge that other researchers may use their words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.
  - o Yes  No

- I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

o Yes  No

- I agree to allow my young person to take part in this research study.

o Yes  No

Name of Child .....

Name of Parent/Guardian .....

Signature ..... Date .....

Name of Researcher .....

Signature ..... Date .....

## Appendix 8 - Consent Form (Stakeholders)

**Title of Project:** An Investigation of Young People's Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Scottish Youth Work in Supporting Wellbeing in COVID-19 Times

**Name of Researcher:** Ms Haley Sneed

**Name of Supervisors:** Dr Sinéad Gormally and Dr Lesley Doyle

- I confirm that I have read and understood the Plain Language Statement/Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
  - Yes       No
  
- I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.
  - Yes       No
  
- I acknowledge that participants will be referred to by a pseudonym.
  - Yes       No
  
- I acknowledge that all names and other data likely to identify individuals will be de-identified.
  - o Yes       No
  
- I acknowledge that the data will be treated as confidential.
  - o Yes       No
  
- I acknowledge that the data will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research.

o Yes  No

- I acknowledge that the data may be used in future publications, both in print and online.

o Yes  No

- I agree to waive any copyright to any data collected as part of this project.

o Yes  No

- I acknowledge that other researchers will have access to this data only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

o Yes  No

- I acknowledge that other researchers may use my words in publications, reports, web pages, and other research outputs, only if they agree to preserve the confidentiality of the information as requested in this form.

o Yes  No

- I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

o Yes  No

- I agree to take part in this research study.

o Yes  No

Name .....

Signature ..... Date .....

Name of Researcher .....

Signature ..... Date .....

## Appendix 9 - Photography Guidance

### 12-15s

**Photography Guidance Sheet (12-15s):** An Investigation of Young People's Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Scottish Youth Work in Supporting Wellbeing in COVID-19 Times

*Haley Sneed, PhD student at the University of Glasgow*

#### **Before taking a photograph of a person:**

Ask! It is polite, respectful, and fair to ask before taking a photograph of a person. If the person is under the age of 16, ask their parent or guardian. Additionally, please tell them that all photos of people's faces will be blurred so they cannot be recognised for anything that is printed and made available to the public.

#### **What do I do if someone asks me not to take a photograph?:**

If someone asks you not to take a photograph of them, do not take the photograph - respect people's wishes.

If you think that someone is confused or unsure about having their photograph taken, think carefully and make the decision not to take the photograph. All people in your images must be comfortable with being photographed.

#### **Safety:**

You should not have to go out of your way to take these photographs - the study is concerned with your everyday experiences of youth wellbeing, youth work, and COVID-19, so nothing out of the ordinary is expected.

If you are taking photographs in public, be aware of your surroundings, and avoid taking photographs of people you have not gotten permission from. Remember

that your smartphone, iPad, or camera may make you a target for thieves, so be careful when using it in public.

If you are in a public location, make sure someone knows where you are and always make sure your safety comes before taking photographs for this study.

Do not go to any places you do not know as part of this research.

## **16-18s**

**Photography Guidance Sheet (16-18s):** An Investigation of Young People's Perspectives on the Effectiveness of Scottish Youth Work in Supporting Wellbeing in COVID-19 Times

*Haley Sneed, PhD student at the University of Glasgow*

### **Before taking a photograph of a person:**

Ask! It is polite, respectful, and fair to ask permission before taking a photograph of a person. If the person is under the age of 16, ask their parent or guardian. Additionally, please inform them that all photos of people's faces will be obscured so they are unrecognisable for any publications.

### **What do I do if someone asks me not to take a photograph?:**

If someone asks you not to take a photograph of them, do not take the photograph - respect people's wishes.

If you sense that somebody is confused or hesitant to have their photograph taken, use your judgment and do not take the photograph. All people captured in your images must be comfortable with being photographed.

### **Safety:**

You should not have to go out of your way to take these photographs - the study is concerned with your everyday experiences of youth wellbeing, youth work, and COVID-19, so nothing out of the ordinary is expected.

If you are taking photographs in public, be aware of your surroundings, and avoid taking photographs of people. Remember that your smartphone, iPad, or camera may make you a target for thieves, so be careful when using it in public.

If you are in a public location, make sure someone knows where you are and always prioritise your safety over taking photographs for this study.

Do not go to any unfamiliar locations as part of this research.

## Appendix 10 - Participant-Generated Visual Materials

This appendix includes a curated selection of photographs created by youth participants during the photovoice process. These visual materials illustrate the creative, reflective, and narrative dimensions of the project, highlighting how young people chose to represent their experiences of wellbeing, youth work, and the structural conditions shaping their everyday lives. For a detailed explanation of the methodological approach and ethical considerations underpinning these images, see [Section 4.7](#). This section also includes the photo-elicitation photo bank. The images used for the photo-elicitation activity were sourced exclusively from open-access and royalty-free image platforms. All photos were obtained from websites that explicitly allow free use without attribution, such as Unsplash, Pexels, and Pixabay. These images were selected to prompt discussion and reflection and were not intended for publication beyond the research context. Care was taken to avoid any copyrighted, sensitive, or identifiable imagery.

### Coco's Photographs



Figure A10.1: Coco - Photograph 1

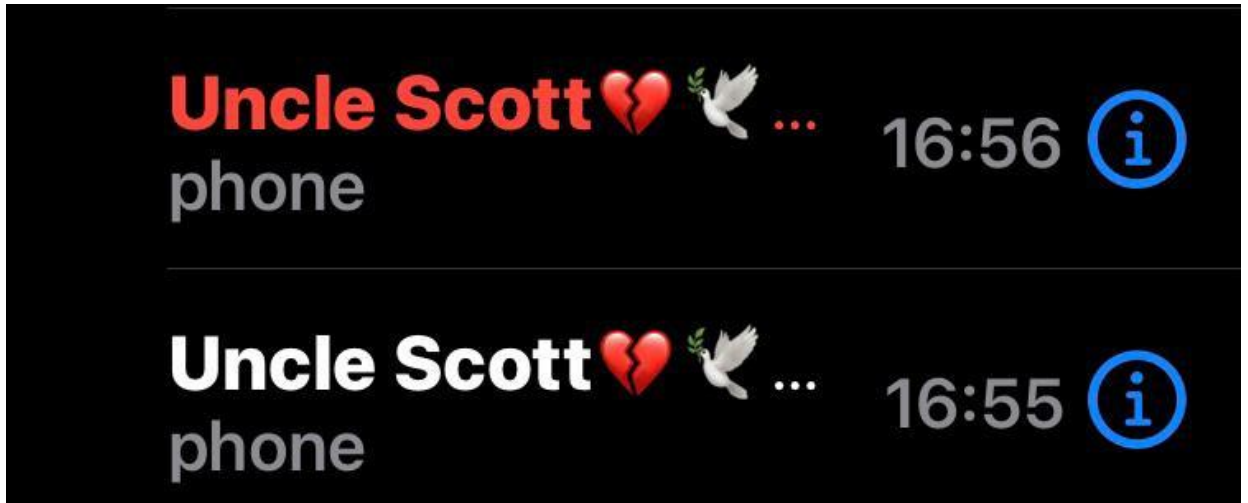


Figure A10.2: Coco - Photograph 2



Figure A10.3: Coco - Photograph 3



**Figure A10.4: Coco - Photograph 4**



**Figure A10.5: Coco - Photograph 5**



Figure A10.6: Coco - Photograph 6



Figure A10.7: Coco - Photograph 7



Figure A10.8: Coco - Photograph 8

### Gean's Photographs



Figure A10.9: Gean - Photograph 1



Figure A10.10: Gean - Photograph 2



Figure A10.11: Gean - Photograph 3



**Figure A10.12:** Gean - Photograph 4



**Figure A10.13:** Gean - Photograph 5

## Lalo's Photographs

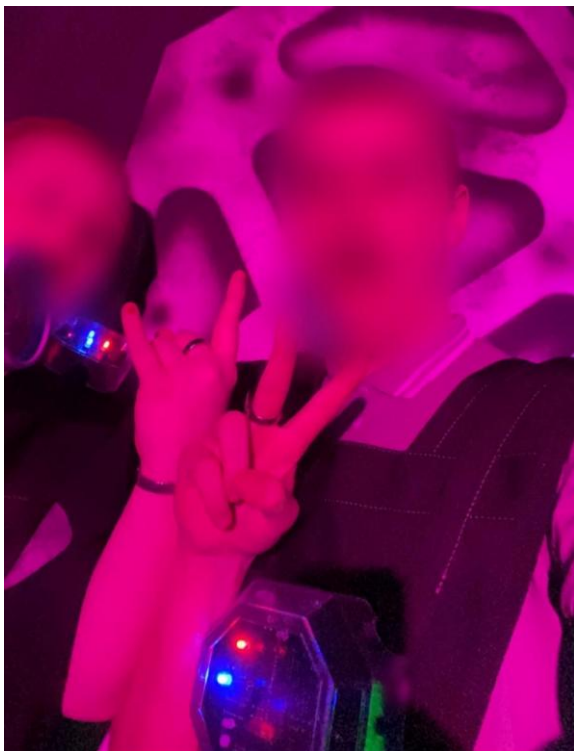


Figure A10.14: Lalo - Photograph 1



Figure A10.15: Lalo - Photograph 2



Figure A10.16: Lalo - Photograph 3



Figure A10.17: Lalo - Photograph 4



Figure A10.18: Lalo - Photograph 5

### Lauren's Photographs



Figure A10.19: Lauren - Photograph 1



Figure A10.20: Lauren - Photograph 2

### Lei's Photographs



Figure A10.21: Lei - Photograph 1



**Figure A10.22:** Lei - Photograph 2



**Figure A10.23:** Lei - Photograph 3



**Figure A10.24:** Lei - Photograph 4



**Figure A10.25:** Lei - Photograph 5

## Rosie's Photographs



Figure A10.26: Rosie - Photograph 1



Figure A10.27: Rosie - Photograph 2



Figure A10.28: Rosie - Photograph 3



Figure A10.29: Rosie - Photograph 4



**Figure A10.30:** Rosie - Photograph 5



**Figure A10.31:** Rosie - Photograph 6



Figure A10.32: Rosie - Photograph 7



Figure A10.33: Rosie - Photograph 8

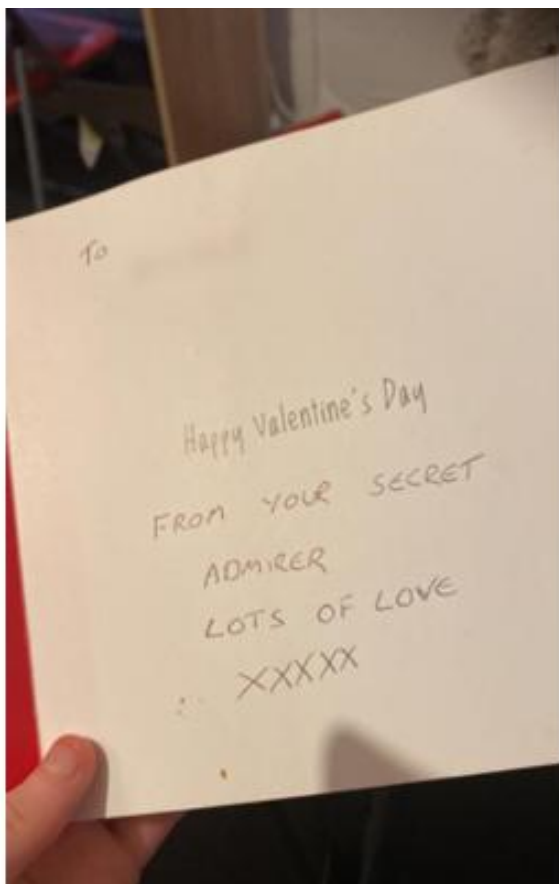


Figure A10.34: Rosie - Photograph 9



Figure A10.35: Rosie - Photograph 10



Figure A10.36: Rosie - Photograph 11



Figure A10.37: Rosie - Photograph 12



Figure A10.38: Rosie - Photograph 13

## Photo-Elicitation Photo Bank



Figure A10.39: Photo Bank 1



Figure A10.40: Photo Bank 2



Figure A10.41: Photo Bank 3



Figure A10.42: Photo Bank 4



Figure A10.43: Photo Bank 5



Figure A10.44: Photo Bank 6



**Figure A10.45:** Photo Bank 7



**Figure A10.46:** Photo Bank 8



Figure A10.47: Photo Bank 9



Figure A10.48: Photo Bank 10



**Figure A10.49:** Photo Bank 11



**Figure A10.50:** Photo Bank 12



Figure A10.51: Photo Bank 13



Figure A10.52: Photo Bank 14



Figure A10.53: Photo Bank 15



Figure A10.54: Photo Bank 16



**Figure A10.55:** Photo Bank 17



**Figure A10.56:** Photo Bank 18



Figure A10.57: Photo Bank 19

## Appendix 11 - Group Work Artefacts

This appendix presents selected artefacts from group-based activities co-produced with young people during photovoice and reflective sessions. These materials illustrate the participatory and youth-led nature of the research process, highlighting how participants collaboratively explored themes of wellbeing, structural challenges, and community change. Activities included thematic mapping, ethics discussions, group agreements, visual analysis, and envisioning future action. The artefacts were developed through flipchart work, collaborative coding, and visual planning exercises, and they serve as tangible evidence of youth-centred meaning-making and analysis.

### Selected Artefacts:

#### 1. Wellbeing Mind Map

- Youth-defined factors affecting wellbeing, including mental health, family and friends, food, nature, dreams/future, physical health, alcohol, and environmental factors.
- This mind map reflects the initial co-created framework used to shape photovoice prompts and discussions.

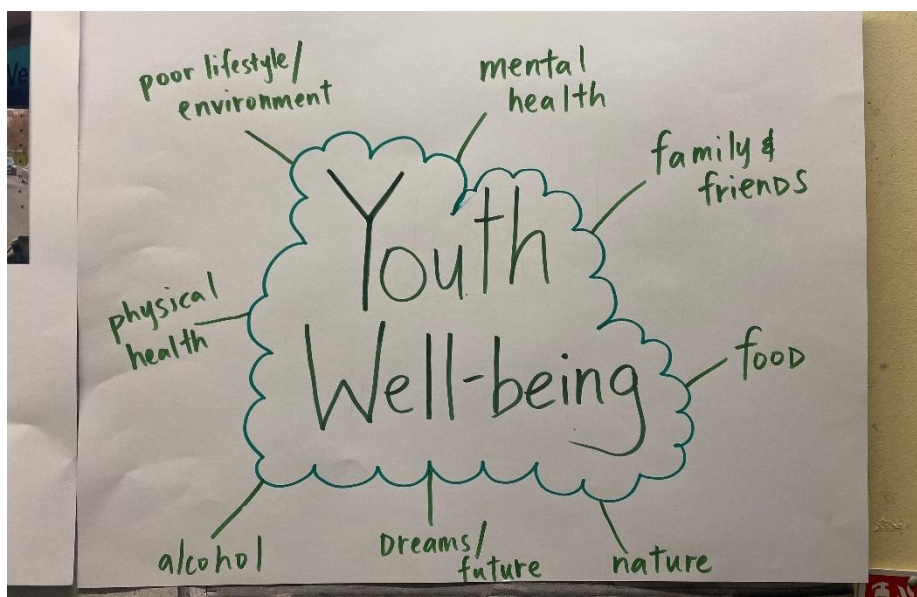


Figure A11.1: Wellbeing Mind Map

## 2. Thematic Poster: Physical Health

- Visual collage connecting everyday activities and environments to physical wellbeing.
- Included photographs and keywords selected by participants to represent challenges and supports.

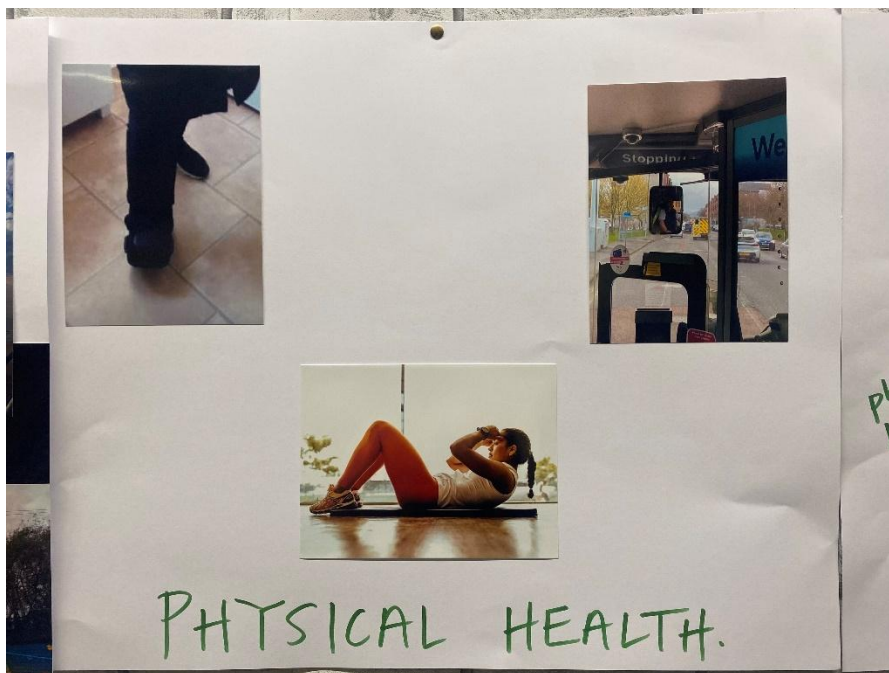


Figure A11.2: Physical Health

## 3. Thematic Poster: Nature

- A compilation of participant-generated images highlighting the importance of nature and outdoor spaces for mental health and emotional balance.



**Figure A11.3: Nature**

#### 4. Thematic Poster: Alcohol

- Collage of images illustrating youth perspectives on alcohol use and its perceived effects on wellbeing and community safety.



**Figure A11.4: Alcohol**

#### 5. Thematic Poster: Dreams & Future (Image 5)

- Visual representations of aspirations, education, career goals, and community engagement, illustrating the hopes and challenges young people associate with the future.



**Figure A11.5:** Dreams and Future

## 6. Thematic Poster: Mental Health

- Combined photos and written reflections on mental health challenges, including bullying, social media pressures, and support needs.
- Includes definitions and youth-led explanatory notes on depression and self-harm.

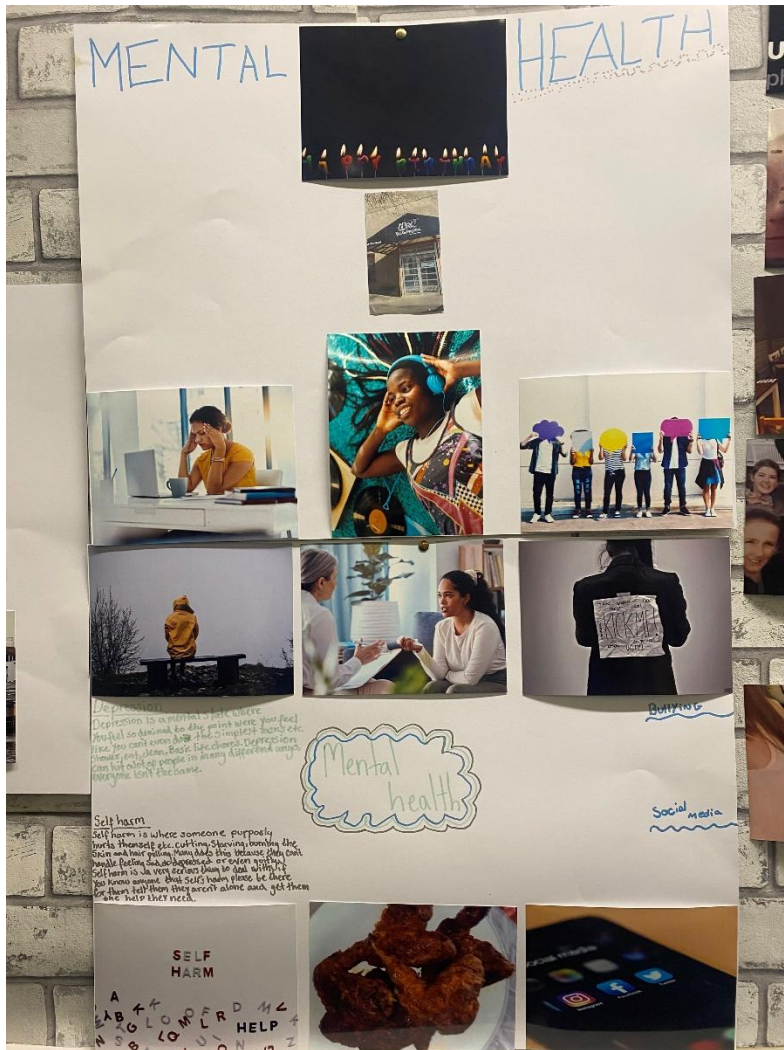
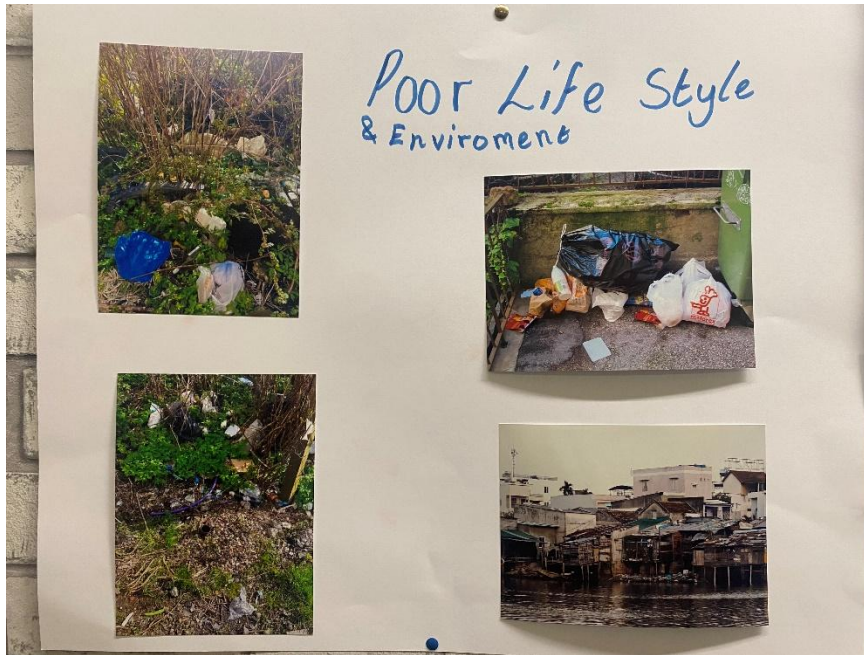


Figure A11.6: Mental Health

## 7. Thematic Poster: Poor Lifestyle & Environment

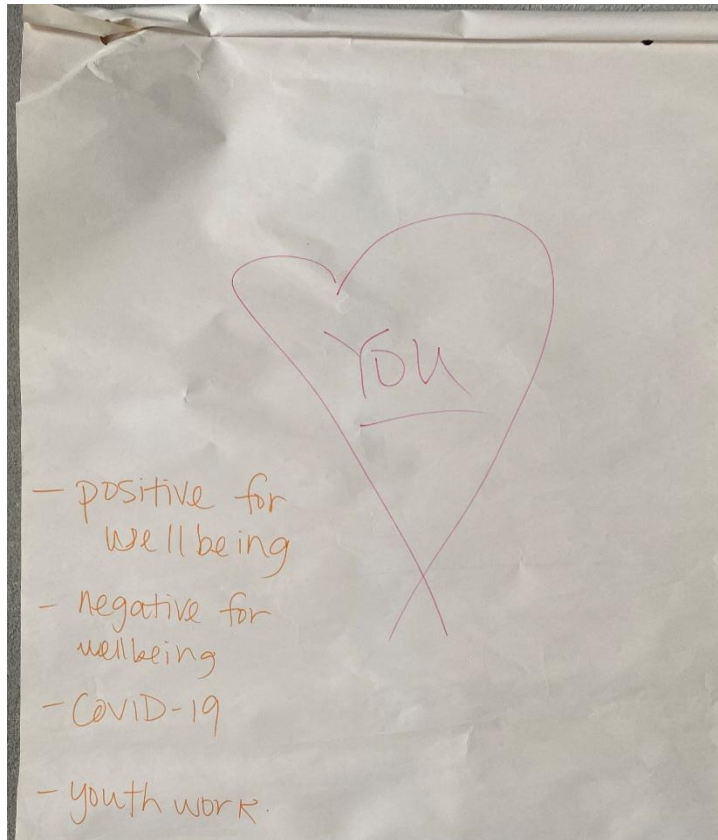
- Images highlighting environmental degradation and neglect, emphasising connections between place-based stigma and youth wellbeing.



**Figure A11.7:** Poor Life Style and Environment

**8. Group Session Flipchart: Positive/Negative for Wellbeing & COVID-19**

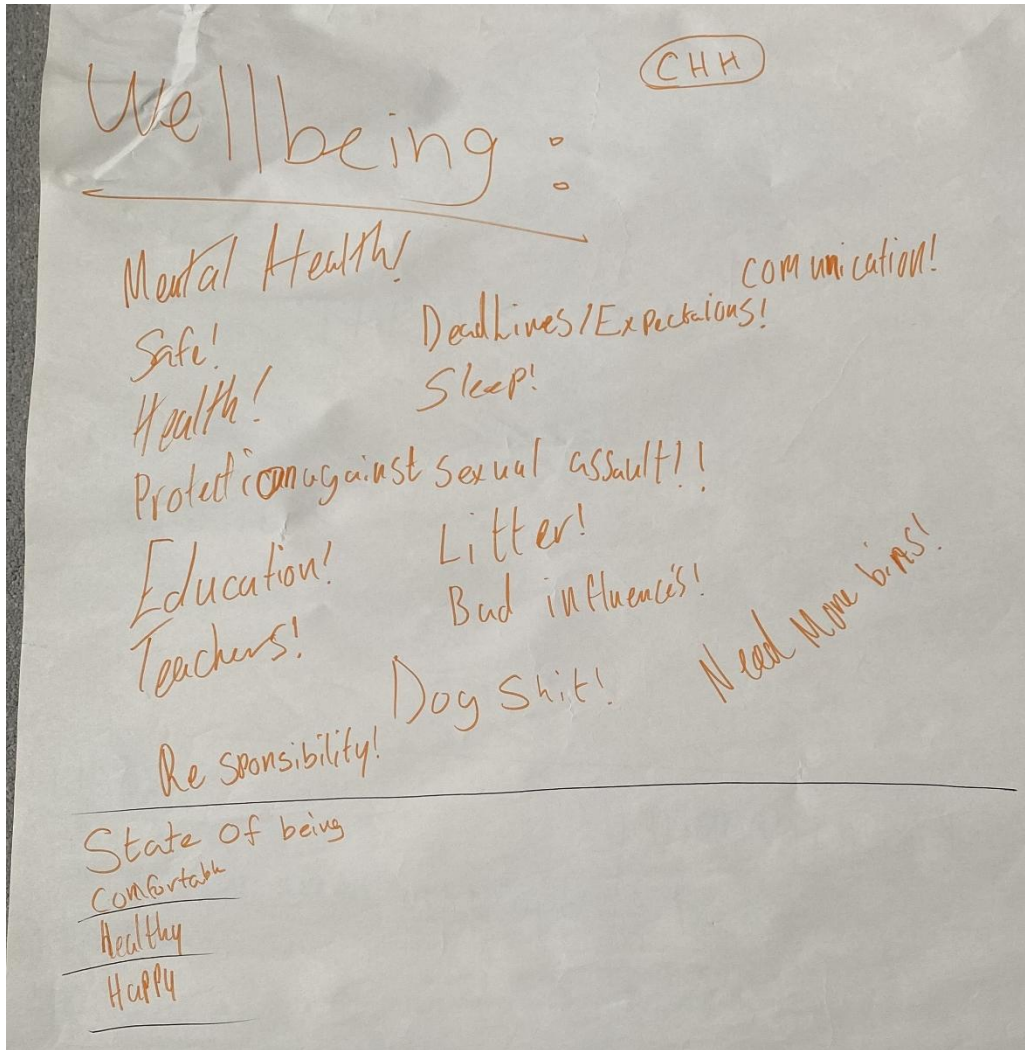
- Flipchart documenting early group reflections on factors supporting or hindering wellbeing, the impact of COVID-19, and youth work.



**Figure A11.8:** Positive/Negative for Wellbeing & COVID-19

## 9. Wellbeing Definitions & CHH Framework

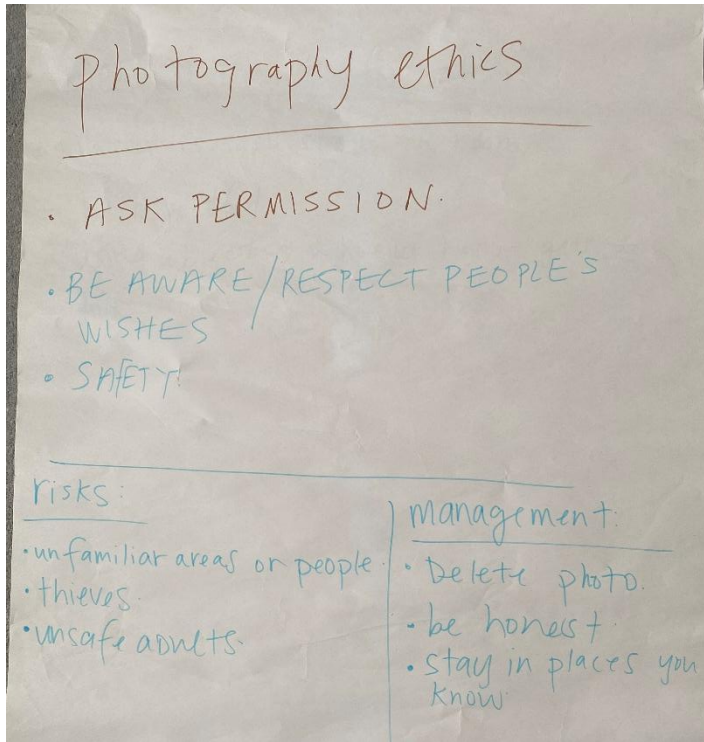
- Group-generated keywords and the "Comfortable, Healthy, Happy (CHH)" definition of wellbeing.
- This became a foundation for coding and analysis.



**Figure A11.9:** Wellbeing Definitions and CHH Framework

## 10. Photography Ethics Flipchart

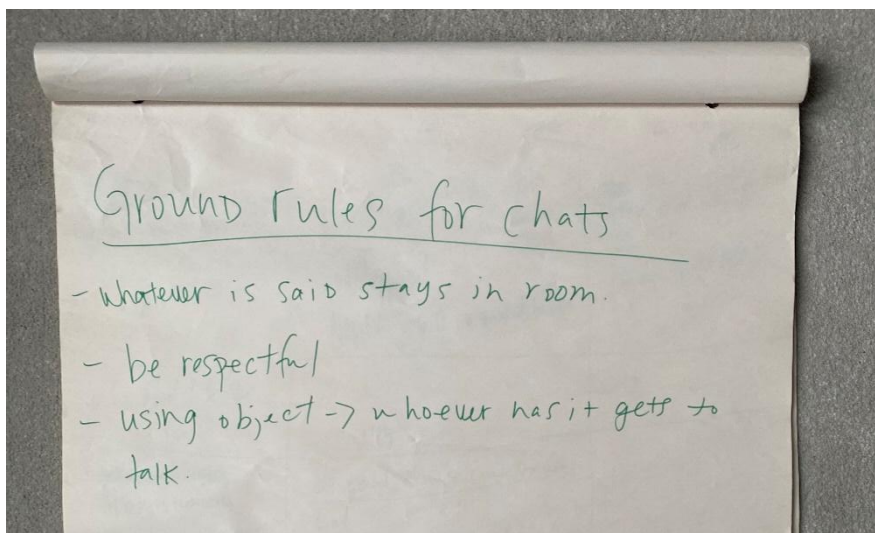
- Group-developed guidelines for ethical and safe photography practices during the photovoice process.



**Figure A11.10: Photography Ethics**

## 11. Ground Rules for Group Chats

- Collective agreements on respect, confidentiality, and equitable dialogue.



**Figure A11.11: Ground Rules**

## 12. Photo Reflection Matrix

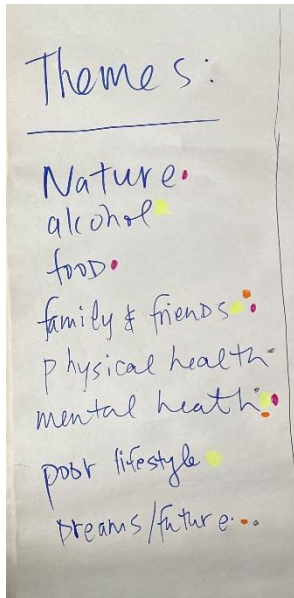
- A grid capturing group analysis of photos, including perceived positive/negative impacts and possible actions.
- Illustrates critical engagement with visual storytelling.

Photo # / Positive impact	Negative impact	What can we do about it?
Photo #1 Alone time	Sub/Depressed Negative impact on mental health	having Sp to talk to. i.e 1-1
Photo #2 pos	Neg	
<del>Photo #3</del> Making memories Birds/whisper from the leaves & friends	all good things come to an End Engagement with family & friends	
Photo #4 pos	Neg	
Baby Steps achieving goals Self care/love		
#5 social media	neg body image bullying negative pop culture	pos Keep updated on entertainment

Figure A11.12: Photo Reflection Matrix

## 13. Thematic Analysis Activity Chart

- Collaborative identification and coding of emerging themes during data analysis workshops.
- Highlights youth-led identification of key topics.



**Figure A11.13:** Thematic Analysis Activity

#### **14. Calls to Action Board**

- Youth-developed list of proposed community initiatives focused on mental health, safety, and creative expression, including community picnics, mental health chats, art therapy series, and trust-building activities.

# Calls to Action

## ◦ mental health

- tea & coffee mental health chats
- one to one meetings
- Community picnic
- mental health information series
  - anti-bullying
  - eating disorders
  - Drugs & alcohol
  - self-harm
- anti-bullying guest speaker
- art therapy series
  - paint by numbers
  - nature scene painting trips
- Trust building exercises
- rage room trips
- DRC blog
- powerpoint series

Figure A11.14: Calls to Action

## **Appendix 12 - Group Discussion Transcript Excerpts**

The following excerpts are drawn from focus group discussions held during the photovoice and photo-elicitation phases. Participants reflected on their everyday lives, wellbeing, relationships, local environments, and structural barriers. These excerpts highlight the relational, emotional, and critical aspects of dialogue and demonstrate how images prompted storytelling and shared understanding. Transcripts have been lightly edited for readability while preserving participant voice. All names are pseudonyms.

### **Excerpt 1: Pets and Emotional Support**

**Rosie:** "Because... I know it's just a picture of a dog, but it's because during COVID, a lot has happened in my life. There's been changes we didn't expect, and it was all chaotic. So, my dog feels like he's helped me. She makes me feel happy and safe. She's my baby."

### **Excerpt 2: Alcohol and Coping**

**Coco:** "I thought if I went out drinking it would help me a bit, because I'd be with my friends and I'd feel happy instead of just sitting in my house. But alcohol isn't the answer. At that moment, it might make you forget, but then after, you feel worse. It's not going to help, and it makes me feel more anxious after."

### **Excerpt 3: Friendship as Strength**

**Gean:** "Coco makes me happy. She's my best, best, best, best friend. When you don't want to talk to your parents or teachers, you can talk to your best friend. It helps me be more comfortable and confident. We've been pals for eight years!"

### **Excerpt 4: Reflections on Trust**

**Lalo:** "You always have that one person you keep close, you treat them like family. Trust goes a long way, especially when there's people who break it. Having a good friend really changes your wellbeing in a good way."

#### **Excerpt 5: Family and Change**

**Lauren:** "I don't get to see my dad often, and it makes me sad. But I have a photo on my lock screen so I can see him when I feel down. It reminds me of good times. It's a strength because it makes me feel he's still there, even when he's not around."

#### **Excerpt 6: Sibling Bonds**

**Gean:** "Me and my wee brother fight all the time, but when we get along, it makes me happy. It shows we can trust each other. After COVID, we have a stronger bond because we couldn't get out, and now we spend more time together."

#### **Excerpt 7: Place and Environment**

**Coco:** "People in the community just leave rubbish everywhere. It makes me embarrassed to live here. You put it beside the bin, foxes get into it, and it's everywhere. It affects your wellbeing because you're getting blamed as a young person for something you didn't do. It makes the area look bad and feels bad to live in."

#### **Excerpt 8: Bullying and Self-Image**

**Coco:** "I got bullied about my weight and my ginger hair. It got me to the point I didn't want to leave the house and stopped going to school. I still barely go. It made me feel like I had to act a certain way to protect myself, and I started avoiding places and people."

**Lei:** "A boy used to call me 'toothless' because of my teeth. After that, I started hiding my smile. Even now, I laugh with my hand over my mouth. It's something small that turns into a big thing for your wellbeing."

#### **Excerpt 9: Social Media and Body Image**

**Lei:** "Social media can be toxic. You look at other people and think, 'I wish I looked like that,' and then you start pointing out everything wrong with yourself. You think everyone's judging you. It can really bring you down."

**Coco:** "Celebrities edit their photos and look perfect. But that's not real life. Young people try to copy them and feel like they're not good enough. It messes with your mind and confidence."

#### **Excerpt 10: Coping Strategies and Self-Care**

**Lei:** "Self-care is important, like taking small steps, taking a break for yourself. It's good for your wellbeing because you're not overworking your brain and you get to relax and recharge."

**Coco:** "After a long week, I love going for a bath with a bath bomb, lighting candles, wearing fluffy jammies, and just chilling in bed with snacks. That's self-care. It helps you feel better and more positive."

#### **Presentation Note**

These excerpts are presented thematically to illustrate the range of critical, emotional, and relational insights shared by participants. Full group discussion transcripts are securely archived and available upon request in line with University of Glasgow ethical guidelines and participant consent.

## **Appendix 13 - Semi-Structured Interview Excerpts**

This appendix presents selected excerpts from semi-structured interviews conducted with youth participants. These reflections offer insight into participants' experiences of youth work, wellbeing, agency, and their roles within community life. The excerpts have been selected to demonstrate the diversity and depth of perspectives shared, while maintaining ethical commitments to confidentiality and participant voice.

### **Participant: Lei**

"I think my experience with youth work has been wonderful, like I wouldn't change anything about it. It opened quite a lot of new doors for me... If it was maybe three years ago, my anxiety wouldn't let me do certain things. [My youth project] has helped me loads in helping me come out of my comfort zone and try new things, and meeting new people, and speaking in front of people."

"My role as a young person is being a voice for people that are too scared to speak up... I just feel like my role is wanting to see change and actually trying to get the word out there that there are young people with a head on their shoulders."

### **Participant: Rosie**

"Youth work has changed my life. Before I came to [my youth project], I did not belong anywhere... But here, people see me more clearly... I feel like I have a purpose and belong somewhere now."

"I feel as though change can be made by a young person, but I don't think I, by myself, would be the one to do it. You need a group of people to change a community... That's why I think the youth committee is good."

### **Participant: Gean**

“Youth work has made my life so much better. I have had so many opportunities to do things I never would have thought, and it’s put me in a better position in life... I feel like they have helped me figure out who I am and what I want.”

“I think it’s hard to make big change. I don’t know if I’m the person to do that, but I think I can help in my own small community with the committee group.”

**Participant: Coco**

“All around, just being there [at youth work] because there’s been sometimes when I’ve been in a dark patch... But if I go along to [my youth project], I know that I can speak to you without feeling like, oh, they’re going to tell people. It’s a bit of motivation to get up and actually leave the house for a change.”

“It motivates me to go out and just see the outdoor world. I want more... That is something I would never normally think of myself doing... but it was actually my idea to start it.”

**Participant: Lalo**

“I feel like we’ve all gained a little bit of positive mental health because we’ve talked about things that we don’t normally talk about... I feel like this project has just brought us a little bit closer together.”

“If you’re pushed in a bush, you’re not depressed, the anxiety goes away... But after you just feel terrible. It’s better to talk about your feelings... but sometimes people can feel ashamed, and they don’t want anybody worrying about them.”

**Participant: Lauren**

“Because of my gran drinking, she got put in the hospital with dementia from drink. It affects our physical health as well as my mental health... Youth work has helped me and my family get a new house and helped take care of us, and that’s doing so much.”