



Cumulative Growing2gether in the Community Impact Report February 2021 – August 2022

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Summary

Growing2gether in the Community empowers young people to create and deliver youth-led community projects on issues that matter to them most, supported by community mentors. Throughout the process of designing and implementing projects to make their community better, young people acquire valuable skills that will help them in their future careers as well as their personal lives. Furthermore, by setting small individual achievable goals as well as achieving group goals, participants develop the self-efficacy and confidence in achieving what they set out to achieve. This leads to raised aspirations, enhanced wellbeing and connectedness in their community and strengthened relationships with peers and family. This is a systemic approach where young people are encouraged to discuss ideas with their families. The programme has been developed to promote psychological growth by allowing young people to feel in control of setting their own goals and group projects (autonomy), by helping them to build confidence through the acquiring of new skills in order to achieve these personal and group goals (competence) and through providing positive reinforcement and facilitating connectedness with others (relatedness). Young people will be more motivated to achieve their goals if they are supported by others and feel a sense of belongingness to the group as well as to the wider community. This report focuses on three main outcomes of the projects:

- Improved life and employability skills
- Improved aspirations and wellbeing
- Positive relationships and connectedness with the community.

Overall, 55 out of 73 (75% retention) participants completed the programmes. This report summarises data from the three cohorts (February 2021 – April 2021, September 2021 – February 2021 and April 2022 – August 2022) collectively. The results indicate that the project had a positive impact on the young people's mental health in terms of increasing wellbeing (as measured by YP-CORE). Mean scores revealed that there was **a 24% improvement** in YP-CORE scores (pre and post testing), indicating greater mental wellbeing by the end of the programme. Young people's skills relating to employability (Listening, Problem Solving, Communication, Teamwork, Positivity, Efficiency, and Leadership) increased significantly by the end of the programme. Happiness to be in a group, sense of support from others outside school and willingness to ask for help significantly increased from baseline. Other results show improved positive feelings in relation to confidence, self-efficacy, aspirations (regarding employment) and empowerment. Case studies demonstrate qualitatively, how positive connections and friendships can impact on confidence and wellbeing. The impact of these projects benefitted the wider community and helped spread positive messages. The involvement from trusted adults, including our experienced facilitators, other local

organisations and charities, equipped the young people with new skills as well as provided a sense of connectedness amongst the community.

Introduction

Adolescence

Adolescence is a developmental period characterised by multiple changes in virtually every aspect of an individual's life. The prefrontal cortex (front part of the brain) is responsible for teenager's ability to plan and think about the consequences of actions, solve problems and control impulses when making decisions (Lang et al., 2016). This developmental phase continues until early adulthood and consequently, when making decisions, teenagers are more likely to rely on the amygdala which is associated with emotions, aggression and impulses (Lang et al., 2016). It is therefore unsurprising that these dramatic physiological, social and cognitive changes may exceed the coping abilities of young people, leading to maladaptive coping mechanisms and behavioural problems such as substance misuse, engaging in unprotected sex as well as experiencing mental health problems (Galván, 2012). Research indicates that adolescents use different coping mechanisms to deal with problems compared to adults, suggesting that interventions need to be sensitive to these developmental changes (Vanucci et al 2018).

The findings illuminate *when* and *how* associations between specific coping strategies and depressive symptoms may emerge and change across developmental age. It is therefore important that teenagers who are struggling are targeted and intervention is offered. Growing2gether programmes are youth led and are facilitated by professionals who are sensitive to these changes as well as to the young person's psycho-social background, and who tailor their approach in order to maximise the experience for young people. Many young people recruited onto the programme lack the support and encouragement from others to achieve their aspirations and goals. In some situations, they feel a lack of connectedness to others, which has impacted on their mental wellbeing and reduced their motivation to achieve their goals.

Self-determination theory

Self-determination theory assumes that people are actively driven towards growth and development. Gaining mastery over challenges and taking on new experiences are vital for developing an individual's self-identity. To encourage a person to pursue a particular goal, there are two types of motivation: intrinsic and extrinsic motivation. Intrinsic motivation refers to a person's engagement in a particular behaviour that is personally rewarding to them, while extrinsic motivation refers to one's engagement in certain behaviour because of external outcomes, such as social recognition and financial benefits (Williams. 2012).

According to self-determination theory, psychological growth is facilitated by autonomy, competence, and relatedness. Autonomy refers to an individual's need to feel in control of their own behaviours and goals. Competence refers to the ability to gain mastery of tasks and the acquisition of new skills in order to achieve desired outcomes. Relatedness refers to the need to feel a sense of belonging, acceptance and connectedness with others, as well as to love and provide care for others and for this to be reciprocated (Deci & Ryan 2000). The absence of relatedness is likely to result in failure to achieve intrinsic motivation which can also negatively impact on a person's mental wellbeing. However, offering positive encouragement and feedback on a person's performance on a task can increase intrinsic motivation (Deci & Ryan 2000). The programme has been developed to encourage

psychological growth by allowing young people to feel in control of setting their own goals and group projects (autonomy), by helping them to build confidence through the acquiring of new skills in order to achieve personal and group goals (competence) and by providing positive reinforcement and facilitating connectedness with others (relatedness). Young people will be more motivated to achieve their goals if they are supported by others and feel a sense of belonging to the group as well as the wider community. It is hypothesised that the interpersonal skills developed on the programme, combined with the novelty of creating totally youth-led projects can encourage young people to strengthen relationships at home.

Community Programmes and Connectedness

Community programmes targeting younger adolescents are important as it gives young people a chance to respond and learn from their experience, potentially modifying their behaviours (for example not being confident to ask for help, not resolving problems and turning to drink/drugs, showing aggression etc.) before they become established and more difficult to change. Facilitating this process is connectedness, which refers to the emotional attachment and commitment an adolescent makes to social relationships in the family, peer group, school, community, or culture (Visser, 2017). Research places great importance of connectedness in relation to positive youth development programmes and claims to protect young people from sexual risk taking as well as performance in school (Visser, 2017). Findings from a study on youth work illustrated the importance of an ecological approach to reducing adolescent sexual risk behaviours through the engagement of parents and increased school connectedness (Caderbaum et al 2017). Connectedness has been linked to many of the influences of suicidal behaviour and suggests that it may be a powerful tool in preventing suicide (Walsh et al, 2019). A recent study examined the potential protective role of school connectedness in the relationship between cyberbullying and suicide risk behaviour. Findings indicated that being a victim of cyberbullying, was associated with increased risk of suicide and that connections to school moderated this relationship in that, among victims of cyberbullying, those more connected to school were less likely to report suicidal behaviour (Walsh et al, 2019).

The ability to connect to others and build positive relationships are among the most commonly listed employability skills in job advertisements and are in demand across most industries, disciplines and professions. Not only is it a desirable quality, but it allows people to build positive networks and consequently opens up and broadens employment opportunities. Connectedness and feeling a sense of belonging promotes mental wellbeing, and increases people's confidence to talk to others, allowing them to practice and develop on their communication skills. Through the Growing2gether in the Community programme, young people are encouraged to communicate with peers, family, facilitators and other agencies as part of their project, allowing them to confidently seek advice regarding their health as well as employment. Growing2gether understands that many of the young people in the community come from unstable and ever-changing environments. Providing an opportunity to work with other young people and adults in their own community to achieve a shared goal provides a sense of stability, connectedness and empowers the individuals involved.

Positive Psychology and Growing2gether in the Community

Growing2gether in the Community is underpinned by transpersonal psychology, which provides a holistic psychological approach focusing on enabling individuals to access more of their potential; on developing self-awareness and personal responsibility and on recognising the importance of meaning as requirements for wellbeing and positive engagement with society. Combined, we find a congruent pedagogy with transpersonal psychology and positive psychology, a branch of mainstream psychology, which was founded 1998 by Seligman (Seligman 1998). Positive psychology has added scientific rigour and has become more established over the past decade. More recently, a systematic review of 36 papers concluded that interventions using Positive Psychology led to reductions in anxio-depressive symptoms as well as increases in wellbeing (Sitbon, Shankland, & Krumm, 2018). These interventions are extremely useful and popular, considering their large-scale development and low cost. Growing2gether in the Community focuses on bringing out the unique potential of young people, rather than seeing them as a 'problem', empowering them with life skills, work experience and a deeper understanding of who they are.

Method

Participants

This report comprises three cohorts. In Cohort 1, a total, 18 young people started the programme (55% Female and 45% Male) and 15 completed it (83% retention). The Mean age of participants was 15.8 (SD = .78) ranging from 15-17 years old and 89% of participants described themselves as "White Scottish" and 11% described themselves as "White British. The young people attended three schools in the Highlands; Inverness High School, Dingwall Academy and Charleston Academy. Dingwall Academy comprised 5 young people from different schools: Inverness Royal Academy, Tain, Dingwall Academy and Millburn (Mixed group). In cohort 2, 25 young people (53% Female and 47% Male) participated in the programme and 20 completed the programme with a retention rate of 80%. The young people attended three schools in the Highlands; Kingussie High School, Inverness High School, Millburn Academy and Charleston Academy. In cohort 3, 30 young people started the programme (67% Female and 33% Male) and 20 completed it (67% retention). The Mean age of participants was 13.3 (SD = 1.1) ranging from 11-15 years old. 86% participants described themselves as "White Scottish" and 14% described themselves as "White British. The young people attended schools within three areas in the Highlands: Invergordon, Tain and Alness, and were involved in 3 youth cafes/hubs, namely Tain Youth Cafe, Balintore Youth Hub and The Place, Alness. We also reached eight Young Leaders, to assist in the delivery of the projects. They were given training/support by the Growing2gether facilitators/community mentors to build their confidence and leadership skills.

Please see **Table 1** for summary.

Table 1: Summary of Starting and Completion Figures			
School	Started	Completed	Retention
Cohort 1 Inverness High School	7	6	
Cohort 1 Charleston Academy	6	5	
Cohort 1 Mixed group	5	4	
Subtotal	18	15	83%
Cohort 2 Inverness High School	7	5	
Cohort 2 Kingussie High School	5	4	
Cohort 2 Millburn Academy	7	6	
Cohort 2 Charleston Academy	6	5	
Subtotal	25	20	80%
Cohort 3 Balintore	12	8	
Cohort 3 Tain	8	4	
Cohort 3 Alness	10	8	
Subtotal	30	20	67%
TOTAL	73	55	75%

Intervention and procedure

Growing2Gether in the Community centres around the concept of choice, whereby young people lead the process in terms of how they run the project. During the research process, the young people must research the needs of local residents, which involves communicating with their parents and other disadvantaged young people, hence facilitating connectedness and improving relationships with others. Through a democratic process, all ideas are assessed in terms of what they believe would make the biggest contribution. The facilitators encourage lateral and free thinking, which enhances creativity as well as maintaining interest. This continues with exploring various ways that they might address their community topic (a film, an event, posters, social media, talking to the community etc.). Facilitators ensure that each participant is included and valued for their thinking and contributions. The process of this positive reinforcement encourages the participants to share more ideas, thereby increasing their confidence. Once the means of delivery for their projects is chosen, a project planning tool, designed for use by young people, allows them to plan their work and how they will deliver their community project. Each participant expresses what they love to do and, where possible, their passions are actively engaged with project planning. Each member is involved on a delivery task (e.g., managing the budget, writing copy, artistic design, distribution of the project) as their responsibility, hence acquiring valuable life skills in the process. Depending on the project subject, the group searches for an expert local community mentor and enrolls them for support.

Throughout delivery of the project, each session begins with a 'check-in' where every young person is consulted on how things are developing. This includes the group dynamic and what is needed to continue working together in a positive, inclusive way. Young people self-assess that they are using their skills in the way that they intend. Where necessary, short-term goals for increased participation are established. Leadership of the check-in is rotated to enable

each participant to have this experience. Once the community project is complete, the young people develop further distribution to the target audience to ensure maximum reach (e.g., social media/press/within school). Through a de-briefing session, the young people assess what worked and what they would do differently, providing a sense of closure and a reflection on learning from experience. Facilitators ask questions and empower young people to find their own answers. Respecting their needs and choices, they help them to set personal goals and build skills throughout design/delivery of their project, and to exercise their personal power of choice in a positive way; They are building this capacity for their future. Sessions were face-to-face, lasting 2 hours for 16 weeks.

Measures

Life Skills

Facilitators encouraged young people to identify a major goal in relation to their employability and rate it on a scale of 1-10 (1 = not confident in achieving the goal and 10 = very confident in achieving their goal). Goals were reviewed at the end of the programme. In addition, participants were asked to identify 10 important skills that are valuable for future employment and to subsequently rate on a scale of 1-10 how weak or strong (1 = very weak and 10 = very strong) they are for each skill. The skill sheet was completed before and after the programme. Young people were asked a series of questions relating to skills in the post programme questionnaire. Each question is scored on a 5-point scale (1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Unsure, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree).

Aspirations and wellbeing

The Young Person's Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation (YP-CORE; Twigg et al., 2009) is a measure of psychological distress designed for use with young people in the 11-16 age group attending counselling or therapy. The measure comprises 10 self-report items relating to wellbeing, symptoms/problems, functioning, and risk (to self). Research into the reliability and validity suggest that the YP-CORE satisfies standard psychometric requirements for use as a routine outcome measure for young people (Twigg et al 2015). All items address the same time period (the preceding week) scoring from 'Not at all' (0) to 'Most or all of the time' (4). The total clinical score is obtained by adding together scores for each item (range 0 to 4) so the possible scores range from zero to 40. Although a clinically validated cut-off has yet to be determined for the YP-CORE, a score of 11 or above on the CORE-10 indicates clinically significant distress. In addition, scores on the CORE-10 can be divided into categories of distress: Healthy (0–5), low (6–10), mild (11–14), moderate (15–19), moderate-to-severe (20–24), and severe (25 and above). These cut-offs were established by asking a large sample of the UK population to complete the questionnaire and comparing their scores statistically with those for large samples of clients in therapy (Connell and Barkham, 2007).

Young people were asked a series of questions relating to aspirations in the post programme questionnaire. Each question is scored on a 5-point scale (1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Unsure, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree).

Positive relationships and connectedness

Young people were asked a series of questions regarding connectedness and relationships in relation to employment, for instance who supports them, how confident they are in their ability to support them to seek employment, how likely they are to ask other organisations for

help and advice. Answers were represented on a “happy face scale” whereby each number 1-10 corresponded with a face (sad to happy),

Young people were asked a series of questions relating to relationships and connectedness in the post programme questionnaire. Each question is scored on a 5-point scale (1=Strongly Agree, 2=Agree, 3=Unsure, 4=Disagree, 5=Strongly Disagree).

Case studies/young people’s journey

This report contains observational case studies written by the facilitators of the projects as well as quotes from the young people.

Analysis

Standard descriptive analyses were performed to report the respondents’ ratings on feedback questions. Paired samples T-tests and Bivariate correlations were conducted to detect any differences in respondents’ answers. All analyses were performed using SPSS 27 for Windows, and the significance level was set at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed). Please see case studies in **Appendix A**.

Description of the projects

This report will summarise the main themes identified by the young people across all three programmes that were undertaken since February 2021 and ending in August 2022.

Mental Health

Project 1, Cohort 1, February 2021 – April 2021

This project consisted of 7 pupils from Inverness High School. The group explored the possibility of creating a community intervention to help young people with anxiety and depression, extending this to the wider community for ideas in order to facilitate community connectedness. Young people’s ideas were expressed in the form of Graffiti Art which was subsequently exhibited at Eden Court, Scotland’s largest arts organisation. They were also able to produce a short film which was showcased at the Highland Youth Parliament conference.

Figure 1: ITC Team showcasing their Mental Health Mural



The link below shows the journey young people went through in developing their project.

<https://youtu.be/kBkgr0H0lhU>

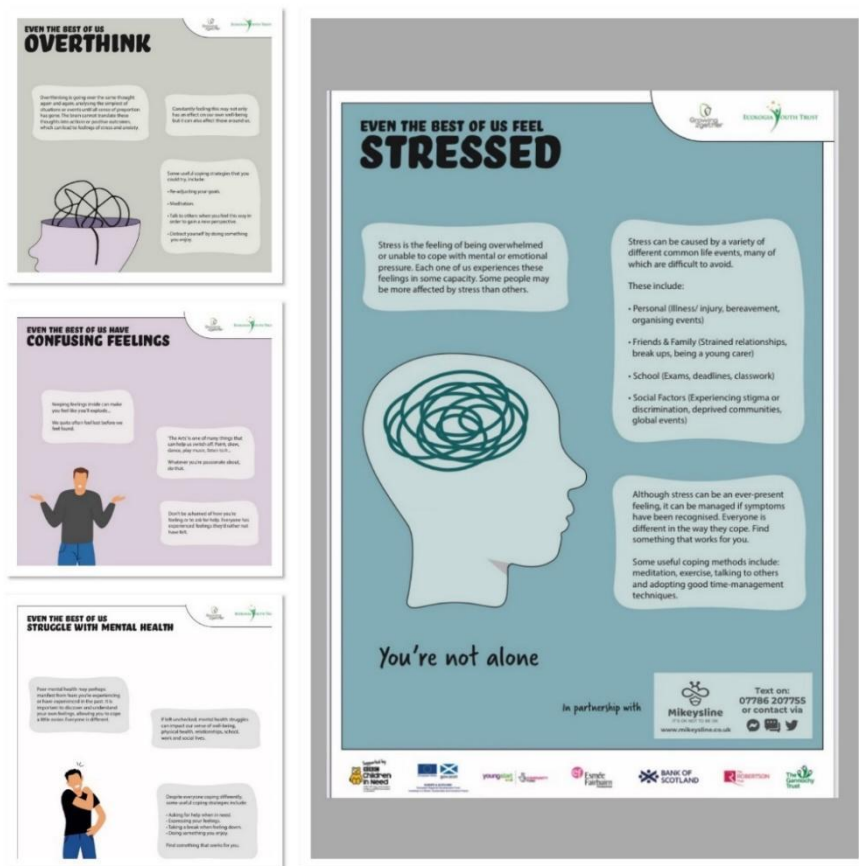
Project 2 (Cohort 2, September 2022 – February 2022)

This project comprised 7 participants from Milburn Academy. Members of the group suggested a key topic (long term mental health, climate change, obesity and poverty) that would benefit their community. Each young person reflected and reported on 1) the negative effect of this issue and 2) what might be done about it, how can it be addressed to improve the situation (coping strategies) and by session 4, the group had proposed 5 potential topics, which they subsequently narrowed down to one agreed topic for their community project; namely, 'mental health'. They discussed issues such as, anxiety, stress, depression as the negative effect of this issue and explored coping strategies, which included self-care, raising awareness, empathy, understanding, communicating with others and kindness.

The group felt that mental illness is something that affects everyone and is not addressed enough in the community. In order to raise awareness of this issue, the group applied their creative skills to create a poster to raise awareness of mental health issues and to signpost other young people to mental health services that can support them. The group designed 6 mental health posters, which covered mental health topics such as anxiety, feeling overwhelmed, stress, anger and over thinking.

Each poster contained facts on mental health and a coping strategy as well as signposting to Mickey's Line (a mental health charity for young people). Please see below **Figure 2** for examples. The Young Leader provided the graphics for printing of posters which were distributed throughout the school and local area. The young people felt especially proud to see their posters based on their designs. The young people commented that they signed up for the programme because they wanted to increase their life and work skills.

Figure 2 Selection of posters created by the young people



Project 3 (Cohort 2, September 2022 – February 2022)

In total, 6 young people and 1 Young Leader from Inverness High School completed the programme. The group felt that young people’s mental health is not taken seriously and should be a priority for schools and communities. The group contacted a Development Worker at Mikey’s Line in order to gather information regarding the work that they deliver. This allowed the group to explore ideas including creating a space for young people in their school to talk about mental health and producing a workshop to create positive mental health affirmations. A decision was made to organise a “drumming workshop and jam” at their local Community Centre. This would offer a space for young people to meet with staff and ‘Youth Champions’ from Mikey’s Line to learn more about what mental health support is out there for young people and to have fun trying out different styles of drumming and jam together. The group created a beautiful improvised jam session with all percussion instruments, including xylophones, shakers, and West African instruments. In creating this community project that young people learned how to truly listen to each other (through the music) and how to create a synthesis of beautiful sound, they felt that they could create beauty together and felt proud of this. This was not easy and from the beginning the interpersonal relationships among a disparate group, however the young people became supportive and respectful.

Connectedness and Supporting Vulnerable People the Community

Project 1, Cohort 1, February 2021 – April 2021)

This group comprised 5 young people from different schools: Inverness Royal Academy, Tain, Dingwall Academy and Millburn, hence creating a diverse, yet cohesive group from different areas of the Highlands. Through the implementation of a voting system, the group decided that frontline NHS staff were most in need of community support at this time. Two members of the group had family members who worked for the NHS and were privy to first-hand information regarding the impact the pandemic had on the physical and emotional wellbeing of NHS staff's families.

The young people explored how they could help frontline NHS staff, for instance arranging online yoga sessions and delivering care packages. However, they decided that they wanted to raise awareness of the pressures that NHS staff experience and how people can manage their behaviours to ensure nurses feel valued and supported. Subsequently, they explored several ways of achieving this such as creating a poster and an animation. The group became very excited to be given the opportunity to work with an animator to guide them through the process of creating a short animation. The group created a storyline involving 'Nurse Susan' who expressed the challenges and rewards of her job on a daily basis.

The main aim of the 30-second animation was to raise awareness that Nurses have had a difficult time during the pandemic and to ask the general public to be kind to them. Although one member illustrated, all other members of the group contributed to the animated video by supplying text, font sizes and types to convey the mood of the scene as well as sourcing sound effects. The animation was completed and shared with and was promoted through NHS Highland social media platforms.

The animation can be accessed on <https://youtu.be/jrHmyibvGBc>

Figure 3: Displaying project planning meeting and the character, "Nurse Susan" for the animation



Project 2, Cohort 1, February 2021 – April 2021

A group of 6 young people from Charleston Academy decided to focus on 'young carers' for their community project. The topic emerged from the experiences of three young carers in the group, including the Young Leader. The group created a series of activities for young carers online and were advised by an organisation called 'Connecting Young Carers'. An individual from the organisation provided an overview of the challenges facing young carers and facilitated group discussions amongst the young people. What arose from these discussions, is that young carers needed a break from being a carer and not to be seen just as a 'young carer'. The group subsequently developed a google survey which they sent out to 300 young carers affiliated to 'Connecting Young Carers' to find out what activities they would like to be offered online. In addition, the group discussed ideas to offer art and music sessions as well as create a Virtual Gala Day as their project offering three activities: a cookery class; a pet show and tell and an art competition with two categories for under 12s and over 12s. The event was attended by 13 young carers. Each member of the Charleston group hosted an activity supported by the Growing2gether facilitators and members of the organisation, "Connecting Carers". This event revealed the leadership skills of the group members as well as their growing confidence to present themselves in front of a virtual audience. The feedback from the young carers was extremely positive.

This was a motivated and cohesive group with many members knowing each other from the Growing2gether nursery mentoring programme two years before.

Figure 4: Young people setting up for the carers BBQ



Project 3 (Cohort 2, September 2022 – February 2022)

The project consisted of 6 individuals from Charleston Academy. The group discussed potential topics and agreed to explore hidden disabilities, prompted in part by two members of the group who had experience of living with a hidden disability. After conducting research around the topic, the young people were inspired to support the work of The Elsie Normington Foundation in Inverness. After a conversation with Rona Matheson, (Community Mentor) the group decided they would like to be involved in the 'Spade in the Ground' event which marked the opening of the 'Haven Centre'; a rehabilitation centre for young people and children with severe disabilities. The group created flyers and distributed them to other schools across

the Inverness area. The event was a success and the community fundraising manager for the Haven Centre was delighted with the flyers and very impressed with the pupil's efforts and enthusiasm. The pupils showed great interest and pride in keeping in touch with Rona and to continue their support for the project in any capacity they could.

Figure 5: Showcasing the young people on the project



Project 4 (Cohort 3, April 2022 – July 2022) Tain Youth Cafe/Tain Academy

The group comprised young people in Tain. Initially, 8 started the programme and 4 completed it. The remaining four found communication and connecting to others a huge challenge, mostly due to a generalised social and school anxiety that they felt had become worse due to Covid. Having completed the Growing2gether flagship programme they were comfortable together and with the facilitators. It was a slow process to find what they wanted to do, however, eventually all agreed that they wanted to help the elderly of Tain in some way. They contacted many age-related organisations Age UK, Alzheimer's Scotland, the local care home and with a questionnaire they had created found answers to their main question " What can we do to help?

Highland Home Carers, an organisation based locally, provided information and became the group's mentors. The first event was a coffee morning that the young people organised and ran during Alzheimer's week; finding a venue, advertising, baking, decorating the hall, flowers, timings, but also a very short questionnaire that they put on each table asking the attendees what they felt about the elderly in Tain. From this information, the young people decided that the best way to serve the elderly was to raise awareness of just how lonely and isolated the older population can feel in Tain and the surrounding villages. With the help of an independent filmmaker who was happy to introduce them to all the elements of film making, they created a short which is now released on YouTube " Do you see them? "

The film can be accessed by clicking on the link below.

<https://youtu.be/vHS2e3Au8FM>

The overriding message is for everyone to start noticing the elderly and to stop and say hello. Said our facilitator: “The young people were so proud of what they had achieved and inevitably they had to step outside their comfort zones on more than one occasion. They supported each other to do this and all agree that they have gained confidence in many areas, most of all just talking to people with less fear.”

Figure 6: A collection of photographs taken from the Tain group



Project 4 (Cohort 3, April 2022 – August 2022), The Place, Alness

The project started with 10 young people and eight completed it. The young people chose to focus on two key and inter-related areas which are representations of age and disadvantage. Key areas discussed and voted on were older people, food, deprivation, threat/homelessness, and drug use in the community. The young people voted on supporting older people who were experiencing poverty in their community by choosing to deliver an event which made a meal for older people in their families and two care homes in the community. This was then discussed as a project - creating an outdoor oven to cook food and preparing and cooking as part of the final event to feed family and elderly people in the community. The final event saw 25 community folk attend. When asked who would like to support which part of the project, it was voted that some would ‘build’ and some would ‘arrange’ the event. Both ‘teams’ would then come back together to agree, deliver and cook for the event. The outcome of this was the group worked together during the project despite suggesting two separate groups. This demonstrated support, team working and looking at overall group outcomes.

Their skills in decision making (what would be required for an event requiring preparation of food, who to invite, numbers of invites), creative skills (ideas and drawing their invitation designs), voting - showing democratic process and discussion, listening skills and coming to mutually agreeable decisions; increasing areas of team working which were not initially

desired by the young people (some wanted to create and others to organise), which then became team support and multi-tasking rather than avoiding being involved. This was a working example of the young people coming together to support each other through a singular goal for themselves and for their community.

Invitations were created by the Young Leader as part of her skills development in social media and design. In total 40 invitations were sent out to elderly family, neighbours, and also to two care homes in the community. The young people also wished to ask their teachers, Head teachers from Alness and Invergordon were also invited. Inviting the headteachers was seen by the young people as a positive intervention so that the teachers could witness their achievements. For most of the young people in this group, this has been their first achievement award.

They freely brought issues and core fragility of the community and experiences to the sessions. Through the weeks, we were able to witness a deepening of friendships not experienced previously.

Figure 7: Young people on the project in Alness



Improving the Environment Within the Community

Project 1 (Cohort 3, April 2022 – June 2022), Balintore Youth Hub

The group started with 12 young people, then stabilised to a consistent number of 8 young people, 2 boys and 6 girls. The young people focused on the highly positive representations of community such as good relations, a safe & happy close community, good neighbours and also the importance of bringing colour into the community, in particular the area near the youth hub as housing is painted black or dark brown in this area of Balintore.

During sessions on community messages and exploring what they wished their community could be aware of from a young person's perspective, the discussion was of inspirations and images that inspired them. They researched and shared as mini presentations their

inspirational images. One young person who was usually very quiet and did not speak in the sessions, had spent a great deal of time researching and shared her inspirational images of the sea creatures such as octopus and jellyfish in the session. When asked why she had chosen these she said it was because we are people who live by the sea, that is who we are, and so, from this young person's deep sharing of historical community living, came the idea of the sea theme for their chosen community project - a mural wall which represented the positives of their village. From here the ideas grew each week to apply shared images to a local wall to brighten their community.

The young people wanted to engage the local community with positive messages about their home, village and area through the creation of a mural wall. They agreed to research local artists that could support them and transfer their message of positivity, happiness, and colour to brighten their community. They created a wide selection of sea creatures and seashore animals and one young person wanted to add a quirky feature of a giraffe! These were merged and shared with the chosen community mentor, FreshPaint, a local mural artist who works closely with schools across the highlands.

Freshpaint was invited to a creative session to better understand their requirements, rationale and designs for the mural, which FreshPaint supported the young people to incorporate onto the mural wall. Over a period of 2 days the young people were given both an interactive workshop and completed the mural wall, with SMILE as the key message. It was later shared by one of the youth workers that the seagull in the mural was a representation of one of the young people who had died in the community, and the young people wanted to dedicate this to him. This was a touching hidden message that came through one young person during the sessions and transferred to the wall as a representation of his life in the community. The mural wall became a multi-faceted message to Balintore, created by the young people.

Figure 8 Brightening up Balintore project

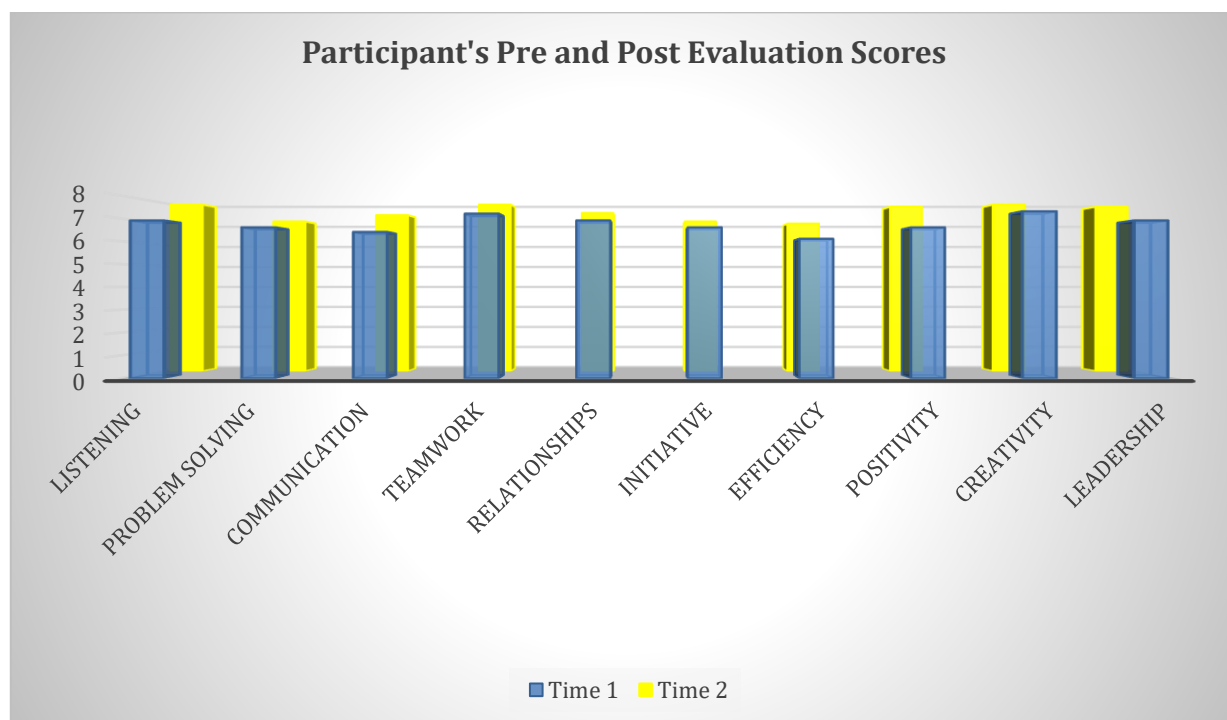


Findings

Life Skills

All analyses were performed using SPSS 27 for Windows, and the significance level was set at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed). Significant increases were found in listening, problem solving, communication, teamwork, efficiency, positivity and leadership skills. There was no significant change in relationships, initiative and creativity, although this was seen in the nature of the projects themselves. **Table 2** displays Mean at T1 and T2, standard deviation, percentage change and significance.

Table 2: Skill Outcomes					
Skill	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Percentage	Significant
Listening	6.9	29	1.64	13%	$p < 0.01$
	7.8	29	1.52		Significant
Problem solving	6.3	31	1.90	13%	$p < 0.05$
	7.1	31	1.73		Significant
Communication	6.4	30	2.14	16%	$p < 0.01$
	7.4	30	1.65		Significant
Teamwork	7.2	30	1.69	10%	$p < 0.01$
	7.9	30	1.14		Significant
Relationships	6.9	30	1.81	9%	$p > 0.05$
	7.5	30	1.43		Not Significant
Initiative	6.6	31	1.73	8%	$p > 0.05$
	7.1	31	1.12		Not Significant
Efficiency	6.1	29	1.96	15%	$p < 0.01$
	7.0	29	1.59		Significant
Positivity	6.6	31	1.85	18%	$p < 0.01$
	7.8	31	1.66		Significant
Creativity	7.3	28	1.15	8%	$p > 0.05$
	7.9	28	1.47		Not Significant
Leadership	6.9	31	2.08	12%	$p < 0.05$
	7.7	31	1.92		Significant

Graph 1: Pre and Post-test skills scores

The table below provides feedback from the young people regarding the programme's impact on their skills and future employment.

	Percentage Agreement	Frequency
I am more confident in communicating with others	81%	27
The programme has made me feel more confident in my abilities	81%	27
The programme has increased my chances of getting a job	85%	27
I have learned valuable skills of the programme	85%	27
The programme has made more focussed in life	73%	27

Aspirations and wellbeing

There was a significant improvement (of **60%**) in young people's confidence in reaching their personalised goals by the end of the programme, ($t = - 7.04$ (28), $p = <0.01$).

In total ($n=27$), **73%** of participants agreed that the programme had made them feel proud, **84%** reported that it had made them feel more positive about themselves. **61%** agreed that it taught them how to cope better with their problems and **77%** reported that the experience had supported them emotionally. **84%** felt that they felt more positive about themselves and **81%** reported that it had increased their confidence.

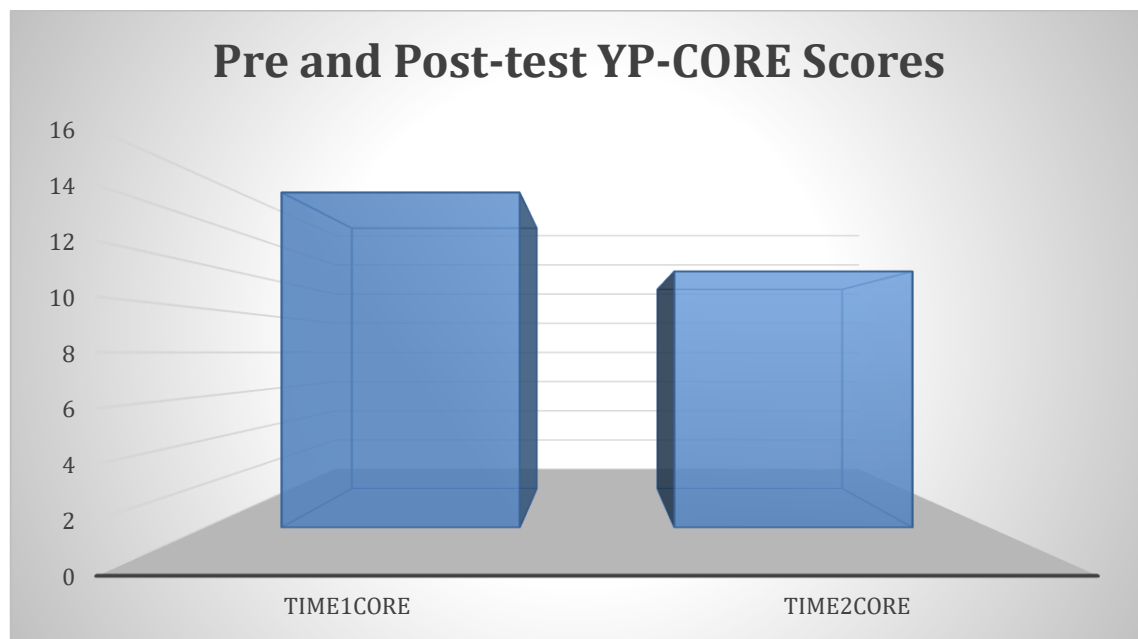
The table below displays outcomes relating to aspirations and wellbeing.

Table 4: Responses to programme evaluation

	Percentage Agreement	Frequency
The programme has given me a sense of purpose	73%	27
The experience has made me feel more empowered	70%	27
I would recommend the programme to others	88%	27

There was a significant improvement in wellbeing by the end of the programme, ($t = 2.78$ (19), $p = <0.05$).

The mean scores reduced from 15.3 to 11.7, a reduction of **24%**, hence showing an improvement in mental wellbeing. See **Graphs 2** for mean and individual pre and post-test scores.

Graph 2: Mean Pre & Post-test YP-CORE scores

Positive relationships and connectedness

The table below displays pre- and post-programme outcomes relating to relationships and employment. More specifically, it shows positive increases in willingness to ask for help regarding career advice, confidence in asking for advice from others and happiness to be working as part of a group. The table below displays Mean values at T1 and T2, standard deviation, percentage change and significance.

Table 5: Relationship Outcomes					
	Mean	N	Std. Deviation	Percentage	Significant
Happiness to be in a group	7.8	29	1.45	8%	p < 0.05
	8.4	29	1.40		Significant
Sense of support from others outside school	7.3	29	1.88	12%	p < 0.05
	8.2	29	1.69		Significant
Willingness to ask for help	5.7	27	2.3	26%	p < 0.05
	7.2	27	2.0		Significant

Table 6 displays post programme evaluation percentages in relation to relationships.

Table 6 Responses to programme evaluation		
	Percentage Agreement	Frequency
I enjoyed building relationships with others	92%	27
I have become more connected with my community	75%	27
felt the experience made me more connected to others	81%	27
I enjoyed working with others	79%	27
I feel encouraged me to be more involved in my community	77%	27

Discussion and Conclusion

It is evident that the young people involved in the projects had made a substantial contribution to their community and were able to promote discussions and raise awareness about important issues within their community. The young people have been given the opportunity to work with charities and organisations who have helped teach them new skills which will help them in the future. Consequently, the young people have developed the self-efficacy and confidence to achieve their goals, while raising aspirations and ultimately increasing their confidence regarding future employment.

The results suggest that the experience made a positive impact on the young people's mental health in terms of increasing their wellbeing (as indicated by YP-CORE). The mean scores reduced significantly by 24%, hence showing an improvement in mental wellbeing. This is echoed by case studies illustrating the young people's journey and how they have transformed throughout the programme.

Young people's skills relating to employability (Listening, Problem solving, Teamwork, Efficiency, Positivity and Leadership) increased significantly by the end of the programme, however there was no significant increase in relationships, creativity and initiative. This is extremely encouraging as gaining confidence in their own goals through this supportive process enables the young person to feel more in control of their behaviours and goals, hence increasing their autonomy. Acquiring and mastering new skills increases the young person's competence which builds on their intrinsic motivation in relation to pursuing a career. The social recognition and positive feedback from peers and facilitators further increase their extrinsic motivation, hence encouraging them to continue with positive behaviours.

Furthermore, the young people are more confident in asking others for help, hence indicating progression with regards to communication, connectedness and relationships. This is echoed by the positive scores in the post-programme evaluation questionnaire. For example, 73% of participants agreed that the programme had made them feel proud, 84% reported that it had made them feel more positive about themselves, 77% reported that the experience had supported them emotionally, and 81% reported that it had increased their confidence in their abilities.

A limitation of this study is that the sample size was less than we expected due to missing data from cohort 2, however the combination of cohorts 1 and 3 provide enough data to capture the impact of the programme. The involvement from other local organisations and charities, equipped the young people with new skills as well as provided a sense of connectedness amongst the community. The programme has been successful in encouraging psychological growth by allowing young people to feel in control of setting their own goals and group projects (autonomy), building their confidence through acquiring new skills in order to achieve personal and group goals (competence) and by providing positive reinforcement and facilitating connectedness with others (relatedness). Young people will be more motivated to achieve their goals if they are supported by others and feel a sense of belongingness to the group as well as the wider community.

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Appendix A – Case Studies: Names changed to protect confidentiality

Young Person’s Journey:

Jane is a young, kind and well-balanced young woman who has been involved previously with our Growing2gether programmes. Her support and role with the In the Community project has been to increase her already capable and able role of supporting the young people. Her ideal is to work with young people and also continue to work with Growing2gether where she can.

Jane is a quiet, reserved young woman who is keen to develop further with youth development. Her aspirations are keenly set on this area of working with young people in areas of deprivation. Her commitment to the project was through her hands-on engagement with the young people but also with our staff. She has trained with Growing2gether previously in our nursery programmes and was introduced to the In the Community project by another staff member. The facilitator introduced her as a kind girl who just wanted to help and Growing2gether has created a strong influence in her life for pursuing wider areas of youth work.

Jane was shy initially but after two sessions together, she became more confident. She would speak with others, meet eye contact and be happy to speak out in a group setting, rather than put her head down. As the weeks went on, her gentle confidence began to blossom and be shared with the group. Her strength and calm helped the group immensely with settling in. The check-in games and also checking out can be a deep experience - some of these areas brought up emotional issues from the day and Jane held them beautifully. Her interaction with the young people was also a calm and positive experience, she supported the young people through helping them expand their ideas and also undertaking research on community needs with a young person who was also very reserved but had a great deal of dynamic ideas to share when she was listened to. Jane was a huge support to the group and to our staff.

“I have done a few years of being a Young Leader and being part of the groups and I would love to further myself into working with you!”

She has recently been asked to be involved in Growing2gether’s Youth Participation Board development, which will give young people on Growing 2gether a voice and ongoing support. Her enthusiasm and love of Growing2gether was recently shared in an email:

“It’s been a pleasure to work with you! It’s been such a great experience for me and for all the young ones. Thank you. I hope to do some more work with them growing together at some point in the future.”

Young Leader’s Journey:

Stewart (23) is a young person who was a recipient of youth work from a very young age and gradually, because it helped him so much, began to assist a Youth Development Officer in youth work programmes with both primary schools in the area. Stewart, created and fulfilled a google document for each week of the programme, which contained information on what the group did for each session.

The Lead Facilitator of the programme had left on week 8, yet Stewart had risen to the challenge and was an inspiration in showing his commitment to the group despite these setbacks. He worked creatively and applied his innumerable skills to support others. On reflection, Stewart felt that his leadership skills were greatly increased due to the manager leaving. Stewart himself had been a struggling child when young and how his “lived experience” and compassion for the young people, helped him to step up to the plate. He is

now at university. We are extremely proud of his accomplishments on the programme as well as in his life.

“It feels like a good experience where I got to use my skills and experience to help the group discussions and was good for my development to try new things that I had not done before; which greatly increased my confidence”.

Young Leader’s Journey:

“Clare is 18 years old and a former pupil who was recruited for the post of Young Leader. She went on to study at University and was keen to re-join as our Young Leader when we resumed the programme online. Clare is an enthusiastic youth worker who has a great relationship with the group with a consistent approach. She is encouraging and supportive of the young people, is open hearted and willing to have fun, so the group have warmed to her and treat her as one of their own. Clare showed excellent leadership and organisational skills when she took charge of one session and assigned tasks and deadlines to each group member.

“I thoroughly enjoyed my time as a Young Leader for the In the Community project. I can’t fault the group I worked with. Having come from different areas they worked well together, formed friendships between themselves and they all contributed something positive towards the final project. Both facilitators were very welcoming to the project and made me feel at ease and included in every session.

I contributed to this project with my practical way of working, I helped the girls allocate tasks between them and create a task list for them to follow. This ensured we stayed on task, the girls knew when their deadlines were, and all their materials were gathered in on time. Although I like to get things completed, I like to think I can still bring a load of fun and laughter to the group. I also like to ensure everyone feels supported and comfortable within a group.

Having had previous youth work experience, this was another opportunity for me to use my skills in an area which I enjoy working in. I have dealt with some challenging behaviours and busier environments in the past. I personally didn’t find this a challenging group to work with. In fact, I really enjoyed the different way of working, it was a much more relaxed environment and I feel we had more time to gel as a group. Being a part of the In the Community project definitely helped to further develop my confidence by working with a different group of young people in a different setting.

When working with a group of fellow young people, I aim to ensure everyone feels included and safe when working together. With the added challenge of being online, I think we rose to this well. I made sure I was present and not distracted during each session, which I think in return helped the girls feel confident and supported by me. I feel I connected well with each member of the group, in particular the girls as I was a familiar face to them having been a pupil at the school myself and having worked with them both previously .

Young person’s journey:

Robyn was lacking in confidence and self-belief at the beginning of the programme and had a low sense of self-worth, which was often reflected in their comments where they would belittle themselves. Robyn had previously been a participant on the Growing2gether Schools programme as well as a previous Growing2gether in the Community programme.

When Robyn joined the current ITC group, they found it challenging to speak up in a group and didn't believe that their opinions had any value. When we were discussing possible community topics to explore during the pandemic, Robyn suggested that we could create a project that came directly from their experience. Robyn shared their personal experience with the group in which they explained that their mental health had deteriorated and that the responsibilities had impinged on their sleep and affected their attendance at school. This was a very brave and deeply personal sharing by Robyn which took immense courage.

Robyn also demonstrated great leadership qualities. Feedback was overwhelmingly positive and it was wonderful to see Robyn's personality and self-expression flourish.

"I have learnt that I can do things and that I don't have to sit in the background and I can control the situation. I want to be a teacher involved with young kids. It's a big passion of mine working with primary school kids or younger."

Comment from Heather Mackenzie, community worker for Connecting Carers:

"I have known Robyn now for four years through different roles. The difference I've seen in Robyn has been amazing. Robyn is a young person that doesn't always know where they fit into the world and can find it very difficult to navigate new people and new situations. In fact, they would historically avoid situations that they imagined to be difficult. The difference I could see this time was that Robyn has been supported through this by the facilitators to help them find their place. This allowed them to then be relaxed and able to achieve their full potential. The biggest difference I saw in Robyn was they were able to speak up and put their opinions across. They felt valued, including all things SHANARRI. Robyn was able to speak up with regards to what the group and the event could be and they appeared to be a huge force in moving it forward. I really feel the nurturing, bespoke care and support that they received was the contributing factor to their growing confidence and self-esteem."

Young Person's Journey:

John is a wonderful young man with a huge amount of potential. He is kind, engaging and very thoughtful. He has been a joy to get to know, and a pure pleasure to work with over these many weeks in the ITC sessions. His dynamic and positive change is the reason for sharing his story. He was initially very unsettled in the wider group and to other group members. He would not sit down or engage in the group in any way and chose more physical activity to fill his session time than interaction about working together. He found it difficult to concentrate and his attention would falter. and only called me 'Miss' with yes/no answers.

At first, he would not meet my eye contact, choosing to look to the side or around rather than speaking directly with me. From the beginning, it is safe to say that he did truly want to be there - he would ask if the session was on, and make calls to seek assurance that the session would be running each week.

During the sessions, it was seen that John was becoming more engaged, little by little. The hugely transformative moment was when we were talking about our community needs and

how they, as YP, could make a positive impact for the community, but also for themselves. We used the topic of stereotypes of young people - 'What do you think your community says about young people? What has been said to you, personally?' This was the turning point in our group - which allowed and encouraged others to open up and share. The silence, as each person shared, was the most powerful experience to witness. We were there, trust had been anchored. From this session onward, John became more engaged and shared in the group. His concentration and choosing to take responsibility for tasks and responsibilities became more and more present..

*John has been a total joy to work with on the ITC programme. His kindness to his peers, willingness to take on further responsibilities, and commitment to attending the sessions each week has been a powerful transformation to witness. John approached me at the end of the project, and shared: **"I am sorry for swearing at the start. I have really enjoyed the project and I was telling my careers advisor about it and he said that I was really lucky to have this. If you have anything else I can get involved in, I want to do it."***

John expressed his aspirations for the future as wishing to be part of further Growing2gether groups, and will be invited to take part in the development and implementation of the Youth Participation Board as a shadow board member, with 2 others from the ITC group.

Young Leader's Journey:

Sam is a determined, confident and conscientious individual, who has taken pride in the organisation of logistics to accommodate the group. He is always enthusiastic, despite being clearly under pressure and at a very busy and important stage of his own education. His ability to connect with younger members is admirable and he has shown empathy and words of encouragement and support. This experience as a Young Leader has given Sam real experience and he has handled it with a professional and very competent manner.

Young Person's Journey:

"Bex is a 16-year-old female participant who had previously participated in the Growing2gether nursery programme. She is a natural leader and has some experience already in taking on this role from her work with young people. She is a keen researcher and encourages open discussions in the group. Bex is also a very creative individual and is well matched to facilitate the process of envisaging the final project in the group as a whole.

"It was good to learn something new, a new skill and to see the others develop skills too and to come together to create something good that had a message to it. Although I was friends with most of the people on the project, as we were dealing with a sensitive topic and people were really open about their experiences, I learned more about them as people. I found it difficult to find my position in the group but the more I checked in with people during and after the sessions to see how they were, the more comfortable I felt. During the project, I developed teamwork skills and how to compromise on ideas...the planning and time keeping skills I learned are also useful."

- ends -