

**Youth work changes lives – a personal reflection.** “When I walked back in aged 29, the good memories hit me and it has still got the same feeling. This will always be a place where I feel at home.”

I first came here at 14 with a group of friends and thought it was just somewhere to relax. This was a good place, not associated with school, where I could forget whatever was going on in my head or at home. For 2 hours I could chill out and feel like a normal teenager. Favourite times were the residential week, summer programme, arts & crafts, graffiti, fireworks, pancakes and the Christmas meal - all together like one big family. However, much more was going on alongside, as the youth club also provided practical and emotional support. Even when feeling low, youth workers encouraged us to do things for ourselves: “Do you want to cook yourself some tea?” They saw below the surface, preparing us for what was to come in the future, but it felt like fun because we were all together and helped each other out.

Other services branched out from youth club, including a counsellor who helped many of us, which was ok as we understood people had issues. When I was really desperate, this was the only place I felt I could go. I then saw how many other services linked with the Centre. Nick, the youth worker, secured immediate help, accommodation and follow-on support, always seeing me as a person not a problem. Even though I had to move away, he helped me get to youth club to keep in touch with my (only) friends. For a 17-year-old this was a ‘lifeline’. Others also benefited from Nick’s encouragement and help to find jobs around the area.

At 19, a new mums group helped me to learn skills and build confidence, and then help new attendees to feel included. Through this I could socialise and make new friends. Each session we had a budget to feed everyone: making a plan, buying food, cooking and serving it. I learnt something each time, felt involved and had fun.

As an adult, I realise what a massive impact the youth centre had on me and really don’t know what I would have done without it. Back then, I didn't want to deal with anything I was going through but Nick showed me that I do matter and I’m worth caring about. Now I can acknowledge how far I’ve come, feel that I am in charge of my future and can deal with anything. I’ve even adopted his caring, positive, encouraging approach! Now I really want to be able to support others, equipping them to move forwards, particularly homeless and vulnerable people. I feel very strongly about it and am exploring ways to become a key worker for people facing crisis, starting by taking a youth worker course (helped by the current team). My long-term aim is to provide practical help, routine, continuity and ongoing support for people with issues that caused, or resulted from, homelessness - and one day run my own hostel.