

YOUTH SERVICES EVALUATION

2025-2026

THANK YOU

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Cyrenians' services in the Skills and Development Pillar

Feedback from young people

"You sat down and understood what I needed and wanted with me when no one else did"

(feedback from young person supported by Cyrenians)

Report written by Dr Christina McMellon, Research Consultant

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Executive Summary

Purpose of report

Cyrenians mission is to tackle the causes and consequences of homelessness. This report details findings from an evaluation undertaken by a consultant focused on Cyrenians' Skills and Development Pillar which offers targeted services for young people (aged 14-24) who are experiencing, or are at risk of, disengagement from education, employment or training. The purpose of this report is to bring together feedback, understand what difference Cyrenians' support has made from their perspective, and identify what aspects of the organisational approach appear to support positive change.

Methods used

The data collection was carried out by Cyrenians staff who already had trusted relationships with the young people using a creative feedback sheet developed for the evaluation.

Key findings

As a result of engaging with Cyrenians:

- Young people reported improved confidence, self-belief and resilience;
- Young people developed practical, social and life skills that supported greater independence;
- Young people described stronger relationships, reduced isolation and improved ability to seek support;
- Young people experienced greater hope, direction and motivation for the future

Conclusion

The evaluation indicated that Cyrenians' youth services are making a positive contribution to the lives of young people facing significant barriers.

Across the different services, the strongest and most consistent finding was the importance of trusted relationships with keyworkers. Feedback from young people suggests that Cyrenians' relational, practical, and flexible approaches create environments where young people feel safe, seen and supported to take meaningful steps forward. The experiences young people described with Cyrenians point to what becomes possible when targeted support is available to those who need it. The perspectives gathered in this report speak to the resilience and potential of the young people themselves, and to the value of services that take the time to listen and to believe in them as they find their own way forward.

1. Background

1.1 About Cyrenians

Cyrenians has been providing innovative relationships-based support to people experiencing or at risk of homelessness for over 50 years. Their mission is to tackle the causes and consequences of homelessness, learning from lived experience. They deliver targeted services focused on prevention, early intervention and support into a home; and by influencing changes in legislation and policy.

Cyrenians recognises homelessness as a complex social problem that arises from a system of multiple interrelated causes and consequences. They take a public health approach to homelessness prevention, delivering 47 services covering seven local authorities, including five services that run nationally in Scotland. These services improve the life chances of over 7,800 people a year who are homeless or on the edges of homelessness – 1,700 of whom are children and young people.

Cyrenians organises its work into different service areas, known as pillars. This report presents the findings of an evaluation of the Skills and Development Pillar, which includes services supporting young people who are at risk of leaving school with few or no qualifications and no clear next step identified. The purpose of these services is to provide early intervention and prevention support for young people at key transition points in their lives – such as moving on from school into work or further learning, navigating leaving child services and becoming an adult, and potentially leaving home – either by choice or because they have been asked to leave. This support is both 1:1 and within group settings and takes place at the pace of the young person. Keyworkers help them navigate the transition by helping them identify what they would like to do post-school by increasing their confidence, widening their aspirations and supporting them with next steps into further learning or work. Ultimately the support Cyrenians offers helps young people to take charge of their lives and gives them the tools and the support to avoid falling into poverty, unemployment and homelessness in the future.

Many of the young people supported by these services have experienced disrupted attendance at school, or have been long-term non-attenders, for a range of reasons. Further details and descriptions of all services that took part in this evaluation can be seen in Appendix 1.

The seven services that took part in this evaluation support a total of around 450 young people each year in Edinburgh, Falkirk and West Lothian, in areas of high deprivation. Many of these young people might not have adult support and/or their relationships with care givers have sometimes become fractured. A high percentage of those Cyrenians supports are neurodiverse and/or are struggling with additional support needs. Most have disengaged from school or work and do not have a clear pathway to a positive destination such as further learning, training or employment.

1.2 Aim of the evaluation

While individual Cyrenians services regularly collect feedback from young people, this is the first attempt to draw feedback from young people from across the services together in one report, to enable us to look at the value of the broader Cyrenians' approach for young people.

The focus of the evaluation was to gather information about young people's perceptions of whether their engagement with Cyrenians has made a difference to their prospects and life chances and, if so, what it is that Cyrenians do that makes a difference for them. The aim of collecting and

presenting this information is to support service development and enable staff at Cyrenians to have effective, evidence-based conversations with their networks and have a report available that can be used as leverage for systems change to improve outcomes for young people.

2. What we did

2.1 Approach

Cyrenians commissioned an independent consultant to support the evaluation. A key principle was that data collection would be carried out by Cyrenians staff already working within the services, rather than by an external researcher. This had clear advantages — staff knew the young people well, and young people were more likely to engage openly with someone they already trusted. However, this approach also placed additional demands on an already busy Cyrenians workforce, and it is possible that some young people may have felt less comfortable sharing negative feedback with someone connected to the service itself.

The consultant worked with a Cyrenians staff member (a keyworker and graphic designer) to develop a first draft of a creative questionnaire to gather young people's views. Initial ideas were tested with the Cyrenians' youth advisors, who are an already established youth participation group, whose feedback shaped both the design and content of the questionnaire. As a result, the questionnaire shifted from a long set of questions to a more flexible prompt sheet, combining written responses with guided discussions recorded by keyworkers.

The final questionnaire covered:

- young people's experiences of school
- what they had achieved during their time at Cyrenians, and what had supported these achievements
- their views on the Cyrenians' approach

The consultant also facilitated a workshop with staff who would be supporting young people to complete the questionnaire. This provided an opportunity to refine the tool and discuss practical approaches to gathering feedback. A facilitator's guide was developed, including guidance for supporting conversations, and a supplementary worksheet to capture additional detail.

Each service supported young people to complete the questionnaire, usually through one-to-one sessions. Participation was voluntary, and young people received a £15 reimbursement for their time. All young people also completed a consent form that explained the purpose of the evaluation, that offered an alternative to speaking with keyworkers; a WhatsApp number was provided for additional information that could be messaged or sending a voice note, though this was not used.

The original plan included two rounds of data collection. After the first round, the consultant led an analysis workshop with Cyrenians staff to identify emerging themes. Reviewing key quotations highlighted both the richness of the data and the time required from keyworkers. As a result, the second round of data collection was focused on services with new cohorts of young people.

2.2 Limitations

We note here some limitations of the evaluation – Cyrenians staff talked only to young people currently accessing the services; there will be other young people who have not engaged with Cyrenians who might provide a different viewpoint. Some Key to Potential/Key to College clients who took part in this research had sustained their college place for two or three years. However,

across the data set we note that the data reflects young people's perceptions but does not seek any objective measurement of change or reflect whether the changes they describe are sustained. The aim and scope of the evaluation is, however, exploratory, rooted in the desire to hear young people's experiences. We suggest that, especially where many of the challenges expressed here relate to their sense of self, their subjective experience is key to understanding the value of the service.

It is also important to note that young people's lives are complex and multi-faceted. These findings are a snap shot in time that reflects young people's perceptions about Cyrenians, family, school and other services, in that moment. The changes they have experienced may also have been shaped by different factors in their lives beyond their engagement with Cyrenians, and the findings should be understood in that broader context.

2.3 Participants:

Service *(see Appendix 1 for service descriptions)*	Number of young people (Wave 1)	Number of young people (Wave 2)
Creative Natives	5	
Key to Potential (Falkirk)	7	
Green Skills Centre	5	6
Key to Work	4	8
Key to Potential and Key to College (Edinburgh)	15	
Moving Forward	5	
Total = 55 *N.B Please note that we did not collect equalities data of these 55 young people in order to protect anonymity*		

3. What we learned

3.1 What difference do young people perceive since they have been working with Cyrenians?

3.1.1 New Skills and Pride in Their Achievements

Young people frequently described gaining new practical, social, and life skills through their involvement in Cyrenians' services — from cooking and managing their time to applying for college, attending interviews, and engaging in group activities. Many reflected that they had learned useful everyday skills such as budgeting, travelling independently, keeping routines, and preparing meals. These accomplishments gave them a sense of independence that many had not experienced in traditional school environments. Learning by doing, at their own pace and with guidance, allowed them to see tangible results and to feel proud of what they could achieve.

For many, developing new skills also restored their motivation to learn. They spoke about rediscovering a sense of curiosity, achievement, and satisfaction in completing tasks well. Young people described feeling proud of practical and creative successes — such as cooking a meal, completing a project, or sustaining attendance — and recognised that these experiences built their confidence and helped them believe in their own abilities. The encouragement and trust shown by

staff reinforced this progress, helping young people to recognise their own growth and to take genuine pride in what they had achieved through hard work and perseverance.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "I tried pyrography and am now selling my designs." (Creative Natives)
>
> "I've finished two college courses - skills for college and skills for life & work. I now feel ready to move into a job." (Key to College and Moving Forward)
>
> "I feel happy when I complete a job here, it's fulfilling to see an area of dirt and mud change into a growing place which will feed people." (Green Skills Centre)
>
> "Before I was just in my room with as much sense of purpose as the trash can. Now I am in college, have a couple of lessons about pipe organs and I know what I want to do." (Key to Potential and Key to College)

3.1.2 Confidence, Resilience, and Being Comfortable in Themselves

Young people described feeling more confident, more at ease with who they are, and more able to express themselves without fear of judgement. Many spoke about a growing sense of self-worth and pride in their progress — recognising how far they had come and feeling genuinely positive about the person they are becoming.

This increase in self-confidence often came from being given the opportunity to try new activities in supportive environments, where mistakes were understood as part of learning rather than signs of failure. Relationships built through the service, both with peers and staff, gave young people space to be seen and valued — helping them trust others and feel more comfortable in their own skin. Several spoke powerfully about this shift in how they see themselves, describing it as a fundamental change in their sense of identity and belonging.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "Before coming here, I was scared to speak to new people, at the RTG (Routes to Grow) group I actually feel able to speak to people. When I'm here I feel like I can try things again and not be judged for it." (Green Skills Centre)
>
> "Two years ago, I didn't want to be perceived by people, but now I can chat and am more happy to exist around others." (Creative Natives)
>
> "Before working with you I was really scared to do things or go to places. Now that I've done it and challenged myself to go places and to do more, I don't feel so scared and I know I can do it now." (Key to Potential and Moving Forward)

3.1.3 Being More Confident in Socialising with Others

One of the clearest changes described by young people was an increased confidence in socialising and building relationships with others. Many said they now find it easier to start conversations, work alongside peers, and form friendships — something that had often been a major challenge before participating in one of the Cyrenians services. They spoke about feeling less anxious in group settings and more comfortable contributing to activities.

A number of participants – particularly those in Creative Natives and the Green Skills Centre - highlighted that spending time with others who shared similar experiences made them realise they were not alone in their struggles. This sense of belonging created safer spaces where they could practise communication, teamwork, and problem-solving. Several noted that as their confidence in social situations grew, so did their willingness to participate — joining new groups, volunteering, or meeting new people outside of the service. A small number of young people identified that their growing social confidence in Cyrenians had transferred to their wider relationships.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "I now find it much easier to talk to people. I am not socially active at the moment but I do feel like I am able to communicate much better with adults in my life." (Key to Potential, Falkirk)
>
> "When I first came here, I only spoke to one person, after a while I started to speak to the others. This helped my confidence as everyone is so sociable and talkative, which helps me to be more sociable too." (Green Skills Centre)
>
> "I haven't really talked to anyone for 2 years before [keyworker]." (Key to Potential and Key to College)
>
> "I find it easier to talk to people while doing an activity." (Green Skills Centre)

3.1.4 Coping Mechanisms for When Things Don't Go Well

While fewer young people spoke explicitly about coping strategies, those who did provided compelling examples of developing healthier and more constructive responses to challenges. They described being able to pause, reflect, and think through problems instead of reacting in frustration or giving up. Some explained that the service had helped them find ways to calm themselves when things became overwhelming — for example, stepping back to take a break, listening to music, or talking with a trusted member of staff.

Several young people described how these skills helped them deal with specific challenges, such as anxiety, disappointment, or difficulties with peers. Having supportive adults who listened without judgement and modelled calm problem-solving gave young people the confidence to develop their own coping mechanism and to reach out when they struggled, rather than withdrawing or coping alone.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "If something goes wrong, I can talk to [keyworker] and what she says calms me." (Key to Potential and Key to College)
>
> "I know if I'm feeling a bit shit I'll feel better for coming to the studio. I notice staying at home when I'm feeling down doesn't help me. I know I need to be around people and CN is good for this." (Creative Natives)
>
> "I do feel that, through conversations, I can deal better when I am feeling low. I feel I have better ways of dealing with my depression." (Key to Potential, Falkirk)
>
> "Two years ago, I'd have coped quite badly, now I can think more clearly when things go wrong. The solution to problems I'm faced with seem a lot more logical now." (Creative Natives)

Asking for help was something many young people said they had previously found difficult or even impossible. For some of those who said that they had become more willing and able to ask for help, this was a significant shift in itself, reflecting a growing trust in the people around them and a recognition that seeking support is a strength rather than a weakness. Several described how this change had extended beyond the service into their wider lives, improving relationships with family members and other adults. Others mentioned that they make choices about who they ask for help, based on whether they trust them and whether they have the expertise to help. This growing confidence in asking for help was not just a coping strategy in itself, but an enabling one — opening the door to other forms of support and making it easier for young people to access the help they needed before things reached a crisis point.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "I feel more confident to ask for help now. This has helped me have a better relationship with my mum." (Key to Potential, Falkirk)
>
> "I want to raise things that concern me to people I trust. I appreciate getting advice from others that can help me make informed decisions." (Creative Natives)
>
> "I feel that having my keyworker has helped me be more open and ask for help when I need it." (Key to Potential, Falkirk)
>
> “I find it easier to talk to people who will help me with things I need done. I have learned to open up and trust people who are there to help me." (Key to Potential and Key to College)

3.1.5 Hope and Momentum for the Future

Many young people talked about feeling clearer on what they want to do next — whether pursuing college courses, apprenticeships, or employment — and having practical ideas about how to achieve those goals. For some, this represented a major turning point after periods of uncertainty, low confidence, or disengagement. The supportive environment of the service encouraged them to reflect on their strengths, set achievable goals, and take small steps toward them.

Young people spoke about feeling motivated and equipped to move forward, describing a renewed enthusiasm for learning new things and increased optimism about the future. Many young people were able to point to goals they felt proud of and expressed that they were beginning to see a realistic path toward independence and stability.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "Doing Carousel, I feel more confident about getting a childcare job. I feel more hopeful that I will have the career I want in the future." (Moving Forward)
>
> “I know how to get there now, I know what courses I need to take and who I need to ask support from." (Creative Natives)
>
> "I have more hope for my future, yes. I have a plan." (Key to Potential and Key to College)
>
> "Being referred to employability courses makes me feel more hopeful about my future." (Key to Potential, Falkirk)

3.2 What is it that Cyrenians does that makes a difference for young people?

3.2.1 Relaxed environment and keyworkers

Young people described the service environment as relaxed, welcoming, and easy to be part of. They appreciated that staff created a calm and friendly space where they could be themselves without fear of judgement or pressure. Unlike school, where – due to the nature of the school system - many felt constantly assessed or compared to others, the service offered a setting where progress wasn't measured by grades or performance, which helped young people feel more comfortable, open, and confident to take part. They valued the down-to-earth approach of their keyworkers, who were approachable and honest, making conversations feel natural rather than formal or intimidating. The humour, patience, and flexibility shown by staff helped take the stress out of situations that had previously felt overwhelming, allowing young people to focus on learning and personal growth in their own way.

The relaxed atmosphere also gave young people the confidence to try new things without the fear of failure. They spoke about having space to explore activities, apply for courses, or take on new challenges — and to sometimes discover that they didn't enjoy them or weren't naturally good at them, but that this was completely okay. This freedom to experiment built resilience and self-awareness, showing participants that not everything had to go perfectly in order for progress to happen. By removing pressure and expectations, the environment fostered curiosity and the willingness to continue trying — essential qualities that underpin ongoing confidence, learning, and engagement

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "Everyone here is really kind. Meeting new people at first can be awkward, but everybody is really friendly." (Green Skills Centre)
>
> "My keyworker has a relaxed approach and they are easy to talk to." (Key to Potential, Falkirk)
>
> "They treat me more like a pal than a stranger. The atmosphere is welcoming." (Green Skills Centre)
>
> "It's a nice group of people who are nice to each other." (Green Skills Centre)

3.2.2 Feeling Seen

A recurring theme across young people's feedback was the difference it made to feel truly seen and understood. Many explained that in school or other services, often due to a lack of time or resources, they often felt overlooked — just another student in a system that didn't recognise their individuality or potential. By contrast, their keyworkers took time to listen, ask questions, and get to know them as people, not as problems to be solved. Young people described staff who noticed when something wasn't right, remembered details about their lives, and responded with empathy rather than judgement. This attention made them feel visible, valued, and worth investing in — something many said they had not experienced before. Quotes such as *"They listen to everyone and try people's ideas"* and *"They are kind and helpful, they listen and don't judge"* reflect how consistent, genuine listening helped restore young people's belief that their voices mattered.

Several young people spoke about how their keyworkers were able to "*see behind the mask*" — recognising when confidence or humour hid deeper struggles. This ability to look beyond surface behaviours and see the person underneath was deeply meaningful to participants who had often felt misunderstood or labelled elsewhere. Keyworkers understood that there was more to the young

person than lateness, anxiety, or low motivation, and that support began with understanding their story. As one young person described, staff made them feel "*important and normal*." This recognition fostered trust and safety, enabling honest conversations and real personal growth. Feeling genuinely seen in this way helped young people believe they were capable of more than others — and sometimes even they themselves — had expected.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "They listen to everyone and try people's ideas." (Creative Natives)
>
> "The staff are all good at different things which means we can all ask for help without being judged." (Green Skills Centre)
>
> "You sat down and understood what I needed and wanted with me when no one else did." (Key to Potential and Moving Forward)

3.2.3 Feeling Cared For and Supported

Young people repeatedly described their keyworkers as kind, caring, and reliable, emphasising the difference it made to have adults who genuinely cared about them. Many said their keyworkers listened attentively, took their feelings seriously, and responded with understanding rather than criticism. Comments such as *"They are kind and helpful, they listen and don't judge"* and *"Very nice to me, very attentive and responsive to my feelings"* illustrate the warmth and empathy that underpinned these relationships. Young people valued being able to express worries or make mistakes without fear of being lectured or dismissed. For some, this was the first time they had worked with adults who looked beyond behaviour to understand what was really going on, offering practical help and emotional reassurance side by side. This depth of care and patience allowed them to relax, trust, and start believing in their own ability to overcome challenges.

The consistency and reliability of keyworkers were described as particularly important. Having someone who could be counted on — to check in, give advice, or simply listen — built a sense of safety and stability that had often been missing elsewhere. Young people frequently mentioned that keyworkers "*don't have a go at you for not knowing things*" and "*treat you more like a pal than a stranger*." This tone of genuine care helped them feel equal rather than dependent or judged. Knowing that support came from people who wanted to see them succeed, rather than from people they perceived as 'simply doing a job', made a lasting difference to young people's confidence and wellbeing. It fostered a feeling of belonging and reminded participants that they were worth the time, encouragement, and belief that staff so consistently offered.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "My keyworker is kind and helpful, they make me feel like I am important and they really care about me." (Key to Potential, Falkirk)
>
> "They don't have a go at you for not knowing things." (Green Skills Centre)
>
> "Always someone there to help if I need it." (Key to Potential and Key to College)
>
> "I always came to you for advice, you were advice people." (Key to Potential and Key to College)

3.2.4 Creating New Opportunities

The services opened up new experiences and possibilities that many young people hadn't previously imagined for themselves. With the support of their keyworkers, they explored college courses, apprenticeships, and job opportunities, as well as creative and community-based activities that developed new skills and confidence. Several young people described how the service helped them "*get out of the house*," "*find out what I am interested in and what I want to do in the future*," and feel more prepared to move forward. For many, these were the first opportunities they had to consider their goals in a positive way — a turning point from feeling stuck or uncertain toward building a sense of direction. Young people spoke about learning how to complete college or funding applications, write CVs, and attend interviews, all with calm, encouraging support from staff who taught them step by step and celebrated each milestone.

Beyond formal education and employment routes, young people also appreciated the chance to try new things and socialise in a relaxed, supportive setting. Many talked about enjoying activities they had never done before — experiences that "*gave me more confidence*," "*helped me learn new skills*," and "*made me feel ready to take on the next step*." These opportunities were important not only for skill building but also for helping participants rediscover a sense of curiosity and possibility. Keyworkers' open, patient, and practical approach gave young people space to experiment, take small risks, and sometimes realise that it's okay if things don't go perfectly the first time. Through being encouraged to take these steps, they built both confidence and momentum, seeing that their futures could hold many different and achievable paths.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "You helped me get college interview, Street league and more confidence about talking English" (Key to Potential and Key to College)
>
> "Helped with applying for apprenticeship. Feeling more confident to go into places and try things." (Key to Potential and Key to College)
>
> "You helped me get money for getting into college (even though I didn't continue) and get into Action for Children who are helping me get a job. And driving lessons and a personal trainer." (Moving Forward)
>
> "Creative Natives has shown me how many opportunities there are for careers in art." (Creative Natives)
>
> "I have the apprenticeship at nursery because of the service which is all new experience. Without your help in finding the opportunity I would still be at home not doing anything." (Moving Forward)

3.2.5 Developing Trust and Connection

Building trust was central to the success of the Cyrenians' approach. Young people described their keyworkers as approachable, down-to-earth, and easy to talk to — as one participant put it, *"more like a pal than a stranger."* Trust was not created instantly but built gradually over time through everyday consistency: keyworkers keeping their word, remembering what young people said, and checking in regularly. Participants appreciated that staff didn't rush them but instead spent time getting to know who they were and what was important to them. They noticed when staff showed up even on difficult days and gave them space to talk openly or just be quiet. This patience, reliability, and genuine interest made young people feel respected, safe, and understood. The

informal style — friendly conversation rather than formal meetings — helped to remove the power imbalance they often felt with adults in other services.

Alongside the strong bonds formed with staff, young people also reflected on improvements in their relationships with others. The services created opportunities to meet peers in a relaxed, supportive environment, where kindness and humour were the norm. Many said that everyone was "*kind and funny and always willing to help,"* and that meeting new people no longer felt intimidating. This mix of peer and staff relationships helped young people learn to trust again and practise communication skills in everyday contexts. Crucially, participants said that being treated like adults — with respect, choice, and honesty — encouraged them to take responsibility for their own actions and decisions. Feeling trusted in this way was transformative: it gave them confidence in their own judgement, strengthened motivation, and built the foundation for more equal, respectful relationships in the future.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

> "The keyworkers seems to have their shit together so I can trust them." (Creative Natives)
>
> "Very open and very chatty. Good at giving support and helping find other opportunities." (Key to Potential and Key to College)
>
> "Everyone is kind and funny and always willing to help." (Key to Work)
>
> "There is no power dynamic. I can swear and not get told off (but not swear at people, we're not disrespectful)." (Creative Natives)

3.2.6 Problem Solving Together

Young people valued the way keyworkers worked alongside them to tackle challenges, rather than simply telling them what to do. The services gave space to slow down, reflect on what hadn't worked in the past, and understand how to move forward in more constructive ways. Keyworkers helped participants recognise patterns — such as attendance issues, confidence barriers, or strained relationships — and supported them to find realistic solutions. This process wasn't just about fixing immediate problems but about helping young people to rebuild trust in themselves and plan for a more positive future. By working things out together, young people began to see that setbacks weren't permanent and that small steps could lead to meaningful change. Many said this approach gave them a sense of ownership over their decisions and confidence that they could handle difficulties differently next time.

This collaborative, relational problem-solving extended beyond one-to-one work into peer settings as well. In group activities and sessions — particularly at the Green Skills Centre — young people learned to manage group dynamics, work through disagreements, and support each other's success. They noticed that staff modelled the same respectful and caring behaviour they encouraged in the group, showing what it looks like to listen, be kind, and disagree without conflict. One young person explained that everyone was "*kind and funny and always willing to help*," and that this consistency of behaviour made a real difference. By seeing adults treat each other and participants with genuine respect, young people experienced what positive communication looks like in practice. This modelling of empathy, patience, and honesty created a community where problem solving became a shared skill.

YOUNG PEOPLE SAID:

"You helped me find out what I am interested in and what I want to do in the future." (Moving Forward)

"They explain stuff, I feel confident asking for help if unsure what to do." (Green Skills Centre)

"I have learned how to do things rather than rely on others." (Key to Potential & Key to College)

4. Discussion: why is this important

Everything that young people told us in this report paints a consistent picture of what meaningful support can look like for young people who have, to varying extents and for different reasons, disengaged from mainstream education. Across all of the different services involved in this evaluation, a clear picture emerges: that when young people feel safe, seen, and genuinely cared for, many begin to rebuild the confidence, motivation, and sense of self that had, for a range of reasons, been lost. This discussion draws together themes that cut across the findings and reflects on what they may tell us about what works in practice with young people.

4.1 Young People's Experiences at School and with Cyrenians

Young people described a range of difficult experiences at school: young people who felt overwhelmed by busy environments, feeling unsupported in managing additional needs or mental health challenges, and disengaged from teaching approaches that did not suit the way they learned. The difficulties young people described are not simply a reflection of individual failings but of a system that is not always able to meet the needs of those who require a different kind of support.

It is striking how differently many young people described their experiences with Cyrenians compared to school. The smaller scale, relational nature of the support — with keyworkers able to spend dedicated time with individual young people — created conditions that are simply not replicable within a mainstream school setting. The services recognise that some young people need something different: a different pace, a different environment, and a different kind of relationship with the adults supporting them. Understanding this contrast helps to explain why targeted outreach services like those delivered by Cyrenians can play such an important role, either alongside or as a next step after mainstream provision.

4.2 Relational Support as the Foundation of Engagement

The theme that runs through every section of this report is the importance of consistent, trusted relationships. Young people described their keyworkers as approachable, honest, patient, and genuinely interested in them as individuals. What appeared to make these relationships meaningful was not simply that staff were kind, but that their support was consistent and reliable over time. Keyworkers showed up, remembered what mattered to young people, and continued to engage with them even when progress was slow or setbacks occurred.

For young people who had experienced difficult or inconsistent relationships with adults in authority, this quality of relationship appeared to be an important enabling condition for engagement. Young people who felt trusted and cared for described being more willing to try new things, ask for help, and take small steps forward. The large number of references to the importance of relationships within the data suggests that for this group, the relational dimension of support is not simply one factor among many — it is often the thing that makes other forms of support accessible in the first place.

4.3 Confidence as a Key Enabling Factor

Increased confidence is described as an outcome across almost every theme in section 3.2 — in socialising, in trying new things, in asking for help, in planning for the future, and in coping with setbacks. While confidence is one outcome among many, the findings suggest it may also function as an enabling condition that makes other forms of progress more accessible. Young people who grew in confidence described becoming more willing to engage with peers, more open to new opportunities, and more able to consider a positive future as genuinely achievable.

For many of the young people in this report, confidence had become significantly depleted before they engaged with Cyrenians — often as a result of a combination of factors including difficult school experiences, mental health challenges, social isolation, and personal circumstances. Rebuilding it was therefore a gradual and sometimes non-linear process, requiring patience and a willingness on the part of staff to meet young people where they were. The findings suggest that for this group, confidence-building is not a preliminary step before more substantive work begins, but a core outcome in its own right — one that is closely intertwined with all other forms of progress.

4.4 The Value of Practical, Hands-On Experience

A recurring theme is the value of practical, hands-on activity. Many young people said they had struggled with traditional, text-based learning and found it difficult to stay engaged with more passive approaches. By contrast, they responded positively to activities that gave them tangible, visible results — growing food, making art, cooking meals, completing a college application — and which allowed them to experience the impact of their own efforts directly.

For young people who had experienced repeated disengagement or difficulty in academic settings, practical activities appeared to offer something importantly different: a way to demonstrate competence, experience success, learn from challenges, and take pride in their own abilities in contexts that felt less loaded with the anxiety of formal assessment. The fact that so many young people described feeling proud of practical and creative achievements — and that these experiences often sparked broader curiosity and motivation — suggests that hands-on experience can play a particularly valuable role in re-engaging those who have become disaffected from more traditional forms of learning.

4.5 From Isolation to Connection

Many of the young people who engaged with Cyrenians' services described having withdrawn significantly from social interactions before doing so. Some had had very limited contact with peers for extended periods; others described finding it difficult to leave the house or be around others. One of the more consistent themes in section 3.2 is a gradual movement toward greater connection — first within the service environment, and in a number of cases extending into wider relationships and communities over time.

This shift was supported both by the relationships young people built with their keyworkers and by the peer connections they formed within group settings. For those in group environments, knowing that others shared similar experiences appeared to reduce feelings of isolation and difference, and several young people described the service environment as one where kindness and mutual support felt like the norm. A number noted that the social confidence they developed within the service began to carry over into other areas of their lives — improving relationships with family members and making it easier to engage with new groups or activities. While it is difficult to attribute these

changes solely to their involvement with Cyrenians, the findings suggest that the social dimension of the work — the communities created as well as the individual support provided — is a meaningful contributor to positive outcomes.

4.6 Hope and a Growing Sense of Agency

One of the more significant shifts described across the findings is a movement from uncertainty and low motivation toward a greater sense of hope and personal direction. Many young people arrived at Cyrenians' services feeling unsure of what they wanted or overwhelmed by what felt like an unbridgeable gap between where they were and where they might want to be. By the time they reflected on their experiences, many described feeling more motivated and more able to think about their futures in a positive and concrete way — though for some, this was still very much a work in progress.

An important aspect of this shift appeared to be the way in which support was offered. Keyworkers worked alongside young people rather than directing them, helping them identify their own interests, set their own goals, and take ownership of their own decisions. Being treated as capable individuals — rather than as problems to be managed — was described by several young people as meaningful in itself, fostering a growing belief in their own judgement and ability to move forward.

5. Conclusion

The evidence gathered in this report suggests that Cyrenians' services are making a positive contribution to the lives of young people who face significant barriers to education, employment, and wellbeing. The outcomes described by young people — greater confidence, stronger social connections, improved coping skills, new practical abilities, and a more hopeful outlook on the future —reflect a consistent pattern across services and across the young people who took part. These changes will have been shaped by many influences in young people's lives, and it would be an oversimplification to attribute them to any single source of support. What the findings do suggest, however, is that Cyrenians' approach — relational, patient, practical, and genuinely person-centred — creates conditions in which positive change becomes more possible.

The challenges young people described at school reflect broader systemic pressures that no single service can resolve. However, the experiences they described with Cyrenians point to what becomes possible when targeted support is available to those who need something different: a different pace, a different environment, and different kinds of relationship. The perspectives gathered in this report speak to the resilience and potential of the young people themselves, and to the value of services that take the time to listen and to believe in them as they find their own way forward.

6. Appendix

Appendix One: descriptions of the Cyrenians services that took part in this evaluation.

Key to Potential (Edinburgh) has been running since 2012 and is a pre-stage 1 visiting support careers outreach service for young people aged 15–17 who have been identified as at risk of leaving school and not moving onto a positive destination. We assist young people who have experienced disrupted education or long-term non-attendance and, therefore, have had limited access to in-school careers guidance and post-school planning. Our keyworkers offer outreach support, including home visits, to build trust with young people and families who are disengaged from school to offer career guidance and support, to increase their awareness of post-school options, and to work together on gaining a suitable positive destination. We also offer practical support for essential school leaving tasks such as opening bank accounts, sourcing birth certificates and families accessing benefits.

Key to Potential (Falkirk): After successfully delivering Key to Potential in Edinburgh for 12 years, we decided to replicate the service in Falkirk in 2023 because we observed a similar demand there for this type of service. Key to Potential is now in year three in Falkirk. It is a vital service, offering much needed support to young people in the local authority area who are deemed to be the 'hardest to reach' (and their families) in a way that suits them best and leads to positive outcomes at a critical time. We provide outreach and home visiting support for non-attenders aged 16+ (and their families) as they transition from school to help them towards positive destinations. Referrals come from high schools in the Falkirk area and word of mouth from families or peers of existing clients.

Key to College is an outreach careers keywork service designed to assist school leavers aged 16+ to apply, gain entry, enrol, and start college successfully. The service provides intensive, one-to-one careers and transition support for young people who want to progress to further education but without this assistance may not make it to college. Our keyworker offers personalised guidance throughout the application process, college visits, and preparation for interviews or assessments. If applicants are offered a place, we provide ongoing assistance, including self-enrolment, setting up student accounts, accessing timetables, opening first bank accounts, gaining ID and a Young Scot Card for travel, accessing MY SQA qualifications and National Insurance Number. In addition, we offer practical assistance for parents and carers to obtain student bursaries and an Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA). The overarching aim is to remove barriers and enable young people and their families to make informed choices about continuing their education and be fully prepared and confident to start college.

Key to Work is a targeted employability engagement programme for young people aged 14–18 who might not have had opportunities for work-related learning, social capital to arrange their own work experienc and/or require confidence building. Referrals are received from secondary schools across Edinburgh, with a particular focus on schools that are in areas of multiple deprivation. The programme offers a structured series of vocational taster sessions, including Creative Natives art studio, Cyrenians' Green Skills Centre, Cyrenians' Cook School, and Edinburgh Zoo. These placements provide young people with opportunities to explore different career sectors through direct, hands-on experience, supported by activity leaders with specialist knowledge and experience in the field. Each 8-week placement is designed to build confidence, develop practical and transferable skills, reduce anxiety and social isolation, and foster positive relationships between participants, key workers, and activity leaders. The service takes a nurturing and supportive approach to real-world

experience in professional working environments, increasing motivation, awareness of post-school options, and support learning in alternative environments.

Moving Forward is a Stage 1 employability training provision delivered by Cyrenians for young people aged 15–19 who are not currently in education, employment, or training. Operating in partnership with schools in East Edinburgh, the programme provides targeted one-to-one support and structured group work sessions delivered primarily within the young person's local community. Its core aim is to support participants to progress into positive destinations, including further education, training, employment, or volunteering. The service offers financial support to young people, enabling them to access Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) and support with bursary applications (if eligible). This includes working closely with parents/carers to offer practical support of gathering and submitting required evidence such as birth certificates, benefit or Universal Credit letters. Each young person receives individualised, strengths-based support to identify their interests, aspirations, and personal goals, enabling the development of realistic progression pathways. Where appropriate, the service also supports engagement in hobbies and interests that contribute to increased confidence, motivation, and personal autonomy.

Creative Natives is a targeted, holistic support service for young people aged 14–24 across Edinburgh, providing open-ended weekly group sessions alongside individual one-to-one support within a professional art studio. The service engages young people who are at risk of disengaging from education, including those who are school non-attenders who may be experiencing low self-esteem, social isolation, or additional barriers to participation. Referrals come from schools, CAMHS, Skills Development Scotland (SDS), and self-referrals. The service utilises a range of artistic mediums as a primary engagement tool, offering a flexible, trauma-informed, and consistent approach that supports engagement. Through supported creative processes, young people develop key life skills, both practical (hard) and transferable (soft) skills, alongside tailored support to explore and progress towards their next education, training, or employment pathway. The service motivates and re-engages young people, enabling them to explore new creative opportunities within a safe, inclusive, and purposeful environment that supports personal growth and progression.

The Green Skills Centre (where the Routes to Grow programme is delivered) offers group training and development for young people from under-resourced backgrounds and other vulnerable groups at risk of experiencing homelessness. Using a person-centred approach, the centre provides learning across a range of areas including horticulture, market gardening, land management, woodland skills, woodworking, and outdoor education, supporting young people to develop confidence, self-esteem, and readiness for their next steps. Routes to Grow is a 10-week programme based at the Green Skills Centre in West Lothian, accepting young people aged 14–18 referred by their school or West Lothian Council. Running three times a year with groups of 8–12 participants, the programme combines green skills activities and employability workshops with one-to-one support to identify appropriate routes into training, work, or education. Participants contribute to a trading market garden and work towards their Forest and Outdoor Learning Award (FOLA) at level 2,3 or 4. For those who wish to continue beyond the 10 weeks, the centre offers trainee roles and volunteering opportunities, enabling young people to further develop their skills while working alongside volunteers from a range of ages and backgrounds.