

(space to
breathe)

National Youthworker Survey 2022

**A picture of the mental health and wellbeing of
Christian Youth workers**

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Executive summary

The National Youthwork Survey was conducted between March and May 2022 to capture the wellbeing experience of Christian youth workers at this time.

We found that 30% of youth workers surveyed had poor or very poor mental health, with 1 in 7 reporting that they had had a medical diagnosis of anxiety in the last year, and many others reporting symptoms such as insomnia, muscle tension and difficulty concentrating which they believe to be linked to their work.

Around 1 in 5 told us that they intend to leave their job in the next year. This is similar to the number of teachers who report their intention to leave their profession in the next year, suggesting the pressures on youth workers are not dissimilar to those on teachers. Teacher wellbeing regularly hits the headlines, whereas the subject of youth worker wellbeing is rarely or never discussed.

We also found that only 48% of youth workers would feel comfortable talking to their employers/leaders about their mental health and wellbeing which is a similar figure to that in the secular world. We believe the church and Christian organisations should be able to lead the way on employee wellbeing.

The survey looked at what things youth workers had used to support their mental health and wellbeing, and whilst many reported things like prayer, worship and bible reading, around 1 in 5 had taken part in 'unnecessary spending', a quarter said they used alcohol, and 59% had turned to food to support their mental health and wellbeing.

As a result of this survey, we would like to see greater support for the mental health and wellbeing of youth workers. Specifically, we believe the following things would make the most difference:

- Employers/leaders prioritising meeting regularly with their youth worker for line management. This would ensure employers/line managers are aware of what challenges youth workers are facing both personally and professionally, ensure clear priorities are agreed and there are realistic expectations set.
- Employers/leaders ensuring youth workers have regular access to reflective space with a supervisor, mentor or spiritual director. This would ensure youth workers have the opportunity to step back, reflect and process some of the challenges they face personally and professionally.
- Training for youth workers in how to proactively look after mental health and wellbeing. This would ensure there is greater understanding about 'what works best'. This would lead to youth workers being more empowered to look after their mental health and wellbeing better.
- Training for employers/leaders in how to proactively look after mental health and wellbeing. This would ensure employers/leaders are more able to support their youth workers to proactively look after their own wellbeing. This may have the added benefit of improving the mental health and wellbeing of employers/leaders themselves.
- Employers/leaders putting in place clearer policies on mental health and wellbeing, outlining what youth workers can expect from their employers/leaders in terms of regular support and access to further support such as therapy/counselling.

Further details and commentary on how these things could be achieved can be found in the recommendations can be found in the 'Recommendations' section of this report.

Context

The National Youthwork Survey was conducted between March and May 2022. It aimed to capture the wellbeing experience of employed Christian youth workers at this time. We were aware that there has been very little research into this previously, and we believe that this was the first time such a survey had been done.

We hope that the results of this survey might help to inform what help and support can become available to support the wellbeing of youth workers in the future. We also hope it might influence those who employ youth workers to put better support and structures in place. Most of all, we hope it might support youth workers to be even more effective at supporting young people to become more 'well'. Our premise is that if we get it 'right' for youth workers, they will get it 'right' for the young people they support.

We bring to this process the experience of supporting the wellbeing of school staff and recognise some of the similarities between the role of school staff and youth workers, whilst also acknowledging the different aims and foci the work involves. In our work with school staff, we have found that certain cultures, and practices can ensure people are more 'well' and we designed the survey to capture to what extent these things are in place for youth workers.

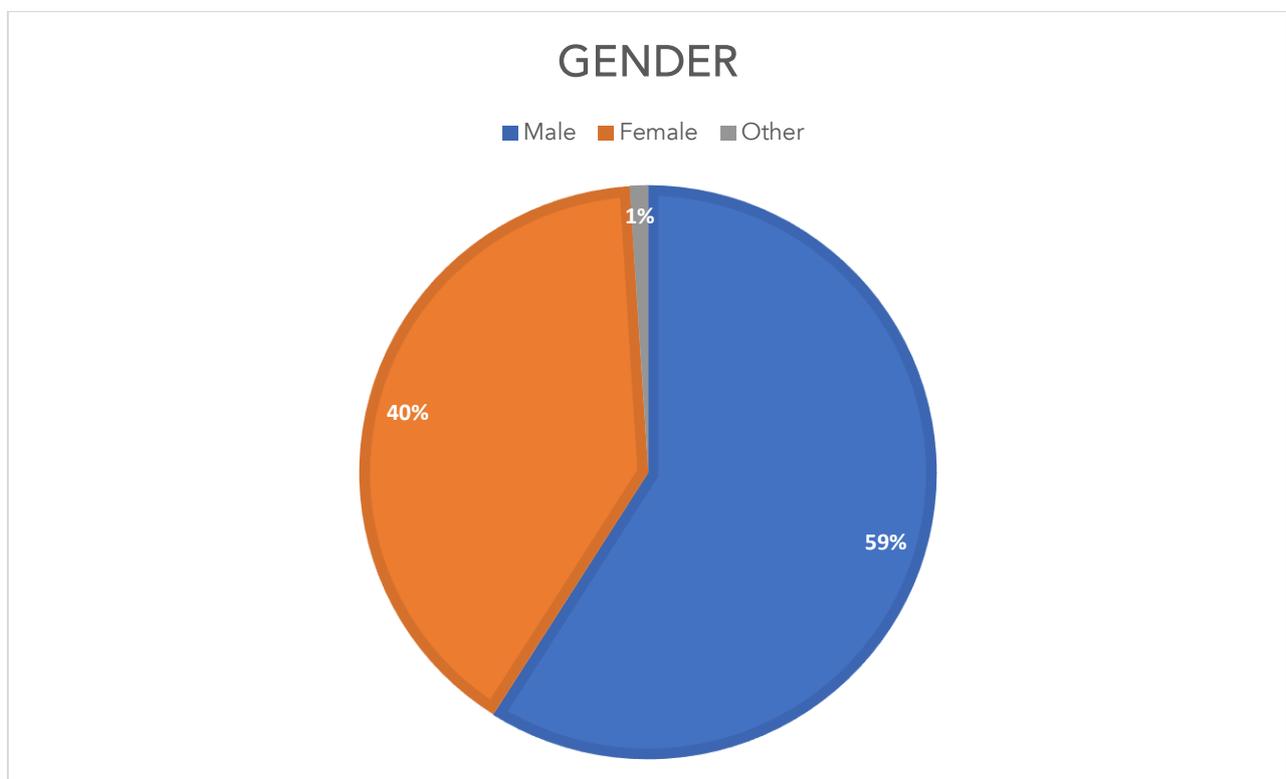
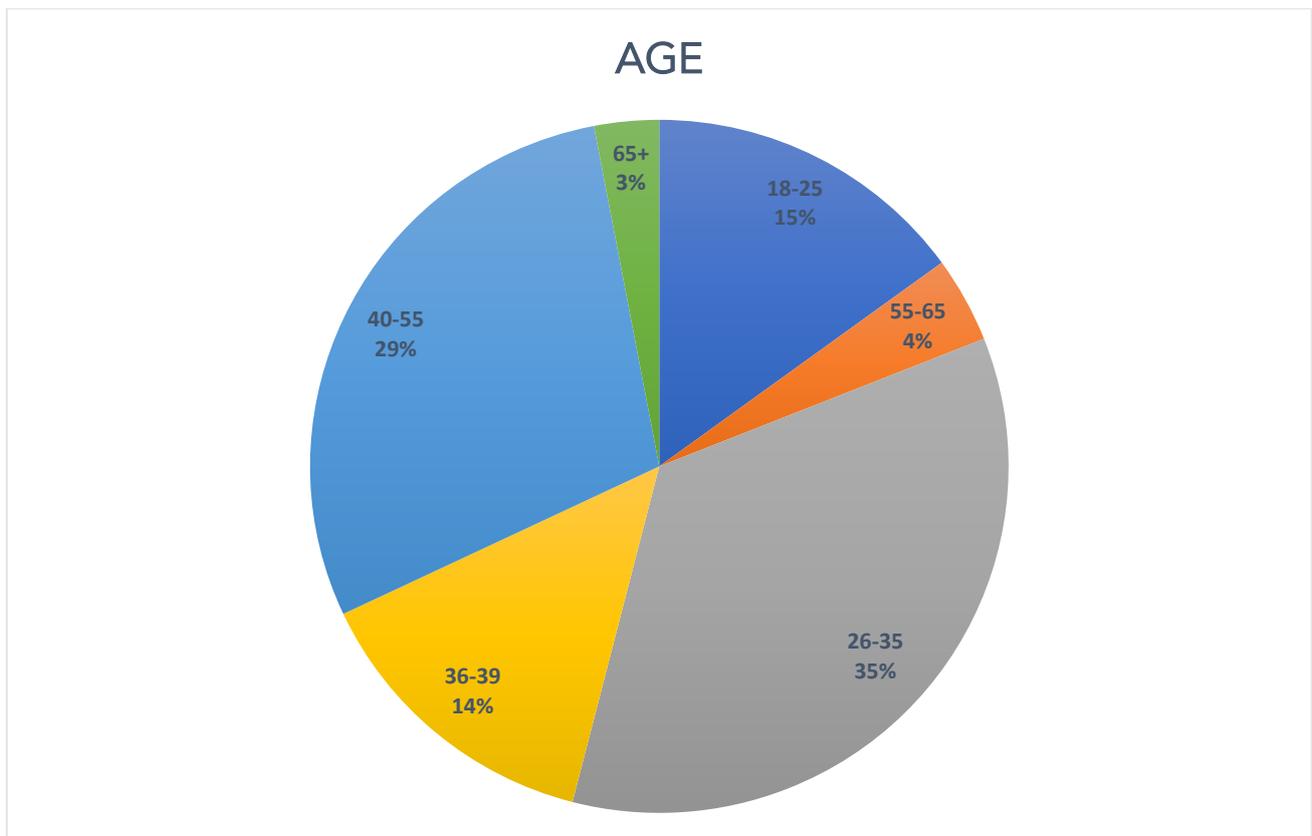
The survey was completed by 73 people. It's challenging to work out what kind of representation of the youth worker population this is, as no official statistics exist about how many employed youth workers there are in the UK, but it might be fair to assume that the results provide a helpful snapshot at the very least.

This was an initial survey and we may want to ask further questions in order to bring more clarity to the picture of youth worker wellbeing. We hope however that this initial survey will provide a baseline of statistics on which to measure trends in the future and inspire further conversations about and research into this field.

We at Space to Breathe declare our interest in providing some of the support and resources to meet some of the needs identified in this survey whilst recognising there is a wealth of experience and skills within other organisations that will also be needed for those needs to be met fully. We welcome the perspective, investment and contribution that others can and will make.

Profile of respondents

The profile of those completing the questionnaire was as follows:



Work hours:

Full time for one employer only	Part time for one employer only	More than one part time role with children and young people	More than one part time role, but only one of them is with children and young people	Volunteer
43%	27%	16%	4%	10%

Working for:

A denomination	One church	More than one church	Charitable organisation	Diocese	Schools
12%	58%	8%	18%	4%	>1%

Length with current employer:

0 – 6 months	6 month – 1 year	1 – 2 years	2 – 3 years	3- 5 years	5 -10 years	10 years +
>1%	8%	10%	16%	23%	23%	18%

The highest level of qualification people have:

Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Level 6	Level 7
0%	4%	6%	3%	7%	53%	27%

Whilst it's somewhat simplistic to create a typical profile of those completing the questionnaire, by way of summary, the most common profile of those completing the questionnaire overall would be a male between 26 and 35 years old, working for one church for between 3 and 10 years, and with a level 6 qualification (equivalent of a Bachelor's degree).

Scores of Mental Health and Wellbeing

Those completing the survey were asked to complete a WEMWBS questionnaire as part of the survey. The Warwick & Edinburgh Wellbeing Scale (WEMWBS) is a standardised measurement tool for wellbeing. It consists of 14 items scored from 1 – 5. The possible range of scores is 14 – 70 and asks those completing it to indicate answer questions based on the last two weeks. WEMWBS is not designed to be a screening tool for mental health but scores below 40 are considered to indicate low wellbeing, and score below 30 may indicate the need for more professional help.

The average score overall was 45.01. The range of scores was between 29 and 69.

The following table shows the percentage of people scoring at different levels of wellbeing according to the WEMWBS and a categorisation of what that might indicate in terms of mental health and wellbeing.

WEMWBS Score	Percentage of people scoring in this bracket	Indicator of wellbeing being...
60+	3%	Very good
49 – 59	29%	Good
40 – 48	38%	OK
30 – 39	29%	Poor
Less than 30	1%	Very Poor

These scores represent a range of experiences and demonstrate that there are both those who are doing 'well' as well as those who are struggling.

Those completing were also asked to indicate how they felt their mental health had been over the last year. Responses are shown below:

Self-rating of wellbeing	Percentage of people scoring themselves in this bracket
Very good	3%
Good	30%
OK	40%
Poor	26%
Very Poor	1%

Again, these scores represent a range of experiences, but reassuringly are largely congruent with the findings of the WEMWBS.

It is encouraging that so many people have ok, good or very good mental health and wellbeing, but it is important to note that there are significant numbers of youth workers who completed this questionnaire whose mental health and wellbeing was poor or very poor.

For comparison, measures of school staff wellbeing are collated annually by the charity Education Support. In their 2021 audit, 32.9% of staff who had completed the survey reported WEMWBS scores which we have categorised as poor or very poor. This survey shows that youth workers are similarly challenged, with 30% having scores which would be categorised as poor or very poor. The average WEMWBS score in an NHS study of the general population in 2017 was 49.85. A study in Wales

attempting to capture some of the impact of COVID-19 in June/July 2020 found the average score for 25 – 54-year-olds was 43.1, and 30% of youth workers survey fell below this average score.

Mental Health Challenges

Those completing the questionnaire were asked to indicate what mental health symptoms they had experienced in the last year which they believed were related to their work as a youth worker. These symptoms are those that are commonly associated with anxiety and depression. Results are shown in the table below:

Symptoms	Those who reported poor or very poor mental health over the last year	Those who reported 'Ok' mental health over the last year	Those who reported good or very good mental health over the last year
Insomnia	45%	55%	25%
Irritability	50%	62%	33%
Tearfulness	60%	34%	13%
Overeating	50%	34%	38%
Undereating	10%	0%	8%
Changes in appetite	35%	17%	8%
Forgetfulness	60%	45%	21%
Difficulty Concentrating	75%	69%	46%
Muscle Tension	40%	31%	29%
Recurring Headache	40%	24%	13%
Dizziness	20%	7%	0%
Panic attacks	25%	10%	8%
High blood pressure	5%	7%	0%

The most common symptoms experienced by those who reported poor or very poor mental health were difficulty concentrating, forgetfulness, and tearfulness.

The most common symptoms experienced by those who reported 'OK' mental health were difficulty concentrating, irritability and insomnia.

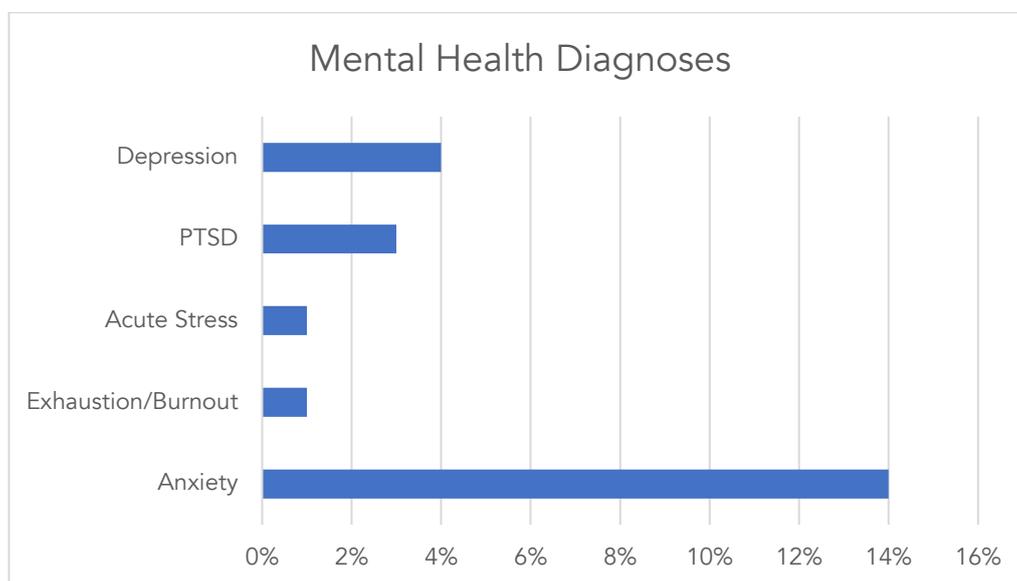
The most common symptoms experienced by those who reported good or very good mental health were difficulty concentrating, overeating and irritability.

It could be interesting to note the commonality of 'difficulty concentrating' across all groups. It's also noteworthy that even those reporting good or very good mental health experienced some symptoms associated poor mental health which they relate to their youth work.

It's understandable that those with lower levels of mental health would have experienced more symptoms. More people who reported having poor or very poor mental health experienced all of the symptoms more than those with better wellbeing. The exception to this is insomnia, which more people with 'OK' mental health reported as symptom than those with lower mental health. Similarly, overeating/undereating was a reported more by those whose mental health was good than those whose mental health was 'OK'.

Mental Health Diagnoses

Those completing the questionnaire were asked if they had been given any mental health diagnoses from a medical professional in the last year that they believe relates to their work as a youth worker. The results are shown below:



The most common diagnosis here is anxiety and the symptoms most reported in the previous section would be most commonly associated with this diagnosis. This represents those who have received a medical diagnosis, which would be dependent on an individual seeking out medical support. Based on the symptoms reported in the previous section, it could be assumed that many more would receive such a diagnosis if they sought out support from medical professionals.

Mental Health and Wellbeing Support

We asked people what support they had accessed to support their mental health and wellbeing. We asked this in a couple of ways: we firstly asked ways people had used to support any poor mental health/stress/anxiety (diagnosed or undiagnosed) caused by their youth work, and we then asked people what things they had done to proactively look after their mental health and wellbeing over the last year.

The table below shows what things people had turned to support any poor mental health/stress/anxiety:

Source of support	Those who reported poor or very poor mental health over the last year	Those who reported 'Ok' mental health over the last year	Those who reported good or very good mental health over the last year
Food	55%	69%	50%
Alcohol	25%	24%	25%
Unnecessary Spending	30%	21%	21%
Pornography	10%	14%	8%
Meditation/Mindfulness	65%	55%	46%
Bible Reading	50%	66%	46%
Friends/family	85%	86%	75%
Physical Exercise	35%	55%	63%
Therapy/Counselling	70%	14%	29%

The most common form of support for all groups was friends and family.

In addition, those with poor or very poor mental health most commonly reported utilising therapy/counselling and meditation/mindfulness as a source of support

Those with 'OK' mental health most commonly reported utilising food and Bible reading as a source of support

Those with good or very good mental health most commonly reported utilising physical exercise and food for support.

Those with poor or very poor mental health were more likely to spend unnecessarily, access therapy and counselling and less likely to utilise physical exercise than those with better mental health.

Those with 'OK' mental health were more likely to use food, pornography, and bible reading than those in other groups and less likely to use meditation/mindfulness and therapy/counselling than those in other groups.

We also asked people what things they had done to proactively look after their mental health and wellbeing over the last year. We also asked them how often they had done such activities.

Activities done the most (at least once or twice a week):

Activity	Those who reported poor or very poor mental health over the last year	Those who reported 'Ok' mental health over the last year	Those who reported good or very good mental health over the last year
Creative activities	15%	14%	25%
Sporting activities	10%	48%	57%
Hobbies/interests on their own	40%	42%	36%
Hobbies/interests with others	5%	11%	29%
Spending time with friends/family	30%	70%	69%
Helping others	65%	55%	66%
Connecting with nature	40%	28%	38%
Prayer/worship or other 'spiritual activities such as meditation/mindfulness	65%	74%	84%

Activities done the least (less than one or two times a month or never):

Activity	Those who reported poor or very poor mental health over the last year	Those who reported 'Ok' mental health over the last year	Those who reported good or very good mental health over the last year
Creative activities	40%	45%	41%
Sporting activities	30%	35%	20%
Hobbies/interests on their own	35%	32%	16%
Hobbies/interests with others	50%	42%	20%
Spending time with friends/family	25%	7%	4%
Helping others	15%	21%	4%
Connecting with nature	20%	35%	34%

Prayer/worship or other 'spiritual activities such as meditation/mindfulness	10%	11%	4%
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The most common activity done to proactively support mental health and wellbeing was prayer/worship or other spiritual activities for all respondents.

For those with poor or very poor mental health, helping others was utilised as much as prayer and worship.

For those with OK mental health, spending time with friends and family was utilised almost as much as prayer and worship.

For those with good or very good mental health, spending time with family and friends and helping others were common, but significantly less than prayer and worship.

Those with good or very mental health were much more likely to use sporting activities, hobbies/interests with others and creative activities than those with OK, poor or very poor mental health.

50% of those with poor mental health and 42% of those with OK mental health rarely or never take part in hobbies/interests with others.

Those with OK, good or very good mental health were significantly more likely to spend time with friends and family than those with poor or very poor mental health.

Taking all this data into account, we could conclude that the activities that best support the mental health and wellbeing of youth workers are:

- Prayer/Worship/Spiritual Activities
- Spending time with family/friends
- Sporting activities
- Helping others

Support from others with mental health and wellbeing

We asked people who had supported them with their mental health and wellbeing over the last year. Results are shown in the table below:

	Not at all	Very little	Somewhat	A lot	To a large extent
Family/Friends		1%	27%	37%	35%
Employer/leaders	6%	22%	33%	27%	12%
Colleagues/other volunteers	4%	18%	42%	27%	8%
Professionals (therapist/counsellor)	60%	6%	15%	6%	14%

The data shows that overall respondents felt that family and friends were at least somewhat helpful.

Respondents seem to have a mixed experience of their employers/leaders been helpful with only 39% feeling supported a lot or to a large extent and 29% feeling they are supported either very little or not at all.

Likewise, respondents' experience of how helpful their colleagues are in supporting them with their mental health and wellbeing is very mixed, with 35% reported feeling supporting a lot or to a large extent and 22% feeling supported very little or not at all.

60% of respondents report finding professionals not at all helpful. It feels this result is most likely to be because people haven't been able, willing or felt the need for this kind of support. One respondent left an additional comment saying they haven't been able to access support from a therapist for financial reasons.

Support with mental health and wellbeing from employers/leaders

We asked for specific feedback on employer/leader support for wellbeing:

	Not at all	A bit true	Somewhat	True	Very True
My employer/leaders are interested in my mental health and wellbeing	3%	17%	19%	18%	43%
My employer/leaders have policies in place to support my wellbeing	26%	16%	17%	33%	8%
There is a positive culture of wellbeing within my workplace/setting	12%	22%	29%	18%	19%
I would feel comfortable talking to my employers/leaders about my mental health and wellbeing	14%	20%	18%	22%	26%

This again shows a mixed picture of experiences. It's encouraging to see over 80% of people feeling that their employers are at least somewhat interested in their wellbeing but concerning that 20% feel that this is not at all true or only a bit true.

The results show that there is significant variation on whether employers have policies in place to support wellbeing, suggesting this is not standard practice for those who employ/lead youth workers. We would want to see all employers having this in place as standard practice.

48% of respondents indicate some confidence in speaking to their employers/leaders about their mental health and wellbeing whilst 34% said that this is either not at all true or only a bit true. We think this may show that a significant number of employers do not create enough psychological safety for their youth worker employees. A survey of the general population that was conducted by the charity MIND in 2016 found that only around half of people would feel comfortable talking to their employers about their mental health and wellbeing. We feel that churches and Christian charities should be better at this than other employers, but this is clearly not the case.

We asked further questions about what support is available to youth workers from their employers/leaders. Results are shown in the table below:

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Regularly	Very regularly
Professional Supervision	26%	14%	26%	25%	7%
Line Management	4%	14%	26%	42%	12%
Mentoring	39%	25%	14%	11%	5%
Training in skills/knowledge	10%	27%	34%	23%	4%

Training in wellbeing or wellbeing activities	30%	34%	26%	7%	0%
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Only 32% get professional supervision regularly or very regularly, with 40% rarely or never having this kind support.

54% receive regular line management, with 26% only having it sometimes and 18% having it rarely or never.

Regular or very regular mentoring is available to 16% of respondents.

61% are offered training in skills/knowledge at least sometimes, with 37% of respondents having this just rarely or never.

Only 7% of respondents have access to regular wellbeing training, with 64% having this rarely or never.

We would advocate for all youth workers to be given regular supervision to support both them and their practice. We would also advocate for regular line management to be in place, as well as access to ongoing training in skills/knowledge. We also believe youth workers would benefit from more training in wellbeing.

We asked people how they rated their employers/leaders overall.

Rating	Percentage of people rating their employers/leaders
Very good	34%
Good	32%
OK	25%
Poor	10%
Very Poor	0%

It's encouraging to see that the majority of respondents can rate their employer/leaders as being good or very good, with a relatively small amount rating them as poor and no respondents rating them as very poor.

However, given the numbers of youth workers who don't receive things such as regular line management, supervision and training, the numbers who report employers not having policies in place, and the possible lack of psychological safety that some employers create, we wonder if youth workers have low expectations of what their employers should provide. We believe these things will be impacting on mental health and wellbeing even if youth workers are not aware of this as being a contributing factor.

Future plans

We asked people questions about how long they intended to stay with their current employer and if they were considering leaving, what their main reasons were.

I intend to stay with my current employer for...	
Indefinitely	16%
At least another 2 years	29%
At least another year	36%
Less than a year	19%

Of those considering leaving, they chose which of the following reasons was their main reason for this decision:

Reason for leaving	Percentage of people
Lack of support	3%
Need a new challenge	13%
Need more money	13%
Poor Management	6%
Poor organisational culture	15%
Unrealistic expectations	6%
Other	40%

Comments in 'other' related to:

'All of the above' reasons

Change of calling

Pursuing family life or further study

Wanting less responsibility/pressure

Whilst many have no plans to leave their current employment in the near future, it's important that we listen to the reasons people cite for wanting to leave. 19% said they plan to leave in the next year representing nearly 1 in 5. This is a high attrition rate for any profession. Employers may need to consider how they may support those in youth work to sustain themselves in their job as their personal circumstances change, and as they manage the expectations of multiple stakeholders.

Recommendations

We believe that the mental health and wellbeing of youth workers can only be improved with greater profile been given to the issues as outlined in this report. We would welcome the support of national organisations, and individuals who have a high profile in the Christian youth work world in making this happen.

As an organisation, we work with the following assumptions:

- Wellbeing doesn't happen by accident – it takes intent.
- Workplace cultures need to be curated in such a way as to support wellbeing
- People need to be empowered to look after their own wellbeing

Based on the results of this survey, we would like to make the following recommendations to improve the mental health and wellbeing of youth workers.

- **More consistent quality line management**
 - This would involve employers/leaders prioritising meeting regularly with their youth worker for line management. This would ensure employers/line managers are aware of what challenges youth workers are facing both personally and professionally, ensure clear priorities are agreed and there are realistic expectations set. Training for line managers on how to provide effective line management may be needed to support this being put in place. Effective line management should always promote dialogue between employers/employees and employers should provide sufficient psychological safety for employees to raise concerns without fear of reprisal.
- **Increased access to supervision/mentoring/spiritual direction**
 - This involves employers/leaders ensuring youth workers have regular access to reflective space with a supervisor, mentor or spiritual director. This would ensure youth workers have the opportunity to step back, reflect and process some of the challenges they face personally and professionally. Youth workers may each need something a bit different depending on their personal circumstances and level of experience, but the principle here is that youth workers have some kind of space for reflection with someone who is able to hold, support and encourage them in their work.
- **Wellbeing Training for youth workers**
 - Wellbeing isn't something that happens by accident or is always instinctive. Giving youth workers training in how to proactively look after their mental health and wellbeing would ensure youth workers are better empowered to support themselves. Training should include understanding what good wellbeing is and isn't, and what practices and habits best support someone to thrive. Space to Breathe have developed highly rated training for school staff along these lines which could be easily adapted for youth workers.
- **Wellbeing Training for employers/leaders**
 - Employers/leaders need to understand how to proactively look after wellbeing in order to support youth workers to put in place good practices and habits. This may have the added benefit of improving the mental health and wellbeing of employers/leaders themselves. Employers and leaders could be trained alongside their youth worker and support one another to improve the wellbeing of both parties.

- Employers/leaders may also benefit from considering how they can create a culture of wellbeing within their church/organisation. Space to Breathe have developed training in creating a culture of wellbeing for leaders in a range of organisations including charities and schools.
- **Clearer policies on mental health and wellbeing**
 - This would involve employers/leaders putting in place clearer policies on mental health and wellbeing, outlining what youth workers can expect from their employers/leaders in terms of support. Policies should take into account an employer's responsibility based on the Health & Safety Act of 1974 and Good Work Plan 2020. It might include clear expectations about hours of work, including how and when to take time out/off, what regular support is on offer and what further support can be accessed including that to therapy/counselling.

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