

When funders join forces: How a trust and council reversed youth work decline

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About the partnership

The Perthshire Youth Work Partnership was created in 2019 through a strategic funding approach developed by the Gannochy Trust and Perth and Kinross Council, who combined their existing youth work budgets into a single long-term fund.

The funders developed the approach in response to a sharp decline in local youth work following years of short-term, fragmented and competitive funding, which limited collaboration and reduced the quality and reach of services.

By pooling resources and offering five-year contracts rather than short-term grants, the funders aimed to halt the decline in the provision of universal youth work opportunities, stabilise the sector and create the conditions for collaboration, sustainability, and long-term impact.

The partnership has exceeded expectations. After a decade of declining participation in youth work, it has reversed this trend, with the number of young people participating in youth work opportunities rising steadily since 2019.

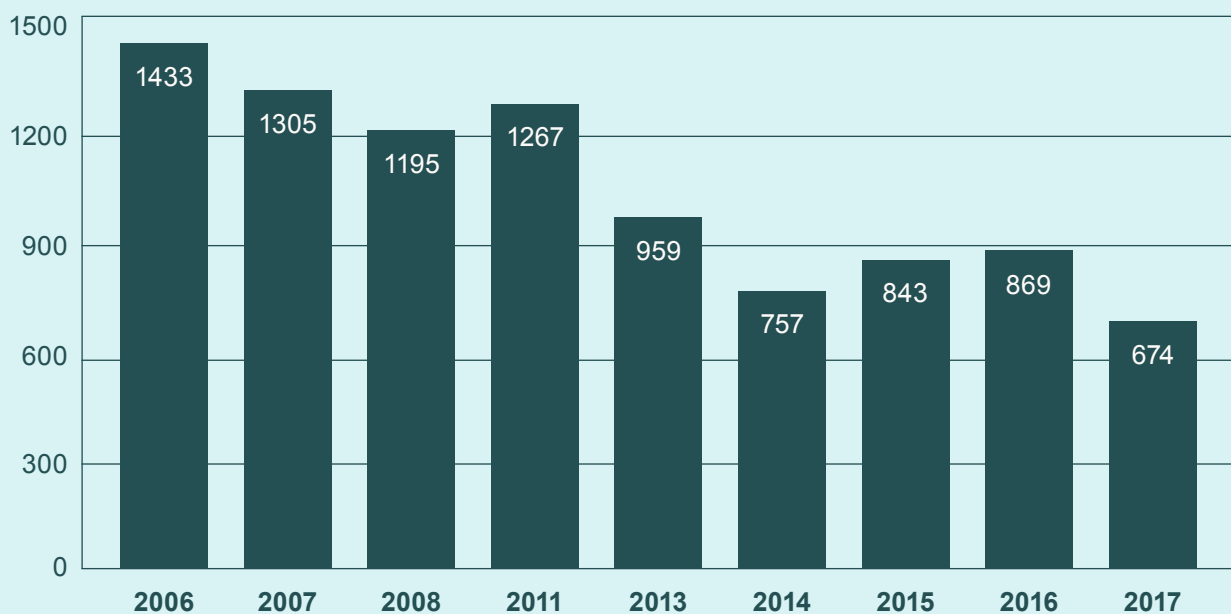
All this has been achieved without increasing the overall level funding.

‘We were all scrapping for the same funding pots to keep our organisations going.’ – A local youth work provider

Youth work under threat

Driven by concern about the national decline in youth work provision, the Gannochy Trust commissioned a comprehensive mapping study in 2017 to better understand the scale of the problem across Scotland. The findings revealed not only a dramatic national picture – with the number of young people participating in youth work opportunities falling by around 50% between 2006 and 2017 – but also an acute decline in provision within Perth and Kinross itself.

**Membership of Youth Groups
in Perth and Kinross 2006-2017**



As one of the principal funders of youth work in Perth and Kinross, the Gannochy Trust recognised that it was uniquely positioned to respond. The scale of the decline, combined with the Trust's long-standing investment in the local youth sector, created a clear opportunity for it to move beyond reactive grant-making and take a more strategic approach to strengthening provision.

Acting on the evidence generated by its mapping exercise, the Gannochy Trust approached Perth and Kinross Council, the other major funder of youth work provision in the area, to explore the potential for a more coordinated response.

Historically, funding from both the Gannochy Trust and Perth and Kinross Council had been largely short-term, reactive and not aligned to assessed need. This approach left local youth work organisations trapped in a cycle of repeatedly applying for short-term grants and reshaping services to appear as 'new' projects. The instability undermined quality, continuity and organisational sustainability, while also encouraging competition between funded organisations for limited resources.

As one of the funders reflected, *'short-term funding had set charities up to compete against each other for as big a slice of that cake as they could possibly acquire... so they didn't work together, they didn't share resources, they didn't share good practice.'*

At the same time, priorities within council services were shifting its own youth work provision toward more targeted groups, creating widening gaps in universal youth work across the region.

An analysis of historic funding showed that the Gannochy Trust and the council were each investing similar total sums annually in local youth work and frequently funded the same organisations. With a shared ambition to strengthen provision of universal youth work, this alignment of scale created a significant opportunity – with both parties recognising that by coordinating their funding and strategy, they could have a greater impact than either could alone.

What is universal youth work?

Universal youth work is an open-access, inclusive approach that supports all young people's personal, social, and educational growth by building trusted relationships and offering non-formal learning, skills development, and opportunities for positive community contribution and to have their voices heard in decision-making.

Core characteristics of universal youth work

- **Voluntary Participation:** Young people choose to take part because they want to; they are not mandated to attend as they might be in school or other services.
- **Relational Practice:** It focuses on building long-term, trust-based relationships with "Trusted Adults" (youth workers) in safe, community-based spaces.
- **Informal Education:** While it happens outside the classroom, it is a form of social education that helps young people develop life skills, confidence, and resilience.
- **Youth led:** The 'programme' is co-created through a partnership between the youth worker and the young person, building on the young person's own interests and needs.



Designing a joint approach

Although the funders had no prior experience of working together, The Gannochy Trust and Perth and Kinross Council established a collaborative funding model grounded in a shared vision and a mutual commitment to strengthen universal youth work in the area.

The starting point for was a shared recognition that by pooling resources into a single fund and committing to five-year funding, they could replace fragmented short-term grants with long-term, stable investment which would protect and strengthen the provision of universal youth work.

The funders also wanted to create a single application route and reporting structures to reduce the administrative burden on funded organisations of making separate applications and reporting to each funder separately.

However, translating the shared vision into a practical working model was not without challenges, and both funders had to navigate barriers in internal structure and process.

They agreed to contribute funding on a 50:50 basis – the level of contribution equivalent to their existing annual spend on youth work – and critically, both made commitments to contribute for five years. This created a combined fund of approximately £1.5 million over five years. The Trust's willingness to commit funding on a 50:50 basis demonstrated a clear appetite to share financial risk. It provided the leverage and assurance needed for the council to financially support the collaboration.



One of the practical challenges in operationalising the vision was that the council's financial systems could not easily support a jointly held funding pot. The practical solution required the Gannochy Trust to agree to transfer its funding directly to the council to create a single fund – requiring significant trust and flexibility on the part of the Gannochy Trust – and to distribute the joint fund through the council's formal procurement process.

The funders also wanted to secure equitable geographic coverage across urban and rural Perthshire while strengthening locally rooted provision. To achieve this, funders offered separate contracts to deliver youth work in each of the five localities, with five-year contracts offered for each area.

The use of the procurement process was challenging for all – it took time to for funders to negotiate the terms of the contracts that they would offer, and the arrangements for the joint management of the fund. This also presented difficulties for the local youth work providers – the majority of which were small, grass-roots organisations with limited experience of formal tendering. The funders responded by holding local roadshows to highlight the opportunity to local youth work organisations and provide hands-on support with the tendering process.

Despite the challenges in the process, contracts were awarded through an open competitive tendering process in April 2019. Seven local grassroots organisations were successful in bidding to deliver youth work across the five localities, including one locality served by an alliance of three organisations.

The seven local youth work providers in the Perthshire Youth Work Partnership are:

- [Logos Youth Project](#) is the lead for Strathearn and Strathallan
- [KYTHE](#) (Kinross-shire Youth Enterprise SCIO) is the lead for Kinross-shire, Almond and Earn
- [YMCA Tayside](#) is the lead for Perth City
- [The Breathe Project](#) is the lead for work in Highland Perthshire
- An alliance of three local organisations deliver the services in Eastern Perthshire: [Strathmore Centre for Youth Development \(SCYD\)](#); [Alyth Youth Partnership \(AYP\)](#) and [Coupar Angus Youth Activities Group \(CAYAG\)](#)

High-trust relationships and individual leadership within the Gannochy Trust and the council were critical in navigating challenges in establishing and providing governance for the joint fund. While they co-signed a formal partnership agreement, the collaboration relies far more on the strength of the relationships than on the document itself. Mutual confidence has meant that the funding partners rarely need to refer to formal governance arrangements in practice. Both described trust and relationships as “the reason this works,” enabling governance to function through dialogue and shared understanding rather than formal processes alone.

‘Shared interest is what made it work... But I think what defines the [funding] partnership is the trust that we have in each other.’
(Funding Partner)

The fund design

The core elements of the fund's design included:

Long-term investment:

The fund replaced short-term ad-hoc grants with long-term flexible funding, giving security and capacity to funded organisations to plan and develop.

- **Open and transparent distribution of funding:**

Funding allocations were redesigned using population and deprivation data, creating an equitable allocation across five localities. The procurement arrangements ensured an open and transparent approach to the distribution of the funds.

- **Trust-based contracts and flexibility:**

Funders identified the broad outcomes that they wanted to achieve but made the decision not to include numerical output targets in contracts. Funded organisations had autonomy to use funding flexibility and to adapt responsively to local circumstances. Funded organisations reported that flexibility released them from the pressure to chase targets to achieve compliance and enabled them to focus on quality and purpose.

Co-designed monitoring and reporting systems:

The funders co-designed the monitoring and reporting systems with funded organisations. The system focuses on collection of data which is useful to the funded organisations for planning and development rather than generating data to meet funder requirements. The process reduces the burden of reporting on small organisations and has turned the culture of reporting into one that focuses on learning and continuous improvement instead of compliance.



Behaviours and cultures

Beyond the fund's structural design, the ways of working adopted by the funders were central to the partnership's functioning. The defining behaviours in the funding approach were:

Building relationships based on trust, openness and transparency

The funders developed trust with the funded organisations through long-term funding, open dialogue and co-designed processes. The absence of micro-accounting and target-driven performance management created an environment where organisations felt safe *'to be honest about challenges instead of massaging numbers'*, and to learn from setbacks and focus on improvement rather than compliance.

Funded organisations reported that they felt *'valued and trusted'*, and described a shift in the traditional power relationship between funder and funded organisation: *'The power dynamic feels more equal'* and described the funders as *'genuine partners'*:

'They work alongside us rather than above us, not as funders to be reported to, but as partners in the room.' (Funded organisation)

Going beyond funding

Both funders have provided considerable additional support and resources to the partnership beyond contractual funding. The Gannochy Trust provides direct support and advice to build the capacity of organisations (e.g. with governance), and has invested resources in training and development, strengthening workforce capacity and volunteer pipelines. The Trust has also funded the development of a [website](#) to raise the profile of the partnership and opportunities for young people. The council has also supported workforce development by including staff from funded organisations in its training.

'They've opened access to training and professional development we wouldn't have had otherwise.' (Funded organisation)

The council also supports funded organisations by brokering connections with other departments and helping them navigate internal systems. This has raised the profile of both the individual organisations and the partnership within the council. As a result, youth work providers are more firmly embedded in the planning and delivery of services for young people at both strategic and operational levels.

‘Local organisations now have better relationships with council services.’ (Funded organisation)

Supporting collaboration

The funders intentionally fostered connection through regular partnership meetings, creating space for the funded organisations to build relationships, develop trust and a collective identity. Open and transparent reporting processes supported a culture of learning, enabling funded organisations to identify common challenges, learn from each other, and respond collaboratively, and positioning them as part of a wider shared endeavour. This has resulted in a more joined-up approach to planning and delivery of youth work and stronger use of collective skills and resources.

Together, these ways of working changed both how youth work was delivered and what it was able to achieve.



What the partnership achieved

The impact of the Perthshire Youth Work Partnership has been transformational, reversing a long-term decline in youth work and significantly expanding the capacity, quality and sustainability of the youth work sector in Perth and Kinross.

Its success has been recognised locally and nationally, including renewed five-year funding from 2024–2029 and a [national award for community-based youth work](#).

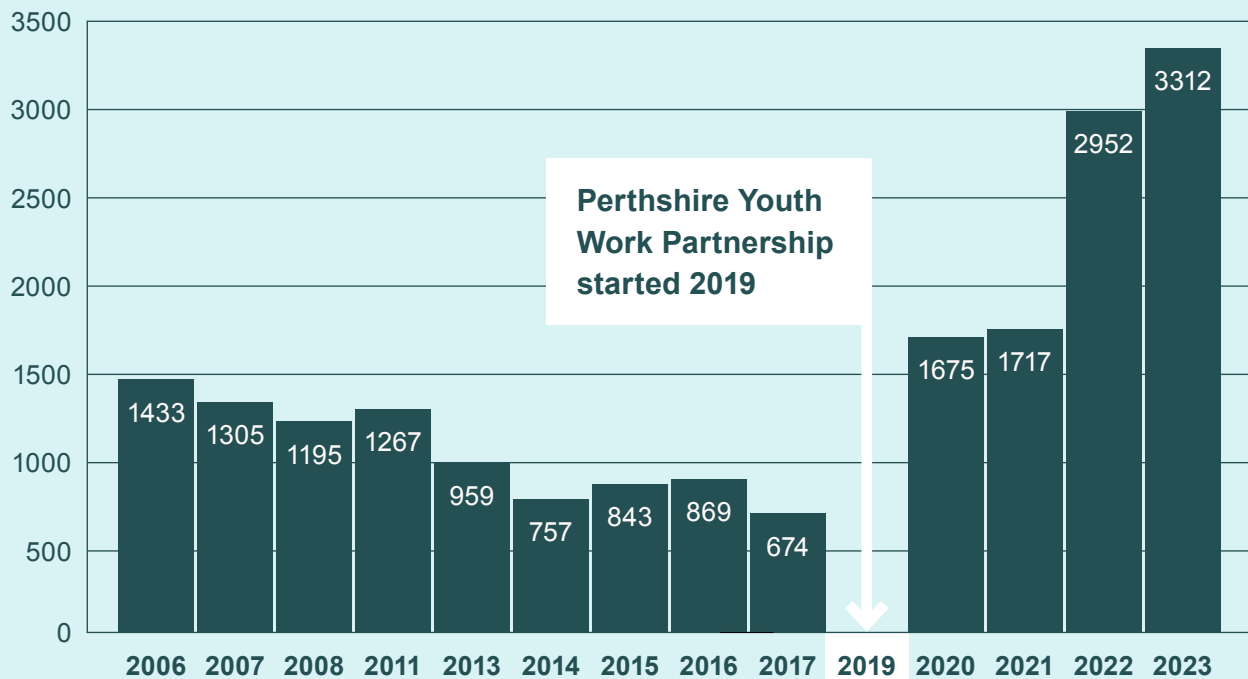
Increased the scale and reach of youth work provision

Since 2019, participation in youth work has increased sharply, reversing a long-term decline.

The seven funded organisations have expanded the numbers of staff and extended provision into new localities. They now deliver grassroots youth work in twice as many locations across Perthshire compared to 2017/18.

By 2023/24 they had reached nearly five times the number of young people that they did in 2017/18, which means that around 42% of the entire secondary school population in Perthshire have engaged in youth work opportunities.

Membership of Youth Groups in Perth and Kinross 2006-2023



Increased capacity and sustainability of funded organisations

The funding approach has had a profound impact on funded organisations – not only in scale and capacity, but also in confidence, culture, professional practice and sustainability.

- **Stability, continuity and long-term planning:** Long-term flexible funding has enabled organisations to move from short-term survival toward strategic growth – investing in infrastructure and expanding provision into new sites, investing in leadership and workforce development and delivering sustained provision rather than time-limited projects. *‘It gave us the bravery to open a new site and think strategically.’ (Funded organisation)*

This has a positive knock-on effect on young service users, who no longer experience the cycle of short-term projects and staff, that appear and disappear. Funded organisations report that: *‘Consistent faces and spaces have strengthened trust and participation.’*

- **Improved quality of provision:** The availability of long-term flexible funding has reduced time spent on bidding and compliance and has allowed funded organisations to *‘focus on young people rather than paperwork’*, supporting higher quality practice and strengthening responsiveness to local need.
- **Confidence, credibility and legitimacy:** The development of the Perthshire Youth Work Partnership has strengthened the legitimacy of universal youth work. Funded organisations “feel valued” and have gained recognition through their membership of the partnership, enhancing both their confidence and their credibility. The recognised success of the Perthshire Youth Work Partnership has also raised their profile with external funders, enabling them to secure additional funding which has contributed to increased capacity and sustainability.



Professionalisation of youth work and development of workforce pipelines:

The partnership has validated youth work and supported professionalisation of the sector. With guaranteed five-year funding, funded organisations can offer secure, long-term employment contracts, reducing staff turnover and creating the conditions to invest meaningfully in workforce development, including through apprenticeships and staff training. New job opportunities in the sector mean a greater chance of career progression. There is now migration of staff across the funded organisations.

The funding has also supported training for young people and volunteers. This has resulted in the development of a volunteer pipeline which has created progression routes for volunteers and for young people. Around half of the staff who are currently employed across the seven funded organisations progressed into paid work through this structured volunteering pipeline. This 'grow your own' approach to workforce development has addressed long-standing capacity risks in the area, where volunteer and workforce shortages previously constrained service expansion.

Shared training and youth worker exchanges have also broadened perspectives, improved practice, and enhanced morale and resilience, particularly important for staff in rural organisations or single-worker settings.



Collaboration

Prior to the partnership, the local youth work organisations typically operated in isolation within their own geographic patches. They had limited relationships and little history of joint working.

The partnership has forged connections between the funded organisations and fostered strong, trusting and mutually supportive relationships. Partners now share information, opportunities and resources, and collaborate in practical ways – including sharing expertise, staff, venues and equipment – leading to improved provision, reduced duplication and more effective use of limited resources.

Funded organisations recognise the mutual benefits of collaboration and now work together to strengthen the delivery of youth work in Perth and Kinross, but also to support one another's capacity and long-term sustainability.

‘As a partnership we have collective power – we can challenge things we couldn’t individually.’ (Funded organisation)

They now share funding opportunities, plan and develop services and funding bids together, and have worked together to agree collectively on how to price their services. One funded organisation commented that they would *‘choose not to pursue funding that would disadvantage another’*.

As evidence of the mutual trust and collaboration, the funded organisations have recently made a successful collaborative funding bid to an external funder. The bid was led by one of the funded organisations but was co-designed and will be co-delivered by all.

‘We’ve achieved joint funding bids that wouldn’t have been possible alone.’ (Funded organisation)

System-level impact

Taken together, these changes represent not just growth in activity but a fundamental strengthening of the local youth work ecosystem – enabling wider reach, deeper impact and a sustainable foundation for the future.

At a system level, the partnership has transformed youth work across the area from fragmented provision into a coordinated, strategic approach. The sector now has a stronger collective voice and greater influence in local decision-making.

As one funder observed, *‘The funded organisations have become strategic partners in youth work provision rather than annual applicants.’*

Young people themselves also have a stronger role in shaping services through Youth Panels and influencing the development of a new regional Youth Work Strategy. As one partner noted: *‘Young people are now shaping funding decisions with real confidence.’*



Learning from the Perthshire Youth Work Partnership

The success of the Perthshire Youth Work Partnership demonstrates that system-level change can be achieved without increasing overall funding, through a deliberate shift towards longer-term, flexible and trust-based investment. For the first five years of the partnership, the collective level of investment remained broadly unchanged; what shifted was the relationship between funders and providers, the willingness to share risk, and the move towards long-term, flexible support:

‘It’s the trust and collaboration that we have enabled through the way that we have funded that has made all the difference.’ (Funding partner)

A key lesson is that sustainable impact is driven less by formal structures and more by shared purpose, trust-based relationships and the confidence of leaders to work in new ways. As financial pressures intensify across sectors, this model offers a practical and replicable approach to increasing the capacity and reach of local services and improving outcomes for young people.

The partnership illustrates how independent trusts and local authorities can collaborate to improve services for young people without compromising independence, using joint funding, joint stewardship and relational governance.

Together, these changes reshaped not just the funding relationships, but the planning and delivery of youth work provision across the area – enabling funded organisations to move from short-term survival to collective planning, and funders to act as enablers rather than controllers.

Key takeaways for funders and local authorities

For funders

- Take a proactive approach grounded in robust evidence. Credible, non-political data provides a strong foundation for constructive dialogue.
- Human connection and relationships help sustain successful partnerships rather than formal structures. Invest time in building trust, as governance functions well when trust is present.
- Lead with values and trust rather than relying solely on metrics.
- Long-term, relationship-based funding models consistently outperform short-term contractual approaches.

For public agencies/local authorities

- Start with shared vision and values, not structures. Ensure alignment before initiating collaboration.
- Invest in relationships. Trust between individuals unlocks progress.
- Recognise Trusts as equal partners and innovators that can help to achieve your objectives.
- Allow sufficient time for development and invest in the groundwork.
- Accept that effective partnership involves risk and relinquishing some control.

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