Youth Work in a Pandemic:

The Shaping of a Service Through the Lockdowns

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To my dad, Kje

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Abstract

Youth work within England was disproportionately impacted by austere policies from 2010 through to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. These financial cuts occurred alongside an expectation for youth services to take a targeted approach to youth work and consider vulnerabilities within young people. The current project began during the lockdown phases of the COVID-19 pandemic. This thesis examined the role of one local authority in England, anonymised as ''Sunshine" Youth Service, through the COVID-19 pandemic. Data collection consisted of 25 in depth semi-structured interviews across the lockdown phases, as well as observation of staff meetings within the Sunshine area. This thesis sought to answer questions related to Sunshine Youth Service during the COVID-19 pandemic. These research questions specifically contribute to wider academic narratives pertaining to youth work through the consideration of the relationship between youth work and austerity, contextualisation within a critical realist perspective, a novel conceptualisation of the youth services' reflexive approach to vulnerability, and a new way to interpret the space in which services are delivered. These elements work together to demonstrate the reality of working within Sunshine Youth Services through the precarity of a pandemic, the ways in which previous years of austerity may have prepared the youth workers to do so and considers how these may impact youth work in the future.

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I think … it's quite nice to be able to have the opportunity to talk about work in

that way … 'cause it gives a bigger picture … I think [youth services] are

misunderstood

(Nicholas, Sunshine Youth Development worker)

Chapter 1

Thesis Introduction

Youth work in England has a lengthy history (Ord & Davies 2018). Davies (2009) considered the emergence of youth work to be through the development of the Young Men's Christian's Association (YMCA), while others like Jeffs and Smith (2002) and Ord and Davies (2018) noted that the development of Sunday schools could also been seen as initial phases of youth work. Both the YMCA and Sunday schools were developed as ways in which young people could informally engage with activities and education (Davies 2009; Jeffs & Smith 2002; Johnson 1970; Ord & Davies 2018). In the modern day, youth work is considered to be a form of education and is intended to help young people gain support for their development within the personal and social aspects of their lives (NYA 2021e). As set out by the National Youth Agency (NYA), youth work is intended to facilitate young people through the exploration of themselves, through learning more about their own voice and values within the boundaries of an adult-run space that is meant to be welcoming for all young people who wish to attend (NYA 2021e).

With research in relation to youth work that occurred between 2020 to 2021, it was important to consider the COVID-19 pandemic, and the lockdowns that impacted all of society on a global scale. The pandemic shaped all of the research questions and every aspect of data collection for this project. With this context in mind, this thesis addressed the perspective of those working within youth work during a crisis, but also the practice of youth work. Though this thesis focussed on the practice of youth work at a time when the world was experiencing a global pandemic hitherto unknown since the early 1900s, the conclusions drawn from the

findings presented in this thesis provide an understanding of youth work and youth services beyond the pandemic as well. The consideration of the future of youth work is rooted within the policy that impacted youth work prior to the pandemic lockdown, as well as the ways in which the youth service coped with the lockdowns. All of these aspects will be discussed through the literature review chapters, the empirical chapters, and the conclusion to the thesis.

1.1 Current project

The initial work for the thesis began in September 2019, and the COVID-19 lockdowns began in March 2020. The COVID-19 pandemic altered the social and cultural landscape of the UK, and extended across the globe (Pickersgill 2020). The overall aim of this thesis was to critically examine the provision of youth work in a time of structural crisis, in relation to both a fiscal and public health crisis. This thesis will illustrate how those within youth services were able to utilise the available resources to ensure youth work provision within the area. This project is important in the current climate for a few reasons. It serves as a case study within one local authority, anonymised as 'Sunshine', of the resonating impacts of a unique global crisis. From this perspective, this thesis was able to consider the impacts of austerity prior to the pandemic, as well as the way that austerity policies influenced the way in which a single youth service was able to operate in constrained financial and physical lockdown guidelines. As time has moved beyond the lockdowns, this thesis will contribute to narratives about the strains of working in youth services within compounding states of precarity, and it will make recommendations for the future.

Trelfa (2018) considered youth work in line with previous definitions presented by the National Youth Agency (NYA). At the time, the NYA defined youth work as, ''…building resilience and character and giving young people the life skills…to live, learn, work and interact successfully with other people (NYA as cited in Trelfa 2018, p. 2). At this time, the NYA placed emphasis was upon the 'science' of youth work as a practice (NYA as cited in Trelfa 2018, p.2). The NYA (2024b) has shifted the conceptualisation of youth work as, ''….supporting young people at one of the most important periods of their lives…help them learn new skills, embrace their passions and develop a sense of identity and independence,'' (n.p.). The NYA (2024b) brings attention to the voluntary, informal nature of youth work, through enabling young people to feel safe while also having an active voice within the service (NYA 2024a). The emphasis within the NYA's (2024a) plan toward youth work from 2024 to 2029, a central theme of youth work is rooted within young people being given the resources and space to, ''..take charge of their own futures,'' (n.d.).

For the purpose of this thesis, youth work is considered in line with the NYA definition: as a space in which to support young people through learning new skills, embracing passions, and developing their sense of self (NYA 2024b). The definition of youth services also follows the guidance of the NYA (2024a), through considering youth services as voluntary and informal spaces, where young people have an active voice. Trelfa (2018) noted that using the NYA as a guide for defining youth work is valuable, as the organisation itself serves as a guide to the application and practice of youth work and youth services across England. In addition to the definitions supplied from the NYA (2024a, b), this thesis will also consider youth services specifically as the formal operation of a youth service

provision through the use of youth centres both online and in person as well as through detached youth work within a local authority in England. With this in mind, unless it is stated otherwise, 'youth service(s)' within this thesis are in reference to formal youth service organisations within a local authority. In this way, the youth service, youth centres, and youth workers are all tied to the local authority in their area.

As the pandemic began during my first year of the PhD, it directly impacted the formation of the project. The original project proposal was intended to occur in person, with data collection through ethnography and interviews. With the start of the pandemic and lockdowns that would not allow for an in person ethnography, the focus of the project shifted from wanting to learn more about both young people and youth workers within one youth centre, to focusing on youth service employees in one local authority area, those they work with in partnership, and their experiences through the pandemic. Specifically, the research questions are:

- In what ways did COVID-19 impact youth services in a local authority in England?

    o In what ways did changing economic, political, and social contexts impact youth services during COVID-19?

    o In what ways did youth service professionals conceptualise and create space within youth services for young people during COVID-19?

    o In what ways did youth service professionals manage and conceptualise vulnerability during COVID-19?

These research questions were aimed towards gaining insight into working within youth services through the pandemic. However, through this approach, there was

also an opportunity to learn about the pre-pandemic experiences of youth work and the youth service, as the central research questions allow room for comparison. In order for participants to express their experience with the pandemic in different contexts, it has also been important to give explanation about *how* the impacts of the pandemic compared to their prior experiences. Further, this research was aimed to provide insight into the experience of working as a youth worker through the pandemic. This is valuable, given the speculation that the UK government may reinstate austerity policies in light of the economic crisis that followed the lockdowns (Hiam & Dorling 2022). Current policy does not appear to plan more funding toward youth services (Department of Culture, Media and Sport 2023), and funding that was promised prior to the pandemic was delayed and cut (DCMS 2022a). Previous literature identified the impacts of austere measures in the 2010s upon youth services (YMCA 2020). This thesis will aim to provide details in relation to the lasting mark of austerity and the pandemic moving into an uncertain future for youth services. Further implications of current policy will be explored in Chapter 8.

The nature of this thesis and the methodology utilised to gather the data serve as a case study of one youth service in England within the context of prolonged austere policy and global lockdowns. The methodological approach to analysis was rooted with a critical realist and grounded theory framework. This included consideration of the structures that surrounded youth services in England, the ways in which policy impacted youth services, and the detailed perspectives of those who were working within youth services (Bhaskar 2010), while allowing the themes to be emergent from the data (Glaser & Strauss 1999). Critical realism as a method has been supported through a reflexive approach to the data collection

and analysis stages. Each stage of data collection and analysis consisted of a reflexive practice to the next steps of the project. The data collected through the thesis will contribute to research that addressed the impacts of funding cuts to the youth service, and the precariousness that the youth service experienced prior to and through the pandemic. This thesis demonstrated the resilience and perseverance of youth workers to push through the adversity of funding and lockdowns to continue to provide for young people, as well as reflexively innovate new ways in which to understand their own practice.

1.2 Significance and limitations

Youth work was already a practice experiencing precarity, with numerous youth centres across England being shut down as a result of funding decreases due to policy from the financial crash in 2007- 2008 (YMCA 2020). Many youth services across England reported that they did not have appropriate support and infrastructure to meet the needs of their young people through the lockdowns of COVID-19 (Reynolds & Charraighe 2022). These circumstances allowed for an approach to the present research through the lens of working through the pandemic lockdowns. Future research will be able to ask participants to reflect upon their experience of the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns; however, the data presented in this thesis is a reflection upon the time as it occurred. The timing of data collection allowed for rich analysis with insight into the COVID-19 crisis for youth services.

At the time of writing, it has been over a year since all restrictions were lifted. However, there have been lasting impacts of the pandemic upon the

economy and state funded spending (International Monetary Fund 2022). While the pandemic was far from the only impacting factor upon the economy, it was a contributing factor. The economic crisis combined with the previous history of funding for youth work allowed for an interesting insight and interpretation of the data collected during the research, future directions for youth work as a practice, as well as future directions for research around the topic.

There were also limitations to this project. The data collected was a case study in one local authority youth service within England. The participants for this study were those working within youth services, or in organisations that worked in partnership with youth services. Young people were excluded from data collection, as the lockdown restrictions limited the ways in which any young people would be able to be contacted to participate. While the thesis does hold value on its own through gaining the perspectives of those working within or in partnership with the youth service, the lack of participation directly from young people is something to consider when reflecting on the data and conclusions that can be drawn from them. The perspectives of the youth service employees, and those working with the youth service, provided insight into the experiences of being a youth worker or within the service in line with provided guidelines and expectations, along with available funding.

Another limitation could be the number of participants. In total, there were 25 in-depth interviews, across 13 participants. An initial interview occurred with 13 participants, and 12 of the original participants partook in a follow up interview. Data collection also consisted of 4 observations of staff meetings. All the interviews and staff observations occurred online. All initial interviews were during

the lockdowns or restrictions to in-person activity in England. However, it is important to note that across the interviews, over 40% of the entire youth service staff participated. Further, it was previously argued that saturation can occur with 12 interviews (Guest, Bunce & Johnson 2006).

With these limitations in mind, the data presented and conclusions drawn were illustrative of the pandemic lockdowns upon the youth service within the case study, as well as the impact of preceding austerity measures. The interviews produced rich data, allowing for saturation by the end of the interview process. Further, by doing a follow up interview, the data collected detailed a narrative about each participants' experience through strict lockdowns, as well as restrictions being lifted. The observations of staff meetings also allowed for supplemental data to reinforce data collected through the interviews. Through considering these with a critical lens, perhaps more light can be shed around the expectations and practicalities of providing a youth service within the policy and financial expectations.

1.3 Thesis outline

The introduction thus far has served as an overview of relevant background information for the topics that will be addressed through the remainder of the thesis. This has included brief discussion of background information, methodology, the research questions, and the aims and limitations of the research. The final section of the introduction will serve as a guide through the remaining chapters of the thesis.

Chapters Two and Three together make up the literature review. Chapter Two is on the history and expectations of youth work in England. This chapter discusses the fluctuations in policy from more recent decades, such as the impacts of austerity after the 2007/2008 financial crash, but also details youth service policy dating back through the 1900s. Chapter Three is aimed toward contextualising the current project with the discipline of sociology, but with acknowledgement of influence from other fields. Concepts and key terms that will be relevant through the empirical chapters will be presented, beginning with establishing a critical realist framework as a perspective and framework for which the data to be analysed. This section then explores reflexivity, vulnerability, and space. These concepts will be discussed from an academic standpoint, but also tie the terms into youth work and youth services.

The next chapter is Chapter Four, which is the methods chapter. This chapter will describe the project in detail to allow for better understanding and further context around the conclusions drawn. This chapter will detail the initial project proposal as well as the methodological choices that contributed to conceptualising the present thesis. The methods chapter will also discuss the shifts in philosophical considerations of various methodological choices through the process of the PhD. This has been included, as the methodological choices that ended up being used were informed and influenced by the exploration of different perspectives. These methodological choices help to detail the evolution of the project.

The methods chapter will be followed by the first empirical chapter, titled *A Thematic Approach to Sunshine Youth Service and Austerity*. This chapter begins

the narrative of the empirical chapters with a wide scope. Data is presented through common themes that were discussed by the participants in relation to their experience of austerity and youth work, or working alongside youth work. The chapter then moves on to suggest that the relationship between youth services and austerity could be considered within a critical realist framework. This chapter expands the understanding of critical realism from Fletcher (2017) to relate to youth work. The perspective of participants in regards to their role and the impact of austerity is also explored within critical realism.

Chapter Six, *Youth Work Practice During COVID-19: Vulnerability and Reflexivity*. This chapter address the use of vulnerability within the youth service, and the ways in which the youth workers and wider youth service employees conceptualised and adapted their practice around vulnerability through the stages of the COVID-19 lockdowns. This chapter will introduce a classification of vulnerability. This classification can help to detail the process by which youth workers evaluate vulnerability within young people, which may help to clarify the use of vulnerability within youth services. The classification includes consideration for the ways that youth workers engage in a reflexive practice in relation to vulnerability, both of the young people and of the resources of the youth service.

Chapter Seven is the final empirical chapter, and is titled '*The New Age of Youth Work': The Conceptualisation and Creation of Space*. This chapter will examine the participants' interpretations of what a youth centre space is. A critical discussion of Hart's Ladder of Participation will be used to contextualise the ways that the youth service and youth workers incorporate participation to their roles. This chapter will also discuss the start of the COVID-19 lockdowns, and

the ways in which the youth workers adapted to a new way of delivering the *space* of the youth service through the adaptation of an online space. The adaptation of an online space, and the practicality of the use of the online space within youth services will be explored.

The final chapter of the thesis will provide a wider discussion around the project, specifically tying together the empirical chapters and providing a basis for practical implications as well as future research. The three empirical chapters discuss different aspects of the data with some overlap, but this section will work to detail more clearly how these chapters relate to and inform one another. The conclusion will also make policy recommendations and comment on the current state of youth services in England. This thesis will work to further the understanding of youth work as a practice, and the wider service that it plays within society, as well as the role and function of youth work through a global pandemic These elements provide a basis for this thesis to contribute to wider sociological academic literature that exists in relation to youth work.

Chapter 2

A Literature Review of Youth Services:

A Historical and Policy Based Perspective

Throughout the pandemic, youth services across England had to adapt to the changing social and health-related contexts in line with governmental guidelines as well as personal reactive adaptations to their style of delivery (Batsleer et al. 2021). The reactions to the pandemic lockdowns by youth service staff were shaped by previous and current economic, political, and social contexts. In addition to this, youth service employees were tasked with reconceptualising and creating space for young people and have been faced with determining which of their young people had vulnerabilities that warrant in-person work (NYA 2020c). This draws into question how youth service employees create and conceptualise space for vulnerable young people, as well as how vulnerability is defined.

The remainder of this literature review will address various relevant topics that are embedded within or help to establish the framework for this project. This will be made up of relevant concepts and theory, the history of youth work, and political perceptions and policy implications of youth work. These topics will be discussed across two separate chapters. Chapter Two, the first literature review chapter, will discuss the history of youth work, including political perceptions and policy implications of youth work across the last century, through to the time prior to the start of COVID-19 lockdowns and data collection. This chapter will also present the reality of COVID-19 and the lockdowns upon youth services. Chapter Three, the second literature chapter, will address key academic concepts and

theory. These topics will include a critical realist framework, reflexivity, vulnerability, and space.

The first two sections of Chapter Two examine the early history of youth work from the 1800s to the early 1900s. This will be followed chronologically by the mid-1900s, beginning with World War I and World War II. The chapter will then transition into a discussion of the Albemarle Report in 1960, which has previously been cited as the foundation of modern day youth services (Grace & Taylor 2017; Ord & Davies 2018). The third section will continue a historical narrative, detailing the 1980s to the 2000s. This will include discussion around the political shifts through these decades from a Conservative government to New Labour, and the policy presented through these decades.

The following section will discuss policy and programmes that were designed for youth people through the 2010s and into 2022. These policies and programmes are important to consider, as they were directly relevant at the start of data collection and helped to make up the landscape of youth policy and practice. A discussion of the Youth Review from 2022 will also help to demonstrate changes to policy after the lockdowns ended, giving context to the state of youth work in relation to analysis. The following section will discuss the implementation of austerity measures, and the direct impact of these upon spending towards youth services from 2010/2011 through to 2020/2021. With these cutbacks, the use of outside funding applications will be introduced, with examples of different organisations that give funding, as well as the expectations for what youth services should look like from the perspective of these organisations.

The final section will briefly detail policy and funding toward youth work after the COVID-19 lockdowns. While data collection occurred through the

lockdowns, a glimpse into policy that resulted from the COVID-19 crisis allows for a deeper understanding of youth services through the lockdowns, but also what change has or has not occurred since.

This chapter will also include information pertaining to some current youth organisations in modern day England and consider their operation. The National Citizen Service (NCS) and the National Youth Agency (NYA) will be introduced as examples. Both of these organisations were centred around youth work as a practice, but they used different approaches to working with young people. These similarities and differences will be explored, which will help to provide a perspective of what working with young people looks in England from different organisations. Chapter Two will also address the relationship between the COVID-19 pandemic and austerity policies. The consideration of COVID-19 and austerity will then expand into the impact of the pandemic upon youth services.

The pandemic had an impact upon the service prior to the start of data collection, which influenced the way in which the service was operating through data collection for this thesis. It is important to establish the changes to youth work through history to allow for a better understanding of *why* youth services operated as they did during the lockdowns, and the ways in which youth workers approached the practice of youth work. These considerations will help to illuminate the impacts of economic, political, and social contexts upon the youth service.

2.1 The history of youth work in England from the 1800s to early 1900s

For the purpose of the below history of youth work, I have relied on literature that highlighted thematic similarities between present day youth work,

and practices involving young people in previous centuries. In this way, the history of youth work section is rooted within appreciating the types of social activities that helped to shape and inspire what is seen as youth work today.

Types of practice that can be seen as youth work in the UK has been documented for over a century, with literature referencing the use of group activities, such as the formation of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) (Mills & Kraftl 2014; Davies 2009). This was formed in 1844 and was thought of as the first national youth organization based within voluntary participation in the UK (Davies 2009; YMCA 2024). Further, people like Hannah More are credited with establishing youth work provisions through the use of Sunday schools (Jeffs & Smith 2002). These programs were informal ways via which engaging activities were able to be delivered. The Sunday Schooling programs were aimed at young people who did not attend full time school, or did not have access to school at all (Jeffs & Smith 2002). The lack of access to school in the 1800s was common, as nearly a third of young people worked full time (Tebbutt 2017). These foundations of youth work provided informal educational programs for young people (Mills & Kraftl 2014; Johnson 1970). The underlying purpose of this educational movement was to allow young people to choose to participate in activities that helped them grow personally and educationally (Mills & Kraftl 2014; Ord & Davies 2018).

During these times, such activities were also viewed as a form of leadership for young people. Mills (2013) elaborated on this point, by highlighting the development of programmes like the Scouts in the early 1900s. 'Youth leadership' groups placed value upon helping young people learn new recreational, social, and personal skills, and have been argued to have helped shape the underpinnings of youth work in the UK for over 150 years (Davies 2009, p. 9). Some of these values

were being hardworking, loyal, and respectful (Johnson 1970). These different organisations and values are cited as being integral in the development of what is considered youth work in the modern day (Jeffs & Smith 2002; Ord & Davies 2018). However, Mills (2013) critiques these ideas of youth programmes like the Boy Scouts as a way in which to guide young people by an adult perception of what makes a good citizen.

2.2 Into the 'Golden Age' of youth work: the mid-20th century

Davies (2009) argued that state interest in youth work organisations began during the period of the first World War. This was because there was an interest regarding the impact of the war upon young people. With this growing involvement of the state, by the start of World War II, some local authorities across England had the ability to fund youth work programs in their area (Ord & Davies 2018). Further, in the 1930s and 1940s, young people were seen as problematic, and in need of more structure for their leisure time (Bradford 2007a; 2007b). By the end of the war, England had developed the Service of Youth (Bradford 2007b; Ord & Davies 2018). This service was guided by state resources, but run through voluntary organisations. During this time, youth services were voluntary to attend, and educational (Bradford 2007b). The 1950s were characterised by a moral panic in relation to young people (Bradford & Cullen 2014). However, the government response to this panic was to place more funding in the youth service into the 1960s (Bradford & Cullen 2014).

In 1960, the Albemarle Report was developed and has previously been credited as the leading factor in saving the Service of Youth (Ord & Davies 2018). Muirhead (2020) summarised the Albemarle Report policy as pertaining to youth

participation and diminishing the social perception of young people as being 'bad'. While Mills (2013) critiqued earlier policy as attempting to shape young people into positive citizens, this report marked a shift away from the consideration of young people as problematic (Bradford 2007a; 2007b). The report also addressed the importance of equality around access for both boys and girls (Muirhead 2020). The Albemarle Report spoke about young people as a partner within youth services alongside local authorities, the voluntary organisations, and the government (Ord & Davies 2018). Youth workers were intended to not be seen as solely an authority figure in the young peoples' participation, and the work was intended to be rooted within participation from the young people, and what they wanted to do (Grace & Taylor 2017). The report is also credited as laying the foundation for detached youth work practice (Ord & Davies 2018). Detached youth work is rooted within engaging young people outside of institutional settings (NYA 2020b). This provision is based upon outreach for young people through street-based work, mobile provision, or pop up provision. Detached youth work allowed for youth services to build trust and a meaningful relationship in a youth-chosen setting that could lead to further involvement of the young people in the detached work or for them to go to a youth centre (NYA 2020b). Further, the National Youth Agency (NYA), which will be discussed in more depth later in the chapter, (NYA 2021c) stated on the website that the entire organisation was initially formed due to the report. The Albemarle Report also led to increased funding, the development of youth service buildings, double the number of full-time youth service employees, and the formation of coursework for aspiring youth workers (Ord & Davies 2018). These advancements in youth service provisions were made possible by funding and guidance from the state (Bradford & Cullen 2014). This time, as indicated in the

subheading, has been previously referred to as the 'golden age' of youth work (Ord & Davies 2018; p. 37).

2.3 Overview of youth work from 1980s to the 2000s

In the late 1970s, the Conservative government and Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher were elected, which began a trend of neoliberal practices that impacted open-access youth work (Mason 2015), and social programmes aimed toward helping those from lower socio-economic backgrounds were viewed in a stigmatised way (Ord & Davies 2018). The political stance of Thatcher in the 1980s was different to that of Conservative and Labour discourses that came before (Farrall et al. 2022). These differences were in relation to perspectives that value self-reliance and did not look favourably upon welfare or taxation (Crewe & Searing 1988; Farrall et al. 2022). Crewe and Searing (1988) considered Thatcher's policies to be informed by three key ideas: discipline through hard work and deferred gratification, free enterprise through reducing state involvement in the economy, and statecraft through an authoritative position over local authorities and other aspects of government. These approaches to policy led to the rise of neo-liberal policies within England, where the emphasis was placed upon being market focussed and facilitated toward profit alongside drawing back involvement from the state (Bevan 2023; Jessop 2015). Thatcher's policy saw an emphasis upon privatisation, with a decrease of state involvement in the economy, and the welfare state being marketised (Crewe & Searing 1988; Hay 1999).

During the 1980s, a focus upon neoliberal policies as well as negative perceptions of young people were coupled with reduced funding to youth services (Hughes, Cooper, Gormally, & Rippingale 2014; Ord & Davies 2018). Young people

were seen as repeat offenders and hooligans (Newburn 2005). This impacted the perception of those from working-class socioeconomic backgrounds, and citizenship welfare based programmes were undermined (Hall, Williamson & Coffey 2000; Tyler 2013). The 1980s also was a time when perceptions of some poor people were seen as being more deserving than others (Hall et al. 2000; Hughes et al. 2014; Jackson 2015; Murray 1996). Funding for youth service was targeted through reduced government funding to local authorities (Hughes, Cooper, Gormally, & Rippingale 2014; Ord & Davies 2018). Farrall and colleagues (2022) and Bevan (2023) argue that Thatcherite values have left a legacy well beyond her time as Prime Minister, with traces woven in the following decades through to the time of this thesis.

In 1997, New Labour was elected, and Jessop (2015) argued that new Prime Minister Tony Blair continued neo-liberal public policies with an emphasis upon, ''…workfare rather than welfare…targeted…measures would redirect welfare spending within otherwise rigid fisco-financial parameters,'' (p. 22). With this approach to welfare, previous neoliberal policies were not discarded, but instead continued through the policy at this time(Jessop 2015). The initial focus for youth services was on values such as 'enabling the voices of young people' and 'promoting intervention and preventative measures' (Ord & Davies 2018). The Department for Education and Skills published guidelines in 2002, some of which were aimed at targeted provisions and measuring outcomes (DES 2002). These targeted outcomes have promoted negative perceptions of young people (Bradford & Cullen 2014; Cooper 2018). Reminiscent of programmes like the Scouts critiqued by Mills (2013), the targeted approach from New Labour policy focussed more on a response to the perceived needs from adults onto the young people. Alongside the

emphasis upon targeted work, New Labour also shifted the focus of youth work from 'open access' to 'positive activities' (Ord & Davies 2018). This drew emphasis away from the value of leadership that was central to youth work in prior decades. Authors like Cooper (2018), Hughes and colleagues (2014), and Grace and Taylor (2017) argued that the emphasis upon preventative and targeted youth work detracted and undermined the previous years of success through open access youth work.

2.4 Youth work in the 2010s: Influences on youth work through COVID-19

Youth work policies through the 2010s continued the pattern of focussing on addressing perceived problem behaviours through targeted activities that was present through the 1990s (DES 2002; Ord & Davies 2018). Some relevant policies from this time period are Positive for Youth and Youth Review, which tie into programs and campaigns like #iwill and the different uniformed groups, as well as through campaign points like Levelling Up with the Johnson Government.

The Positive for Youth policy aims to create a shared societal vision for young people, while also giving them a voice in their provisions (HM Government 2012, 2013). This is with emphasis upon those from vulnerable or disadvantaged backgrounds (HM Government 2012). Buckland (2013) identified Positive for Youth as a significant shift in youth policy, though not necessarily positive, due to its vague provisions for structural support or social mobility (Kielty 2017). Davies (2013) noted similar concerns about the clarity of the policy, as there were not clear directions on how local councils would be expected to have services to improve the overall well-being of the young people in their area.

Kielty (2017) noted that Positive for Youth highlighted changes for young people through the themes of respect, empowerment, and belonging. While government policy like Positive for Youth assumes a positive, mutually respectful relationship between young people and their wider community (HM Government 2012, 2013), there are restrictions to the ways in which young people choose to interact with adult-led provisions. Kielty (2017) noted that the themes of respect, empowerment, and belonging resulted from an adult perspective in vague terms of what young people should want and seek.

While Positive for Youth outlines societal responsibilities toward young people, it fails to provide specific funding plans (HM Government 2012). The entities listed toward helping improve the lives of young people are first and foremost, young people themselves. The Positive for Youth policy cites numerous other sources, such as parents, professionals, youth workers, and the government is listed last, as a way to oversee reform, consider new ways of working, and monitor progress across other entities (HM Government 2012). The policy document does indicate that funding would be given to the British Youth Council for integrating youth voice into decision making, so it is not that this specific document does not address funding, but instead that wide-spread funding was not part of this policy change. The policy for Positive for Youth also notes ways that could be used to make provisions for young people less expensive (HM Government 2012). Positive for Youth detailed that the complicated vetting process for volunteers would be reduced; however, Buckland (2013) critiqued that a better solution would be to reconsider why the process is so lengthy as opposed to potentially creating a safeguarding issue due to a reduction in the vetting process.

The initial publication of Positive for Youth addressed youth work and youth centers indirectly, as it noted charities or places with voluntary attendance for young people (HM Government 2012). In a follow up from the initial publication of Positive for Youth, HM Government (2013) listed the ways in which the policy did make changes for young people in relation to youth services. Among these changes, the document lists that youth services is a statutory requirement for local authorities. However, 'youth services' is considered as services that help to improve the well-being of young people. In this way, the government passed along the responsibility of structuring and defining services for the well-being of young people as well as the funding for these. These two elements together create an environment in which the vague consideration of 'youth services' is open for wider interpretation. While on the surface, the policy seems as if it is aimed toward bettering community provision for young people, the actual policies are vague and flimsy.

Moving forward from Positive for Youth, the Youth Review in 2022 identified that young people needed to be part of decision making within youth work, as well as the importance of regular, informal, long-term provision for young people (Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport 2022). The Youth Review proposed 'Levelling Up' youth spaces, promising £560 million over a decade, though its distribution remains subject to critique (House of Commons Library 2024). More detail in relation to funding will be discussed in the next section. However, it is important to note that the provision of funding in the Youth Review was a progression from the Positive for Youth policy document. Ord & Davies (2022) noted that the £560 funding was not all for youth spaces, instead the funding was broken apart into funding for short term programmes like the National Citizen

Service (NCS) as well as rebuilding the youth service. Through funds for programmes like the NCS as well as voluntary youth provision, Levelling Up policy aimed to improve opportunity and public services, which included those aimed toward youth provision (Ord & Davies 2022).

In addition to the promise of more funding and a focus on active voice and participation from young people, the Youth Review also addressed youth programmes and initiatives under the umbrella of opening up opportunities for young people (DDCMS 2022). Specifically, the NCS, which will be discussed in more detail later in this chapter, was reformed to have a year-round offer. Further, initiatives like Uniformed Groups and #iwill also had changes.

Prior to the Youth Review, young people across England were not able to participate in Uniformed Groups due to a high demand for the programme. The review included policy that would eliminate these waits by providing 24,000 more places (DDCMS 2022). Uniformed Groups, such as Scouts or Sea Cadets, encourage volunteering and skill-building for active citizenship (See, Gorard & Siddiqui 2017). While Uniformed Groups have existed for decades, varying policy and funding have allowed for different variations of the programme to run. For example, Mills (2013) noted that historically, the Scouts were intended as a way to address unkempt young men into a proud, upstanding citizen. In more recent times, Uniformed Groups have held programmes aimed toward young people deemed as hard to reach, such as young offenders (Tyler-Rubinstein et al. 2016), or those that run for all students in a secondary school (See et al. 2017). Tyler-Rubinstein and colleagues (2016) noted that young people were keen to engage with the programme, the larger issue was in finding adult volunteers. Adult volunteers are instrumental to the programmes, as some programmes are intended to be run

completely by volunteers (Tyler-Rubinstein et al. 2016). Reliance on volunteers was noted by Barber (2022) as well in relation to the Sea Cadet Corps. For Barber (2022), adult volunteers had variability in how well they may be trained and whether or not enough volunteers were able to be recruited.

Another volunteer based programme, #iwill, was promised to have new volunteering opportunities through the Youth Review (Davies 2024; DDCMS 2022). #iwill as an initiative began in 2013, and is a way in which young people aged 10 to 25 would be able to benefit and engage with their communities (Davies 2024; #iwill). #iwill has shifted over the years. At times, the programme has focused on inspiring young people to, ''...make a positive difference,'' (Davies 2024, p. 496), or to focus on encouraging young people to decide and want to engage in social action (Davies 2024; Gill 2023; Lamb, Taylor-Collins, Silverglate 2019). The #iwill movement also received funding to provide paid volunteering opportunities as part of the Levelling Up policy (Davies 2024). Lamb and colleagues (2019) critiqued the #iwill movement as being subjective, as the key values are vague. For example, one of the main focuses of #iwill is to make social action into a habit; however, there are not any specific details of what a habit means to individual young people (Lamb et al. 2019).

With this in mind, the idea of a habit, individual benefits, and benefits to the community are ambiguous goals, open to critique and different conceptualisations (Lamb et al. 2019). This is an issue, as different campaigns in various areas across England may consider how to run volunteering campaigns and measure impact in very different ways. Taylor and colleagues (2018) further critique the idea of focussing upon social action and volunteering as a manner in which to seep neoliberal ideals into youth work policy. These authors argue that

neoliberal values are rooted within the emphasis for young people to take responsibly for their community, and using this as a way to measure returns back to the community and positive outcomes for the young person themselves (Taylor et al. 2018). However, as Lamb and colleagues (2019) argued, these vague outcomes are not consistent or easy to measure.

Together, the NCS, Uniformed Groups, and #iwill represent a pattern of the central government to give funding and precedence to short-term, volunteer based activity. While it is not necessarily an issue for there to be programmes focussed upon garnering interest in volunteer activities, this emphasis highlights a tendency of the central government to place the responsibility of community development and improvement upon young people. Instead of providing support to long-term, foundational programmes aimed at voice and co-creation, such as youth service based programmes, emphasis is placed upon a quid pro quo of giving support to young people as long as they are willing to continually seek out opportunities to directly give back to the community as well.

While Positive for Youth and Youth Review detail an evolution of policy across time, there has been criticism of youth focussed policy as being disconnected from young people and the practice of youth work itself (Buckland 2013; Davies 2013; Kielty 2017). One example of this is through evaluation from external funding sources. Both youth workers and young people critiqued the practice of evaluation, as the workers felt the process took away their time and attention from engaging in the practice of youth work, while young people felt it could be quite intrusive (Doherty & de St Croix 2019). Doherty and de St Croix (2019) even noted that young people gave responses to survey questions that they felt would specifically allow the current provision to continue (Doherty & de St

Croix 2019). In this way, the evaluation and monitoring element that underlies the government's role within youth policy, such as that seen in Positive for Youth (HM Government 2012), may not be fit for purpose. Instead, the element of evaluation is a routine issue that youth services must complete in order to survive.

This is not to indicate that youth workers think the evaluation process is unnecessary, de St Croix and Doherty (2024) did note that youth workers enjoyed evaluating their work and improving their practice for young people. Rather, the impractical and detached policy requirements drew away resources from delivering programs through unfit measurements (Buckland 2013; Davies 2013; Kielty 2017) as opposed to allowing for evaluation to be a productive and reflexive way to consider a youth workers role with their young people (de St Croix & Doherty 2024). The process of evaluation is embedded within policies, such as within Positive for Youth, and the indication that the government will ensure that youth programmes run sufficiently within local authorities (HM Government 2012). Evaluation is also a byproduct of policies like Youth Review and Positive for Youth when there is not additional funding for youth services, and it is instead the responsibility of these services to apply for outside funding. If evaluation is an element of receiving funding, and youth services must attain additional funding in order to function, the practice of and criticisms toward evaluation as a practice are innately a policy related issue.

This section has focussed on policy that impacted youth programmes in the 2010s. These policies shaped the nature of this thesis, as they dictated the ways in which the youth service used for data collection was able to operate going into the COVID-19 lockdowns. While programmes like #iwill and Uniformed Groups are not the focus of the current thesis, it is valuable to consider the use and

impact of policy upon youth focussed programmes in addition to the youth service because it allows for a more comprehensive picture of the ways various governments have attempted to address young people in policy work. Specifically, the transition from Positive for Youth to the Youth Review detailed a distinct shift from young people being recipients to youth programmes, to instead a focus upon youth voice and active participation within the development of youth programmes. With the shifts and adaptations to policy, criticism has also been a marker of Positive for Youth, Youth Review, #iwill, and Uniformed Groups. With policy changes, it is valuable for literature and research to continue to consider the wider implications and real-life impacts upon society, especially in relation to young people. As will be discussed in chapter 3, there are criticisms that policy related to young people can be undermining and stigmatising, taking power away from young people as opposed to lifting up their voices. The context, implications, and criticisms of youth-focussed policy going into COVID-19 and data collection for this project will allow for a rich image of the environment surrounding youth services through a time of crisis.

Subsequent sections will go into more detail in relation to youth programs and funding. As mentioned previously, a direct contrast between a short-term youth programme, the NCS, and the organisation that details voluntary community youth service programmes, the National Youth Agency (NYA), will be directly compared and contrasted later in the chapter. While this section has briefly referenced funding, the next section will go into depth toward funding for youth services specifically. These sections together provide context for the environment in relation to policy and funding for youth services at the start of the current project.

2.5 Youth work in the 2010s: The precarity of funding

Beginning in 2010, David Cameron was elected Prime Minister and introduced the idea of the 'Big Society', which was aimed toward a shift in the relationship between society and the state through the encouragement of 'shared responsibility' (Mycock & Tonge 2011). This initiative focused on so-called 'broken' families and society. The years of the Coalition government are also critiqued of being reminiscent of the austere policies after WWII (Bramall 2013). The neoliberal approach of the prior governments did not fade, as the emphasis was still upon the idea of reducing debt for national interest (Crines 2017). Bramall (2013) noted this as a strategy to direct responsibility for the 2007- 2008 financial crisis on the expensive welfare state and public sector, as opposed to the potentially risky strategy of banks. In this time, the government stance on public spending stated that it was out of control and negatively impacting even those on benefits (Bramall 2013).

From 2010, austere measures were put into place, which led to a reduction of 27% of funding to all local authorities between 2010 and 2015 (Horton 2016). On top of these cuts, some local authorities choose to pursue even further budget cuts and, since 2010, local authorities in England have made the largest cuts by restricting those previously given to services for young people and children (Youdell & McGimpsey 2015), making youth services the most impacted through this flow of budget cuts, according to a report by YMCA (2020). Specifically, over the last decade, the local authorities across England have reduced spending from £2.36 billion collectively on youth services in 2010- 2011, to £398 million in 2018-2019 (YMCA 2020). This is a total cut of 71% from the fiscal year of 2010-2011. This time period also saw the closure of over 760 youth centres and the

loss of over 4,500 youth workers (UNISON 2019). The spending of £398 million prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic continued to shrink, with local authorities across England spending £379 million in 2020 to 2021 (YMCA 2022). This brings the total cut in spending to 74% since 2010 to 2011, with a reduction of £1.1 billion (YMCA 2022). This cut in local authority spending continued to impact youth services, with a further 4% reduction in spending on youth services since 2018 to 2019 (YMCA 2022). In 2011, the average spending per young person was £136, with lower income areas averaging £250 per young person (Lepper 2021). At the time of publication, Lepper (2021) noted that the average spending had fallen to £54 per young person. However, for those from lower income areas, the average spending dropped down to £25 (Lepper 2021).

The drop in funding left different areas of English youth services in a battle over short-term funding from various organisations. Alongside the pressure of cuts to funding youth services over the last decade, some youth services across England have also been commissioned out, compromising the capabilities of open access youth work (Mason 2015; Murphy 2017b). The commissioning of youth services was a shift from government grants to competitive funding applications (Body 2019). It is a process used to plan and deliver services, possibly through third sector organisations (Body 2019). For youth services that had not been commissioned out, such as Sunshine Youth Service, which was used for data collection in this thesis, funding was impacted through the local authority. Specifically, the state limited the budgets of local authorities and then each local authority had to decide where to send money. Therefore, funding for each area is decided by the local authority (Youdell & McGimpsey 2015). Within the context of a survey by UK Youth (2021), youth service providers collectively were not seeking to make up the loss of over a

billion in funds that were provided a decade ago, they had been competing to supplement their service with just a fraction of that amount. One example of funding is through the Youth Investment Fund (YIF), which youth services have been able to apply to since 2019 (CYI 2022).

The YIF had a focus on open access youth provisions, with a 'shared theory of change' for services and organisations that choose to follow this framework, or are funded by it (Hill, Scanlon, & Anderton 2019). This theory holds that youth organisations will provide quality activities for young people, and mechanisms of change through the creation of an environment that allows for trust, respect, and safety, as well as a line of accountability (Bradshaw-Walsh, Scanlon, & McNeil 2021). The theory of change also includes intermediate, or medium term, outcomes, as well as impacts, which are longer term outcomes. Some of these outcomes are characterized by the development of emotional skills, social connections, and control in the lives of the young people (Bradshaw-Walsh et al. 2021). The theory of change also indicated that some of this work, and quality activities, may be targeted toward certain communities or young people (Hill et al. 2019). The impacts are ideally characterized by positive changes in the young peoples' lives, such as in education, employment, and relationships (Bradshaw-Walsh et al. 2021). Overall, the YIF is summarised as young people, ''… building their confidence and supporting their transition to becoming happy, healthy and economically active adults,'' (Hill et al. 2019, p. 4). With the application process, the YIF asked the applicant to detail the how the funding will allow for, ''… differences that will be achieves in the lives of the children and young people…'' (Youth Investment Fund 2022, p. 14). There were stipulations to the funding, such as spending all money prior to the end date, or risk not being

reimbursed for the costs (YIF 2022). The potential outcomes needed to be detailed as child focussed, realistic, and measurable in the application before any funding is possibly awarded (YIF 2022).

Alternatively, there is also a funding body called the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF). The YEF began in 2019 and has a decade long mandate from the Home Office (YEF 2022c). The values listed to be a basis of the YEF are to fund work in England and Wales to reduce violence in young people, evaluation of every activity to learn in what ways they may work to reduce violence, and to make a long term difference in the ways that those working with young people are able to ensure they receive evidence-based support (YEF 2022a). While YEF focuses on violence reduction, they fund projects around themes, place based, and targeted projects (YEF 2022b). To list a few, these themes may be around a safe place to learn, supportive home life, social skills, and mental health (YEF 2022c). Place based programmes are within areas identified to have higher instances of violence, while targeted projects are those that may not fall within the themes or place based (YEF 2022b). During the pandemic, there was also an opportunity within the YEF for COVID-19 specific funding. The COVID-19 funding was aimed to help support the reduction of violence in at risk young people, as well as to explore and learn about the most effective ways in which to work with vulnerable young people during the lockdowns and social distancing (YEF n.d.).

Both of these frameworks within funding bodies are important to consider in relation to youth work, as youth services must demonstrate the ways in which they can fulfil different criteria for when applying for funding. Without appropriate funding, the youth service is unable to run or fulfil criteria laid out by

the funding bodies. With this in mind, youth service employees must strategically consider what funding to apply for, how to speak about it, and the ways in which they interact with their job role, their colleagues, and the impacts to young people.

The YIF and YEF are notably different, in that the YIF had goals to learn about how open access can benefit young people, and develop a theory around the change in young people through accessing youth work based organisations (Hill et al. 2019). The YEF is centred around a reduction in violence in young people, but this is achieved is through a variety of ways (YEF 2022a). Even though there are differences in general approach, these funding bodies do have similarities as well. Both list ideals around trying to help develop the skills of young people, and help young people make positive choices in the future. The YIF and YEF both also had elements of their work centred towards young people or areas that are determined to be in need of 'targeted' approaches. Further, while the YIF has an entire ethos of open access, which indicates voluntary participation, the COVID-19 funding from YEF went to predominantly voluntary organisations, with only one out of eight requiring young people to attend (YEF n.d.). In this way, there are underlying similarities between these approaches to youth work. The NYA values around youth work help to perhaps differentiate between these two ideas, specifying that one value in youth work is around, ''Seeking to develop young people's skills and attitudes rather than remedy 'problem behaviours','' (NYA 2021e, n.p.). This value helps to separate the underpinning ideas of the YIF, centred around helping young people to learn skills (Bradshaw-Walsh et al. 2021), rather than any focus on specific behaviours and focussed support, as is indicated by the YEF (YEF n.d.).

The YIF and YEF demonstrate the differences between youth work organisations, and how they might situate their approaches to working with young people. The descriptions of the funding bodies also demonstrate that a common theme across youth work is the consideration of vulnerabilities that may be present in the lives of young people that they work with, regardless of if the youth service is aiming to reduce violence, or be open access. It is important to note that the targeted and open access approaches to youth work are not mutually exclusive. They can both occur within spaces that are voluntary for young people to attend. What is important to remember is the ways in which the values of open access and targeted practice impact the ethos to youth centres, activities, and therefore the interactions between young people and the youth workers. While the YIF does not directly try to address a certain behaviour, the idea of providing a quality way to engage with young people in an open access setting speaks to the indirect or inadvertent role of youth services to keep young people from some kind of non-quality activity. This demonstrates the idea of a spectrum of approaches to vulnerability, wherein funders like YEF may be more directly attempting to address specific vulnerabilities, like violence reduction, compared to funders like YIF that are rooted within an open-access format to provide services to young people.

2.6 A tale of two youth organisations: Youth work in the 21st century

The funding bodies available to youth services, such as the YEF and YIF, as well as relevant government policy and programs prior to the COVID-19 pandemic are important to consider as they help to demonstrate the process through which youth services have been expected to gather funding in order to keep the service

running. The ways in which different organisations may use funding will depend upon the underlying values of the organization. The next section will briefly compare two relevant youth organisations that operated during the 2010s. These examples will help to demonstrate the environment for youth services leading up to the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Specifically, this will be the National Citizen Service (NCS) and the National Youth Agency (NYA). Both of these organisations were rooted within a youth work practice, but have differences in their approaches. The NYA is most relevant to this thesis, as the youth service used for data collection within this thesis spoke around the direct usage of NYA advice. However, it serves to compare the two in order to demonstrate the ways in which different youth centred organisations in England described work with young people. As stated previously, the years following 2010 had been shaped by austerity policy (Bramall 2013). This translated into NCS being run with limited state funding, relying instead on private or voluntary organisations to run the program (de St Croix 2011; Mills & Waite 2017). Authors like Mycock and Tonge (2011) and Mills and Waite (2018) argue that the idea of 'Big Society' from the 2010 Coalition government was represented by the National Citizen Service.

The NCS is a voluntary scheme for 16 to 17 year olds, with the goals to help young people achieve their dreams regardless of their background (Community and Society n.d.). The strategy of the NCS for 2023 to 2025 is to, ''Deliver in partnership with the youth sector…Shape the government's ambition for young people … Build a platform for future growth,'' (National Citizen Service 2023, p. 2). The NCS is able to impact youth programmes through acting as a commissioner with a variety of organisations (NCS 2023). The vision of the NCS is to allow the citizens within the UK to feel connected and, "…where everyone feels at

home," (NCS 2021, n.p.). The program has been critiqued as a way in which the state can shape 'good' citizens through a sense of belonging and a sentiment aimed toward building up the UK in a positive and inclusive way (Mills & Waite 2017), while being fuelled by neoliberal policies with less of a role from the welfare state (de St Croix 2011). These values can be rooted back to the policies of 'Big Society', with an emphasis upon a shared responsibility of society and the state (Mycock & Tonge 2011). Some data that has been previously gathered from young people that have participated within the NCS have included questions that ask around concepts such as failure in life, and whether or not it is the fault of an individual. These capture neoliberal qualities, with an indication that failure is placed upon the individual, without regard for outside contexts in the social world (de St Croix 2017). Even though the NCS lists values that are built around teamwork and community, there is also an emphasis upon individualism, displaying the structural aspects of neoliberalism that are rooted within the organisation.

It is important to note that the NCS has had real world benefits for the lives of people working within the program, and also those who have taken part in it (Murphy 2017a; Murphy 2017b; de St Croix 2017). The program itself is not necessarily the issue, rather it is the neoliberal policies that are rooted within varying aspects that can be seen as problematic. From funding, to the ways in which young people are viewed and shaped, neoliberal values concentrating on the individualism and support outside of the state are clearly established (de St Croix 2017; Mills & Waite 2017; Mycock & Tonge 2011).

The pattern of neoliberal policies and values impacting the ways in which various services that are aimed toward young people are able to function has also been apparent within the National Youth Agency (NYA) as well. The NYA is a charity

that oversees English youth policy and youth work (2021b). The website for the NYA cites the year 2009 as being a shift within the charity and, "...an increasingly difficult funding environment...," (NYA 2021b, n.p.). Without local or national funding, the NYA is still responsible for running youth work campaigns, as well as continuously pursuing ways in which to improve and support youth work across England, but must also utilize contracts and programs as a means to produce funds necessary for running these, as they are, "...the important things that no one else will fund..." (NYA 2021b, n.p.). These words speak to the constrained aspects in which the charity must function, largely indicative of the neoliberal policies that are present across services for young people within England. The lack of funding for the NYA is contrasted to the NCS, as the NCS received government investment over £1 billion from 2016 to 2020 (de St Croix, McGimpsey & Owens 2020).

The NYA has some ideals that could be interpreted as neoliberal. The NYA (2021a) states that youth work is a way in which young people are able to develop their own voice and a place within society. These are phrased in a way that is indicative of an individualistic approach to youth work, with tones of individuality within society. However, contrasted to the NCS, the NYA (2021a) also indicates that young people are valuable in society, but some "... feel blocked by the complex ... disheartening challenges the modern world throws at them," (n.p.). This description indicates that the NYA places more emphasis upon the problems that young people may face in the world around them that are outside of their control. The emphasis being placed outside of the individual is present within the ways in which the employees are addressed as well. Within the NCS, staff working with young people have commonly been referred to as 'leaders', which has previously been critiqued as a way in which to describe a relationship that is not equal (de St

Croix 2011), taking away elements of power and agency for the young people simply in the way those working with them are referred to. The NYA refers to those within youth services and youth work as 'workers', which de St Croix (2011) identified as a less corporate and neoliberal way to describe those working with young people.

2.7 COVID-19 and the impact on youth service provision

The way of life around the world shifted during the emergence and continued management of COVID-19. At times during the lockdowns, the UK recorded some of the highest figures of death rates among wealthy countries (Lupton 2020). The years 2020 and 2021 were characterised by some people calling for tighter restrictions to protect vulnerable populations and structures, countered by those calling for an end to the limit on social interactions and the economy (Pickersgill 2020). Past literature explored the various strains that an epidemic of some sort can have on society, policy, and practice. These strains have been cited as fear, urgency, uncertainty, and instability of social order to name a few (Desalegn, Tangl, & Fekete-Farkas 2022; Lipsitch et al. 2009; Monaghan 2020; Strong 1990). While these pieces of literature were written with reference to AIDS or past influenza pandemics, similar dynamics have been observed in relation to the crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic (Brown & Zinn 2021; Monaghan 2020; Pickersgill 2020). There was a fear for some to catching the virus, uncertainty toward the future and the effectiveness of policy regarding public health, and instability in not knowing what could be the lasting impact in years to come (Monaghan 2020; Pickersgill 2020; Zinn 2021). The anticipated uncertainty of the

pandemic was also noted as an influence to resilience as a social response (Bryce et al. 2022). Uncertainty and anticipation for crisis created a need for sociological literature to better understand the governmental responses to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the impacts of these actions (Bryce et al. 2022; Pickersgill & Smith 2021).

Batsleer and colleagues (2021) noted experiences of uncertainty and instability within youth services through recording perceptions from youth workers at various stages of the pandemic. Through the pandemic, youth service workers were expected to adapt quickly to various changing restrictions and deliver services in innovative ways. However, there were critiques of the ways in which youth service employees and the youth service sector had been the target of cuts since the financial crash in 2007-2008 (UNISON 2019; YMCA 2020; Youdell & McGimpsey 2015). These constraints remained through COVID-19, with some authors (Batsleer et al. 2021) noting that the government promised £500 million to help rebuild youth services, which was delayed from 2019 to the beginning of 2022, and cut to approximately £380 million (DCMS 2022a).

In lieu of these consistent financial impediments, youth service employees were expected to deliver services online during the pandemic lockdowns. The online space was a format that had previously not been used, and had previously been cited as a, ''...source of tension for youth workers,'' (Jaynes 2020, p. 217). The resilience of youth workers was seen through the last decade of tightening austere policies (Mason 2015; Murphy 2017b), through to COVID-19 lockdowns. Amidst a global pandemic, the resilience of youth workers had been noted through their ability to adapt and continue to deliver services to young people who wanted or needed support (Batsleer et al. 2021; UK Youth 2021), which were noted

responses to uncertainty (Monaghan 2020). This can be seen partly through efforts of youth services to place emphasis upon young people through encouraging or enabling power in their lives.

A study by UK Youth (2021) found that approximately two thirds of youth services across the UK experienced an increase in demand for services during the pandemic, but over 80% underwent a decrease in funding. This was accompanied by more than half of youth service organisations reporting an increased cost to delivering their services through the pandemic. Ironically, the data for this study was collected as part of an application process for youth services to receive funding from UK Youth (2021). Nearly 1,800 youth organisations applied for up to £50,000 of the £2 million available. However, the collective need for funding reported from these organisations totalled over £52 million, and 86% of organisations that applied for funding noted that they worked with vulnerable young people (UK Youth 2021).The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic combined with a demonstrated need for funding within youth services across England highlights the ways in which a neoliberal approach to policy continued to impact youth work through the lockdowns.

As mentioned previously, youth services were meant to receive £500 million to transform the sector; however, this funding was delayed from 2019 through to early 2022 (DCMS 2022a). As of 2022, the government dedicated £500,000 to be used to help fund youth work qualifications from underrepresented and lower socio-economic backgrounds (DCMS 2022b). This was cited as specifically for areas where the employer would not be able to fund the qualification on behalf of the employee (DCMS 2022b). The government also promised £368 million to improve youth work in underserved areas, with an additional £12 million promised to be

delivered to projects for young people in the early months of 2022 (DCMS 2022a). This was a drop from the £500 million originally promised, and with a delay of nearly three years. This cut in the original promised amount occurred alongside a cost of living crisis, with inflation rates reaching highs that have not been experienced since the 1980s (Whyte 2022). Some estimates noted that the rate of inflation may not lower for at least a few years (Hourston 2022). The rate of inflation had been impacted by various factors including the knock-on effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as the Russian invasion of Ukraine (IMF 2022). Amid the rise in inflation, the slashed promise of £500 million was effectively worth even less against the rising cost of goods. With the strain upon the cost of living in the UK, there were predictions of austerity measures being reinstated (UNISON 2022). This was concerning for a wide variety of government funded programs, including youth services. While the funding for youth services had not been delivered as promised prior to the start of the pandemic, youth services across England had to find ways to adapt to the lockdowns.

The NYA played an important role through the COVID-19 crisis. The NYA provided guidelines for youth work with the changes and variations in restrictions through the pandemic, providing information that allowed the services across the country to function in accordance with government mandates. These guidelines were not static, for example, in October 2020, there was more emphasis upon maintaining 'bubbles' for in-person youth work, whereas the early months of 2021 stated to only provide in-person services to 'vulnerable' young people (NYA 2020d). Further, each part of the country was treated differently depending upon infection rates. At one point, the levels were considered among tiers from 1 to 3, with 3 being very high alert (NYA 2020d). These tiers were intended to reflect the

instances of COVID-19 within each area (NYA 2020d). Moving on from the tier system, the country and youth services used readiness levels ranging from Red, Amber, Yellow, and Green (NYA 2020c). Level Red stated all youth services must be online or detached, with only in-person youth work for vulnerable young people in one on one sessions. In Yellow, youth services was able to provide online, detached, and socially distanced in-person youth work; whereas in Green, youth work was able to operate as 'normal' (NYA 2020c; 2020d). As the COVID-19 cases fluctuated, so did the guidelines and restrictions for youth services, with changes to the rules happening multiple times over the years.

These guidelines from the NYA throughout COVID-19 are important to consider as this limited access had impacts upon the ways in which youth service workers were able to support the users. As stated by McGeachie (2020, n.p.), "There is a horrible irony that the need for youth work is perhaps never greater than during moments like these." For youth services, this tied back to sociological discussions on uncertainty and instability. The uncertainty and instability is seen through the way the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted people across society (Pickersgill 2020), and how young people have previously been impacted by pandemics (O'Reilly et al 2020; UK Youth 2021; Young Minds 2021). These elements drastically shifted the way in which youth services were able to be delivered during the lockdowns.

Efforts were made through the youth service sector to continue to provide services to young people, much like the activities that previously would have been provided within a youth centre. These were in the form of online services and communication (McGeachie 2020; Warf 2020), a strategy that was common through the lockdown periods of the pandemic (Zinn 2021). This ranged from activities,

through to services like therapy via video chat or phone calls (Loades 2020; McGeachie 2020). The experience of young people through the time of the pandemic had been reminiscent of the fear and uncertainty written about by Strong (1990), surrounding the current state of the world, more lockdowns and restrictions in the coming months, and instability over the impact for the future (Young Minds 2021). This was demonstrated through an increase in demand for services within youth work across England (UK Youth 2021). However, some research found that young people felt their voices and power were diminished through the responses to the COVID-19 pandemic across many aspects of society (Day et al. 2020; UK Youth 2021). Youth participation organisations, such as a youth centre, were reported to provide the most significant and impactful youth engagement; however, many young people still felt that resources relied upon the adult interpretations of their needs in a crisis (Day et al. 2020; UK Youth 2021). This is important, as a metanalysis by O'Reilly and colleagues (2020) looking at the mental health of young people during previous pandemics reported instances of higher anxiety and distress during and after an outbreak. This implies that the mental health of young people will continue to be a societal issue beyond the cessation of COVID-19 guidelines. Combined with the years of funding cuts prior to the pandemic to youth services in England, the impact of the lockdowns to mental health will create a framework for youth services where more young people may need additional support, or may have more complex needs.

Compounding the reported mental health and personal experiences of young people, there were also widespread economic and educational impacts. In addition to schools and youth services being shut or online, young people's access to employment was severely disrupted (Gabriel, León & Outley 2020; Mayhew &

Anand 2020), as people under the age of 25 were more likely to work in a sector that was shut down due to COVID-19 (UK Youth 2020). Unemployment was anticipated to rise among those who have less marketable skills, which was predominately young people (Mayhew & Anand 2020). Prolonged periods of unemployment for young people have previously been historically noted. For example, after the 2008 to 2010 recession, young people faced increased instances of unemployment, lower pay, and poor job prospects for a decade when compared to young people who were in work before or after the recession (Mayhew & Anand 2020). During the recession, UK unemployment went from 5.2% to 8% over the course of two years (Mayhew & Anand 2020). The unemployment rate has fluctuated in the years following COVID-19 with a rate of 5% in February 2021, and 4.2% in January 2024 (Bell & Blanchflower 2020; Mayhew & Anand 2020; ONS 2021; ONS 2024). For young people specifically, unemployment was at a, ''...historically low level...,'' in 2022; however it has been slowly increasing (ONS 2024). From September to November 2023, youth employment had risen by 79,000 from the previous year (Francis-Devine 2024). While the rates of unemployment post-COVID-19 were not as high as they were following the recession, it is still concerning, as there is evidence of youth unemployment having lasting impacts upon society, with greater chances of unemployment or lower pay later in life, as well as increased likelihood of mental health impacts (McQuaid 2017). These findings pertaining to young people during the pandemic are important to the current project as they help to provide context around the exacerbated challenges of employees within youth services in the UK. After the initial lockdowns, the NYA emphasized the importance of employment for young people, and the necessity of youth services and youth workers to help achieve this (NYA 2021c).

These impacts were not exclusively upon the young people, but also the youth workers through the pandemic. Batsleer and colleagues (2021) collected diaries from youth workers from April to December 2020, noting the commitment of youth workers to meet young peoples' needs in creative ways amid restrictions. As stated above, past literature (Lipsitch et al. 2009; Strong 1990) and more recent sociological literature (Desalegn et al. 2022; Monaghan 2020; Pickersgill 2020) wrote about the uncertainty and instability of social order that enveloped society during an epidemic. This uncertainty was reflected within the diaries in earlier months of the pandemic in regards to the ways in which youth services could operate under new guidelines, and struggles to adapt to a new way of working while still supporting young people (Batsleer et al. 2021).

2.8 Brief overview of English youth services post COVID-19

While this chapter has largely discussed policy and practice prior to the lockdowns, this section will consider the ways in which policy has shifted in the years after COVID-19 restrictions being lifted. While some policy, such as the Youth Review (2022) indicated that funding was a necessary addition for youth services, these provisions have been in a more precarious situation than they were in 2010 (Hoddinott, Fright & Pope 2022). The National Audit Office (NAO) (2022a) reported that the government dedicated £2 billion to programmes aimed toward helping vulnerable adolescents, as well as families and children. One of the departments that will help deliver this funding is the Department of Culture Media and Sport toward provisions for young people (NAO 2022b). However, policy from the DCMS (2023) indicated that 'youth services' are statutory and need more local authority support, but does not indicate that local authorities will be given more funding

toward a loose definition of 'youth services' which encompasses programs and activities for young peoples' well-being. Instead, the document provided advice for how local authorities can approach outside funding sources or cope with the funding they already have.

These two contradictory elements suggest that some services for vulnerable young people may receive some kind of funding from the £2 billion; however, as services like Sunshine Youth Service are not necessarily included within the government definition of 'statutory', that does not mean any new funding will go toward youth work within youth services directly. Local authorities must first fund their statutory requirements. This contradiction is not completely surprising, as the NAO (2022a) critiqued the strategy of government policy as having an incomplete picture of vulnerable young people and the ways in which they can be impacted by risk factors, as well as what kinds of programmes help to support them best. As indicated at length in this chapter, austerity was argued to have disproportionately impacted youth services (YMCA 2020). Policies with austere elements have arguably continued past the COVID-19 lockdowns as well. The policies discussed in this chapter from the 2010s onward have been aimed toward services for young people; however, no further government financial support is promised to go to youth services as it is defined in this thesis (DCMS 2023). The lack of additional resources after the pandemic lockdowns has been reminiscent of the pattern of a lack of funding that prevailed for decades.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, researchers like MacDonald and colleagues (2023) have indicated that young people have reported an increase in anxiety and depression. Hoddinott and colleagues (2022) reported that there was a relationship between a rise in children's social care from the 2010s following

cuts to services like the youth service, which are seen as preventative. This rise in children's social care was by 34% (Hoddinott et al. 2022). MacDonald and colleagues (2023) also reported the impacts of the pandemic were worse for young people from lower income families (CNE 2020), and employment for young people fell five times more than it did for adults (ILO 2021).

Since the lockdowns ended, literature has indicated that young people benefit and engage more with services aimed toward their own wellbeing and acquiring skills through preventative services (Hoddinott et al. 2022; Axford et al. 2023; Webb, Bennett & Bywaters 2022). Further, the decline in positive outcomes for young people followed the fall in funding from austere policies (Hoddinott et al. 2022; Webb et al. 2022). Howard and colleagues (2020) noted that the benefits of youth work have been well presented through past literature; however, this had not been reflected in policy and funding. While these noted relationships since the end of the lockdowns would encourage more funding for services like Sunshine Youth Service, the government has been estimated to need to save approximately £40 billion in the next few years (Hoddinott et al. 2022). These authors have predicted that the kinds of services that were previously cut due to austerity will likely continue to face more cuts through these savings, which they named ''…a return to 'austerity','' (Hoddinott et al. 2022, p. 2). It seems relationship between the benefits of youth work alongside strict policy and slashed funding (Howard et al. 2020) is a pattern that will likely continue.

If the last 15 years have been any indication (Crines 2017; Lepper 2021; YMCA 2022; Youdell & McGimpsey 2015), youth services as a whole faces being cut further, with a likely increase in negative outcomes for the local young people in the process. These kinds of impacts have long lasting effects that may not be able

to be cited for years. While cuts may be labelled as austerity, the root of austerity is to reduce government spending and save money. This is reminiscent of Thatcher era neoliberalism continuing through modern times (Bevan 2023; Farrall et al. 2022).

2.9 Conclusion

The current literature review chapter has aimed to establish context in relation to youth services, and specifically the research question that asks: in what ways did changing economic, political, and social contexts impact youth services during COVID-19? This question is independent on its own, but also relates back to the overarching research question: in what ways did COVID-19 impact youth services in a local authority in a England? The history of youth work from decades and centuries past through to the COVID-19 lockdowns and beyond is critical to establish, as the shifts in how youth services have operated shed light into the current practices and patterns. For instance, youth services remain a way in which for young people to obtain formal and informal education in a voluntary setting. These are values that have remained through various iterations of youth services, such as the YMCA or Sunday Schools (Jeffs & Smith 2002; Mills & Kraftl 2014). While the values have remained reminiscent of the past, the ways in which the government has influenced youth services has changed. From less overall state involvement in the early to mid-20th century, through to the neoliberal values of the Thatcher era, the expectation of targeted practice in the 1990s, and the emphasis upon youth voice and active co-creation in 2022 (Bradford & Cullen 2014; Crewe & Searing 1988; DES 2002; Mason 2015; Youth Review 2022). The history of youth work in terms of social values rooted within the service, and the economic

and political shifts allow for a deeper understanding into the role of youth services at the time of data collection, as well as further context into the ways in which the service dealt with the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns.

Chapter 3

A Literature Review of Theory and Concepts

The literature review to this point has focussed on contextualising the history of youth work, policy, and the impact of COVID-19 upon youth workers through the decades since its conception. The approach of this chapter is to consider a conceptual and theoretical approach to understanding youth work and Sunshine Youth Service. Previous research drew attention to the changing spaces in which youth services were delivered and spoken about the impacts of a neoliberal shift in policies toward a market-driven approach upon welfare programmes (Jackson 2015), as well as targeted practice within youth work, and the additional stress and anxiety that these place upon those working within youth services (Jaynes 2020; Nolas 2014). Youth services have been expected to provide physical spaces for young people to attend, with the expectation that the youth workers would be able to focus upon target driven outcomes for the young people that attend the service. However, within these expectations, youth services around England have historically been under scrutiny from neoliberal policy, which resulted in budgetary restraints. These restrictions strained the youth service, as well as the ability to produce the desired outcomes with the young people. The impacts were amplified through the COVID-19 lockdowns.

This chapter will address key theoretical and conceptual ideas that will be relevant to developing a deeper understanding of the practice of youth work and youth services through the empirical chapters. The first section will introduce the study of youth based practices in relation to sociology as well as other related disciplines. The next section will explore ideas of critical realism and reflexivity. Critical realism and reflexivity are related through the manners in which they can

be conceptualised across various levels, and with understanding that there is a relationship between people and structures within society (Archer 2019; Bhaskar 2010). This section will also address the use reflection versus reflexivity in relation to youth services. The third section will address the idea of vulnerability. This will be both in relation to vulnerability as a concept and vulnerability within the youth service. It will be discussed that a critical consideration of vulnerability is important, as there are researchers who previously identified that vulnerability can be used as a means to stigmatise young people (Morrison et al. 2019; Tyler 2013). Vulnerability is a term that has been commonly used within the youth service and in relation to youth practice more generally (see Furlong, Cartmel, Powney, & Hall 1997; National Audit Office 2022a; National Youth Agency 2020c; Sonneveld 2022), making it a key term to consider within a research context.

The next section considers the role of participation within youth services. Participation is discussed as it has had an important role in the history of youth services (Ord & Davies 2018). One way in which to consider participation is through Hart's Ladder of Participation. This ladder is a tool in which to scrutinise if actions within services for young people operate in a manner that gives autonomy to young people (Hart 1992). This is important as the input from young people was an integral aspect of youth services (NYA 2021e). A critical discussion of Hart's Ladder of Participation will be presented, as it previously has been critiqued. The final section will discuss the idea of space. This will be in terms of space as a sociological concept, but also what space looks like for the youth service. Ideas of safe and liminal spaces will be presented in this section.

Together, these sections will detail the main concepts that helped to shape the research questions, and contextualise the specific aspects of youth services

that are being considered within the historical and policy context provided in the previous chapter. This will serve as a way in which to further contextualise the research question that pertains to economic, social, and political contexts that impacted youth service through COVID-19, and also lays a foundation for the research questions that consider the conceptualisation, management, and creation of vulnerability and space through COVID-19.

3.1 A note on the study of young people

While this thesis has been rooted within a sociological perspective toward the study of young people, there have been previous discussions toward the variety of ways in which to consider youth related research, and the separation or integration of these topics among different academic disciplines. France, Roberts, and Wood (2018) noted that the study of sociology in relation to young people and youth related studies had limits. These limits were in relation to methodological issues that accompany limitations to qualitative or quantitative data as well as the topics that individual researchers had chosen to examine (France et al. 2018).

Limitations to research in this way was not unique to the discipline of sociology. Sloam (2010) as well as Tatlow-Golden and Montgomery (2021) both considered the role of youth related research to their respective fields of study. The former wrote in relation to political science and young people, while the latter demonstrated the tension between psychology and childhood studies. Sloam (2021) noted that a perspective from a political science perspective would enable researchers to form research questions that could help to address gaps in literature specific to the discipline of political science. Alternatively, Tatlow-Golden and Montgomery (2021) wrote about the separation that they observed

between the discipline of psychology and childhood studies, as well as the benefit that they experienced when they allowed for the existence of both within their research practice.

Threadgold (2020) noted that youth studies as a discipline drew from many backgrounds, including sociology, cultural studies, and anthropology to name a few. Overall, the idea of youth studies is a manner in which to understand what it means to be a young person (Wood 2017). However, within the realm of youth studies, conflicting perspectives can also arise. Threadgold (2020) noted that the discipline of youth studies did not always represent a common narrative of youth. This author noted differences between researchers from varying independent disciplines as well as qualitative versus quantitative approaches to research. Threadgold (2020) did indicate that these different approaches were not a bad thing. Rather, it is instead important for researchers to be aware of their own limitations, as well as how their narratives speak to the larger theme of young people.

In relation to the current thesis, points from a discipline specific focus, as well as in relation to wider youth studies are both important. The conclusions that will be drawn as well as the basis for the study have been situated within a sociological context. However, it is not completely removed from literature that is based within other disciplines, nor is it intended to only be of use to other sociologists. As will be laid out in forthcoming chapters, this research was a case-study of a specific youth service in one local authority in England during the COVID-10 pandemic lockdowns and guidelines. The conclusions drawn will be useful to sociologists, but also to related disciplines like geography or anthropology, as well as the broader discipline of youth studies. The themes of the

conclusions will be rooted within a variety of important concepts, like austerity, vulnerability, space, and working through a crisis. While these will be sociologically based, it is my intention as a researcher for this thesis to be helpful toward forwarding the sociological approach to youth services and youth work, but also that it may branch out and be useful to researchers from other backgrounds as well. To begin the below sections within a sociological perspective, an influential sociological concept for this thesis has been critical realism. A critical realist approach will be introduced below.

3.2 Critical realism and youth work

The role of a youth worker is rooted within negotiation. In addition to negotiating their relationship with young people, youth workers must also negotiate the relationship between themselves as youth workers or youth service employees in relation to the wider service, local authority, and the government. Critical realism is a useful way in which to consider the dynamic between youth worker and structure. Critical realism is a theoretical framework that makes a distinction about what is *real* in the world (ontology) and how people observe and perceive (epistemology) about the social and cultural structures that shape the world in which they live (Bhaskar 2010; Fleetwood 2014). It is a theoretical position that seeks to provide an explanation (causes) to understand how people react and achieve (agency) within a set of external factors (structures) that enable or prohibit their behaviour (Fleetwood 2014; Fletcher 2017; Lawani 2021). Critical realism examines the world as a place of shifting structures, and the ways in which these structures impact social phenomena (Bhaskar 2010).

Critical realism was originally conceptualised for social research by Bhaskar in the 1970s and 80s, with collaboration from other British social theorists (Gorski 2013). Prior to this time, critical realism was a philosophy within the physical sciences (Fletcher 2017; Gorski 2013). Within social research, critical realism can be conceptualised as three separate levels that help to demonstrate the various ways that structure and agency can interact (Fletcher 2017; Lawani 2021). The 'empirical' level is events as a person experiences them (Fletcher 2017). This level is subjective, with acknowledgment for human experience and interpretation. The 'actual' level attests that events will occur regardless of whether or not any human experiences the event (Fletcher 2017). These 'actual' events may be different than what would be observed at the subjective 'empirical' level. The third level is 'real', where causation exists, and events occur from an interaction between objects, and these events are then observable at the 'empirical' level (Fletcher 2017). Through these three levels, the subjective interpretation of an event, the objective structure of the event, and the cause of the event are all able to be considered (Lawani 2021).

Fletcher (2017) previously conceptualised critical realism as an iceberg, which is presented below in Figure 1. Within the metaphor of an iceberg, there are implications for what each level of critical realism means. The empirical level is above the water, as it is the level where human observation occurs. However, fitting within the metaphor of an iceberg, there is much more below the surface. Fletcher (2017) clarified that this image is not intended to imply that the levels only interact in a linear manner, it is instead useful to depict the depth of social phenomena beyond human experience.
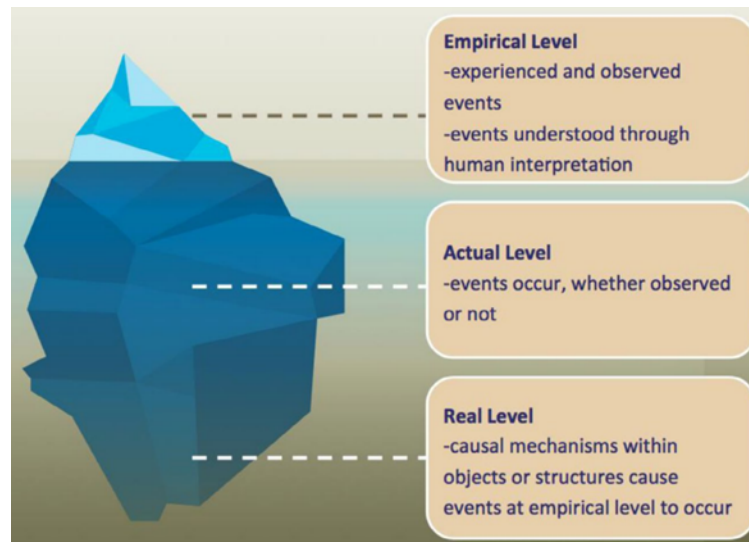
Figure 1: Fletcher's Conceptualisation of Critical Realism as an Iceberg

For Bhaskar (2010), all social structures had an element of social relation. This social relation can be between structures and individuals. The structures may have existed prior to a certain individual entering, but the individual's actions may impact the structure (Bhaskar 2010). With this in mind, the critical realist perspective allows for consideration of larger structures in society, individual actions, as well as the interplay between these (Seal 2016). This is important in relation to this thesis, as the focus is upon youth work, and those working within and in relation to the youth service, and the presence of larger structural practices and policies that determine the environment in which this work was able to take place.

Soriano-Rivera (2017) considered a critical realist framework in relation to austerity and the impacts to single mothers in England. Soriano-Rivera (2017) used critical realism to consider both the perceptions of the participants as well as the systemic impact of austere policy. This was not dissimilar to the impact of austere polices in relation to youth services in England. To recall from Chapter Two, youth service provision in England had been directly impacted by shifts in policy

pertaining to neoliberal ideals in the 1980s, as well as a shift in focus from open access to targeted practices in the 1990s (Bevan 2023; Bradford & Cullen 2014; Cooper 2018; Farrall et al. 2022; Hughes et al. 2014). In this way, the perceptions of youth workers and those within the youth service in data collection for this thesis existed within the context of policy and systems in relation to austerity.

Seal (2016) considered the way that a critical realist stance could help to inform the dynamics between young people and community youth workers, as these relationships had power dynamics that had already been structured through past interactions and iterations of youth practice. Within a critical realist context, both the empirical (human observation) experiences of the youth workers and those within the youth service were able to be considered, as well as causal, real (structural mechanisms) impacts upon actual (events interacting) occurrences within the social world. In this way, the use of critical realism allowed for a critical examination of the structural mechanisms that had impacted policy, both historically and in relation to the COVID-19 lockdowns, upon the experiences of those within the youth service.

Critical realism has been previously explored in relation to young people or children. Walker (2004) posed the benefits of considering the role of family from a structural perspective in relation to young people within the foster care system. Belfrage and Hauf (2017) considered austerity from a critical realist perspective in relation to the impacts of austerity in Iceland, and wrote about the rippling impacts of austere policy in relation to disillusionment and distrust among wider society. For Belfrage and Hauf (2017), the reality of the social world was within numerous events that interacted or countered one another. In this way, it is not possible to completely separate structure from reality. Instead a critical realist

perspective served as a way of isolating certain elements. The work of Belfrage and Hauf (2017) was useful in establishing the current chapter because the perception of the participants in relation to the three levels (empirical, actual, real) will be considered in the empirical chapters. However, the word *perception* is used carefully. The perceived reality of the participants (empirical level) in relation to the youth service and austere policies may not necessarily reflect what is known to exist (actual and real levels). For example, the over 70% of cuts to funding for youth service across England is factually based. The numbers for funding can be found through tracing back sources, such as those cited from the YMCA (2020, 2022). However, the participants do not necessarily have the same perception of how much funding has been cut, or their experience of them.

Through considering austerity and youth services with a critical realist framework, the perceptions of the participants (empirical level), real world interactions (actual level), and causal systemic mechanisms (real level) were all able to be considered. The consideration of each of these levels is important, as they are not independent of one another. The real (systemic mechanisms) were embedded within the actual (events interacting) level, which then may or may not be observed on the empirical level. Inversely, the observed perceptions upon the empirical level can feed back into underlying systemic mechanisms, whether or not an individual was aware it was happening. In this way, none of these elements can be ignored.

For Soriano-Rivera's (2017) work in relation to austerity and lone mothers within a critical realist framework, the empirical level is where the, ''…characteristics of the policy and economic settings…on the UK population,'' exist (p. 75). The actual level is elements such as welfare policy and practice due to

austere policies. The real level is the, ''...generative mechanisms which operate through...social division,'' (p. 75). Through the use of critical realism, Soriano-Rivera (2017) was able to consider the perspectives of lone mothers, and the disadvantage that austerity posed to factors such as welfare and economic experience. One noted impact in relation to austere policies after 2010 was the disproportionate decrease in income for lone mothers (Soriano-Rivera 2017). Previous literature considered various aspects around youth, community, or children's services with a critical realist lens. Alderson (2016b) wrote around the usefulness of critical realism from a philosophical point of view as a perspective that did not consider structure and agency as separate. Rather, they interact over time. In regards to children or young people, this is a valuable perspective as critical realism allowed for acknowledgement that each person would have unique aspects to themselves, from their family history, where they were born, or socialisation, to name a few (Alderson 2016a). These aspects of individuality also related to wider constructs like class and cultural identity. Contrasted to this, there are realities that exist within the world, such as governmental systems that vary from country to country. A critical realist perspective allows to correct for this clash through acknowledging reality and practicalities, as well as the unique ways in which different people exist and interact with the social world (Alderson 2016a).

For Alderson (2016a; 2016b), the acknowledgment of human agency was not exclusive to adult persons. Rather, it was important to consider the manner in which young people or children may interact with the systems around them. These systems were through things like the social world, family dynamics, community dynamics, and peers. This may even be through the limits in which agency of

children or young people is impacted through larger systemic operations, or by adults themselves acting within their own agency, imposing their concerns onto younger people (Alderson 2016a; 2016b). The consideration of young people's agency within the youth service will be discussed (see below) in relation to Hart's Ladder of Participation.

Literature that was produced more recently within a critical realist approach expands from Larkins (2019) consideration of the use of agency within childhood, and Seal (2021), who wrote about the use of critical realism as a way in which to explore multiple possibilities for agency, and the way it may change over time. Mercier (2022) described the benefit of looking at youth-based settings, as young people helped shape and influenced the structures around themselves. However, Mercier (2022) also noted that there were limits to these influences. For example, the influence of individuals was limited in the ways that they may be able to impact institutional racism (Mercier 2022). However, over time and across various individuals, the actual (events interacting) level may see changes that were developed within the empirical (human observation) level, which could go on to influence the way that institutional racism was structurally embedded within the real (systemic mechanisms) (Mercier 2022). Within a critical realist perspective, consideration in relation to agency and structure in a youth-based setting can be made.

Through literature rooted within considering the philosophical role of critical realism, Seal (2016) wrote about the interaction of the roles within a youth work setting between the young people and the staff, and the way in which these interactions were pre-determined by structure as well as the roles that each agent undertook within the youth community work setting. Seal's (2016) contribution is

valuable, as it demonstrated the complexity of the interactions within a setting around youth community work between the young people and the staff of the centre, but also the ways in which these interactions were shaped by larger structural factors.

In relation to the research question around economic, political, and social impacts through COVID-19, the use of a critical realist framework allowed for a deeper critical examination of the pandemic in these contexts. However, a critical realist framework also allowed for more context around the creation and conceptualisation of space and vulnerability, as the mechanisms that shaped the ways in which the youth service existed and was able to operate will also be established. For this thesis, critical realist framework lays the foundation for each of the empirical chapters.

Within these conversations of critical realism in relation to young people, childhood, and in youth work settings, there is also a theme of the differences within the way various people may act across varying situations. Thinking of the differences in individuals adds a further layer of complexity to the consideration of the ways in which people in youth-based settings may work, but also an element of clarity and understanding for the reasons why different agents may react differently in a similar environment. Larkins (2019) and Seal (2021) both considered the use of critical realism alongside Archer's ideas of reflexivity to allow for a more rounded understanding of the ways in which people interact and behave within certain settings and within structural confines. There is much depth to Archer's ideas of reflexivity, and these will be discussed within the next section.

3.3 Reflexivity within critical realism

Archer (2019) echoed and elaborated upon the ideas of Bhaskar (2010), arguing that there was a need to understand and incorporate individual action when considering structure and agency. Archer (2019) wrote *all* theory that relates to social order must consider structure, agency, and culture (SAC). The writings of Archer considered the relationship between SAC and presented various perspectives to consider. Archer (1995) examined morphogenesis and morphostasis. Morphogenesis is a creation or change, whereas morphostasis is a maintenance of stability or consistency (Becerra 2017; Becerra & Coffey 2017). However, what was most important within both of these definitions is that there is an interplay between both structure and agency, indicating an individual's role or collective action within either the morphogenesis or morphostasis for a structure (Archer 1995). The discussion around morphogenesis and morphostasis opened the consideration around the structure, agency, and culture to also consider the different ways in which individual agents may act in different situations and structures. Archer considered this individual action as *reflexivity* (2003, 2007, 2012).

Archer (2007) defined reflexivity as, '…the regular exercise of the mental ability, shared by all normal people, to consider themselves in relation to their social contexts and vice versa,'' (p.65). Reflexivity can be achieved through what Archer (2003, 2007) calls internal conversation. Internal conversations are the dialogues that individual people have with themselves (Archer 2007). The internal conversation that an individual has may not always be reflexive, as there is a necessity for an object to be considered as part of the internal conversation in order for it to be reflexive (Archer 2007). In the 2003 book *Structure, Agency and*

Internal Conversation, Archer discussed the stages through which people were reflexive in relation to the world. Stage one was in relation to the powers and cultural properties, and the ways in which these influenced and impacted the situations of individual people. Stage two refers to what Archer called 'human agents' (p. 132), and the ways that these agents interacted with their social environment. This occurred on an individual basis as well as within a collective context within society. Stage three was where agents acted in a reflexive manner. In Archer's words, ''Agential subjectivity reflects upon societal objectivity ... elaboration of strategy by self-conscious social subjects towards non-reflexive social powers,'' (2003, p. 133).

Specifically, Archer (2003) drew particular attention to stage three, as it helped to detail some reasons for *why* and *how* agents act independently in relation or in response to stages one and two. For Archer (2003), these stages were important because they were necessary to understand the reflexive conversation and processes around personal consideration, which would then be imposed into the outside structural and cultural environments in stage one. As Archer (2003) stated, ''...we are radically heterogenous as people, rather than having common ends ... our subjectivity is dynamic rather than static because we modify our own goals in terms of their contextual feasibility,'' (p. 134). Essentially, Archer (2003) was describing that individual people were going to have their own internal thoughts and considerations that impact the way that they approach and interact with the world. The subjectivity of human agents influenced the way that one person may pursue a goal, and how that would be different to what someone else does.

The three stages do not directly impact each other, rather there is interaction between them. These stages are reminiscent of the stages discussed by Fletcher (2017) in relation to critical realism, with emphasis on the independence of systems on themselves, but also the interplay of individual agent action. Within the setting of youth work, the interaction of the stages is useful within the evaluation of cultural contexts upon an individual, and the decisions they make. The emphasis of Archer upon individual action expanded beyond Bhaskar's conceptualisation of critical realism to consider the different ways in which various individuals may react or respond to their cultural setting. This is useful within this thesis, as a reflexive perspective builds upon the critical realist framework to consider the manner in which individuals react to an underlying circumstance.

Within the youth service, it was relevant to consider the variations in reflexivity among youth workers, as the goals of youth work were open to interpretation and flexibility. For example, from the NYA website, one aspect of youth work is, ''Promoting the voice of young people,'' (2021e, n.p.). While there was discussion about youth voice and the participation of young people in youth services, and how it was an important, longstanding aspect of youth work, this is not specific and could interpreted many different ways. With this in mind, Archer's (2003, 2007) work about reflexivity is valuable in relation to this thesis, as a consideration of the reflexive practice of youth workers will shed light on the ways in which the youth workers act within their roles, and provide youth work to young people.

Specifically, Archer (2007, 2012) worked to categorise reflexivity into four different types. These types are communicative, autonomous, meta-reflexivity,

and fractured reflexivity. Communicative reflexivity occurs when an individual reflects on solutions or options to the subject of thought, but needs to discuss this with an additional individual prior to taking action (Archer 2007). Archer (2007) placed emphasis upon the notion that there is a *need* in this scenario for the involvement of a second individual. It is not that the primary reflexive practitioner cannot make a decision on their own, but there is a preference to gather opinions, and express their thoughts to a second individual as well. Autonomous reflexivity occurs when an individual reflects upon their options for the subject, and takes action. It does not require any additional intervention from others (Archer 2007). Meta-reflexivity is when an individual reflects upon the subject, while also considering additional knowledge, forming a loop within the internal dialogue of the individual (Archer 2007). For Archer (2007), this reflexivity is less about the internal deliberation around a subject, and more about why the internal conversation and loop in thoughts is occurring. Fractured reflexivity is much like autonomous reflexivity or communicative reflexivity, in that the individual is reflecting around a subject, and they may speak about it to other individuals as well. However, the important distinction is that fractured reflexivity will not result in action and can be accompanied by feelings of anguish or frustration (Archer 2007).

Archer's considerations to reflexivity have previously been considered in youth work literature. Seal (2021) considered the four types of reflexivity within research about young people in a community work based setting and highlighted the benefit of considering these types as a way to consider structure, agency, and the relationship between them. While this literature was interested in the relationship between structure and agency in relation to heteronormativity, Seal

(2021) did note the tension that existed between structure and agency within a community space for young people, and the ways in which people may shift and change within the types of reflexivity over time. Iacono, Craig, and Pascoe (2021) considered the role of reflexivity within the incorporation of an online setting for young people through the pandemic. The use of online material in this research was in relation to vulnerable young people within the LGBTQ+ community and their ability to access mental health services online. Iacono and colleagues (2021) noted the switch to an online delivery of services was stressful and uncertain, as it had not been done before; however, it was necessary in order to continue to deliver services to the young people in order to help with their vulnerabilities. This is not dissimilar to the noted experience of youth workers toward adapting an online practice in the lockdowns noted by Batsleer and colleagues (2020a; 2020b). It is important to note that Seal (2021) expressed that the types of reflexivity, specifically meta-reflexivity, was potentially a limiting way in which to consider structure and agency. However, Archer (2007) stated that the four types of reflexivity were not fully encompassing. Archer wrote an appreciation that not every person or every situation will be able to always be covered by these types. Instead, the types of reflexivity are meant to provide guidance for the ways in which we can consider reflexive practice in a variety of manners (Archer 2007).

While reflexivity has been the focus of this section, it is important to acknowledge that other authors and some youth work guidelines highlight the use of a *reflective* practice (de St Croix 2018; NYA n.d.). For de St Croix (2018), a critical reflection within youth work became a necessity after the transition from a monitoring system to an evaluative one. Within the nature of evaluation, a critical reflection is a manner in which to consider current practice as well as alternatives

(de St Croix 2018). Similar sentiments are present within NYA guidelines, such as Hear by Right. Hear by Right is a participatory framework where youth services across England are able to plan and develop, as well as evaluate the ways in which they incorporate participation within the service (NYA n.d.; NYA 2024). This framework follows the stages presented by the large consulting firm, McKinsey: structures, systems, style, staff, skills, strategy, and shared values (NYA n.d.; NYA 2024). Hear by Right interacts with this framework to consider where a youth service can reflect upon their own practice of youth participation. Ultimately, Hear by Right is estimated to take 10 to 12 months to complete (NYA n.d.), making it a long-term consideration of the big picture of the practice.

The evaluation and adaptation of practice occurred quickly in line with immediate closures for COVID-19. Youth services across England did not have months to consider their adaptation of practice. In this way, guidelines like Hear by Right are not encompassing of the changes that had to occur by youth workers during the initial phases of COVID-19. Further, Seal (2019) argued that reflection in and of itself is not robust enough to consider youth services and the interaction between youth services and participation from young people. Seal (2019) considered a pedagogical approach to be, ''…a state of being; one of continual reinvention and recognition of praxis within an evolving cannon of knowledge and practice,'' (p. 96). Trelfa (2018) echoed similar sentiments, stating that reflection led to a process of critical reflection.

With Seal's (2019) critique of reflection, and Trelfa's (2018) noted perception of reflection as leading to a state of critical reflection, the concept of reflexivity is a way in which to pedagogically approach youth work and youth services. Through the indication that the practice of youth work needs to be

considered with continual reinvention and evolution of the practice, the values that underpin reflexivity are present. As stated previously, Archer (1995; 2003; 2007; 2012) wrote about reflexivity as the process that humans go through in order to adapt to and impact the changes in structure, culture, and agency. Since youth work values the voice of young people (NYA 2021e), a reflexive practice is a manner in which youth workers could approach considering the perspectives of young people. This will be explored more within the empirical chapters. One way in which youth workers may act reflexively is through the consideration of what to plan for a young person in relation to vulnerability. The concept of vulnerability will be discussed in the following section.

3.4 Vulnerability and youth work practice

The framework of critical realism and the way in which it related to reflexivity established a way of considering decision making within the youth service and from the youth workers. A reflexive approach allowed for an understanding of the variation in decisions from one individual to the next. Critical realism is a way in which to consider systemic interactions that help detail the wider societal contexts that influence these decisions. In relation to youth work, vulnerability is an concept and practice that is rooted in policies and practices that have a rich history in England. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the austere policies born out of neoliberal values have previously been framed within critical realism (Soriano-Rivera 2017). Considering the youth service was arguably impacted most by austere policies (YMCA 2020; 2022), the practice of youth work considering vulnerability is rooted within larger, real (systemic mechanisms) and actual (events interacting) levels of critical realism. Alderson (2021) argued that a

critical realist perspective helped to critically evaluate the impacts of neoliberal policies, as well as the way in which the policies impacted certain groups in society, such as those who are vulnerable due to illness and those who are not. The remainder of this section will discuss vulnerability as a term and practice within youth services. This will establish context pertaining to the research question that addresses the conceptualisation and management of vulnerability within youth services through the COVID-19 pandemic.

The term 'vulnerable' has been commonly used in sociology, specifically, the topic of vulnerability and 'youth' was of particular interest, rooted in other topics such as inequality, exclusion, and social control (Brown, Ecclestone, & Emmel 2017; Spini et al. 2017). Forbes-Mewett and Nguyen-Trung (2019) considered the manner in which vulnerability had previously been discussed across various literature and noted that two elements were common themes in the way vulnerability was considered. First, there needed to be the presence of a stressor, followed by an inability to cope (Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung 2019). This definition of vulnerability will be utilised through the thesis. Berzin (2010) commented on the ways in which young people may be vulnerable in their transition to adulthood, such as through access to support, race, and social class or poverty. There were mentions of vulnerable young people within guidelines for COVID-19 in youth services (NYA 2020d). Further, literature examining impacts of previous pandemics indicated that 'vulnerable' populations tended to be disproportionately impacted (Ahmed, Ahmed, Pissarides, & Stiglitz 2020; Carvalho et al. 2022). Albertson Fineman (2021) noted that COVID-19 guidelines of vulnerability were encompassing of nearly everyone, with more specific consideration for specific groups, like those who were elderly. In relation to the

youth service, references to vulnerability within COVID-19 based guidelines were vague, and youth workers were then left to decide what defined a vulnerable young person for their services.

A loose definition of vulnerability can be beneficial, as it allows room for youth services to adjust and accommodate the young people they work with independently. However, this has also been criticised as concepts of vulnerability can be seen as a manner in which to restrict agency and decision-making power which, ultimately, can be seen as a form of social control (Brown et al. 2017). This is concerning as some authors, like Tisdall (2017) and Brown and colleagues (2017), discussed the idea that vulnerability was an inevitable part of being human. Brown (2015) also wrote about the idea of universal vulnerability, wherein humans share an element of precariousness and insecurity. While the use of vulnerability as a concept may allow a young person to access targeted approaches to address their vulnerability (NYA 2021d), there are potential limitations to resources if everyone is seen as vulnerable. This is particularly potent when the youth services are already caught within years of continual budget cuts, as discussed earlier in this chapter. Further, the use of vulnerability as a label of young people may also restrict the extent to which their 'youth voice' is considered within the services they're accessing (Morrison et al. 2019). This difference in the ways young people have their 'voice' heard could be considered a type of stigma in the way it attributes restrictions upon the young person.

Stigma around young people, and those within youth services, has a history within the UK. When Margaret Thatcher was Prime Minister in the 1980s, and onwards, social programs intended to help the poor were often viewed in a stigmatised way, which largely impacted the perception of those from lower

socioeconomic backgrounds (Tyler 2013). Douglas (1968) used the word 'pollution' to help describe the ways in which different groups may respond to what they deem as undesirable behaviour. Within this, 'polluting' people were viewed as undesirable because they placed others in danger, or because they breached the societal norms (Lupton 2013). The idea of people 'polluting' society, as well as negative perceptions toward young people, is reminiscent of moral panics toward young people that have occurred through history (Bradford & Cullen 2014; Newburn 2005). The word 'polluted' was also used by Goffman (1963), when considering the historical perspective of stigma. The use of the word 'pollution' seems similar to that of more recent discussions by Tyler (2013) pertaining to 'abject', as both view certain people or groups within society with stigma and aversion. Vulnerability, while intended to help identify what needs may be necessary within a young person's life, could also be seen as a stigma which results in a loss of power or control for the young person identified as 'vulnerable'.

When considering vulnerability in relation to the ideas of youth participation, there may also be limiting aspects from stigmatisation (Morrison et al. 2019). Participation helps to make the space of youth services, both abstract and physical, in which youth services operates; however, the way that policy or guidelines upon youth services define vulnerability then limits the ways in which this is realistically achievable. This further complicates the constant negotiation that youth service workers must navigate when working with young people, especially in a time with so many other constraints, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, the idea of general uncertainty, and the ways in which the youth service needed to manage the growing problems for young people. For the purpose of this thesis, a portion of the overall argument in relation to the research

question that asks how economic, political, and social contexts through COVID-19 impacted youth services will discuss the stigmatisation of youth services, and the practical impacts of this stigma. From a critical realist perspective, some of the stigma of youth services can also be demonstrated historically, such as through political rhetoric that looks negatively upon young people or overzealous state spending. Previous literature by McCardle (2014) indicated that youth workers did not think that society understood the role of youth work as anything beyond helping host fun activities for young people. It is difficult to dispute the perception of youth work being misunderstood as austerity cut backs disproportionately impacted youth services (YMCA 2020), the delay and cut to promised youth service funding (Batsleer et al. 2021), and political rhetoric that spoke negatively toward the welfare state (Bramall 2013).

When considering all of the above points around vulnerability and stigma, two main issues arise. First, the classification of vulnerability within youth services upon young people can be helpful, but can also potentially reduce participatory power due to stigma placed around young people. Second, the stigma about youth work within society places the entire service into a position of vulnerability demonstrated through the lack of policy and funding that supports youth services.

The concept of vulnerability, and the potential stigma that accompanies it, is important to consider within the context of this thesis as vulnerability could potentially inhibit the participation of young people, or as a scope through which to view participation.

From a critical realist perspective, the guidelines that exist in relation to youth work and vulnerability have been rooted within systemic patterns, and shaped the way that youth workers approach their roles. For example, the manner in which

many groups were considered vulnerable during COVID-19 (Albertson Fineman 2021) would have shifted the way that youth services viewed their practice through the pandemic. Further, the neoliberal rhetoric of the Thatcher years that portrayed young people and state programmes in a negative manner were argued to still be present in policy (Bevan 2023; Farrall et al. 2022). Therefore, while participation was an integral role within the youth service (NYA 2021e), and has been part of the history of youth work (Ord & Davies 2018), the extent to which youth services were able to engage in a participatory manner with their young people is limited by larger policy and guidelines toward targeting vulnerability within young people. Therefore it is valuable to consider the ways in which vulnerability may inhibit the practice of youth work, but also more deeply consider what participation means within the youth service.

3.5 Participation in youth services

The emphasis upon allowing young people to express power through the role of participation has been present in the practice of youth service for over a century (Ord & Davies 2018; Russel & Rigby 1908 cited by Davies 2015). Participation extends from agency in decisions within a youth centre, through to detached work, where youth workers approach young people in the public space that they have chosen (Davis 2015). Appreciating the autonomy and power of young people involved in youth services is important, as, in many cases, their participation was voluntary. Just as soon as they may choose to participate, they can decide to leave (Davis 2015; Mason 2015; Morrison et al. 2019). For some young people, such as those identified as being 'vulnerable', this power and ability to influence their experience in the service may be limited. For example, in

instances where a young person is required to attend a youth service, such as a through the supervision of a Youth Offending Team, power and autonomy can likely only be displayed by the young person in the form of thin engagement in the service (Klocker 2007; Mason 2015; Morrison et al. 2019). 'Thin' in this context would mean that the space is restrictive (Klocker 2007; Morrison et al. 2019). Alternatively, a 'thick' form of engagement would indicate that there were many explorable options within a space (Klocker 2007; Morrison et al. 2019).

For youth service workers, there is a constant unspoken negotiation with the young people using the service in order to provide more instances of autonomy, and therefore power, within the service (Davis 2015). There can be room to provide 'thickeners', which are ways in which youth services can allow for more agency from the young people, even if this were to be through small decisions for young people in more restrictive programs (Klocker 2007; Morrison et al. 2019). The attribution of power, and consideration of the ways in which young people are able to participate is dictated by the youth workers. Jaynes (2020) describes this power dynamic as, ''…a balancing act between professionalism and friendship…' (p. 208-209).

Within the context of COVID-19, the space of youth work extended into the online world as well. Through accessing the services of a youth centre online, young people might be provided with an accessible space that was safe to use and engage with their peers (Shifflet-Chila, Harold, Fitton, & Ahmedani 2016). This is similar to the expectations of attending a youth centre physically (Jaynes 2020; Nolas 2014). The online sessions that were adapted due to COVID-19 could be seen as a 'thickener' (Klocker 2007; Morrison et al. 2019) of participation and power, as many young people previously reported that they felt like experts when working

online (Shifflet-Chila et al. 2016). For example, a young person being able to log onto Minecraft with their peers and a youth worker, then being able to make decisions, and displaying autonomy in the world being built, is a way to thicken power and participation (Morrison et al. 2019) during a time marked by instability and uncertainty (Pickersgill 2020; Strong 1990; Young Minds 2021). However, engagement with online services was dependent upon which young people were willing and able to attend.

One way in which the youth service was able to critically consider participation is through Hart's Ladder of Participation. This ladder has rungs that relate to non-participation as well as Degrees of Participation (DOP) (Hart 1992). The non-participation rungs consist of manipulation, decoration, and tokenism; whereas the DOP are assigned but informed, consulted and informed, adult initiated with shared decisions with children, child initiated and directed, and child initiated with shared decisions with adults (Hart 1992). Hart's Ladder of Participation was originally based upon Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation; however, the Ladder of Participation has remained prominent since publication (Corney, Cooper, Shier, & Williamson 2022; Shier 2001). Researchers have found that Hart's Ladder of Participation continued to be a beneficial way in which to consider the participation of young people within youth service settings (Body & Hogg 2019; Corney et al. 2022).

Hart's Ladder of Participation does have critiques, such as some authors pointing out that the top rung of participation were centred around sharing decisions with adults (Corney et al. 2022). However, Hart (2008) defends this, as adult influence may be necessary in order to facilitate the participatory decisions by young people (Corney et al. 2022). Hart (2008) also specified that the Ladder of

Participation was not a set guide to interpreting participation, rather it was a tool to evaluate and reflect upon practice that involved participation with young people.

The use of Hart's Ladder of Participation and the boundaries put in place by the adults within a youth space allowed for a perspective around the ways in which young people were able to act with agency in an adult run space. Within a critical realist framework, the negotiation of systemic power between the youth service and larger governing bodies, such as the distribution of funds or the development of guidelines, can be argued to operate on the actual (events interacting) or real (systemic mechanisms) levels within critical realism. The empirical (human observation) level could be able to be demonstrated through the experiences of the youth workers and the young people within the service due to the interactions on the other levels. As one example, the actual (events interacting) level may impact the way that a youth worker is able to encourage participation from young people.

Another concept of relevance to youth participation is the idea of 'co-production' within youth spaces (Pearson 2022). Co-production of activities assumes that there was a relationship between the professionals and service users, where they worked together to put together an activity (Pearson 2022). Howard (2017) described co-production as a conversational learning process. Taylor and colleagues (2022) noted that co-production was a beneficial way in which to improve mental wellbeing for young people in mental health settings. Within a social work setting, co-production was a way for young people to learn a new way to express themselves in a formal setting (Heron & Steckley 2020). However, co-production could cause tension between adults attempting to step back and listen

to the input of the young people (Heron & Steckley 2020). This is not dissimilar to Hart's Ladder of Participation, as the ladder acknowledges that there are rungs of participation that are not necessarily participatory (i.e. manipulation, tokenism, decoration) (Hart 1992). Similarly, co-production can be hindered by adult interpretations of what the young people want (Pearson 2022), or participation by young people may be gained through formal measures imposed by adults (Saggers et al. 2004). As has been demonstrated within this section, participation is a complex aspect of youth services, with consideration for what could thicken the participation for young people in a space where they have limited voice (Klocker 2007; Morrison et al. 2019). Youth workers and the youth service need to consider the voice of young people in *how* the space of youth work is constructed.

3.6 Space: Safe and liminal

As the pandemic involved the need to implement online programs within youth services, this also involved a consideration of what *is* a space within youth services, and to what extent that space is accessible and extended. Sack (1980) considered the way in which a space and the elements within it affect all things. Sack's (1980) perspective detailed an intimate relationship with each individual and their unique encounters with different spaces. The way that Sack (1980) described space was akin to a social space as opposed to a natural space (Gans 2002). A natural space occurred outside of socialisation, when the area is question is, ''…literally air over dirt…'' (Gans 2002, p. 329). A social space was a space in which there may be behaviour effects (Gans 2002). Tuan (1979) considered space as the feelings and ideas of individual people in each experience.

Previous youth work literature described youth services as providing a space of *safety* for young people (Nolas 2014). One trait that is necessary of a safe space within community, such as those within youth services, is for the space to be participatory (Forrest & Kearns 2001). Participatory spaces were able to facilitate new possibilities through offering a place in which people who may experience stigma or discrimination were able to have a sense of normalcy (Bertotti et al. 2012; Bryant, Tibbs, & Clark 2011; Conradson 2003; Cumbers 2018; Pain & Francis 2004). The NYA reflected similar sentiments within the descriptions it provided for youth work. Youth work is described as providing 'safe spaces' for young people to experience and explore decision-making and their identity (NYA 2021f). Previous literature by Howard, Livingstone, and Talbot (2020) noted that a safe space allowed young people to feel a sense of community, and view the youth workers as role models. Jackson (2015) considered spaces for young people who were experiencing homelessness to be safe, while also acknowledging that safety is complex and may mean different things to different young people.

In addition to spaces related to youth work being seen as a place of safety, there is also reason to consider them as liminal. This was also reflected in the way that the NYA described youth work as a way to explore identity. 'Liminal' is derived from Latin for 'threshold' (Murphy & McDowell 2019). A liminal space is dependent upon the user transforming, learning, and accepting new versions of self (Land, Rattay, & Vivan, 2014; Reid 2017). It is an 'in-between' space filled with ambiguity (Murphy & McDowell 2019; Wood 2012).

Jackson (2016) explored a space specifically for homeless young people, and described the centre as an 'almost home' space (p. 34). The idea of a space being 'almost home' was explored by other authors as well. Ortiz (2005) considered the

'almost home' of a halfway house in the US, whereas Einstein (2020) conceptualised the exploration of the author's hometown in a post-apocalyptic videogame called *Fallout 76*. 'Almost home' for these authors took on differing meanings. The liminal in-between of an 'almost home' is written about in the contexts of in-between prison and freedom (Ortiz 2005), a virtual representation of a real area (Einstein 2020), as well as in relation to youth focussed spaces (Jackson 2016). An 'almost home' was embedded within the *feeling* of the space in question. Both the physical and virtual are relevant to the current thesis, as youth services had to operate within an online space through the COVID-19 lockdowns.

Liminality in itself has been described as a reflexive process, through the use of the direct transformation and acquisition of new knowledge (Enosh & Ben-Ari 2016). Authors like Wood (2015) argued that liminality was not necessarily negative or indicative of powerlessness, rather it can also be shared joy and spontaneity (Nissilä 2018). Past literature examined liminality across a variety of contexts. There was a focus on liminality in discussions surrounding higher education and the transformation and in-between state of students within the classroom (Meyer & Land 2003; Nelson & Brennan 2018).

These examinations of education and liminality hold similarities to the instances of liminality and youth work. Young people are arguably in a phase of liminality within their lives: not a child but also not yet with the autonomy of an adult (Reid 2017; Wood 2015). In this way, youth workers serve as mediators between other spaces for young people, such as their homes and schools (Renick, Abad, van Es, & Mendoza 2021). This 'in-between' space of youth work, as it is not home or school (Jaynes 2020), is reminiscent of the 'in-between' that past research has examined within education settings (Meyer & Land 2003; Nelson &

Brennan 2018). Further, Nolas (2014) accounted that youth service spaces provided the users with resources that allowed for their knowledge and behaviours to transform. Within literature exploring the dynamic between liminality and young people, liminality was written about as a phase between 'separation' and 'incorporation', it is a way in which to address the ambiguity of youth within society as being outside but also within society (Wood 2012). Research by Renick and colleagues (2021) identified youth workers as needing to have a deep knowledge of the culture of the street as well as the culture within other youth work organisations. The liminality of the space of youth services expands to both the young people who use the youth services as well as the workers within it.

The consideration of both 'safe space' and 'liminal space' will allow for a deeper understanding of the ways in which youth service employees interpret the space in which they work. Given the work that can be done with young people outside of a physical space, such as detached youth work, as mentioned above, the idea of 'safe' or 'liminal' is not confined to the physicality of the space. Rather, it may be an abstract understanding of everything that makes up the space and the ways in which these can be interpreted as a 'safe' or 'liminal' space. This will be especially interesting, given the complete physical closure of youth centres and other services through the COVID-19 pandemic, measures surrounding social distancing, as well as the power and autonomy given to young people via online spaces through the lockdowns. As stated above, youth participation has historically been an integral aspect of youth services, allowing for young people to assert some level of power and autonomy upon their surroundings and the ways in which they participate. This power is embedded within the space, as young people could

potentially able to help make decisions regarding these spaces, or what activities are done within them.

Both liminality and safety are relevant terms, as the NYA (2021a) used the idea of 'transformation' and 'safety' to describe youth work within youth services. The transformation could expand from the youth centre into the lives of the individual users through the safety of the space. Transformation in this way is not dissimilar to the idea of targeted practice, where there was emphasis upon a change within the young people who attend the centre. With this in mind, the idea of a youth service space within guidelines from organisations like the NYA is rooted back within policy that focussed on neoliberal policies. A critical realist perspective in relation to austerity in addition to space would illuminate the ways in which youth services must tailor their spaces for young people within neoliberal confinements. A critical realist framework helps to establish context for the research question that pertains to the creation and conceptualisation of space through the COVID-19 lockdowns. The context for this was possible through the consideration of long lasting neoliberal policies, and how they constrained the youth service space for decades. These ideas will be discussed more in the empirical chapters.

3.7 Conclusion

Frameworks of critical realism, reflexivity, vulnerability, participation, and space are at the centre of this project. Previous literature discussed the consideration of some of these in relation to youth work, such as Horton (2016) who considered the anxiety of youth workers around austerity measures, or Nolas (2014) who considered aspects of space, as well as the potential positives and

drawbacks of considering vulnerabilities (Tisdall 2017). It is these ideas that were looked at specifically within this thesis while considering the context around the history and impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic upon youth work within a critical realist framework. These concepts and ideas together through the research questions will allow for an understanding of youth work within the pandemic, providing a deeper knowledge of youth work and youth services within England. The exploration of these questions will contribute to literature around youth work sociologically, and serve as a basis for future research in related projects through the exploration of the deep impacts of the pandemic, as well as the structural mechanisms that set up the foundation for youth services to operate as it did through the lockdowns. The specific approach of data collection and analysis, as well as a review of the philosophical underpinnings of the methodology will be explored in the following chapter.

Chapter 4

Researching Youth Work in England:

Methodology and Methods

This chapter will outline the methodology and methods used in this thesis. Multiple factors impacted the ways in which I have navigated my research, both within my own exploratory inquiry as a growing scholar with a background in a different field of study, but also by forces upon which I had no control. The first section of this chapter will discuss the considerations I had as a new PhD researcher. In the beginning of the PhD, the exploration of methodology was shaped by perceptions I had regarding methods, data, analysis, and conclusions. My past within psychological quantitative research experience impacted early considerations of a sociological qualitative based project, and ultimately allowed me to discover what I find important as a qualitative researcher. The ideas explored early on were largely centred around positivism and objectivity compared to subjectivity and personal experience. The consideration of these will be discussed briefly, as well as an explanation for my own reflexive consideration of *why* those perspectives appealed to me, and *what* they helped me understand about my own values as a researcher. The section will then discuss the methodological perspectives that were relevant to this project, which are critical realism, grounded theory, and a reflexive practice.

The next section will address the methods in more detail. The shifts in what was achievable for this project was greatly impacted by COVID-19. The direct impacts of the pandemic lockdowns will be addressed, as the PhD began in the few months prior to the COVID-19 restrictions. During data collection, there was concern for successive waves of COVID-19 (Ali 2020). This concern created a need

to consider alternatives to the research and data collection to all be achievable online. Ultimately, data was collected through an initial interview and a follow up, totalling 25 semi-structured interviews. For the interviews, participants were recruited through the youth service, as well as those working in partnership with the service in one local authority in the south of England. As indicated in earlier chapters of this thesis, this local authority will have the pseudonym 'Sunshine' and the youth service will be referred to as 'Sunshine Youth Services'. All of these decisions, and the justification for them, will be discussed within the chapter.

Together, these sections will detail the methodological processes that made up this project, as well as provide a detailed insight into the ways in which the project was conducted. This will help to illuminate the analysis within the empirical chapters, as well as final remarks within the conclusion chapter, while ultimately addressing the central research questions. As a reminder from the introductory chapter, the formal research questions are:

- In what ways did COVID-19 impact youth services in a local authority in the South of England?
    - In what ways did changing economic, political, and social contexts impact youth services during COVID-19?
    - In what ways did youth service professionals conceptualise and create space within youth services for young people during COVID-19?
    - In what ways did youth service professionals manage and conceptualise vulnerability during COVID-19?

4.1 Methodological considerations in the early years of the PhD

As a researcher in the early phases of the PhD, I explored and developed my own philosophical understanding of the methodological approach to this project. This took many different shapes and forms over the years of PhD study. My background prior to undertaking a PhD in sociology was in psychology, which impacted the approach to conducting research. This section will explore some of the initial ontological and epistemological discourses that were explored in the early years of this PhD, followed by the approaches that have been used through data collection and analysis. These two perspectives in tandem are both important, as the former will help to detail early methodological considerations, which will help to describe the methodological decisions that ultimately were made.

In regards to this project, I read various topics to determine where I think I fall as a researcher, but also the way that would best suit my project, and data analysis. Toward the beginning of the PhD journey, I was considering the perspectives of objectivity and positivism compared to subjectivity and interpretivist perspectives. A positivist perspective maintained that speculation of what could or ought to be is not able to be derived from statements of what is (Letherby, Scott, & Williams 2012). In the early stages of research, this perspective was appealing because of the elements of objectivity. However, it was difficult to truly define objectivity as different researchers paradoxically view it in different ways (Reiss & Sprenger 2014). Criticisms of this stance would claim that it is unrealistic for a researcher to claim a position separate from values and free of bias as there is value and bias rooted within each human social interaction

(Douglas 2011; Letherby et al. 2012; Reiss & Sprenger 2014), or that this viewpoint risked participants being objectified by the researcher (Harding 1992).

Conversely to positivism, interpretivism was also explored. This concept places emphasis upon the meaningful nature of peoples' participation within the social world (Chowdhury 2014). From an interpretivist perspective, a researcher looked for motives within the actions, behaviour, and interactions with their surrounding society and culture (Chowdhury 2014). It is a process by which a researcher would be able to understand the ways in which people interpret meaning in their own lives, their own interactions, and, through this, understand the actors involved with certain actions (Chowdhury 2014). This is important to consider as one of the methods of data collection that was considered from the beginning stages of planning the thesis was interviews. Interviews are social interactions, regardless of the perceived level of subjectivity or objectivity within them; therefore, the researcher must have an established way of thinking about these underlying details (Mason 2017). There is subjectivity simply within the way that each participant may hear and interpret each question, regardless of any efforts toward an objective standardisation. In this way, subjectivity was inherent to my proposed research process, and had to be addressed by the researcher.

A glaring issue with positivist and interpretivist perspectives is the incompatibility of using them together. The examination of these perspectives served a basis to understand what was valuable as a researcher within this project. Through the thought processes around truth and objectivity, consideration at the root of this was the inclusion and appreciation of policy, guidelines, and practice, and the ways in which these impact the youth service. Regardless of how participants may interpret or feel about *why* the youth service exists as it does,

there were still objective realities that constrained and shaped the service. Equally, the subjective knowledge of the participants is not incompatible with 'truth', rather it is the appreciation for the subjectivity that may exist within their answers. This acknowledgement was important to me, as it allowed the participants to speak their own realities with consideration for the social and cultural systemic contexts that had shaped the reality in which their perspectives exist. These approaches are reflective of interpretations of reflexivity and critical realism written about by Archer (2003) and Fletcher (2017). The consideration of both the unique interpretations of the participants as well as the ways in which societal structures were shaped led to the exploration of critical realism as a method alongside grounded theory, as well as engaging in a reflexive practice.

4.2 Critical realism and grounded theory: An approach to analysis

To briefly reiterate from the previous chapter, critical realism examines the world as a place of shifting structures, and the ways in which these structures impact social phenomena (Bhaskar 2010). One commonly used method in conjunction with critical realism is grounded theory. Grounded theory in relation to critical realism provided a link between practice and theory through an iterative process (Yeung 1997). With a grounded theory practice, research was not confined by pre-existing theory, but instead the data of the current project can help to shape the theory emerging from it (Birks & Mills 2015; Glaser & Strauss 1999). This is because grounded theory, ''…helps us to see things as they are, not as we preconceive them to be,'' (Glaser & Strauss 2014, p. 48).

For this research, it was important to acknowledge systemic mechanisms (real level) that shaped the role of youth work within youth services. This could be through how the system has been formed, challenged and reshaped over the last few decades, but also in the time since the conception of forms of youth work in the late 1800s (Ord & Davies 2018). From an ontological perspective, critical realism allowed for subjectivity and objectivity through examining reality on the real, actual, and empirical levels (Fletcher 2017).

With this approach to social research, critical realism was rooted within the formation of the research questions through to analysis (Fletcher 2017; Oliver 2012). This is an abductive approach to research, where the research process is informed by theoretical perspectives (Oliver 2012). However, within critical realism, a researcher would not be held to any theory, regardless of when it was explored or which part of the research process it informed, as theories may not continue to reflect reality (Oliver 2012). Theories are instead intended to help inform and build explanations that may be more fitting (Fletcher 2017).

Fletcher (2017) argued that critical realism and grounded theory were incompatible. Grounded theory used inductive analysis and, while theory can guide initial considerations, like the literature review, theory is left out of the analysis process; whereas critical realism is abductive and explores theory throughout the process (Fletcher 2017; Oliver 2012). However, grounded theorists engage in a reflexive process. Charmaz (2008) wrote about the cyclical nature of analysis through grounded theory. Critical realism is also cyclical and reflexive with the consideration of various theories, their applicability to the research, and encouraging the researcher to adapt where necessary (Fletcher 2017). Other

authors view grounded theory and critical realism as compatible and complimentary, because the researcher is able to examine the theory and relationships under new conditions and extremes (Turner 1981; Yeung 1997). With grounded theory and critical realism together, a researcher can develop theory, as opposed to being constrained by theory from the beginning (Yeung 1997). In this way, critical realism is a method in which a researcher is able to explore complex organisations (Lawani 2021). Within critical realism, reality is able to be explored through understanding the overarching structures that may not be visible, but nonetheless impact the observable world (Lawani 2021).

While critical realism may be able to be argued as abductive in nature, such as by Fletcher (2017), it does seem to dip into induction when necessary. A critical realist approach encourages the researcher to think about what theories may be appropriate, but to also consider what could be better, and continually make adjustments as necessary (Oliver 2012; Yeung 1997). This could involve building a new theory. There is fluidity, depending on what themes arise from the data, and whether or not they fit with existing theory (Oliver 2012; Yeung 1997). Most importantly in relation to this thesis, the use of critical realism allows for consideration to systems and structures that exist (Fletcher 2017). To understand youth work, how it was funded, and how it functioned, these considerations were important, and potentially limited by the use of just critical realism or grounded theory independently.

4.3 Reflexivity

The stages of critical realism within grounded theory also have elements of a reflexive practice. To briefly reiterate from the last chapter, reflexivity can be described as a critical examination of one's actions while considering the assumptions underlying them as well as their impact (Cunliffe 2004). Critical realism and reflexivity also both have aspects that aim to acknowledge society within individual agency, as well as conceptualising this within three levels of society (Archer 2003; 2007; Fletcher 2017). For Archer (2003), stage one relates to power and culture, stage two is the interaction of human agents with the social world, and stage three is the individual reflexive actions of human agents. Both the stages of reflexivity and the levels of critical realism consider the social world, individual interpretations of the world, as well as structure and power that exist regardless of individual action or consideration of them (Archer 2003; Fletcher 2017).

Through the process of engaging with a reflexive practice, I was better able to understand my own assumptions and limitations. As the interviews occurred in two stages, there were changes and fluctuations to the COVID-19 guidelines that I needed to know. Some of the interview prompts were based upon the COVID-19 restrictions at that time (see Appendix 1). It was necessary to be aware of the changes to allow for context and appropriate follow up during the interviews. In addition to COVID-19 updates, I also frequently considered past youth work policy, and the current youth work practices. This reflexive practice in relation to data collection allowed for early analysis of empirical (human observation) opinions of the real (systemic mechanisms) and actual (events interacting) levels. The context for the interview data was able to be considered both within the opinion of the

participants as well as the realities of youth service policy. The complexities of each interview helped to develop the specific contexts and situations that may play a role within the interview setting (Mason 2017). The interviews were dependent upon each participants' ability and willingness to express themselves and conceptualise their own perspective, therefore looking for some kind of inarguable 'fact' was not realistic. This was further complicated by the sensitive nature of some of the topics, such as the impacts of funding and use and effectiveness of the evaluations for working with young people, as well as the current stress surrounding restrictions and economic implications of COVID.

Through the interviews, participants were encouraged and allowed to take their time, consider their responses, and speak freely. I elected to be actively engaged within each interview, using sensitivity to hear nuance in meaning, and critically consider not only what was said, but also how it was said, and silences. The intention was for interviews to be open for the direction of conversation that the participant gravitated toward based upon the questions and prompts presented. These approaches to interviews as a researcher have previously been discussed in literature (Kvale & Brinkman 2007; 2009; Mason 2017).

A large part of the approach to the interviews was rooted within a reflexive practice toward data collection and analysis through every step of the project. To the extent that was possible, transcribing the interviews and basic analysis began during the data collection stage. Through this practice, the daunting amount of analysis once the interviews were over was mitigated. This also allowed for a reflexive process within the interview stage (Turner 2013). With this, themes that arose in the interview, spoken or not, were able to be considered with continued

data collection. This helped to establish a foundation of confidence surrounding any analysis or conclusions that could be drawn after data collection.

Through the process of gathering data across 25 interviews, and four observations, it was necessary to be able to know when sufficient data had been collected, which was considered through saturation. Saturation can be determined by the way in which themes were being addressed by the varying respondents (Saunders et al. 2018). Saturation can be recognised as the point of 'knowing' data (Morse 2015). Morse (2015) noted that this 'knowing' comes when a reasonable number of interviews was conducted and the student conducted them, transcribed them, and coded them on their own. This was referred to as, "…getting inside their data," (Morse 2015, p. 588).

While this description seemed very elusive and vague when I first began data collection, once I had conduced most of the interviews, I truly began to appreciate this feeling. The formation of categories through analysis written about by Turner (1981) and Yeung (1997) was distinct, which was accompanied by being deeply embedded within my data, and understanding the story that I would be able to tell within the empirical chapters. This 'knowing' became more concrete through reflexively considering the data and categories. Within more concrete terms, previous research by Guest, Bunce, and Johnson (2006) found that 6 interviews tended to be enough for early stages of analysis, with saturation at 12 interviews.

4.4 Methods: Introduction to the local authority and present study

The local authority area that was used as a case study for data collection will be referred to as Sunshine. It is within the South of England in a large urban

area (SC 2024a). The area consists of a younger age demographic, a smaller economy, and lower skills levels than other areas in the southern regions of England (SC 2024a). The Sunshine area consists of four physical youth centres, each with its own team of youth workers. The youth centres each provided services to young people aged 10 to 17 years old, with provisions for those aged 18 to 25 years old if they had Special Educational Needs (SEN).

Across the youth centres in the Sunshine area, there were activities ranging from open voluntary sessions where young people can attend and participate in open activities such as sports or art, as well as sessions with a more specific focus, such as time to develop and record music or complete an escape room (SC 2023b). These open sessions, as well as sessions with more of a focus, existed prior to the pandemic, during the lockdowns, and after the restrictions were lifted. However, whether they were online or in person shifted based upon the COVID-19 restrictions at that point in time. These sessions were further split by the age group of the young people, and some sessions were only for special educational needs. Once the COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, there was also an offering one day a week for online sessions, where young people could communally play games or hang out with other young people in a virtual setting (SC 2023b).

The youth service employees within the Sunshine area had a variety of roles. These roles ranged from management positions, to youth workers, and to a team for innovation, advice and guidance (IAG). Among those working within the youth service, the average age of participants was 45 years old. Two participants worked within the Sunshine Council, with an average age of approximately 53. Two of the participants, one of which was in a youth worker role and one which worked

within the local council, did not provide their ages. Six of the thirteen interview participants were female, and seven were male.

The availability of staff to work within the different youth facing roles is important, as the Sunshine area had different areas that were served by different youth centres and staff. Across these areas, there were ratings within the Indices of Deprivation (IoD). In each category, these areas ranged from a point of 1, which is used to demonstrate more deprived areas, all the way up to 10, which is used to represent the least deprived areas (MHCLG 2019a). These rankings were able to help illuminate deprivation within small areas, and to compare larger areas; however, they were not intended to quantify exactly how deprived an area is (MHCLG 2019a). Within the Sunshine area, there was an overall average rating of 4.9 out of 10 for the IoD in 2019 (MHCLG 2019b). More specifically, the Sunshine area averaged 4, 5, or 6 across a variety of indices of deprivation (MHCLG 2019c; 2019d). For some relevant examples, the barriers to housing averaged a 6 across all the areas of Sunshine (MHCLG 2019c). The categories of income, employment, living environment, and income deprivation affecting children all averaged a 5 (MHCLG 2019c; 2019d); whereas crime averaged a 4 (MHCLG 2019c).

With these averages in mind, it can be deduced that Sunshine had variance around the deprivation from area to area, with some places being more or less deprived than others, and with areas being deprived in different ways. This was consistent with other nearby areas in the same region with average IoD deciles of 5 and 6 (MHCLG 2019b). These deciles also help to demonstrate that the Sunshine area had a multitude of different deprivation factors to consider with their practice, but also acknowledge that different factors may impact young people in different ways. For instance, there may be young people who would be considered

as living within an area that was a 1 alongside others who were at a 10 on the IoD decile attending the exact same activities at the youth centre.

These elements of the youth service and area of Sunshine were important to consider when establishing the context of the methodology of this project. This is because this project was embedded within the youth service across one local authority in England through a pandemic. The focus of the findings and analysis will be about the research questions which, to quickly reiterate, centre around the impacts of COVID-19, shifting contexts upon the service, the use and conceptualisation of space, and the use and conceptualisation of vulnerability. However, with these research aims in mind the context of the youth service within England, as well as the perceptions of the employees of the service serve as a way to situate this specific youth service. The literature review chapters served to establish the context of youth work within England, as well as the conceptual and theoretical framework for this project, while this section of the methods is aimed to clarify the specific context of the particular service used for data collection, which may be helpful for future research aimed toward using a small number of local authorities or youth services for data collection.

4.5 Sample, recruitment, and changes due to COVID-19

For this project, I observed staff interviews, and conducted semi-structured interviews with youth workers and those working alongside or in partnership with youth services in Sunshine. These interviews occurred in two stages: an initial interview and a follow up interview. This follow up period is important given the changes in COVID-19 guidelines that occurred frequently throughout the pandemic. The first round of interviews began in January 2021, and the follow up interviews

began in August 2021. During the initial interview, Sunshine was in complete lockdown and was considered 'Red' on the traffic light COVID-19 system. As discussed in the literature review, this indicated that centre-based youth services were meant to be online, with availability to see young people in person if they were vulnerable or through detached youth work (NYA 2020c). The follow-up interview in August 2021 occurred after all lockdown restrictions pertaining to group activity had been lifted (Brown & Kirk-Wade 2021). I chose to conduct two interviews in order to grasp the perspectives of the participants over time. These two time frames ended up allowing me to have insight into the perspectives of the participants at two very different points of the pandemic, as one was during a full lockdown, and the follow up was after restrictions had been lifted.

The proposal of this thesis was originally to conduct an ethnography within one youth centre and interview the youth workers and young people who attended. This youth centre was originally chosen because it has a Youth Offending Team (YOT). YOTs typically work with young people referred to the service through a court, or by police officers (CJL, n.d.). As of March 2020 and the start of lockdowns, there was a need to redesign the project. An ethnography no longer seemed possible, and the staff within Sunshine advised it would be more difficult to recruit young people to participate via video chat when they were unable to meet and build trust with the researcher beforehand. Further, the team of youth workers at just one centre would likely not be sufficient for interviews, as the initial plans for the amended study were to use interviews as a sole research method. With these changes in mind, the study expanded to interview youth service employees and those in services that worked alongside the youth service. These changes were practical, and also would still contribute to wider literature

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related to youth work from an employee perspective, with specific contributions and perspectives for the pandemic. This perspective is valuable, as it can provide insight into the actual delivery of youth services from the practitioners and those working with them.

Observations of the staff meetings and online game activities were also part of the amended methods. The staff meetings were able to be attended; however, no data was collected through online game activities. The youth service employees voiced that they were okay with data collection to occur within both activities; however, no correspondence beyond confirmation of attending the online gaming sessions was ever received. I can speculate that part of the reason why I did not get a response to schedule attendance to the gaming sessions could be due to a lack of young people choosing to attend online once they were able to attend a physical youth centre. Once all other data had been collected, and multiple attempts had been made to arrange the online gaming observations, I decided to move on without that data. This decision was realistic, as saturation had already been reached with the interviews (Guest et al. 2006). Upon searching the youth service, their online category of events included online activities as of the February 2024.

In total, there were 23 participants between the interviews and the staff observations, with 25 total interviews. Thirteen participants agreed to be interviewed in two parts. Both interviews were semi-structured, extended interviews, resulting in rich data collection. Questions covered a wide range of topics, such as the participants experience with youth work, their perceptions of funding, and their experience of COVID-19. See Appendix 1 for a full document of

the interview prompts. One participant did originally agree to the follow up but did not respond to emails to arrange a time.

For context, there are fewer than 30 people working within Sunshine Youth Service. Of the participants who worked within the youth service, 42% were interviewed within data collection for this thesis. The interviews provided rich data across a prolonged span of time, to allow for a deep understanding of working within youth services in a local authority through the different lockdown periods. Four of the participants did not work within the youth service, but worked in positions within the local authority that required them to work in partnership with the youth service. Table 1 details the roles of each of the participants. Table 1 utilises acronyms for the roles of the participants. These acronyms will be used through the remainder of the thesis. YDW stands for youth development worker. This term is used for all participants who were youth workers at the time of data collection, whether they were assistant workers or senior workers. This choice was made to help further protect anonymity of the participants. YS is classified as other roles in the 'youth service' that are not directly youth work. This terms applies to participants within managerial roles or as part of the IAG team. SC is Sunshine Council, and represents the roles outside of the youth service of participants within the local authority. All of these roles are tied to the local authority, but are not specified further to help protect anonymity.

Two participants, Jake and Lewis, did not provide demographic information. As is detailed below in Table 1, Theresa, Marcel, Jake, Darcie, and Jim are the participants who were able to speak about working in partnership with the youth service within the Sunshine area. For Theresa, the perspective of working both within and in partnership with the youth service was able to explored. This is

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because she was working within the youth service in the first interview, and working in a different role within the local authority in relation to the youth service at the time of the follow-up interview. By interviewing participants who were not part of the youth service, I was able to better understand the role of youth services within the wider community, and the ways in which the youth services was interpreted by those who work with the youth service, but were outside of the service themselves.

As mentioned previously, observations at online staff meetings also occurred. These staff meeting observations each had approximately 20 people. Many of the participants in the meetings were also interview participants. I was able to attend four meetings from September 2021 to October 2021, which covered a variety of topics, such as current activities in the service, calls for help between the youth centres, specialist topics presented by the staff, guest speakers from other organisations, and giving shout outs to colleagues for their work within the service. Table 2 (see Appendix 4) provides the anonymised names and roles for the participants who consented to be observed in the staff meetings. This table excludes those that were interviewed, and are instead listed below in Table 1. Demographic questions like sex or age were not asked of the participants within the staff meetings, only their role within the youth service. There were attendants at the staff meetings who chose not to consent to participate in the research, and therefore they are not included within the table, and any actions or comments they made within the meetings were not documented.

Pseudonym	Role	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Education Level
Michelle	YDW	54	Female	White	Undergraduate
Lewis	YDW/YS				
Julie	YDW	59	Female	White	Undergraduate
Theresa	YS/SC	40	Female	White, mixed heritage	Undergraduate
Marcel	SC	60	Male	White	Postgraduate
Anya	YDW	31	Female	White	Undergraduate
Ashley	YS	58	Female	Mixed heritage	Postgraduate
Jake	SC				
Nicholas	YDW	39	Male	White	Postgrad Diploma
Josh	YDW	37	Male	White	Master
Alex	YS	43	Male	White	Master
Darcie	SC	56	Female	White	Bachelor
Jim	SC	44	Male	White	A level

Table 1: Interview Participants

Together, the perspective of participants working in and alongside the youth service allowed for a deeper understanding of the expectations and role of youth services in relation to the service itself, and the wider community. This was valuable, as it allowed for consideration about youth services through the pandemic, and will contribute to wider literature arguing for policy in support of

youth services. The use of interviews and observations served as the best way to gather data, and to address the research questions. Since the research questions were largely centred around the individual interpretation of the participants and their role with or in the youth service, an interview is able to provide insight into each participants' opinions and perspectives. The research questions were also largely centred around the COVID-19 lockdowns; therefore, the interview data had a lot of emphasis upon working within the youth service virtually or under strict in-person guidelines. The addition of staff meeting observation allowed for a different perspective to the information provided in the interviews, especially in regards to space. This is because the staff meetings took place online, and therefore were held with the virtual space that the youth service had to create during the stricter lockdowns, while also serving as a way to gain insight into the ways in which the youth service as a whole works together.

The use of interviews and observations together allowed for insight into the empirical level within critical realism. They also allow for a chance to observe and listen to the experiences of the participants within larger structures, detailing the actual and real level. In this way, these methods fit within the methodological approach of critical realism, and allow for a deeper consideration around the central research questions. Commentary around these methodological choices will be discussed through the following subsections.

It is important to note that the empirical chapters do quote some participants more than others. For instance, the voices of Alex, Josh, and Lewis compared to others like Marcel or Darcie. The reflections of some participants were privileged over others for a few different reasons. Firstly, the participants who are quoted more are all youth workers, or were previously youth workers and

working within the wider areas of the youth service at the time of data collection. The participants who were working within the external roles but in collaboration with the youth service were able to provide data that was helpful to corroborate or contrast the information given from those within the youth service. For example, Chapter 5 will detail perceptions of funding from those within the youth service. The opinions of current youth service employees is most useful in detailing the perceptions and reality of funding upon their practice within the service, and therefore at addressing the wider research question in relation to the interaction of economic contexts and the youth service. However, the perspectives of participants working within Sunshine Council help to illuminate differences in perception of funding to the potential future of funding, as well as reasoning for differences in positionality for why conflicting perceptions may exist.

There are also some participants within the youth service who are quoted more than their youth service colleagues. This decision was made in an effort to consider the past experience of the participant who is quoted, as well as in an effort to be efficient and succinct within the empirical chapters. Participants like Alex and Nicholas worked in the youth service for longer periods of time than a participant like Anya. Alex and Nicholas also worked across a variety of roles, whereas Anya was within her first paid position. With consideration for extended policy and previous practice within the youth service, participants with more time in the youth service were able to comment on a larger time frame and long-term changes to the youth service when compared to a participant who had spent less overall time within the service. This is not to imply that Anya does not have valuable insight, but that a larger picture is able to be painted through Alex, which is then contrasted and contextualised through Anya.

Additionally, participants like Alex tended to go into a deeper narrative in relation to their experience within Sunshine Youth Service. For example, the data in Chapter 5 begins with a lengthy quote from Alex in relation to changes since 2010. While he highlighted themes that resonate or contrast to his colleagues, he also spoke to a knowledge of wider policy implications for the youth service. Through addressing these two points, Alex's quote allowed for a deeper discussion of his peers perspectives, but also a narrative toward the impact of policy upon the service prior to and during the lockdowns. While other participants did speak to similar themes, which is why the themes emerged and are presented within the empirical chapters, participants like Alex tended to speak in a way that served to address multiple points within one quote, and therefore led to them having a stronger presence within the thesis.

4.6 Snowball sampling

Initial contact with the youth service was made through a gatekeeper to the youth service approximately one month prior to the start of the COVID-19 lockdowns. While the gatekeeper had originally considered the project for an ethnography and interviews at a specific youth centre, they were willing to communicate after the lockdowns began to discuss new avenues that were realistic and aligned with the COVID-19 restrictions. This gatekeeper put me into initial contact with my first participant, who then put me into contact with the next, and so on. In this way, the sample for this project was recruited through snowball sampling.

One common critique of snowball sampling is that it is based within a selection bias (Parker, Scott, & Geddes 2019). The bias is within the researcher in

choosing the person they initially contact, and stems out with the participants and who they do or do not choose to recommend (Parker et al. 2019). While it is difficult to say that I fully mitigated this, I was able to interview nearly half of the entire staff working within Sunshine Youth Service at the time, and these staff members came from a variety of positions within the service. However, I did encounter barriers with snowball sampling. I did try to interview youth workers who worked with young people who attended the service voluntarily as well as those on the YOT who worked with young people referred through the court or police; however, I was not able to make contact with those members of staff.

For the participants within Sunshine Council, the participants in the study represent one political party. I attempted to contact members of the other parties, and the Counsellors I did speak to recommended members of other parties as well; however this was not successful. In both of these instances, the snowball sampling stagnated, and the end result for this project was that I was not able to comment on those who work with young people referred through the courts and police, or to any themes among similarities or differences of Council-member perspectives across various political parties within Sunshine. The data collected is full and rich, even within the boundaries created by stalls within the sampling. As the research questions largely pertained to the experience of those who were working within the youth service, the addition of perspectives of those outside the service are supplementary. With this in mind, the most important population was the youth service employees, and recruitment of these participants extended well into the service.

4.7 Semi-structured interviews

There have been four formats of interviews noted: structured, semi structured, unstructured, and focus groups (Alsaawi 2014). Semi-structured best suited this project as it enabled me to ask each participant the same types of questions with room for discussion and follow-up questions (Alsaawi 2014; Macionis & Plummer 2013; McIntosh & Morse 2015). Sim and Waterford (2019) noted that interviews completed in projects with one interviewer, such as this PhD, participants may have had a diminished feeling of vulnerability, which could allow for participants to feel more open to disclosing information. Further, interviews can reveal dimensions about social experience that may not be extractable from other research methods (Warren 2002).

There are some limitations of interviews that are worth noting. Interviewing as a sole research method encourages the researcher to find coherence, regardless of whether or not the various participant contributions allow for this (Lamont & Swidler 2014). This is mitigated by the addition of observations to this thesis. Further, there was also a consideration of power within the interviews (Alsaawi 2014; Nunkoosing 2005). This power was not necessarily one sided, as the power I held was as a knowledge seeker and a researcher, while the participant was a 'privileged knower' of information (Nunkoosing 2005). The use of interviews was useful in this sense, as it acknowledged the questions and information that, as a researcher, I was looking to answer, while also directing power back toward the participant with the detail that they chose to give. Further, previous literature indicated that repeated interviews with the same participants helped to build trust, allowing for more open conversation around sensitive or shifting experiences (Murray et al. 2009). This was a consideration when I decided to do an initial and

follow-up interview, as sensitive topics like the chaotic nature of the COVID-19 lockdowns were topics of discussion.

4.8 Interviewing by video chat

In the climate of COVID-19, video chat was the most realistic format to use for the interviews. This was done on Microsoft Teams. Video chat interviews previously were documented as a practical alternative to in-person interviews, as they were not confined to the same issues of time and place as in-person interviews (Janghorban, Roudsari & Taghipour 2014). In this way, an online interview had few requirements to be met to attend: the participant needed to be able to access the Teams app through an internet connection, and be available at the agreed time. Some people may struggle with technology applications like Teams (Bertrand & Bourdeau 2010); however, every participant had already been using Teams as their main form of job communication for nearly a year at the time of the first interview. This mitigated the potential for small technological issues, such as a participant not knowing how to open the application, to impact on the interview. Some of the participants even commented that they would not have agreed to an online interview prior to the lockdowns due to their unfamiliarity with the application.

It has also been suggested that using video chat can allow for an element of anonymity for the participant, compared to in-person, which may inspire a more authentic expression of self by the participant (Janghorban et al. 2014). Further, when interviewing in-person, there are more opportunities for serious disruptions to the interview, simply due to the increased effort it takes to attend. Illness, especially with the presence of COVID-19, could have impacted interview

attendance. From my position as a researcher, there were a couple times during data collection that I was ill. If these had been in-person, I would have had to cancel. However, as they were online, I was still able to attend.

4.9 Interviewing youth service employees

Interviewing people about their role is a method that allows the researcher to access and gain insight into a field in a way that is able to produce results efficiently (Bogner, Littig & Menz 2009).   At the time of the interviews, the participants were working within or in partnership with youth service, and therefore were able to provide insight into their work and organisation that would not otherwise be easily answerable. The recruitment of participants who were currently within the area of interest to a project is important as there can be a process of 'laicization' for those who previously worked in a role (Bogner et al. 2009). Laicization is when someone who would have been considered an expert in their role becomes more of a lay person, due to a lack of presence or interaction within that area of work (Bogner et al. 2009). In this way, to learn about the role of the youth service and the practice of youth work during the pandemic, it was most important to speak to people who were working within or alongside the youth service. Through interviewing participants who were employed in relevant roles at the time of data collection, the data collected is full and rich, allowing for a deeper understanding of the various aspects of Sunshine Youth Service and the pandemic.

Previous studies have documented instances wherein people working with young people noted the importance of a relationship between the worker and the young people, but also the actual practicalities of this relationship (Clayton et al

2016; Drake, Fergusson & Briggs 2014; Jaynes 2020). For example, previous studies detailed the expectation from young people for youth workers to fulfil roles outside of their expertise, such as acting as a therapist (Rodd & Stewart 2009). Youth work with young people can be categorised by the complex needs of the young people, inadequate system responses, and difficulties of interagency working (McElvaney & Tatlow-Golden 2016). Alongside the previously established economic and political constraints upon the sector, it is important to understand the ways in which these are impacting those within this line of work. Through the use of interviews of those working with young people, there can be an in-depth analysis of the perspectives discussed, which will help to better illustrate the practicalities of these roles and the complexity of these with the constrained economic pressure placed upon the sector (Clayton et al. 2016; Drake et al. 2014).

A specific limitation to interviewing people currently within a role that is of interest to the project is a risk of automatically considering all participants to be an expert in their role without dispute (Bogner et al. 2009; Pfadenhauer 2009). However, as I engaged in a reflexive practice and considered the data from a point of saturation, these limitations were able to be mitigated. Specifically, I was able to consider each participant and their own experience in the process of analysis. Most of the participants working within the youth service, regardless of their role at the time, had previous experience working with the youth service. For instance, those who were in senior positions often had previously worked as a youth development worker. The consideration of each participant individually within their own experience with the service was useful as it helped to provide further depth into the ways in which each individual participant viewed their role or the service. I also took the perspective that each participant was an expert of *their*

experience. After all, the central research questions were aimed toward learning more about the ways in which COVID-19 and shifting economic, political, and social contexts impacted the service, as well as the creation and conceptualisation of space, and consideration of vulnerability. As these questions were approached from within a critical realist framework, there was emphasis upon both the surrounding structure, but also the individual experience. In this way, the participant's own interpretation and experience was important, and provided rich data, even if it did not accurately reflect the current policy.

Chew-Graham, May, and Perry (2002) noted that being experienced in a particular field may result in less detail to topics that would be unknown to a lay person, but also allow for more trust and comfort stemming from a mutual understanding between the researcher and participant. In interviews where the researcher did not have background knowledge pertaining to the subject matter, there may be more explanation into smaller details from the participants, but also a reluctance to give emotionally charged information to someone from outside the field (Chew-Graham et al. 2002; Coar & Sim 2006). However, previous research also argued that an emotional response was inherently embedded within the narrative of those within public services that work with marginalised groups during times of austerity (Clayton, Donovan, & Merchant 2015). As I did not have previous personal experience as an employee of a youth service,   there was a natural encouragement for more detail from the participants, leading to rich data surrounding details that may be more informative for someone outside the field (Chew-Graham et al. 2002; Coar & Sim 2006; Iversen, Farmer, & Hannaford 2002). This helped to mitigate potential limitations listed by Chew-Graham and

colleagues (2002). Further, through the use of two interviews, I had more time to build trust and consider data from participants over time.

4.10 Online observations

Within the social sciences, observation was noted as one of the most important and diverse methods (Ciesielska, Boström, Öhlander 2018). The observation of staff meetings was non-participant observation. This was because the observation was not immersive, and involved minimal contributions from myself as a researcher (Cooper, Lewis, & Urquhart 2004). Non-participant observation is a useful method on its own, but also serves as a secondary method that can help to strengthen and assist other data (Ciesielska et al. 2018). Non-participant observation was most appropriate for this study compared to complete participant or partially participant. Non-participant observation occurs when the researcher is present but not actively taking part in any activities (Busetto, Wick, & Gumbinger 2020). Partially participating is when the researcher takes part, but not within the activities that are specifically being studied (Ciesielska et al. 2018). Completely participating or participant observation as a researcher involves an immersion into the environment that is being studied (Busetto et al. 2020; Ciesielska et al. 2018).

According to Ciesielska and colleagues (2018), non-participant observation should not involve any form of human interaction; however, Busetto and colleagues (2020) argued that non-participant observation is when the researcher is not actively participating. The only interaction I had within the staff meetings was to ask or remind the attendees to fill out consent forms if they were happy to participate. Any other active aspect of participation or interaction I did not get

involved in. With this clarification in mind, I classify my observations as non-participant.

One common critique of non-participant observation is that a researcher may not be able to fully grasp the social interactions and reality in the research setting, or that the researcher was not able to be neutral (Ciesielska et al. 2018). I think that elements of these critiques are addressed within my approach to the project. Firstly, I had already established myself with some participants through interviews, and learned about their perspectives of the youth service and the staff meetings across the initial and follow up interview prior to the observations. I already had background information about what I was interested in observing. Further, previous sections of this method chapter have discussed my own perspective as a researcher upon the ideas of neutrality, and the ways in which I conceptualised and considered these through the entire PhD process.

It is important to note that the data directly from the observations will not be discussed in the empirical chapters. This decision was made because the observations largely supported what had already been said within the interviews. This was expected, as many of the observational participants were also interview participants. Instead, the observations helped me as a researcher truly feel the saturation of the interviews. In this way, the observations were supplementary to the interviews, and helped me to feel confident that data collection was able to end. Initial drafts of the thesis did include portions from the observations; however, through refining the content, it became clear that it was best to use direct quotes in the form of data from the interviews in order to convey the themes that will appear through the empirical chapters.

4.11 Ethical considerations

Throughout this project, there were ethical considerations to address. The emotional and physical safety of the researcher and participants was considered thoroughly (Lee-Treweek & Linkogle, 2000). As all of the participants worked directly with or alongside at least one other participant, all participant data was anonymised to maintain the confidentiality of the speaker. Some participants were employed within the youth service while others had been working in partnership with the youth service, making it more challenging to identify exactly who has been interviewed. Identifying details have been changed, the thesis used a pseudonym for the youth service, and references to partnership organisations will be described broadly (e.g. local council). Further, as some of the questions requested the participant to tell of times they worked with young people, the anonymity of the individuals in these stories was also important. As such, pseudonyms or 'young person' was used for any young person named within the interview transcriptions. I was the only person who interviewed or transcribed, so there was no issue of anyone else possibly hearing the names of young people identified.

There were a few power imbalances between the interviewee and researcher, as discussed above. At the start of an interview, participants were reminded that participation was voluntary, and that they could withdraw at any time without giving a reason. There could also be power imbalances present between participants, for example, interviewing people who work with one another (Jones 2014). While snowball sampling was used, the details of the separate interviews was not discussed with the participants, nor did I confirm or deny who I was able to contact for an interview. For example, when I asked for

recommendations of who else I could interview, multiple participants would ask if I had already spoken to a certain colleague. I would respond that I could not confirm, but I appreciated and noted their suggestion, and would contact them if I had not already. Further, when the thesis or other publicly accessible documents may be published, the names of the participants and organisations will be anonymised, making it difficult to discern who exactly participated, or which data was given by a certain participant. This was articulated within the information sheet given to participants.

Through discussions with the youth centre being used for data collection, there was an expressed interest from employees in learning new ways to grow and develop as an organisation. Any issues that may arise from the research could be used as a learning tool to be addressed within the youth service. These learning tools would stem from analysis that had already been anonymised; therefore, the opinions of individual participants will still remain confidential. There was also a risk that a participant could disclose some form of illegal behaviour. Confidentiality was an aspect of the consent sheet, and was maintained, with the exception of imminent harm to children or acts of terrorism. The final statement of the consent form addressed this and required the participant to agree to this stipulation.

4.12 Data analysis

The analysis process began through a reflexive, iterative process in relation to what I noticed in the early interviews. What I noticed was topics that were related to my research questions, but also concepts like participation were more prominent than I had anticipated prior to starting data collection. Engaging with

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the data through data collection as an early form of analysis had previously been noted as an element of grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss 1990). The initial consideration of connections within the data are codes, but not yet necessarily themes (Saldaña 2021). At that point, it was still important to be open to ideas, trends, and patterns that were not originally anticipated, and make note of them for the formation of themes after the coding process (Corbin & Strauss 1990; Fletcher 2017). Saldaña (2014; 2021) addressed that a large portion of data may not actually be used for analysis. However, it was still important as a new researcher to engage with all data, and code line by line, as this is part of the learning process (Saldaña 2021). The methodological approach of critical realism within grounded theory relate to this approach of analysis through considering the data, categories, and emerging and pre-existing theories through the entire process (Corbin & Strauss 1990).

Saldaña (2021) listed a variety of coding methods that can be used in qualitative research, as well as the benefit to using more than one style. Coding styles that were useful to the initial analysis of this thesis were descriptive, emotional and in vivo coding. Descriptive coding is a ''basic topic'' used as a way to succinctly summarise or label the data (Saldaña 2021, p. 262). Emotional coding is the label of emotion within what a participant was speaking about. In Vivo coding is using the participant's own words as a code (Saldaña 2021). Below are a few examples of codes that were used in analysis. For a full list, please see Appendix 5.

Participation (in vivo)

Frustration (emotional and in vivo)

Funding (descriptive)

The next stage of analysis was saturation, where I felt confident that the previously discovered categories were relevant, rich, and as a researcher, I was at a point of 'knowing' my data (Morse 2015; Turner 1981; Yeung 1997). From this point, I was able to explore larger implications about the theory emerging from the data, as well as potential links to pre-existing theory (Turner 1981; Yeung 1997). It is important to note that within this grounded theory framework, the theoretical development and reflection can occur later in the process, as opposed to the beginning (Turner 1981; Yeung 1997). As noted by Corbin (2021, p. 171), ''Grounded theory is aimed at breaking data apart, denoting concepts to stand for data, then weaving the data back together to form an explanatory theoretical framework by relating concepts around a central or core category.'' Through a critical realist and grounded theory approach to analysis with a reflexive process, I was able to allow theory to emerge from the data (Corbin & Strauss 1990; Glaser & Strauss 2014), and consider my research questions within this context.

4.13 Conclusion

This chapter addressed the methodological foundation and methods used within this thesis. A critical realist and grounded theory approach allowed for influence from past theories, while also providing room to explore what theoretical consideration may emerge from the data. Broadly, data collection consisted of two interview stages and observations. Analysis consisted of finding codes within the data, and for a reflexive practice to allow themes to emerge. The findings will be discussed in depth in the following chapters. These chapters have

been arranged to begin with a broad view of critical realism in relation to austerity and youth services in Chapter Five. This chapter is followed by a conceptualisation of vulnerability and its relationship with reflexivity through the COVID-19 lockdowns for the youth service in Chapter Six. Chapter Seven considers the role of space within the service in relation to the COVID-19 lockdowns. Each progressive chapter has ties into the chapter before it, allowing for narrative to be woven through the findings.

Chapter 5

A Thematic Approach to

Sunshine Youth Service and Austerity

Austerity in relation to this thesis is the introduction of policies that reduced funding for youth services within local authorities across England. These policies were enacted in response to the 2007-2008 financial crash (Bramall 2013), and the cutbacks which resulted from austerity arguably disproportionately impacted youth services across the country (YMCA 2020). The policy for austerity was put into place in 2010, but it took years for these cuts to take effect upon the service. The cuts were also not all together, instead there was a pattern of cuts over the years after 2010 (YMCA 2020). Further cuts from these policies continued to impact the funding of youth services through to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns. Across England, the funding for youth services was cut by £1.1 billion, which was a loss of over 70% of funds from 2010 through to 2021 (YMCA 2022). For this chapter, austerity is considered as the political policies that had a direct impact upon youth service funding from 2010, and as a way to describe the continued practice to reduce the funding to non-statutory services. In this way, austerity is both the policies that directly impact funding distribution, and the pattern of social perceptions and values that underpin the practice.

Specifically, this chapter sought to answer the research question ''In what ways did changing economic, political, and social contexts impact youth services during COVID-19?'' Through considering austerity within a critical realist framework, the economic, political, and social contexts that impacted youth services during COVID-19 can be explored. This will be through contextualising the

youth service relationship to austerity within critical realism, and by comparing youth worker perceptions to non-youth worker perceptions.

The first section of this chapter will demonstrate the relationship between austerity and youth work via a detailed analysis of one section of an interview with a participant. This section is intended to contextualise youth work within shifting policy and funds for the youth service since 2010. While the history of this was detailed within Chapter 2, the perception of Alex will help to contextualise these changes from a personal perspective of emotion toward the changes as well as comprehension for the shifts.

Subsequent sections of this chapter will use this contextualisation of youth work and funding cuts due to austerity to demonstrate the themes that emerged from the participants both within and working in relation to Sunshine Youth Service. The individual data from the participants will demonstrate the varying experiences and perceptions of the participants in relation to the policy and impacts directly to the youth service. These narratives will be connected through shared themes rooted within their *feelings* towards austerity prior to, during, and looking to the future beyond the COVID-19 lockdowns. These feelings are hope, a lack of understanding, and coping with external expectations.

The final section of this chapter will consider these perceptions within a critical realist framework. The analogy of Fletcher (2017) of critical realism as an iceberg will be expanded upon to include the way that youth services within austerity were impacted within the three levels: empirical (human observation), actual (events interacting), and real (systemic mechanisms). The expansion of this diagram will help to create a foundation in which future literature can consider youth work or austerity within a critical realist framework.

Together, these sections will demonstrate the relationship between youth work and austere policies, which will be brought together with a critical realist framework. This chapter will highlight the pattern of austere values that influence and directly impacted the practice of Sunshine Youth Service. In relation to expanding the understanding of critical realism in relation to youth work and Sunshine Youth Services, the unpacking of different participant experiences will help to demonstrate the depth with which varying employees within a same service have experienced austerity in similar and different manners. For the intersection of COVID-19 and austerity, this will detail an insight into the anxieties that were felt through the youth service alongside the crisis of the pandemic itself. From a critical realist perspective, these anxieties arguably were rooted historically, and exist due to policy on the actual (events interacting) level from a long history within the real (systemic mechanisms) level.

5.1 Youth work and context: The experienced impacts of history and policy

At the time of the interviews, Alex was a non-youth worker employee within the youth service. He noted in his interviews that he previously worked as a youth worker and had moved his way through the youth service to a more managerial role across a couple decades of experience. Alex had a wide range of knowledge of policy in relation to youth services, as well as experience within the youth service as these policies occurred. He was willing to share his opinions and perceptions with detail and depth. The quote from Alex will be relevant through the whole chapter, as the following sections that detail feelings of the other participants will often refer back to Alex's commentary.

At the time of the first interview, Alex (YS) spoke about the impact of austerity policies and the drop in funding over the years:

> David Cameron's government coming in, you know, across the country there was significant reductions in spending and then the whole austerity movement … what people don't often get with public services is that, when a government makes a cut, it doesn't necessarily hit instantly, the damage … the policy change will happen, but again, the time it takes for that to start impacting … we got to about 2015 before it *really* hit us … we were aware it was coming and we were aware there was gonna be a problem, but it wasn't until 2015/16 that it really got crucial for us as a problem. And, you know we're fortunate, you know, like we lost a significant amount of money but … a lot of local authorities don't have youth services anymore. And, where they've commissioned them out to charities or, you know, the idea that we had in 2016 was that the youth service was gonna be commissioned out to a charity. And the reality of that, I mean, that sounds great, just send it out to a charity, give them the money, and they'll do it. But the reality is that was going to be on a much lesser envelope, like, let's say that we've got nine hundred odd thousand now, the figures I was seeing was around two hundred thousand that they were gonna give to a charity to do what we *were* doing for two million … You wouldn't of had a youth service, you would have had a few little bits of youth project happening. Which may not even have lasted that long. And what's happened in a lot of areas, is that stuff that got commissioned out hasn't lasted and hasn't been sustainable, and without continued public investment things are… gone

First, it is important to note that Alex's considerations of the youth service are within human observation and interpretation. With discussion among the participants in relation to funding, policy, and austerity measures, it is important to keep in the forefront of thought that each of them has had a different experience to one another. The noted experiences of the participants was where

the effects of wider policy and structure was rooted, whether or not each participant was aware of it (Alderson 2016b; Fletcher 2017; Houston 2010). Alex's account supported the claims by Horton (2016) in relation to the anticipation from youth workers of cuts to youth services across the years following the 2010 implementation of austere policies.

Anderson (2010) considered anticipation as, ''...the present on the verge of disaster...disaster is incubating...'' (p. 780). In this line of thinking, anticipation concerns what the future may hold for events that have not happened, and potentially may not ever happen (Anderson 2010; Massumi 2007). The concern for the ''...verge of disaster...'' (Anderson 2010, p. 780) was a consideration of cause and effect, and the potential impacts that could occur to affect and behaviour of those who experience it. Between the two options discussed, the choice of losing the youth service through being commissioned out as a charity, or through continuing to take cuts to their funding, both involve anticipation related to pending *disaster* within the service. Through waiting to know the outcome of the service, Alex (YS) was aware of the impending policy and the impact that it could have, and he was faced with *years* of anticipating the tangible impact to Sunshine Youth Service. His experience was shaped by a sense of precarity and uncertainty throughout this time period.

Ultimately, Sunshine Youth Service was not commissioned as a charity. While other local authorities in England closed youth centres (YMCA 2020), Sunshine Local Authority continued to fund the salaries of the staff within the youth service. Horton (2016) wrote on the tense times of anticipation for austerity measures and the impact of these upon the youth workers through expressed anxiety around job safety, restructuring, and cuts of funding. For Alex, the changes in funding due to

austerity was more than a policy, it shaped the way that he approached his career and position within the Sunshine Local Authority. Alex expressed gratitude for having a job funded through the local authority, even though pressure was placed upon the youth service to secure outside funding for youth activities. The expression of gratitude, and anxiety related to waiting is reflective of the work of Hitchen (2021) and Jupp (2022), who wrote about austerity as more than a fiscal policy, but entrenched emotions and experiences that were felt by individuals as well as collectives.

Within the experiences of deep emotion of anxiety mixed with gratitude, youth workers needed to grapple with the reality of systemic patterns of restricted funding. However, it is not only funding that was ultimately restricted through austere policy. The participatory voice of young people also was limited. The restriction of funding and open voice from young people placed strain upon the ways in which the youth service may be able to operate, as youth work within youth services has historically been a place to informally educate young people to expand their skillsets with voluntary participation. These restrictions upon the youth service are irrefutable, as the impact of austere policy is able to be traced back through tangible cuts to the funding given to youth services across the country (YMCA 2020; 2022). Cuts to funding directly led to less available funds for the youth service to spend on activities that resulted from youth voice. Some examples of this interaction were in the form of funding available to local authorities, the availability for funding to be given by organisations like the Youth Endowment Fund and Youth Investment Fund, as well as the guidelines for youth work from organisations like the NYA.

These guidelines and expectations for external funding were the result of the patterned neoliberal values (Jessop 2015; Mason 2015) that have arguably been noted in enacted policies for decades (Bevan 2023; Farrall et al. 2022). From Alex's perspective, at least some accountability for the funding cuts specific to Sunshine Youth Service went to the local authorities, as each local area had to decide whether or not they could continue to fund the youth services in their area based upon drops in funding. This is not to indicate that Alex had a negative tone toward austerity and its impacts to Sunshine and the country as a whole. Alex's perspective throughout the interviews was one that spoke to a level of understanding for the decisions that were made in relation to austerity. Instead, his focus was upon anxiety and adaptation of Sunshine, and his role within that paradigm.

Thus far, this chapter has focussed upon Alex's (YS) perception, opinion, and experience of the austerity cuts that were first implemented into policy in 2010. As stated previously, Alex's experience is not a comprehensive narrative for Sunshine Youth Service. The below sections will explore themes that emerged among different participants, and the way that they relate and differ from one another. The first theme discussed will be hope.

5.2 Austerity and hope

Each participant had their own unique experience of funding prior to the pandemic, during the lockdowns, and looking toward the future of Sunshine Youth Services. To contrast from Alex's (YS) longstanding time in Sunshine Youth Service, Lewis joined the service during a period when austerity policies had been announced, but had not yet begun to be put into practice. During the two

interviews, Lewis worked as youth development worker, and then moved into a different role within the youth service.

In the quote below, Lewis reflected upon the funding of the youth service broadly as well as during the COVID-19 lockdowns:

> Obviously, youth services got quite a lot, you know … nationally, didn't they, from the governments gone by. I think that there has been repercussions of that, though … I don't know, the facts and figures, but if you look at it, say in 2010, we decided to close down 50,000 youth centres. Yeah. But then by 2012, crime have gone up by this much. You know, and that's crime, and young people are caught up by this much. So does that correlate? Probably … Because of COVID … there's always a possibility that funding for youth services might go up post COVID because of the work that we've been able to do during COVID … to support young people that have been alone, or have needed that friendly support. And it would be nice actually … I think it's- I think it would be a wise choice

The differences between Alex (YS) and Lewis (YDW/YS) highlighted the heterogeneity of experiences in relation to the implementation of policy following the financial crash in 2007/2008. Even though they both worked within Sunshine Youth Service, and both worked through the COVID-19 lockdowns, their accounts of the effects of austerity do not align.

Lewis (YDW/YS) suggested an element of hope that the combined effort of youth services across England during the lockdowns would shine through as incentive to be granted more funding. This was after Lewis made an observation of the interaction of a rise in crime after the closure of youth centres. Through these two sentiments, Lewis observed that there are societal correlations between crime and a drop in funding for youth services (one of which being the closure of youth centres), followed by the conclusion that if youth services did well during the

lockdowns, this should equate to better funding as the lockdowns were eased. However, these observations from Lewis (YDW) did not account for the pattern of funding cuts to youth services, the rise of expectations for youth workers, and the flow of negative perceptions of young people that have occurred within neoliberal policy since the Thatcher years (Ord & Davies 2018; Tyler 2013). These policies have had a history in England and were discussed in depth in Chapter 2. A more recent example could be noted within the drop in promised funding for youth services from £500 million to approximately £380 million (DCMS 2022a). Not only is the sum of funding much lower, but the drop in proposed funding was over a prolonged delay in distribution from 2019 to 2022 (DCMS 2022a). Contrary to the optimism and hope that Lewis may have felt, the actual disbursement of funds did not reflect a promising outlook for increased funding post lockdown. Further, youth services within England have previously noted not having sufficient guidelines or expectations for youth work, which was a noted contributor to a lack of support for youth-centred services when the country ended the pandemic lockdowns (MacDonald, King, Murphy & Gill 2023; 2022).

In a separate quote, Lewis described a project he had hoped to run, where young people would be able to learn to play instruments.

> So, I was trying to get some tutors in to teach. And then maybe we could put a little band together or something. But I didn't get the funding for it, unfortunately. Probably needed to word my funding application [differently] (laughs)

Lewis blamed himself for not having received funding for this project. He did not acknowledge that the process of applying for funding can be competitive (UK Youth 2021). The competition for funding was not a problem that can be solved through simply writing a better application. Lewis would need to be able to write funding

applications that fit into the discourses of the current policy, and the expectations of the funding provider. The process of applying for funding was forced upon the youth service through neoliberal policies that reduced state funding and commissioning out youth services across England (Body 2019; Mason 2015). With this mindset, there is not acknowledgement that there are larger systems, and policies that have made this the case, but it is an acceptance of the job responsibility. Across his two quotes, Lewis conveyed trust of political leaders, indicating a feeling that policy limiting funds from the youth service were necessary and justifiable alongside self-doubt that he possessed the skills to bring in funding on his own. Ultimately, Lewis conveyed feelings of hopefulness that services like Sunshine could receive funding due to their hard work through the pandemic. With the hope of additional funding, the necessity of writing funding applications would lessen.

Julie, a youth development worker, expressed some similar sentiments of hope to Lewis (YDW/YS). In 2021, Julie had only just begun her role as a youth worker and had previously held other youth work related roles.

> I mean currently we haven't had any cuts to our service, we've been allowed to fill vacancies … I worked for the local authority, I live here, so I know I still want my bins emptied and I want the street lights on and, you know, I want the schools to be able to do what they want, and the NHS to be able to do what they want, so you know, I know that, you know, the local authority has not got an endless pot of money and it's being, you know, it's had to divert funding to all the COVID testing or whatever, you know. I live in the real world that knows there's going to be impacts on the local authority because of COVID. I'm not, you know, if we go into another recession and things like that … at the moment, there's been no impact and I live in the real world that says, 'Things might change and I've got to ride with

it.' … cause the youth service is not statutory, so we know that, in theory, the local authority doesn't have to have a youth service. I know that, I'm not, you know, I've got no sort of rose-tinted specs about it. I am reasonably optimistic because of the work we've done and the fact that the, you know, we are noted for supporting the multiagency work, things like that, there is definitely still roles to the youth service. At the moment, we've got the faith of the councillors and the, you know, the department. Where that will be in the future? I can't say … I would like to think youth service is where it's needed, but I am also aware that things change, so (big sigh) yeah.

Julie addressed similar tones of hopefulness as Lewis. For Julie, this was rooted within a scepticism, because she was aware that other services may require funding above the youth service. The distribution of funds to other areas aside from youth services was justified in Julie's words as being part of 'the real world'. In this way, Julie's sentiments were similar to those expressed by Alex (YS). Even within a time when the service was supported during the pandemic, her expectation was to anticipate an impending cut. This is similar to the findings of Di Feliciantonio (2023) and van Lanen (2021) pertaining to the anticipation of impending disaster in the form of austerity, regardless of if that disaster will happen (Anderson 2010; Massumi 2007). Julie's feeling of hope with scepticism was informed through her current role, but also her past in youth related services, where she worked within the play service. According to Julie, the play service ''… disappeared,'' in the 2000s.

Ultimately, Julie's consideration of the potential impacts to funding post-lockdown was surrounded by empathy for the responsibility of Sunshine Local Authority. Julie noted that she appreciated many services that the council provides, and the youth service may not be able to be kept up in the way that

required statutory services are. With the idea of considering the *feeling* of austerity upon those it impacted and continued to impact from Hitchen (2021), Julie highlighted similarities to both Alex (YS) and Lewis (YDW). Julie held anticipation for more cuts to funding out of the COVID-19 lockdowns, while also being hopeful that the work of Sunshine Youth Service through the lockdowns would have been enough to keep the service from being further cut.

During data collection, Josh was a youth development worker and had been within Sunshine Youth Service for about a decade. Similarly to Julie and Lewis, Josh also indicated a hopeful outlook to youth service spending. Aligning with Julie, Josh, also spoke to a tone of hopefulness with a sense of scepticism as well.

> Every time a local authority is hit by any kind of cuts, restructures, spending funds … you would look at the services as a local authority that are non-statutory … and we are one of those … I'd like to think we wouldn't be affected, because you look at the levels of need that are going to come out of [the pandemic lockdowns] … Labour, there was lots of money funnelled into youth work provisions back in the day, we're talking about … 10 years ago or something like that. Lots of money funnelled into young people, because there was issues around young people in terms of their social education, and specific issues like teen pregnancy and stuff like that, and then the government had to do some kind of cut. They cut money from frontline services, from non-statutory services. And then you start to see a spike in the issues that they saw before. Maybe it's different in different aspects. And then they're like, "…if only there was a service that can meet the needs of young people." You're like, "Yeah, funny that, that you just cut." And then yeah, if they invest more money into it, and then youth services rollout, and that level of need, you know, the vulnerabilities of young people, potential vulnerabilities decrease. Whatever that looks like, and then there's another cut, because there's no issue any more, then there's a spike … There's … troughs and peaks of what that

looks like. And I think from an organisational standpoint, you tried to fund- or at least I think that's how the local authority would work, you try to fund the things that need funding ... if something appears not to be an issue, you won't put funding into it. But I think what you need is the people with the foresight to know that if you cut funding from here, that it's really going to have a detrimental effect, and can actually cause us more money down the line, because we're the early intervention, which is kind of where youth workers operate.

Josh (YDW) was aware of the impacts of austerity policy upon Sunshine Youth Service in a manner similar to Alex. Within Josh's words, he detailed an appreciation for different political factors that may impact the youth service through an allusion to neoliberal policies (Bevan 2023; Farrall et al. 2022). While the New Labour government in the 1990s did not cut funding like the Conservative government of the 1980s, the youth service policy was still rooted within neoliberal values. The late 1990s and early 2000s saw policy that focussed upon targeted services (Bradford & Cullen 2014; Cooper 2018). The shift of youth services historically to be rooted within neoliberal policies has occurred both fiscally and within the expectations for youth services across England.

Similarly to Lewis, Josh also highlighted that he hoped the government would recognise outcomes that resulted from underfunded youth services. While Lewis phrased this as a potential relationship with a loss of youth services with a rise in crime, Josh considered this in relation to an ebb and flow of funding. For Josh, when there were issues, youth services received funding, but when those services appeared to be rectified, the funding would decrease. Josh's perception of funding may not reflect the actual process. In relation to this quote, Josh himself stated that funding was not his area of expertise, and he did not consider himself to be knowledgeable about it.

The hopeful outlook of Josh is similar to Lewis and Julie; however, consistent, stable, direct funding from the government had not come to fruition for Sunshine Youth Service at the time of the interviews. The Department of Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) (2023) released policy guidelines that indicated the importance of youth services, but did not indicate any additional funding for youth services. The importance of youth services reflected in policy was perhaps also highlighted through the transition of youth workers to key worker status through the lockdowns. Initially, the NYA (2020a) published a call for more support for youth services in July of 2020. This publication included the preface that youth workers should be considered key workers given the ways in which they continued to provide necessary services and support to vulnerable young people. In January of 2021, this call was put into action, as the government provided a switch to key status for various roles as lockdowns and COVID-19 restrictions persisted (Simpson, 2021). Anya, a youth development worker reflected upon becoming a key worker after months of uncertainty:

> I think, personally, there was a bit of me that was a bit concerned about what if we're furloughed? Will that then show we're not needed? … If they're not needed then why are we funding it? Yeah, because it's a bit like if you can prove a point that you don't need something, why continue supporting it, but luckily … we eventually got key worker status, and we got involved with more stuff, and more companies and social services and vulnerability panels, and everything like that. They did start coming to us and realise that actually, we asked out there and we were still having this contact with the young people.

The hope that Anya (YDW) felt from becoming a key worker was rooted within reassurance of value toward her position as a youth worker. While the months prior to being a key worker were underpinned by uncertainty, the policy toward making

youth work a key worker status allowed for Anya to feel that, not only did she value her position as a youth worker, but also that it was recognised by those outside of youth work as well.

For Josh, Julie, and Lewis, their position within Sunshine Youth Service did not necessitate a deep understanding of policy related to funding and their roles. However, it was their *feeling* of the impact of funding policy that shaped their positions as youth workers or within the wider team of Sunshine Youth Service. It did not necessarily matter whether or not they chose to fully detail their understanding of funding and austerity in the interviews, as the entrenched emotions of hope for the future alongside jaded scepticism were clearly pronounced. Austerity prior to and during the pandemic impacted their perception of their role especially in relation to other areas of society. They worked hard to have an impact on young people within the Sunshine area and expressed the value of their roles. It was this feeling that led to their hopefulness that policy makers would also see the value. However, there was also acceptance of the likelihood that they would not actually see any increase in funding. All three expressed the value they perceived within their role and a lack of funding to help demonstrate government acknowledgement of this value. This leads into the next theme to be discussed, which is the role of Sunshine Youth Service being *misunderstood*. While the words of Lewis, Julie, and Josh alluded to a misunderstanding, the quotes from Anya, Darcie, and Nicholas spoke more directly to this theme, and it will be detailed in the next section.

5.3 A perceived lack of understanding of youth work

At the time of the interview in 2021, Anya had worked in Sunshine Youth Service for a few years. Compared to some of her coworkers, Anya had not worked in Sunshine Youth Service as long. However, she still spoke to the ways in which she felt her job was misunderstood:

> Sometimes the difficulty of it can be you have to run stuff that's specific to what the funding needs to be for. So a lot of the time … it needs to reduce antisocial behaviour, or it needs to reduce the crime, or it needs to increase young people involvement in education … that sort of thing, which isn't a problem. But sometimes it would be nice to have that money available there just to do what we wanted to do without having to justify it to everybody else.

In this quote, Anya spoke to the difference between open access or targeted youth work, and the strain of funding upon her approach to youth work practice. As discussed in Chapter 2, open access youth work is based in the ethos that young people were able to influence what occurs in a youth space in line with their own interests (Hill 2020), whereas targeted based practice is based upon addressing underlying needs and vulnerabilities of young people in an effort to prevent the potential of future antisocial behaviour (Bradford & Cullen 2014; Cooper 2018; Ord & Davies 2018). Targeted youth work approaches that impacted Sunshine Youth Service and youth services across England emphasised the ability to measure outcomes for young people alongside 'positive activities' as opposed to open access formats (DES 2002; Ord & Davies 2018).

Anya's relation to the theme of a perceived lack of *understanding* toward youth work was not direct, it was layered within the way she described the use of funding. Anya noted the added barrier and difficulty that external funding directly imposed upon Sunshine Youth Service, in that the youth service must use funding

towards specific types of activities, such as the Youth Endowment Fund (YEF) and the Youth Investment Fund (YIF). While the YEF and YIF were discussed in the literature review, to briefly summarise, the YIF holds more values akin to open access, youth led provision (Hill, Scanlon, & Anderton 2019); whereas the YEF is aimed toward reducing violence in young people (YEF 2022a). Anya's words held the impression that her role as a youth worker was not enough to know what programmes may be good for the young people she works with. Rather she must report back to external funders who approve. Within the reality of reporting back to external funders, there is a tone of misunderstanding from funders toward youth workers. The default assumption of a funding body is that there is a risk of the funding to not be used in the manner it was intended. However, as noted by Darcie, a participant who worked within Sunshine Council in collaboration with the youth service:

> ...it's very difficult to measure prevention, and some of this is around prevention ... we have to ... actually understand what data sets other agencies have and actually what pieces of work and activity that we're doing actually make that difference. And that's ... quite difficult for us is actually showing so what are the financial benefits that we've accrued through the intervention work? Or through the identification of somebody who is vulnerable? By doing some activity to actually reduce their vulnerability early on? What has that meant further down the line? Have we prevented them from becoming a victim of crime? Have we prevented them from having to be involved with more services? ... it's not easy, Elise, and if I had the answer, I would be able to give it to you in one sentence, but I haven't yet.

Darcie identified a similar challenge to Anya, in that it was difficult to show that an event did not happen. Darcie's words alongside Anya's are important, as it demonstrated that the issues pertaining to a lack of common understanding of

working with young people may extend beyond just the youth service. As highlighted by Darcie, there were also inconsistencies in the ways that successful intervention were being measured. These two experiences together indicate that the lack of understanding of working with young people was systemically rooted. For both Darcie (SC) and Anya (YDW), the added responsibility of a targeted practice with young people hindered their flow of work. Past literature criticised the shift to a targeted approach as not understanding the positive impact of open access youth work (Cooper 2018; Hughes et al. 2014; Grace & Taylor 2017).

The role of external funders and a targeted approach were both symptoms of neoliberal policies rooted in market efficiency and output as opposed to a focus upon the programmes in place for young people (Bevan 2023; Jessop 2015; Mason 2005). For example, Anya was not considering whether or not the youth service *needed* more funding, she considered *how* to approach a programme to ensure that it aligned with the expectations from the funder. For Darcie, the focus laid upon demonstrating the lack of negative events in a young person's life. Both of these processes take time. For funding specifically, Lewis noted that applications may not be accepted. In this way, the process of applying for additional funding detracted time from other youth work related duties, and also belittled the practical knowledge of youth workers to plan and implement activities for the young people in the Sunshine area. Through the use of funding applications and the expectation for Sunshine Youth Service to report back after receiving funding, there was additional responsibility placed upon youth workers and those within Sunshine Youth Service due to austerity-based policies. Each successful funding application equates to an additional organisation that the youth service must

report to and continue to prove themselves as *deserving* of the funding that was granted.

This perception of a lack of understanding of the role of a youth work was not uncommon in data collection. Nicholas (YDW) welcomed the opportunity to be able to speak about Sunshine Youth Service and the complexity of youth work. Nicholas commented this after he recalled a time when he saw a past head teacher he had in school and told this teacher that he had begun working as a youth worker.

> I was like, 'Oh, yeah, I've started work with the youth service,' and he was like, 'Oh yeah, okay, that's like playing pool and table tennis and stuff like that?' And I was a little bit offended by it, cause it was a little bit naïve, his response, and sort of downplaying our role, and he sort of said something about, 'Yeah it's more of a vocation than a job.'

McCardle (2014) previously noted a common perception among youth workers was a feeling of being misunderstood, where society generally may not understand or appreciate the role of youth workers. While this addition of Nicholas's (YDW) quote is not directly about funding, it helps to elaborate the emotions in Anya's (YDW) quote, which related to youth workers not being able to simply spend money as they deem fit. Anya and Nicholas both expressed discontent with the judgement of outsiders upon youth work. In this way, austerity is *felt* (Hitchen 2021) through a perceived lack of a common understanding of youth work.

The perception of Nicholas (YDW) that his old head teacher only understood that the youth service was a place where youth workers hang out and play games was not accurate, as it is not representative of the depth that goes into youth work. It is important to address that Nicholas felt his role was belittled by a person in a youth-facing authority position as head teacher in a school. It is an issue that

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Nicholas felt misunderstood by a person in this role, as Sunshine Youth Service at times works in collaboration with places like schools or social care. A perceived lack of a societal understanding of the role of youth work can create tension between youth services and wider society (McCardle 2014). The tension can help to illuminate the ease with which there are justifications for the youth service to receive less and less government funding.

While Nicholas's interaction with an old head teacher was in the form of a casual exchange, it was not dissimilar to the policies in the 2000s that shifted youth work from a more open access format to one driven by targeted outcomes (DES 2002), or the blame for the financial crash in 2007-2008 being partially due to state spending on the public sector and welfare based programmes (Bramall 2013). There are patterns in politics and policy of a socially rooted misunderstanding that the youth service was just a place to play games with young people without consideration of the purpose that playing games may have within wider values such as education, a sense of self, and access to trustworthy adults who treat young people with respect (NYA 2021e).

A perceived lack of understanding of youth work has been noted in a few ways thus far: the youth workers had to apply for and report back to funders about their activities, there was not a common system for detailing success, it was difficult to detail negative situations that did not come to fruition, and opinions of others in relation to youth work. These examples detail a perceived misunderstanding of youth work in general, but also a value judgement due to a lack of common understanding. The value of youth work has been declining in a literal sense through the continuous cuts to funding (YMCA 2022), as well as through stricter policy guidelines that instruct youth services to utilise targeted

prevention over open access (Cooper 2018). Both of these devalue the ability of a place like Sunshine Youth Services to simply provide to young people.

The themes in policy that can be perceived as devaluing youth work was demonstrated deeper within government policy. Multiple participants, such as Julie and Josh in their above quotes, mentioned that Sunshine Youth Service was not statutory, therefore Sunshine Local Authority did not have to fund the youth service. However, in the words of Josh, and detailed through a focus on targeted services, the youth service can potentially be a form of early intervention. The lack of statutory guidelines that specifically encompass a service like Sunshine Youth Service alongside the expectation for targeted work details a conflicting narrative for the role of youth workers. The conflict of added responsibility through targeted interventions alongside no promise of funding created a precarious environment for youth services to operate. For Anya, this was in terms of restrictions upon funding, and for Nicholas, this was with his own perception of people misunderstanding youth work. Further, the quotes from Anya and Nicholas both identified elements of judgement around youth work that came from people who were not working in youth services.

For the youth workers like Anya and Nicholas, the sense of a lack of common understanding of youth work created a perceived tension among themselves and others in relation to their roles as youth workers. This section linked these tensions back to the idea of less funding for youth services over the years, and the necessity for external funders. The use of external funders led to the theme of coping with external expectations for others within the youth service.

5.4 Coping with external expectations

Some of those working within Sunshine Youth Service detailed specific examples of their experience of actively managing external funders. Alex (YS) noted:

> I think before we were taking [funding] on, and just adding it into ours, and sort of stacking it, if you like, on a table that was already pretty full. So, I suppose if I was to think metaphorically, I may need a bit more table when I'm applying, you know, if I'm applying for additional funding, if it doesn't come with any management capacity building, then I'd have to think seriously about whether we could apply anymore for that sort of stuff. And it's a challenge. The other side of it, I'm also working on how we develop the service generally. So, I'd like to see an extra, at least an extra four youth development workers, or assistant youth development workers in the system we've got, which would again, then strengthen the teams. That's … part of the strategy that I'm working on at the moment in terms of building the management capacity so that you can cope with that.

Alex's metaphor of a table is useful to depict the problems that the youth service had with funding. Each funding application was tied to responsibility that the team may or may not be able to handle. This responsibility had to be considered. On the other hand, there were ways in which the service could be developed that would help it meet the needs of the young people in the area. This serves as an issue. In theory, the youth service had the *opportunity* to apply for as much funding as they need. However, in practice, there were logistical hoops that must be jumped through for each pot of funding. These elements created a strain between the supply of capital from funders and the capacity of the youth service to manage it. While Anya previously identified keeping up with external funders' expectations in the actual work with young people, Alex highlighted the strain of being able to manage each pot of money, and its added responsibility that extended beyond

planning and implementing activities. As was highlighted in Lewis's (YDW) quote, there was also competition for the funding (Body 2019). Just because the funding pots existed did not mean that each youth service can actually be awarded funding. For Alex, there was also a limit to how much funding was actually helpful.

Theresa worked in a non-youth worker role within Sunshine Youth Services and expressed similar ideas to Alex of coping with the expectations of funding:

> We wanted to do outdoor theatre events. And unfortunately, the funder had said to me, they loved the idea, they want to do it, and so it's something that we're hoping to do next year, but they didn't want to do it now, because of their concerns around anti-social behaviour and parks … Funding bids …. some of them are harder to pitch … it's also that concern of like, a lot more things that we have to consider as part of funding, which made a lot of funding is more expensive was around, well, now do we have to have a security element, now we have to have another element around sort of the hygiene elements around, you know, sanitizer stations, and all these things. So, there's so much more to consider.

Theresa's (YS) quote was similar to Anya's (YDW), as there was a theme of reporting to a funder about the money that was being used. While Anya's quote identified that it would be easier if youth workers could use money as they deemed fit, Theresa's comment detailed more about the logistics of funding through the pandemic. Theresa faced limits in relation to the funders not being comfortable with the money being used for an outside event in light of anti-social behaviour, as well as additional costs for mandated hygiene products, and logistic consideration for spacing and bubbles during a time when people were not meant to mingle as they did before COVID-19 guidelines.

The hesitancy of the funder to allow for an outdoor event considering anti-social behaviour provided further insight into Anya's (YDW) quote around the youth

service being able to use money as it sees fit. As discussed in the literature review, detached youth work is a form of youth work used to engage young people in the community as opposed to within formal youth centres (NYA 2020b). Through the rejection of an outdoor event, the funder actively blocked a part of the youth work process. The outdoor movie could have had a two-fold purpose: the first to bring together the young people in the community to partake in an adult supervised and COVID-19 compliant activity, and the second would be to potentially use the event as an opportunity to approach young people who may have been behaving in an anti-social manner and introduce them to the youth service. In this sense, the funding body actively put a stop to Theresa's plan, and the process of detached youth work. In this way, Anya's sentiments are amplified.

While Anya's quote had tones of youth work being misunderstood, and considering how to meet the expectations of external funders, Theresa's quote was an example of coping with expectations when the funder says no to a proposed project. This was through the rejection of an activity from a funder alongside the stress for additional responsibilities. Though Theresa was not within the youth work team, the relationship of austerity with the use of external funding echoed through her role and her relationship within the wider youth service (Hitchen 2021).

Thus far, the examples discussed have been from youth workers (Lewis, Julie, Anya, Nicholas), or those within the roles in the youth service that are not youth work (Alex, Theresa). Jim was not employed with the youth service at all, his role was within Sunshine Council (SC) at the time of the interviews. Jim noted that he did sometimes work in collaboration with Sunshine Youth Service, and was aware of the manner in which the youth service operated. Jim provided insight

into the theme of coping with expectations with his perception of what the youth service may expect at the end of the lockdowns:

> Across the country, not just necessarily [Sunshine Council], I think part of the problem will be that … councils have had a reasonable amount of support through COVID, that support will end, there will still be a drop off of some income streams, for all sorts of reasons. And then it's a case of non-statutory services, of which youth services are one, I think will then be feeling even greater pinch. I think there's a risk of that. And I think there's a risk of that for lots of other bits of the council as well. But basically, anything we're not legally obliged to do.

Jim confirmed the concerns of Lewis and Julie earlier in the present chapter. While Jim did speak fondly of the youth service, and vocalised appreciation for its role within the community in other aspects of the interview, this quote drew a line of what is and what is not realistic. Marcel also worked within Sunshine Council and reflected upon similar sentiments:

> I think we, as a country, we're … going to go through a pretty rough patch … furlough is still going and it's been extended to September, the Universal Credit uplift is still in place, people aren't being evicted. As soon as those measures are lifted, I think the economy is going to tank and people's lives are going to take a real dip … And I think that services for young people are going to be at risk. So that will be schools budgets, that will be what you might think of as discretionary elements like the youth service budget. And I think it's going to be local government funding. Already local governments are struggling to meet the requirements, some local authorities are going for statutory only service. So you know, you only provide a service for what you're legally obliged to do, which strips local government to the bone. So I don't think we're in that position in [Sunshine] yet, but [Sunshine] has its financial challenges … I'm not optimistic. I'm quite pessimistic. I think things are going to get bad. Things are going to get worse before they ever get better.

The difference in these quotes from Marcel and Jim help to separate why the first theme presented was hopefulness around an ideal vision of funding after the pandemic lockdowns, followed by a sense of a lack of common understanding toward youth work. The theme of this section is coping with expectations. For Theresa and Alex, this was in the form of coping with external funders expectations. As Jim and Marcel had insight into wider funding implications for Sunshine Council, the shift moved from idealism to pragmatism.

For Jim and Marcel, Sunshine Youth Service is not statutory, and there will be a burden to appropriately fund statutory services. It is not that those within Sunshine Council do not value youth services. Systemically Sunshine Council was bound by their own resources, much like Alex mentioned for the youth service itself. The expectation of Jim and Marcel for Sunshine to likely lose funding after the lockdowns was a value judgement of where Sunshine Youth Service sits in the hierarchy of funding. It is not to indicate that those within the council reflect that value judgment in their own perceptions, but rather that the value of Sunshine Youth Service in terms of being non-statutory and impacted by austere policy was an indication of youth service in English policy as systemically undervalued.

5.5 Austerity, youth services, and critical realism

Alongside the above themes that emerged through the analysis process, there were also allusions to wider policy and political narratives spoken through the participants' experiences. As this chapter is aimed at understanding austerity and youth services, it was difficult to ignore the reality of patterns of policy and discourse that has occurred through the history of youth work. When considering the above themes and the experiences of the participants, a critical realist

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framework allowed for consideration of each of the three levels in relation to one another.

To briefly reiterate, the three levels of critical realism are the empirical (human observation) level, the actual (events interacting) level, and the real (systemic mechanisms) level. The data within this study was all rooted within the empirical level of human observation. However, the literature review in Chapter 2, detailed a historical overview of policy and social perceptions of young people and youth community services through the last century. The experiences of the participants were inherently bound to the realities of current policy and practice, and the current policy and practice was rooted within historical patterns. To reiterate briefly from Chapter 2, the real (systemic mechanisms) level holds the historical patterns of perceptions toward welfare programs, young people, and those from working class backgrounds, especially in the Thatcher era (Mason 2015; Newburn 2005; Tyler 2013). These perceptions arguably became systemically embedded within society, such as through the continuance of neoliberal values in policies born from the Thatcher era (Farrall et al. 2022; Bevan 2023).

These values ebb and flow through policy across decades, and therefore continued to have impact upon the practice of those working within Sunshine Youth Service. In relation to Sushin Youth Service, the policies that have been focussed on the most through this chapter are a targeted approach toward youth work that emphasised prevention and positive activities over open access youth services (Bradford & Cullen 2014; Cooper 2018; Ord & Davies 2018), as well as the austere measures put in place in 2010, that placed blame upon the welfare programmes, the public sector, and state spending (Bramall 2013).

To help demonstrate the discussion of the youth service and youth work in relation to austere policies, Figure 1 from Fletcher (2017) will be revisited below. This figure has been expanded to include the contributions of this project upon the levels of critical realism in relation to youth work. Figure 1 has been expanded to create Figure 2, as Fletcher's (2017) metaphor of critical realism within the context of an iceberg allowed for visualisation of the interconnected nature of youth work. Through Figure 2, youth work, austerity, and systemic social perceptions are presented alongside the image of the iceberg and the descriptions of each level.
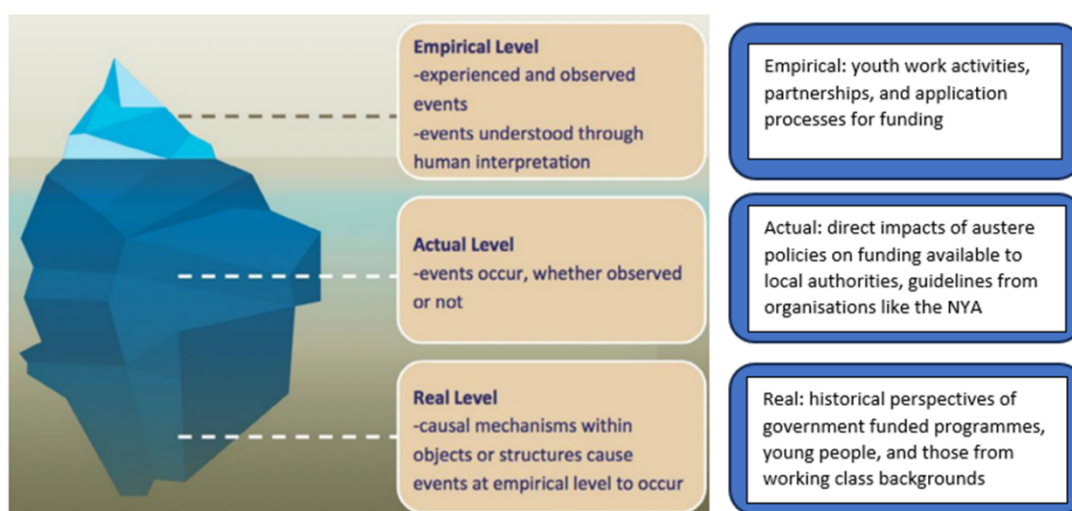
Figure 2: Adaptation of Fletcher's (2017) Conceptualisation of Critical Realism as an Iceberg

For Sunshine Youth Service, the empirical level is the interactions and observations of youth service workers and those they work in partnership with regarding youth activities. The actual level is the interaction of austere policies upon and available funding. The real level is historically rooted narratives of young people, state funded welfare programmes, and the working class.

Funding from the local and state government has ebbed and flowed over time; however, it is the sentiment behind these shifts in funding that allows for insight into *why* youth services has experienced so many cutbacks over the last decade. For instance, Alex (YS) did not directly speak to all of the elements of the real (systemic mechanisms) level that have been addressed in this thesis (perceptions of young people, government spending on welfare, and the working class), but he did first mention David Cameron's government, and the policy enacted that led to the drop in funding. Alex's commentary demonstrated a knowledge of not just the drops in funding, but also reasoning behind why it happened, the waiting that occurred between the policy being made (Anderson 2010; Horton 2016), and the impact in local communities (Hitchen 2021). For Alex, the real level of systemic mechanisms was based within political decision making. The systemic mechanisms were then observable through the necessity of external funders on the actual level, and his experience of coping with the monetary realities within Sunshine was the result of these within the empirical.

Among the themes listed above, there are a few interesting points to identify. Anya, Darcie, and Nicholas spoke about a perceived lack of understanding youth work. Alex and Theresa both noted the practical side of funding where their assumption was not a possibility of additional government funding, but instead the practicalities of dealing with external funders. For Alex, this was in relation to how much funding was actually realistic to manage with limited resources in Sunshine Youth Service, while Theresa considered the realities of juggling the expectations of funders and the activities they may say no to. These discourses help to address the research question pertaining to changing economic, social, and political contexts and their impact to the service in COVID-19. Each of the participants

spoke to their perception of economic, social, and political contexts. For Lewis, Julie, and Josh, the hopefulness to gain more funding after the pandemic was an aspiration rooted within the unknown political decisions that would impact the economic prospects of Sunshine Youth Service. However, all of them also noted individual reasons for why this may have been unrealistic. These reasons highlight their experiences as youth workers prior to COVID-19, and their expectation of what political policy could result after the pandemic. Jim and Marcel, while they both worked with Sunshine Council, also spoke to the reality of patterns in political decision making and the constraints that political policy had upon the economic flexibility of the council in the Sunshine area. The perceptions of Alex and Theresa addressed the economic reality of handling external funders, and the limitations that existed within Sunshine Youth Service to manage additional funds within resource constraints. Anya and Nicholas both spoke more toward the social context, with consideration for how they perceive their role within the youth service, and the youth service in relation to other areas of society. These experiences specifically illustrated the ways in which austerity is both lived and *felt*, and expands upon previous literature written in this context (Hitchen 2016, 2021; Wilkinson & Ortega-Alcázar 2019).

Together, these participants demonstrated the empirical, individual experiences toward the economic, political, and social contexts that impacted Sunshine in relation to the pandemic. Through the consideration of critical realism within Figure 2, further insight into the impact of these contexts upon Sunshine Youth Service was highlighted. While Alex and Josh mentioned political decisions in relation to Sunshine Youth Service, both of these observations were limited to the two decades prior to COVID-19. With consideration toward the history of youth

services in terms of political decision-making, policy, and funding, there is more context toward the economic, political, and social contexts upon youth services. Through the real (systemic mechanisms) level, it is clear that there is a history of funding being given and taken from youth services in England. The impacts to funding have been alongside political rhetoric and social perceptions that looked unfavourably upon welfare spending (Bramall 2013). At times, this was alongside moral panics toward young people (Newburn 2005). Since the Thatcher era, funding from the government has not had a substantial increase, especially in comparison to the decreases (Jessop 2015; YMCA 2020; 2022). While the participants may not have spoken about this kind of policy directly, the real (systemic mechanisms) and actual (events interacting) levels directly impacted the youth service. The reality of the participants' experiences of the political, social, and economic contexts that impacted the youth service through COVID-19 was inherently shaped through the varying levels of the critical realist framework.

5.6 Conclusion

In relation to the research question ''In what ways did changing economic, political, and social contexts impact youth services during COVID-19?'', austerity and critical realism serve as an insight into these themes in youth services into the start of and through the COVID-19 lockdowns. Some participant quotes presented in this section referred to Sunshine Youth Service prior to the lockdowns in relation to cuts to the service through austere policies, while other quotes directly referenced their opinions on funding during the COVID-19 lockdowns. Together, both of these perspectives detail the shifting economic, political, and social contexts that impacted the youth service during COVID-19. As Alex (YS) detailed,

there had been cuts to Sunshine Youth Service, and a risk of it being made into a charity prior to COVID-19. As detailed in this chapter and Chapter Two, the economic and political policy that occurred within the actual (events interacting) level and the real (systemic mechanisms) level were deeply embedded in policy and public perception well before the COVID-19 lockdowns. It was through neoliberal policy and restricting budgets within the actual (events interacting) level that Sunshine Youth Service was impacted during the years prior to the pandemic. During the pandemic itself, the participants spoke about having extra support, but also extra restrictions to that support in line with pandemic restrictions. The implications for Sunshine Youth Service and the way that they were able to work with the young people through the pandemic lockdowns will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter 6

Youth Work Practice During COVID-19:

Vulnerability and Reflexivity

Although there were differences in opinion on the empirical (human observation) level, the theme of vulnerability was highlighted in the interviews, particularly in the context of budget cuts anticipated for the youth service. The theme of vulnerability was also highlighted when the participants spoke about the practice of youth work with their young people. Specifically, this chapter will explore the research question, ''In what ways did youth service professionals manage and conceptualise vulnerability during COVID-19?'' The research question will be answered from the approach of the youth workers considering vulnerability of their young people, as well as the vulnerability of the service as a social institution.

The literature on vulnerability was discussed in Chapter Three. Authors like Tisdall (2017), Brown and colleagues (2017), and Albertson Fineman (2021) discussed the view that everyone is vulnerable, it is part of being human. Brown (2015) considered universal vulnerability, where everyone shares the experiences of precarity and insecurity. Specifically, Albertson Fineman (2021) considered the idea that everyone was vulnerable during the pandemic. Government guidelines during the pandemic applied to everyone, with extra emphasis or rules in place for varying vulnerabilities, such as those who were more susceptible to getting the virus, or the elderly (Albertson Fineman 2021). Within Sunshine Youth Service, the consideration of vulnerability was important in regard to the young people, as the

youth workers were aware that the pandemic could have been or actively was impacting their young people. Albertson Fineman (2021) commented that due to the pandemic policy which considered numerous populations as vulnerable, nearly the whole population could have been considered as such. With the widespread and different classifications of vulnerability through the changing pandemic guidelines, the initial consideration of everyone as vulnerable can get lost (Albertson Fineman 2021).

For Albertson Fineman (2021), this opened the possibility for some to consider themselves vulnerable in a distinct manner, or for some people to believe that they are not vulnerable at all. In relation to youth services, vulnerable could be used to refer to an individual's access to resources or social class (Berzin 2010). During the pandemic, the youth service was given guidelines to provide services for vulnerable young people (NYA 2020d), but vulnerability was left up to Sunshine Youth Service to define. In the 2021 article, Albertson Fineman also argued that the practice of labelling certain groups as vulnerable is not helpful, as it can lead to stigmatisation of those groups. In a meta-analysis of multiple articles, Forbes-Mewett and Nguyen-Trung (2019) found that definitions of vulnerability tended to first identify that some kind of stressor needed to be present, but also an inability to cope.

For the purpose of this chapter, vulnerability will be defined in line with the findings from Forbes-Mewett and Nguyen-Trung (2019), where vulnerability is from the presence of a stressor and an inability to cope. However, there is also influence from universal vulnerability, as the COVID-19 pandemic presented a stressor that impacted everyone in the country. This was an additional stress in

addition to individual specific stressors that may have already been present, exacerbated by, or completely new during the lockdowns. Through a combined perspective of vulnerability, Sunshine Youth Service as a whole was impacted. From a youth worker perspective, this will be considered in relation to the young people that they worked with, as well as the service itself. Through considering the service and all of the young people as impacted by the shared stressor of the pandemic, the focus shifts from considering what is vulnerability, to instead be about the management of vulnerability. A reflexive approach to the management of vulnerability will be explored in relation to role of the youth workers toward the young people, as well as the vulnerability of Sunshine Youth Service. The relationship between vulnerability and reflexivity will be explored through how the youth service managed through the lockdowns.

To briefly reiterate from Chapter Three, reflexivity is the regular consideration of an individual in relation to social contexts, and the consideration of social contexts to an individual (Archer 2007). Reflexive action occurs across three stages. The first stage is the influence of powers and cultural properties upon individuals, the second stage is the way that individuals interact with the social environment, and the third stage is when individuals act in a reflexive manner (Archer 2003). In order for an action to be reflexive, there must be an object that is considered within an internal conversation (Archer 2003).

Various authors (Archer 2012; Baerheim, Ness, & Raaheim 2021; Donati 2011) have previously argued that reflexivity is both a personal and relational act, where reflexive action is considered from the perspective of the individual, but also in a social and systemic manner. There are four different types of reflexivity,

which were discussed in Chapter Three: communicative, autonomous, meta, and fractured (Archer 2007; 2012). This chapter will focus on meta-reflexivity. Baerheim and colleagues (2021) interpreted meta-reflexivity from Archer (2012) as, ''…self and society in critical evaluation upon action,'' (p. 70). While each of the modes of reflexivity have been noted as flexible and applicable in daily life, meta-reflexivity has been considered one that helped to describe workplace learning and interactions (Baerheim et al. 2021; Baerheim & Ness 2021). Donati (2011) made a similar suggestion. This author wrote that the types of reflexivity presented by Archer (2012) have a relational side that is necessary to consider within the context of how networks of people may work together. Donati (2011) argued that the types of reflexivity, meta-reflexivity specifically, can be a way in which sociologists can conceptualise the wider reflexive practice in a network setting, as opposed to an individual one. This chapter will apply reflexivity from Archer's perspective to the concept of vulnerability, and detail the interplay of these in regards to youth work practice.

This chapter will therefore address the research question through analysing the conceptualisation and management of vulnerability through COVID-19 from a reflexive standpoint. This chapter will expand upon the discussion in Chapter Five by elaborating upon the impact of funding in relation to the management of vulnerability within the practice of youth work. The consideration of funding from this perspective is different from Chapter Five, as Chapter Five focussed on the social, political, and cultural perspectives that have influenced funding policy, and the participants' perceptions of this in relation to a critical realist framework. The discussion on funding in the present chapter will consider funding from the perspective of the reflexive practice of youth work.

6.1 The conceptualisation and management of vulnerability

In the lockdowns, where in-person work was forbidden or restricted, there were guidelines for youth work to be in-person, if the young person was able to be classified as vulnerable (NYA 2020d). Alex, who had a role within the youth service, noted:

> We're considered to be red, it's the red/amber/green type approach. If it's green, it's like, everything is open, it's all fine. Then there's a yellow, and amber, and a red. I think the red is pretty much where we're at now, and that says that we're allowed to do detached youth work, so street based work, we're allowed to do virtual work, we are allowed to do one to one and targeted group support if there is vulnerable young people and that work is seen as essential.

Alex continued on this idea and stated that the guides to in-person work were a, ''…bone of contention because some of what is seen as essential, what is seen as vulnerable, is left down to the organisations to interpret.'' For Alex (YS), defining vulnerability in a context that allows for in-person support during the lockdowns was determined by, ''… there's going to be some sort of crisis if we don't intervene.'' Nicholas, a youth development worker, relayed a similar idea:

> The NYA guidance … made a point of, kind of, highlighting was the vulnerable people is very much up to … the individual youth services to define. So what does a vulnerable young person look like? So they weren't willing to necessarily put an official stamp on that … What someone deems is a vulnerable person, another person might have a completely different opinion on that. So we tend to say that a vulnerable person is someone who's at risk. When *I* say at risk, at risk at home from things like domestic abuse, might be on a child protection plan, might be at risk of

being homeless, might be at risk of getting involved in drugs, child sexual exploitation. So we're talking about sort of more high tier risks.

Through Alex (YS) and Nicholas's (YDW) quotes, it is clear that there was an absence of direction for defining vulnerability. Alex and Nicholas both described ways that they considered someone as vulnerable; however, they also had details that qualified them to need to give the young person some extra support. The research by Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung (2019) noted that a commonality in vulnerability literature is that everyone can be exposed to a form of stress or shock, and may or may not have the capacity to cope (Brown 2015; Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung 2019). These findings are interesting to compare to universal vulnerability during a pandemic. Feelings of uncertainty were prominent through the pandemic (Pickersgill & Smith 2021), and Batsleer and colleagues (2021) noted that this was relevant for youth workers as well. In this way, the COVID-19 pandemic brought about a time in which many people were impacted by an unfamiliar type of stressor. The pandemic served as a near universal vulnerability within the youth service. While universal vulnerability would state that everyone is vulnerable (Albertson Fineman 2021), the findings from Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung (2019) shift the focus toward whether or not an individual can *cope* with the factors that make them potentially vulnerable.

The sentiment of vulnerability within youth work guidelines in the COVID-19 pandemic held similar tones to universal vulnerability. The way that Alex and Nicholas interpreted guidelines for youth work during the pandemic lockdowns allowed room to assume there was something within the young person's life that could benefit from the support provided through engagement in youth work. If

necessary, the youth workers could then arrange in-person support to help the young people cope.

Numerous participants reflected on examples of what they perceived to be vulnerability for young people, both before the during the COVID-19 pandemic. The first two participants discussed below are recollections of when the youth worker felt they were able to provide support to a young person in need. The first example is from Nicholas (YDW), who described a time before the COVID-19 pandemic, and the second account is from Lewis (YDW/YS), who described two instances during the pandemic restrictions. Both of these perspectives are important to address the research question, as youth workers had protocol for working with vulnerable young people, and these practices helped to inform their approach to new vulnerabilities during the pandemic. A perspective from Ashley (YS) will also be discussed, as she described a situation in which there were additional barriers to working with a potentially vulnerable young person. These narratives work to demonstrate the multifaceted manner in which the youth workers had to consider vulnerability with their young people, both prior to and during COVID-19.

Nicholas, a youth development worker, listed one example in his early career that helped to shape his consideration of young people and vulnerability. In this example, a young girl had been raped:

> When I very first started youth work, I had a young girl who disclosed to me that she'd been raped the previous night. I wasn't prepared for that, I was quite new. Luckily I had a very supportive manager, I mean, regardless of all the training I had, I mean, I was still, you know, sort of new to the role and I kind of had a … idea of like, the sort of like, policies and procedures I should put in place and how to act …

that kind of set me up to deal with other things that … came about from working with *vulnerable* young people and how to deal with individual situations that can just take you by surprise. Especially working at youth centres, when you might have a fantastic night of working- of group work sessions and it's very chilled and relaxed, and then at the end, at the very end, someone will disclose some information to you, because that's when they feel safest to do it.

Nicholas alluded to his knowledge of policy and procedure for when a young person may disclose sensitive information. He had access to resources and guidance, which he perceived to help the young person navigate the situation they had disclosed. With Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung (2019) in mind, the policy within Sunshine Youth Service was to provide resources to help the young person cope. Nicholas would not have known whether or not this young person needed these resources had they not decided to disclose. Lewis (YDW/YS) gave an example of a COVID-19 specific vulnerability for a young person:

We had a young person … that is deaf. And although they wear hearing aids, they kind of depend on lip reading. We were doing … one of our sessions where we could open up and be in the same space … All the young people were in masks, and this particular young person was like, 'I can't understand what's going on, because I can't see anybody's mouth moving. I can't,' you know, so they were *vulnerable* from that, so it was decided that as long as we were all you know, two metres plus apart and everything, then for that session to make sure we were being inclusive of the young person, we could not wear masks for that for that one session, so that young person could still lip read.

During the time that Lewis discussed, wearing masks was part of the regulations for the COVID-19 pandemic (Department of Health and Social Care 2022; Hobbs & Bunn 2020). Lewis also provided another example of a COVID-19 specific

vulnerability where a young person was unable to wear a mask due to sensory issues related to being autistic. Lewis termed the example of the deaf young person and autistic young person as *hidden disabilities*. The guidelines that resulted from the COVID-19 pandemic, such as wearing masks, presented new ways in which to consider vulnerability in the practice of youth work.

Lewis did discuss that the guidelines were for the young people and himself to wear masks; however, he chose to consider the application of social distancing rules in order to accommodate the young person. While Nicholas provided an example in which he was able to follow policy and guidelines, Lewis described a time in which he had to navigate between guidance due to the pandemic. For Lewis, the potential exclusion or loss of participation from a young person warranted negotiation between the COVID-19 guidelines and inclusion for the young people. Both Nicholas and Lewis' examples detail way that vulnerability can be handled within the youth service. In an example from Nicholas in Chapter 5, he discussed an old head teacher who had made him feel as if being a youth worker was a job where only games are played. In reality, the youth workers in Sunshine Youth Service detailed the ways in which they had to constantly consider vulnerabilities and make quick decisions. Both Nicholas and Lewis had to act in a way that made the young people feel supported, while also helping them to cope with the present situation.

Sonneveld (2022) and Mäkelä and colleagues (2021) both noted the importance of youth work as a way in which to help young people address vulnerabilities, such as through building long term, trusting relationships, participating in group activities, and the opportunity to make new friends.

Lunabba (2023) considered the role of youth services, specifically in relation to young men, and the undeniable impact of larger structures upon their lives. This author considered young people to have autonomy within social settings, but also as a minority within wider social structures (Lunabba 2023). Mäkelä, Mertanen, and Brunila (2021) noted the embedded values of neoliberal politics within a youth setting. Though this literature is not based in the UK, these authors commented on the manner in which political neoliberal rhetoric had been demonstrated among young people within a youth centre (Mäkelä et al. 2021). In this way, the real (systemic mechanisms) and actual (events interacting) levels of critical realism not only seep into the practice of youth work through the management of austerity and the COVID-19 pandemic as discussed in Chapter 5, but structural influences are also within the approach vulnerability. In this way, the approach of youth workers in Sunshine toward vulnerability within the young people is structurally influenced. The structural influence is based within policy and decision making that is imposed upon the youth service, but also the way that the young people are socially influenced both inside and outside of the youth service.

The ideal setting of building trusting relationships through various activities (Mäkelä et al., 2021; Sonneveld 2022) is not always achievable. Further, the examples from Nicholas and Lewis are not intended to indicate that youth workers always know what to do when faced with a potentially vulnerable situation. Ashley (YS) detailed a time when she felt unsupported, and put into a potentially vulnerable situation by a youth worker:

> These lads were sat outside, you know, they were being loud … there's so many of them … and I went out to chat to these guys, and then the door will shut behind

me and locked by another youth worker (Ashley laughs) So I was out there with all these guys who were known to cause trouble. I didn't have any trouble with them, but I had trouble with the member of staff who had locked the door behind me and was watching me through the glass (Ashley laughs) … I had really, really good conversations with these lads … but I was on my own.

Ashley's memory of a youth worker literally locking both herself and the young people out of the youth centre generated an image of young people literally being shut out from other areas of society. The youth service is intended to be a place where young people can be themselves and build up trusted relationships with adults. However, in Ashley's rendition of the story, not every youth worker is willing or able to extend a helping hand in a potentially uncomfortable situation. This is important to highlight, as exclusion is a noted critique and barrier for young people to be involved in decision making or participatory activities (McMellon & Tisdall 2020). In Ashley's recollection, she also mentioned that this situation led her to talk to one young person who mentioned they would be better off in prison as they would have meals to eat, a place to sleep, and the ability to get an education. Each of these concerns link to the kind of support that Sunshine Youth Service aimed to provide to young people in need (SC 2024b). Lunabba (2023) considered the role of youth work within young men specifically, and the importance of youth centres as a place in which they are able to be themselves. In Ashley's recalled memory, the ability of her to represent Sunshine as a place in which the young men could be themselves was hindered by the choice of her coworker to keep the young people from entering the physical space of the centre by quite literally locking them out.

Vulnerability in Ashley's example extended in a few different ways. The young person she spoke to was vulnerable through the definition by Forbes-Mewett & Nguyen-Trung (2019), as he described an inability to cope with the stressors in his life. For him, the way to manage his own vulnerability was to go to prison. However, the inability to cope with a stressor also extended to Ashley's description of her coworker. Instead of finding a way to connect with the young people who were outside with Ashley, the coworker chose to avoid the situation entirely.

The example from Ashley detailed the reality that addressing the vulnerability in young people was not a perfect practice prior to or during the COVID-19 lockdowns. The example from Nicholas specifically mentioned a supportive manager, while Ashley's example is rooted in a lack of support from a coworker. Lewis' examples provided context for vulnerabilities that were not accommodated prior to the COVID-19 guidance, but needed to be considered once lockdowns or in-person interactions were restricted. However, each of the above examples, including Lewis' experience in relation to COVID-19 guidance, occurred in-person. The navigation of online spaces opened new ways in which Sunshine Youth Service had to manage vulnerability within the young people.

6.2 Managing vulnerability: Online versus in-person

For the purpose of managing vulnerability of young people who use Sunshine Youth Service, the difference between online versus in-person youth work served as a way in which to work with young people through lockdown restrictions when in-person youth work was restricted, as well as a way to work with young people

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that did not want to attend the service in-person. Lewis (YDW/YS), detailed an example of this during a period of lockdown:

> This young person, I've only met online, we've only spoke to online during our Talk to a Youth Worker sessions. And when we started talking to her, she wouldn't turn a camera on. So I'd just be talking to her initials, you know, on the screen, and try to build relationship, which is not easy. Having those … I say personal relationships, obviously, with appropriate boundaries in place, but those personal relationships with young people is quite a lot, and quite a huge part of what we do, building trust and things like that. But meeting this young person online, it took her four weeks before she felt confident enough to turn on camera … And about four weeks ago, she came along to our service wide team meeting in front of, what, 27 other people and spoke about her experience of using the youth service, so for someone that wouldn't turn their camera on to talk to me to somebody that would then sit there in front of 27 other youth workers and tell them … how much we've helped her.

This experience detailed by Lewis aligns with other literature around young people who had positive experiences online during the lockdowns, such as through one-on-one conversations, which helped to relieve feelings of stress and loneliness (Marciano, Ostroumova, Schulz & Camerini 2022). The mitigation of stress through the lockdowns is important to consider in relation to vulnerability, as the stress around uncertainty and instability were noted impacts of the pandemic (Pickersgill 2020; Zinn 2021), and previous literature suggested that pandemics can have lasting impacts upon the mental health of young people (O'Reilly et al. 2020). The implementation of online services allowed for the consideration of these needs. The addition of online services for young people through COVID-19 within Sunshine Youth Service is an example of the empirical (human observation) level impacting

the actual (events interacting) level of critical realism. The youth service was able to find a way to adapt to meeting the needs of the young people within the area. As a result, Sunshine Youth Service continued to support online youth activities through to 2024. In this way, Sunshine Youth Service was able to continue to meet the needs of young people in a way that was developed due to the COVID-19 lockdowns.

However, it is important to bear in mind that the comfort of some young people to attend online was not universal. Anya (YDW) described her own concerns pertaining to meeting with young people and helping to provide them support in an online setting from her home:

> I was still working, my partner wasn't, he was furloughed. So he was here 24/7, and then, our daughter ... she was here ... So for me, it was quite stressful, because I would be having these conversations with young people. And I'd have to really think about where I'm going to be, because I didn't have a spare room to turn into a study ... I literally was sat at my dining room table every day, on the computer doing it. So I think for me, it was a bit of a challenge, and I had to be very careful about what I said so nothing was overheard that could have broken, like GDPR and the young person's confidentiality.

In this example, the concerns of vulnerability pertaining to sensitive conversations with young people was relevant for the youth workers to keep in mind. Nicholas (YDW) expanded upon this concern:

> The nature of how people feel about engaging online and how free they feel they can speak and things like that, and who might be kind of in the background. [Young people] might not wanna talk about certain things with a parent, you know, in the house and stuff like that. So it has its restrictions, whereas, young people come

into a youth centre and it's like, there's no one there other than a youth worker and they're gonna not pass judgement.

Nicholas' consideration is similar to Anya's in that it was a concern for a lack of privacy within the home. The concern between Nicholas and Anya is both from the perspective of the youth worker and maintaining privacy within their living space, as well as the young person being able to have privacy in theirs. UK Youth (2020) highlighted the importance of safeguarding when delivering services online during the lockdowns. In addition to concerns for privacy within the home of the youth worker and the young person, there was additional concern for the audio or video to be intercepted (UK Youth 2020). During the COVID-19 pandemic, some literature suggested that those working with vulnerable young people may not have been properly equipped to provide support online (El-Asam et al. 2023). These challenges limited the manner that Sunshine Youth Service was able to work with the young people in the area.

The consideration of vulnerability and safeguarding the young people who chose to attend online was not the only concern that the youth workers had during the lockdowns. Michelle (YDW) also commented about her worry for young people that the youth workers were not able to keep in contact with through the lockdowns:

We had young people, obviously, we've had concerns about in the past that maybe we were working with in a school, or something like that. School was closed down, they were on lockdown, and won't come [to the youth service sessions] online. So you've lost that contact with that young person, if that makes sense. And the additional needs session worked really well online, but there were … still a whole group of them that weren't comfortable with coming online. So I've tried to ring

them to just check in and see how things were going. But even that was difficult. It was just like, you know, it felt like you were losing contact with some, maybe there was issues with some young people that weren't being picked up.

Briggs and colleagues (2021) as well as Bhopal and colleagues (2020) wrote about the unintended consequences of young people being kept at home during the lockdowns. A drop in referrals to youth services for young people served to highlight the *invisibility* of potential vulnerabilities that young people may have needed help navigating that were unable to be spotted by statutory or, in the case of Sunshine Youth Services, non-statutory services (Bhopal et al. 2020; Briggs et al. 2021).

The concern for young people being in vulnerable situations at home and the need for extra support for vulnerability was a concern for many roles that helped young people through the lockdowns. Kim and Asbury (2020) found that teachers were concerned about the safety of some young people being mandated to stay at home. These concerns led to feelings of worry for the vulnerable young people that the teachers were not able to see (Kim & Asbury 2020).

Similarly to the teachers identified by Kim and Asbury (2020), Michelle (YDW) detailed concern around the young people she lost contact with, and worry around vulnerabilities that she was not able to consider. Michelle also reflected on the collaborative nature of youth workers with other roles in the community that work with young people. In this way, the inability to help young people was not limited to just one type of service, rather there was a ripple outward. Where services or teachers may have been able to speak to one another about the wellbeing of certain young people prior to the pandemic, the switch to an online

format inhibited the ability for vulnerability to be managed through these collaborative efforts.

The way that youth workers had to consider and manage vulnerability within the youth service did shift within the lockdown guidelines. The practice of considering masks as a way to make someone vulnerable, ensuring safeguarding practices while within a home space as opposed to a youth centre, and losing contact with young people due to the COVID-19 restrictions were all ways that youth workers in Sunshine Youth Service had to shift their consideration in relation to the management of vulnerability. In addition to this, the crisis of the pandemic that put the youth service into a fully online state did not have clear guidance. Instead, Sunshine Youth Service had to determine the meaning of vulnerability for themselves. Through examples like Nicholas (YDW) and Ashley (YS), a previous approach to vulnerability within the youth service was demonstrated. Nicholas' example highlighted teamwork and managerial support, while Ashley's detailed a lack of support and being forced to work independently. Both of their narratives were in situations where they had to think and act quickly due to the situation at hand. These tactics were not dissimilar to the approach that was needed once the lockdowns and strict COVID-19 guidelines began. The ability of Sunshine Youth Service to adapt to the unclear and shifting landscape of vulnerability was done through a reflexive practice of experiences prior to the pandemic.

6.3 A combined reflexive approach with youth work

During COVID-19, one widespread vulnerability that Sunshine Youth Service had to reflexively consider was the mental health of the young people in the area. Nicholas (YDW) commented on the specific issue of providing mental health services to young people prior to and during COVID-19:

> Counselling, I mean, yeah, this was before the pandemic, but it has increased more so during the pandemic … we sort of took on 2 counsellors to sort of deliver counselling throughout the week, and we could refer young people to that the counsellors within our service, that's fantastic, 'cause there's a massive waiting list for things like CAMHS.

After the initial drop in referrals mentioned in the previous section (Bhopal et al. 2020; Briggs et al. 2021), the time between May 2019 to May 2021 had a 94% increase in referrals to CAMHS (UKP 2021). With the increased pressure for mental health services, Sunshine Youth Service had to consider the vulnerability of numerous young people at once. The response of Sunshine Youth Service was in terms of a growing demand among young people. The NHS Confederation (2022) previously noted that an increase in funding was one aspect that could help to address the long wait lists after the pandemic lockdowns. Without enough funding to support the waitlists of people in need of mental health support, Sunshine Youth Service employed counsellors to help their young people receive support. From the work of Archer (1995; 2003; 2007), there were elements of meta-reflexivity, morphogenesis, and cultural power rooted within Nicholas' consideration. With the emphasis upon how culture impacted a reflexive practice, there is influence from larger structures within the decision of the youth service to bring in their own

counsellors during the pandemic. According to Dyke, Johnson, and Fuller (2012) decisions are framed by socio-economic and cultural factors. For these authors, these factors are an integral element of reflexivity. The socio-economic and cultural factors that contribute to this decision are arguably rooted within state spending, and therefore within the actual (events interacting) and real (systemic mechanisms) levels of critical realism. This reflexive decision illustrates how the real (structural mechanisms) level and actual (events interacting) level impacts the decisions within the empirical (observational) level. In this way, reflexivity is tied to critical realism, and the reflexive action taken by the youth service in relation to the vulnerability of the young people is tied to the tensions that exist between the youth service and the real (structural mechanisms) level within society.

While Nicholas did mention that the addition of counsellors was done prior to the pandemic, he did also clarify that the necessity increased during the pandemic. To recall from Chapter Five, Sunshine Youth Service applied for funding from outside sources both during and prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, the consequences of policy and funding from the actual (events interacting) level that occur outside of youth services can still have an impact upon their delivery, which Sunshine Youth Service had to cope with and incorporate into their practice. In Nicholas's example, the funding that was provided to CAMHS services impacted Sunshine Youth Service, as the service decided to bring in counsellors on their own for their young people to access. Sunshine Youth Service utilised a limited pool of resources to help rectify the shortcomings of fundings for mental health services in their own area.

The decision to bring in new activities to Sunshine Youth Service by the youth service employees and the youth workers was also rooted within the phases of morphogenesis (Archer 1995; 2010; Piletić 2020). The phases that lead to change through morphogenesis are determined through time across structure, culture, and agency, wherein larger structures impact smaller human decision making, and in turn, human decision making can have impacts back upon structures (Archer 1995; 2010). Through the stages of culture, structure, and agency, and the change that occurs through a morphogenesis phase, the youth service was influenced to make changes based upon the larger structural mechanisms within society. The changes that came from these decisions were not pre-determined; therefore, considering reflexive decision-making on a more micro-scale is sociologically interesting. The consideration of a combination of reflexive approaches to decision-making within the youth service allows for a better understanding of how the youth service operates through a pandemic, but also the ways in which Sunshine Youth Service managed vulnerability, as well as how Sunshine Youth Service was impacted by wider aspects of society. The entrenched impact of the real and actual levels upon the management of vulnerability for the young people that accessed Sunshine Youth Service is a macrosocial way in which youth workers and the youth service engage with a reflexive practice. In addition to engaging in reflexivity, Nicholas illustrated a meta-reflexive approach. The Sunshine Youth Service chose to implement a new provision (i.e., counsellors) for young people based upon the reflexive action of youth workers who considered the needs of the young people (i.e., declining mental health prior to and during the pandemic), while considering what needed to be addressed for young people (i.e., additional mental health support, long wait times for CAMHS).

In addition to funding initiatives that were aimed directly at improving mental health, there were activities during the pandemic lockdowns that were able to consider vulnerability through fun activities as well. Josh (YDW) highlighted gaming as an adaptive form of youth work in response to the pandemic:

> We were playing Dungeons and Dragons, if you're familiar with that, and I've been the [Dungeon Master], was trying to run a game, and I didn't think that any of them spoke to each other outside of the session, and I was sending them emails individually to try and get the characters to play off against each other as part of storyline. Quickly found out that whatever I sent to one of them, they would send to all of them on their group chat. So me trying to trick them into going down a certain path or open a certain box, it didn't work, because outside of the (laughs) outside of the session, they had individually come together and formed their own community, their own group, and I think I didn't expect that to come from the session.

In this example, Josh (YDW) detailed the act of playing roleplaying games online in a manner similar to how the NYA (2021e) details the game of football. When is a game of football simply a game of football, and when is it youth work in the form of football? Through the attempt to play the young people off each other, Josh was building up teamwork and cohesion. Similar to when a game of football is youth work (NYA 2021e), the game of Dungeons and Dragons intentionally expanded beyond gameplay to build tangible skills in an adult led setting. However, Josh's plan was forced to change when the young people began speaking outside of the session. Josh (YDW) did still manage to build teamwork and cohesion, but also facilitated the formation of a community.

Online gaming through the pandemic lockdowns was previously shown to have been a way in which young people were able to cope with the stress of lockdowns, keep social relationships, and find a place of belonging (Bengtsson, Bom & Fynbo 2021; Claesdotter-Knutsson, André & Håkansson 2022). While the literature from Bengtsson and colleagues (2021) and Claesdotter-Knutsson and colleagues (2022) was based outside of the UK, other literature has suggested that the UK had increases in online gaming during the pandemic, and concluded that online gaming was a way in which to combat loneliness during the lockdown periods (Hodgetts, Williams & Butler 2022). This is not to suggest that online gaming is only ever positive. Previous literature has suggested that some online gaming can enable toxic communication, such as through negative comments toward teammates (Beres et al. 2021). In some instances, toxicity in online gaming is considered normal (Bourdeau 2022). However, for Josh's (YDW) example, the young people are not simply logging on to play a game in a randomised online lobby, they are participating within a planned youth service activity. The involvement of Josh running the sessions as a Dungeon Master is a way in which to run an activity, but also mitigate forms of online bullying or toxicity. He was able to foster teambuilding and community, combat loneliness, and also monitor the sessions and build a rapport with young people as a trusted adult figure.

It is important to highlight the ways in which playing games online during the pandemic worked to combat loneliness, as planning a gaming activity within the youth service is still a type of youth work and a reflexive way in which to manage vulnerability as well. Through planning the Dungeons and Dragons game, Josh (YDW) was not only considering the vulnerability of one young person, but was also thinking of a wider group. Dungeons and Dragons has been noted as

gaining popularity in the years prior to the lockdowns through changes in society, such as trends in popular media and less of a stigma around the game (Sidhu & Carter 2020). Through planning a Dungeons and Dragons campaign with the young people through the COVID-19 lockdowns, Josh (YDW) demonstrated an awareness of what was of interest to the young people during the lockdowns. The implementation of this kind of activity demonstrated a meta-reflexive process, where Josh planned an activity that suited the interest of young people due to rising popularity of Dungeons and Dragons in wider society. Further, Dungeons and Dragons is inherently a reflexive activity. From the perspective of Josh as a Dungeon Master, it involves preparation of a campaign, but also the ability to quickly adapt to the whims of the players (Gygax & Arneson 1974).

In relation to the purpose of youth work, both Nicholas's (YDW) example of providing counsellors, and Josh's (YDW) example of running a Dungeons and Dragons campaign are relevant to the management of vulnerability in relation to young people, and detailing youth work as a reflexive practice in relation to vulnerability. The use of counsellors demonstrated a manner in which the youth workers are able to work with young people who needed tailored support, whereas the Dungeons and Dragons sessions would be a session that generally worked within the themes that are inherent to open access, voluntary youth work, as opposed to being an activity for tailored support. To reiterate, this is not to say that young people who attended the Dungeons and Dragons sessions did not need tailored support. Rather, the gaming sessions were a way in which to help develop skills, and build trust where a young person may feel safe asking for support if needed.

6.4 Reflexivity, the youth service, and resources

Thus far, this chapter has considered the conceptualisation of vulnerability, and the way that it was managed within Sunshine Youth Service. It was detailed that management of vulnerability was in the form of supporting young people through a reflexive practice. However, the management of vulnerability also extends to the youth service provision within Sunshine, and the ability of youth work professionals to manage the vulnerability of the service. The reflexive practice of a youth worker in relation to the vulnerability of the young people was *always* shaped by what Sunshine Youth Service would be able to accommodate.

The vulnerability of Sunshine Youth Service itself emerged in a couple ways through analysis. The first way was reach of the service, both in terms of young people and the perception of the local authority. This was a particular problem during the COVID-19 lockdowns, as the service was not able to reach as many young people as they had prior to the COVID-19 lockdowns. The second way in which the service is vulnerable is through funding. Funding in times of austerity was discussed in depth in Chapter Five, with emphasis upon how the youth workers *felt* around the cuts to funding, and what those cuts meant for their job role. The focus in this chapter is specifically on the funding in relation to vulnerability of Sunshine Youth Service. Alex (YS) highlighted the considerations that the youth service and youth workers needed to think about as the lockdowns had been occurring for nearly a year in January 2021:

> Traditionally the youth service isn't always a need, it's a want thing … some young people who access youth services are accessing because they need to access support, but majority of young people access youth activities and you know, sort of

youth work stuff that we're doing, will be accessing because they choose to, because they want to be there. I think in some ways you see some of those young people …. because there's not an urgency of engaging with youth services, they maybe have moved away a little bit. And we're starting to see some of that come back. But I think what we're also seeing is some of those young people who otherwise wouldn't have had problems, who've got problems associated with the pandemic, the stress of the pandemic has affected them in that way.

The pandemic lockdowns led to or exasperated mental health concerns for young people (UKP 2021), which the youth service chose to handle through funding specialised mental health support for young people within the service. Alex addressed another interesting point through stating that the youth service is a *want*. Alex's quote spoke about young people, and the voluntary nature of youth work; however, this is not the only way in which the youth service is a *want*. The youth service therefore must be something that the local authority *wants* to continue to fund. In this way, Alex was highlighting the vulnerability of the service in both the manners listed above. Young people must choose to engage, and the local authority must continue to decide that the youth service is worth funding.

Within a reflexive practice, the youth service must try to manage the expectations of both of these parties in order to create the best chance to continue to receive any support from the local authority. Through the decision to fund mental health counsellors, the needs of the young people were able to be addressed, but the counsellors also served the service in another manner. Sunshine Youth Service was able to demonstrate tangible ways in which they worked to benefit the young people in the community, solidifying youth work as an essential practice during times of crisis, such as through the COVID-19 pandemic. However,

the act of providing programs that benefit the young people in the community was not the only factor that has to be considered by Sunshine Local Authority. Local authorities have had decreased funding for youth service from central government for over a decade (YMCA 2020; 2022); therefore, the youth service as a provision was not prioritised. It is not that Sunshine Local Authority did not see a purpose for the youth service. It is instead that they have to first fund statutory, or required services, and then non-statutory services. Sunshine Local Authority was also limited in how much funding had to be given out based upon the funding conditions from the government. These funding cuts compounded year after year (YMCA 2020; 2022), creating an environment rooted within vulnerability for Sunshine Youth Service.

The COVID-19 lockdowns created new ways in which the youth service itself became vulnerable and precarious. When data collection began, nearly a full year of lockdowns had passed. Alex (YS) stated:

> On average, we would contact 2 to 2.5 thousand young people a year, we're nowhere near that, you know, we're probably under 500 at the moment … I think the thing for us is that young people, where we get most contact would be the street-based work, in the nice months. It's not so good now.

These lower contact numbers of youth workers to young people directly impacted the way that Sunshine Youth Services was able to host activities in the short term, as fewer contacts led to lower attendance. However, this could also have longer term impacts as well. Young people who would have learned about the youth service, and participated over a period of time, were not attending. At the same time, the young people who were already attending would continue to age to the

point where they would no longer be able to attend. This limits the breadth of youth work that would be able to be done, and the ways in which youth service activities had an impact on the community. This is important, as participants discussed that one aspect of some funding applications consisted of the youth service detailing the impacts and expected outcomes of the funding projects. These lowered numbers in attendance and contact with young people will directly impact attendance and numerical claims that may go into consideration for funding.

Further, the drop in attendance is also a way in which the youth workers in Sunshine perceived youth services to be valued by wider policy. Anya (YDW) detailed this in the quote below:

> The youth service has continuously had to change, like at the very beginning, the youth service was literally about young people, what young people wanted and what we wanted to run for the young people. And then it came in that we actually had to focus on these set projects, set tasks, set aims, set targets, set outcomes. And then it's been argued that youth service now is about being paid by numbers, so the more people you have engaging, the more young people you have doing what these policies and politics want them to be doing, the more likely you are to get money for it. I think in regards to like politics itself … there are many influences that can be done on the services, and that all depends on what they're governing for, I mean, so if they run in and they want a specific done youth wise, that will fall down to the youth service, and we can't be like, "no, we're not doing it," because they've provided us with funding.

Anya's quote detailed the practice of reflexivity in relation to the vulnerability of the service in a morphogenesis and meta-reflexive manner. The morphogenesis is in the form of change over time, where structure and culture in the form of policy

and guidelines shape the agency of the youth workers and the wider youth service (Archer 2010). The shifting guidelines across years from open access youth work, to targeted approaches, to being paid by numbers have a direct impact upon the ways in which the youth service can operate.

When considering the drop in numbers discussed by Alex (YS), the idea of reaching targeted outcomes or pay by numbers is even more concerning. With less young people attending, the impact upon the young people is not as easily demonstrated. This places the youth service in a position where they must be reflexively considering the vulnerability of young people within the context of the expectations of funders or guidelines. If the context is within pay by numbers, the youth service must consider what the young people attending may want or need, as well as what will attract the most young people to attend. If the context were to be targeted outcomes, the youth service would instead need to consider what is necessary for vulnerability with the young people, but also what will fit within the context of demonstrating the targeted outcome. With these elements in mind, Sunshine Youth Service was consistently engaging with a meta-reflexive practice of considering all of these aspects when planning new activities, or delivering day to day activities that already existed.

Youth workers and those working within the other roles of the youth service were constantly negotiating the tension between being a service that takes influence and builds around the engagement from young people, while also acknowledging the requirements from policy and funding bodies. In this way the *management* of vulnerability is a meta-reflexive practice that evolves around the continual shifts in knowledge and positionality of the youth workers and youth

service (Archer 2007) within the morphogenesis of change around the wider structure and culture that impact the policy that shapes youth work as a practice (Archer 2010).

6.5 A combined approach to youth work: reflexivity and vulnerability

The practice of youth work in this chapter has been considered through the conceptualisation and management of vulnerability who used Sunshine Youth Service both prior to and during the pandemic guidelines. The consideration of vulnerability prior to the pandemic is relevant to the overarching question that pertains to management and conceptualisation of vulnerability during the COVID-19 pandemic because the management of vulnerability was done through a reflexive process. The youth workers and youth service staff in Sunshine Youth Service considered their approach prior to the pandemic to inform their approach to vulnerability, especially when guidelines for the pandemic were not comprehensive. Further, while the pandemic did illuminate additional *hidden* vulnerabilities to consider within the young people, the prior policies of austerity before the pandemic shaped the approach of the youth workers to vulnerability through the pandemic guidelines. Any approach to support within Sunshine Youth Service is underpinned by the limited resources of Sunshine Youth Service.

Through data analysis, a relationship between vulnerability and reflexivity existed within the practice of youth work in Sunshine Youth Service. This relationship is detailed below in Figure 3. It is important to note that the considerations of vulnerability in this Figure are in relation to COVID-19. This is not

to say that the Figure is not applicable to any other scenario, but that the data and analysis of the current thesis were contextualised completely within COVID-19.
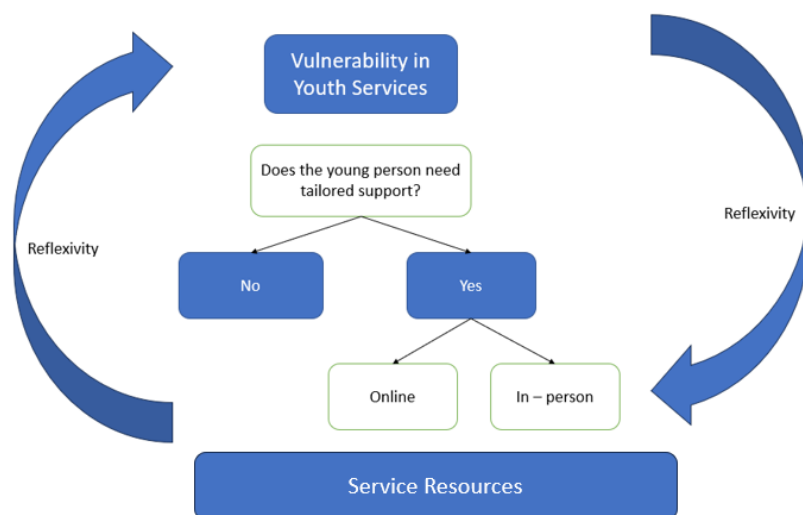

Figure 3: Vulnerability in Youth Services: A Youth Worker Perspective

Figure 3 is a visualisation of the process of managing and conceptualising vulnerability through the COVID-19 lockdowns. The Figure was developed within the consideration of vulnerability as defined by Forbes-Mewett and Nguyen-Trung (2019). Vulnerability in relation to the young people through the COVID-19 pandemic was considered with more emphasis upon if the young person needed further support as opposed to what about them could be considered vulnerable. Within the context of COVID-19, there was also reason to consider most young people as already having a vulnerability, or experiencing a new vulnerability due to the pandemic and subsequent lockdowns (Albertson Fineman 2021). With these two definitions in mind, the focus of the questions in the middle of Figure 3 are aimed toward whether or not the young person needs additional support, and what manner of delivery would be best as opposed to their specific vulnerability. These initial, basic questions are encompassed within a reflexive practice. Each youth

worker approached the unfolding situation of COVID-19 with a reflexive approach to their own practice of youth work within the pandemic, but with knowledge and experience prior to the pandemic as well. The reflexive arrows do not stop at the bottom of the middle questions, instead they extend to the bottom of Figure 3, which represents that the youth service must always consider the underlying resources that are needed to help the young people.

The flow of Figure 3 was not explicitly discussed within the interviews, rather these themes emerged from the data. This figure is not intended to completely encompass every possible consideration of vulnerability through the pandemic. It is instead intended to help demonstrate the general flow of consideration that was demonstrated through data collection in relation to vulnerability in the pandemic.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to answer the research question ''In what ways did youth service professionals manage and conceptualise vulnerability during COVID-19?'' Through the pandemic, the ways in which youth workers conceptualised vulnerability ultimately focussed more around if the young person *needed* more support. In this way, the conceptualisation of vulnerability through the lockdowns assumed that everyone had the potential to be vulnerable, and the vulnerability extended to the youth service itself. The focus then shifted to the management of vulnerability. This chapter illustrated that vulnerability emerged through considering if the young person needed tailored support. If yes, what should tailored support look like? These questions are rooted within a combined

reflexive approach, where the youth service and youth workers engage in a reflexive practice rooted with multiple perspectives presented across multiple pieces by Archer. The reflexive practice of youth work and the youth service extends beyond planning activities for the young people, but also applies to the service itself. The youth service must provide for the young people within shifting guidelines and policy, and also within an unstable funding environment.

It is through these aspects of considering the vulnerability of the young people and the youth service, as well as engaging in a combined reflexive approach that the conceptualisation and management of vulnerability during COVID-19 has been addressed. However, this is not to indicate that the considerations in Figure 3 are only applicable to COVID-19. Rather, the insights from the data the emerged around the pandemic lockdowns helps to illuminate the practice of youth work, and the adaptation of online as well as in-person work in a post-lockdown context. Previous literature has critiqued both public perceptions of youth work, as well as a potential misinterpretation of youth work even among those working within the youth service (McCardle 2014). Through the development of Figure 3 and considering the practice of youth work as a combined reflexive approach around the vulnerability of young people and the needs of the service, this thesis provides clarity around the practice of youth work in a crisis, and the ways in which youth workers and the service plan their activities for young people.

Chapter 7

'The New Age of Youth Work':

The Conceptualisation and Creation of Space within Sunshine Youth Service

The previous two chapters worked together to lay out the practice of youth work within rippling and continued impacts of austerity through the COVID-19 lockdowns. Chapter Five laid out a conceptualisation of Sunshine Youth Services in relation to public spending within a critical realist framework. Chapter Six presented a way to consider a reflexive practice of the youth workers in relation to vulnerability and their ability to address the needs of the young people within the financial constraints that come from lessened state spending, and external funding applications. This chapter will examine the role of space within the youth service and address the research question: In what ways did youth service professionals conceptualise and create space for young people during COVID-19?

The below sections explores the concept of space among the youth service participants, and connect these ideas to previous literature regarding youth service as a safe and liminal space. A safe space has previously been conceptualised as a place that is participatory, even for those who may usually face stigmatisation, to explore new possibilities and feel a sense of normalcy (Bertotti et al. 2012; Bryant, Tibbs, & Clark 2011; Conradson 2003; Cumbers et al. 2018; Forrest & Kearns 2001; Pain & Francis 2004). A liminal space has been considered as an in-between threshold, where a person transforms into new versions of themselves (Land et al. 2014; Murphy & McDowell 2019; Reid 2017).

Within NYA guidelines (NYA 2021a), both safety and liminality have been written about as important elements of youth work.

Smith and Mills (2019) wrote that exploration around youth spaces and young people is important, as cultural and social shifts change what it means to be a young person. In relation to youth work within Sunshine Youth Service, shifts in young people shape the way in which the youth workers work with them. This is because participation is a key component in regards to how youth workers conceptualise and create space for youth work. Participation within the current chapter will be contextualised largely within Hart's Ladder of Participation, and the impacts of the COVID-19 lockdowns on in person work. The idea of co-production as an approach to participation will also be discussed, as it emphasises the collaboration of the design and implementation of youth activities (Pearson 2022). These elements will be connected back to Figure 3 around reflexivity and vulnerability in Chapter Six, as well as within the critical realist framework discussed in Chapter Five.

In the first section, this chapter will discuss the ideas of safety and liminality in relation to Sunshine Youth Services during the COVID-19 restrictions. Other ideas of how to conceptualise youth work will also be discussed. The following sections will discuss the value of participation within youth services as well as the practice of implementing a participatory practice from the youth worker perspective. These ideas will be discussed in relation to safety and liminality, the reflexive practice of youth work, and to a critical realist framework. This chapter will present a new way to consider the practice of youth work in the form of a triangle diagram inspired by a participant. Overall, this chapter will

expand the understanding of the impacts of the pandemic upon the space in which youth work existed during and after the lockdowns.

7.1 The conceptualisation of a youth space: Safety and liminality

The perspective of youth workers in relation to the role of a youth space is varied, but with themes that can be connected and related to one another. Jackson (2015), Nolas (2014), and the NYA (2021f) have all indicated that a youth work space may be a type of *safe* space for young people, where young people feel as if they are allowed to express and be authentic to themselves. Part of this freedom of expression could be due to the way in which the space was facilitated by youth workers.

These sentiments were replicated by participants. Michelle, a youth development worker (YDW), stated:

> It's like their safe space, it's like their second home, you know, they come down, and they know they can just come in and chill out at whatever time the session is. They kind of take ownership of the space as well … cook their meals there … it's just kind of like a home from home.

There was discourse from participant to participant about what a youth space meant for them. For instance, feelings of safety are echoed by Lewis (YDW/YS) in his first interview:

> A safe space for a young person, you know, it's somewhere where they can come in and they can talk about whatever they want to talk about, or not talk about whatever they want to talk about.

Lewis identified the same key word as Michelle (YDW) in the consideration of a youth space being safe for young people; however, Lewis and Michelle described the idea of a safe space in different ways. Michelle emphasised that a youth centre is like a home away from home, and a place of ownership, while Lewis (YDW/YS) spoke more about young people's ability to decide their own level of comfort for their participation within the space. Both of these perspectives are reflected within the NYA guidelines for youth work. The NYA stated that youth work should be built around, ''active participation and empowerment of young people,'' (NYA 2021e, n.p.). Michelle spoke about participation and empowerment through describing a youth space as a place where young people can take ownership, whereas Lewis spoke more about the ways in which young people may feel comfortable engaging, or not engaging.

In relation to safety, a youth centred space is one in which young people who may face stigma or discrimination are able to experience a sense of normalcy (Bertotti et al. 2012; Conradson 2003; Bryant et al. 2011; Pain & Francis 2003). Jackson (2016) described this kind of youth space as an 'almost home' (p. 34). The sentiments from Lewis and Julie are reflected within the considerations of these authors. Ownership, a home from home, and comfortability to interact with others complement ideas of normalcy.

While youth centred spaces were described as safe and reflects past literature (see Bertotti et al. 2012; Jackson 2016; Nolas 2014), this was not the only theme that was emergent. For Josh (YDW) a youth space has a different role:

The buzzword that I use all the time is opportunity … a lot of people say like safe spaces and that kind of stuff. I don't necessarily think young people seek out safe spaces, but they seek out opportunities.

Josh's idea of opportunity is not out of scope with past research pertaining to youth spaces. For Forrest and Kearns (2001) and Cumbers and colleagues (2018), safety within a youth space consists of aspects around participation, and the facilitation of new possibilities. These themes resonate with the idea of opportunity from Josh, where perhaps the *motivation* of the young person is not to find or seek safety but instead what they may be able to receive from attending a youth centre. The safety that is embedded within a youth centre is a product of the different discourses of the youth workers as well as the guidelines of organisations like the NYA. It is through the practice of youth work that the young person is able to passively experience the safety of the space while they generate opportunity for themselves from attending the centre.

To recall from Chapter Six, Figure 3 was centred around the flow of questions that a youth worker may consider when planning youth work activities for individual or groups of young people, and the reflexive practice of continual adaptation to the changes in the desires or needs of the young people, or to accommodate the needs of the service through limited funding. By understanding *how* different youth workers view the space, such as a place of safety, there is a better understanding of the perspective they take when considering the ways in which to address the vulnerability of young people. However, through the addition of opportunity, Josh (YDW) provided insight into what a youth worker may think of to help address vulnerability. With the idea of proving an opportunity to young people, Josh considered a way in which to garner initial interest. If young people

attend the youth centre activities to seek out some kind of opportunity, the youth workers would then be able to consider vulnerability, and suggest or plan activities accordingly.

This concept of *opportunity* is important to address, as it provides deeper context for the embedded practice of youth work, and the ways in which seemingly simple activities may lead to larger change. For example, Nicholas (YDW) spoke about the use of multiagency work, and the role that other organisations played within the youth centre:

> We had the Prince's Trust working out of there, delivering their programming … to help people … get into employment, training, … we had people running training and meetings … mock exams and things … for … teenagers that are in educational employment training.

Here the idea of opportunity is through professional development. The NYA (2021e) does indicate that opportunity is an element of the non-formal education that can occur within a youth centre space. For the context of this thesis, opportunity is not limited to professional development. Rather, opportunity can be found in a variety of activities. In Chapter Six, Josh (YDW) spoke about running Dungeons and Dragons games for young people The use of Dungeons and Dragons can be contextualised as a form of *opportunity* in a similar way that the NYA (2021e) has considered a game of football as youth work. In and of itself, Dungeons and Dragons may seem more like a fun activity than a professional one. However, through the COVID-19 lockdowns, it was fun-focussed activities that provided the youth workers the ability to engage with young people and reflexively consider whether or not individual participants may have needed more support for vulnerabilities in their life. The reflexive approach occurs while also building a

trusting relationship between youth worker and young person, as well as social relationships with their peers. In this way, a youth centre session like Dungeons and Dragons served as an informal opportunity to build skills, like teamwork and decision-making in a group setting (Anderson 2022; Arenas, Viduani, & Araujo 2022; Bowman 2012; Daniau 2016). Dungeons and Dragons has also been noted to foster critical thinking (Anderson 2022), with amplified benefits for young people with special education needs (SEN) (Chaplan Hoang 2021). Bowman (2012) further argued that Dungeons and Dragons created a liminal space, where the players are within an in-between (Murphy & McDowell 2019; Wood 2012) of imagined space and reality. Bowman (2012) also linked Dungeons and Dragons to be a space of safety, as the players each were within the liminality of the game, where the creation of a new persona was protected and accepted by other players. These elements were necessary for gameplay to be cohesive (Bowman 2012). Where a young person may seek out the *opportunity* to play a fun game with their peers, the byproduct is the informal development of skills that can translate into other areas of their life within the same values of safety and liminality that define a youth space (Jackson 2015; Nolas 2014; NYA 2021a).

Josh's (YDW) idea of a youth centre as a space where young people seek out opportunity links into literature regarding the spatial theme of liminality, which is a space where someone learns and transforms into different versions of themselves (Land et al 2014; Reid 2017). A liminal space is an *in-between* space (Murphy & McDowell 2019; Wood 2012). To refer back to the NYA (2021a), transformation within the lives of young people is rooted within the mission of the organisation, and therefore of youth work as a practice. As the idea of transformation is integrated within the mission of the NYA, the resulting guidelines for youth work as

a practice are also built around transformation of young people. For the purpose of Sunshine Youth Service, liminality and transformation are embedded within the transformation of self (Land et al. 2014; Reid 2017). Through providing a place of safety and opportunity, the youth workers within Sunshine Youth Service described a desire to help young people grow on a personal level through the activities (i.e. cooking, sports, music) that were provided, but also, as stated by Michelle, by taking ownership of the space and developing a voice (NYA 2021a). Liminality, safety, and opportunity were themes within Sunshine Youth Service that worked together to shape the discourses of the youth workers.

For the context of this thesis, the values of youth work have previously been rooted from a historical and policy perspective within a critical realist framework. The discourses of the youth workers and youth service staff within Sunshine are within the empirical (human observation) level. While they follow guidelines put out by organisations like the NYA, the expectations for youth work are rooted within the actual (events interacting) and real (systemic mechanisms) levels. The promotion and encouragement of transformation through developmental activities within a youth service is reminiscent of policy that considered young people to have a deficit that needed to be rectified (Bradford & Cullen 2014; Cooper 2018; Ord & Davies 2018). However, past actual (events interacting) level policies also reflect an awareness of policymakers to expand youth work beyond simply an adult discourses of youth work values. An emphasis upon participation from young people has been present in youth services as a way in which to ensure young people have a say within their own development (Grace & Taylor 2017). While liminality, safety, and opportunity laid the foundation for the conceptualisation of

space, youth participation was an important aspect in the creation of a youth work space during COVID-19.

7.2 Hart's Ladder of Participation and the space of Sunshine Youth Service

Within Sunshine Youth Service, the creation of space is widely shaped through the voice and participation of young people. Specifically, multiple participants spoke about the use of Hart's Ladder of Participation (2008; 1992) as a way in which to help guide the creation of the space within their practice as a youth worker. Alex (YS) spoke about the use of the ladder within the youth service:

> When we're training new youth workers, we make sure they understand that and they've got an understanding of what the differences are between sort of tokenistic approaches and manipulation to, you know, that range from young people being consulted to young people leading projects, which is where you would hope that most of our work would live … also we would reflect on that with the Youth Council and other young people involved in youth participation to try and encourage them to think about when they're being asked to get involved in something. Where do they sit in this? Where do they sit on Harts Ladder when they're doing different activities? How do they feel about it? So that it's using it to kind of inform, so people are using it as a reflection tool.

In Alex's description, the ladder played a role for the youth service employees and for the young people. In both instances, the youth workers and the young people were able to assess the way in which youth participation existed within Sunshine Youth Service. This transparency allows for the youth workers to understand the different rungs of Hart's ladder in relation to their own practice as a youth worker, as well as a way for the young people to understand and evaluate their own

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experience of participation within the youth service.

Within Hart's conceptualisation (1992), the lower rungs of the ladder are deemed non-participation, and consist of manipulation, tokenism, and decoration. Within these three levels, young people would not be consulted on their understanding or desire to participate, rather they would be expected to engage in an activity without deeper understanding for *why* they are doing so (Hart 1992). Through the quote from Alex above, it was demonstrated that the ladder is used in Sunshine Youth Service, but also that consultation with the young people about their comprehension was an important aspect of the participatory rungs. Josh (YDW) also spoke on the use of the ladder within Sunshine Youth Services:

> So on the lower rungs … it's a lower level of participation, which could be, you know, you manipulating them, or like it could be tokenistic … we don't want to be that because that's detrimental to our work … if you moved up the ladder to higher levels of genuine participation, where young people have initiated it, they're leading it, and almost to some degree, as a worker or professional, there's very little input from us. Sometimes that's just a support mechanism, or to facilitate to open a door or an opportunity, or to acknowledgement or point something out. So that's what we're kind of shooting for, this high level kind of participation from young people ideally, but it doesn't always come through like that. And just because it's the may be slightly lower sometimes, that doesn't mean that it's necessarily negative. If you ask a young person, "what would you like to do," and they say, "I don't know, '' and then you initiate an activity, and then they jump on it and then move with it. You may have initiated it, but then they're running with it, and then you're supporting them to move up the participation ladder, so to speak.

In this way, Josh (YDW) was not aiming for some kind of idyllic participatory model from the young people, nor was he attempting to portray that Sunshine Youth

Service only operated within an ideal vision of co-production between himself and the young people when planning activities (Pearson 2022). Josh detailed the ways in which he had to make adaptations based upon the comfort or ability to make decisions within the space. In this quote, Josh spoke about sometimes making the decision to move to a lower, non-participatory rung of the ladder. At a lower rung of participation, the choices for the young person become limited; however, for some young people, this may be within their own comfort level. Some young people may have been comfortable to join into activities that were new or unfamiliar, while others may not have been. Youth work had the purpose of helping young people develop their own voice and encourage autonomy and decision-making (NYA 2021e); therefore, emphasis was placed upon the ability for young people to expand these skills. It is not assumed that the young people already have them.

Hart's Ladder of Participation is not an all-encompassing tool. McMellon and Tisdall (2020) noted that the ladder centred around separating adults and children into two categories, and did not allow for any additional context in relation to organisational, political, or contextual factors. These critiques highlight the ways in which consideration of participation within the context of the ladder may have been limited (McMellon & Tisdall 2020). However, Hart (1992) wrote that the ladder is meant to help facilitate and create a participatory space, rather than set strict guidelines. The ladder is a way in which Sunshine Youth Service employees are able to reflect on their own practice with young people, and consider ways in which to better their own approach to participation with the young people. In this way, the concept of participation is a way in which the youth workers create the youth spaces within Sunshine.

One way in which to consider the participatory practice of youth work within Sunshine from a liminal perspective came from Nicholas (YDW), as he described the process of opening a new youth centre:

There was a lot of red tape we had to cross to be able to open up a youth provision in the shopping centre ... Though, luckily, it all got kind of signed off and we were given the keys and basically a big empty room, which had nothing in ... we didn't have furniture, we didn't have seats, we didn't have chairs. We sat on the floor, literally opened the shutters, people walked past, we'd be like, ... ''Yeah, we're youth workers, yeah, we're gonna be about and hopefully for the foreseeable future, you can have a say in this provision, you can be part of it, you know, grab a paint brush, start splashing some paint on the walls, start writing some stuff up, you know, as long as it's not too offensive, you know, ...'' And, after a while, we were getting like these groups of young people who heard about our provision and wanted to come in and sort of like, speak with us and come up with these ideas and sit down with us and start brainstorming ... Actually, the funny thing is some of the young people sort of commented, saying like, you know, one or two of them, like, ''Oh, I liked it before,'' we're like, ''Seriously? (laughs)'' you're like, ''Why?'' ''It's too nice now, it looks like an account building or something,' you know it's like, 'Oh okay,' so we had to tweak it a little bit and sort of, put some things on the wall, but yeah, it was lot of young people kind of informing us, and us making changes.

In this quote, Nicholas (YDW) described the ways in which young people were able to participate in the creation of the physical space. This transformation took a space built for a shopping centre and made it into a youth provision.

Nicholas's quote also can be related to literature pertaining to a place that feels like an almost home, where the youth workers aimed to adapt the space to be somewhere that the young people helped to shape. The idea of an almost home

is liminal in nature (Jaynes 2020; Renick, Abad, van Es, & Mendoza 2021), as the space of an almost home is determined by the feeling of being home without actually being there (Einstein 2020; Jackson 2015; Ortiz 2005). The nature of Nicholas's (YDW) youth centre as being a transformative, participatory space is both through the values and feelings embedded within Sunshine Youth Service, but also through the physical transformation that young people helped shape. Further, Pearson (2022) considered youth participation and co-production to be transformative. Participation is intended to function within a liminal space and guide transformation (Pearson 2022) for young people, but the practice of youth work is also transformative and adaptive to the participatory needs of the young people. For the development of a new physical youth centre space in the Sunshine area, co-production and participation were rooted within the physical remodelling of the centre.

Within Sunshine Youth Service, the value of participation is embedded within the ethos of those who were interviewed. Multiple participants gave ideas of how they try to consider the perspective of young people within their approach to youth work. The example above by Nicholas (YDW) described an initial step toward the creation of the youth space. The initial step was before the centre had even opened, it was embedded within the creation of the space in a literal, physical space.

7.3 Participation in practice at Sunshine Youth Service

While youth centres and youth work spaces are run by adults, and ultimately the adults are there to provide boundaries for the young people, the aspiration of

youth work is rooted within making the space into a place that young people want to be. This is both in terms of being a physical place that young people enjoy, as indicated by Alex (YS) and Nicholas (YDW), but also through the activities that are provided within that space. The idea of shaping youth work according to what young people want is reflective of thickening engagement within a youth space (Klocker 2007; Morrison et al. 2019). The process of thickening the voice of young people is a way in which the youth service can increase the power and agency of the young people using the service (Klocker 2007; Morrison et al. 2019).

However, simply through the suggestion of youth work as a practice using thickeners, there is an implication that there are limits to what can be realistically achieved by youth participation within youth work. The youth workers in Sunshine expressed that it is integral to their role to allow for youth participation; however, it is still a space being overlooked and ultimately run by the youth workers. As stated by Alex (YS)

> When we think about participation, some of the best times in youth work is when I don't have to do anything because, actually, the young people have taken over and they're running it and it's going really well and I'm just there and, almost, in the background.

Multiple participants mentioned Hart's Ladder of Participation as being a guide to their approach to participation within the youth service (see Alex and Josh). While the role of thickeners (Morrison et al. 2019) in relation to participation is not necessarily a part of the ladder, there are elements of the ladder that do thicken a young person's experience. Within Hart's Ladder of Participation, the highest rung of participation for young people is that which is initiated by young people, with shared decisions with adults (Hart 1992). In this way, youth workers and the youth

service work to provide thickeners for participation, which allow young people to hold more decision-making power within the space. The young person can then be able to act upon their ideas further than they would be able to on their own, which is achievable because they have adult support (Hart 2008; Morrison et al. 2019).

The higher rungs of Hart's Ladder of Participation were intended to reflect participation above the non-participation rungs, such as tokenism or manipulation of the young people within a youth centred service (Hart 1992). However, higher rungs on the ladder and what the young person *wants* to do may not always align (Hart 1992, 2008). In the interviews, Nicholas (YDW) described a time when he learned of an impact he made on a young person within the service. It began with him sitting in a pub with friends, and then was tapped on the shoulder by someone who had attended the youth centre years prior:

> I realized who it was, this lad who used to come to my youth centre, and he was like 22 now- this was like 5 years ago, and he was coming in and he was getting a bit bored and was … messing about, he didn't have respect for the staff … he was in that age where it was like a transition where he … wasn't old enough to go to pubs … going to the youth centre … he was only really going there to kind of wind people up and he, kind of tapped me on the shoulder and kind of shook my hand … straight away he was like, 'Thank you so much for that talk you gave me … you know when you dragged me into the office when I was messing about and like kicking that football about in the youth centre?' and I was like, 'Yeah', and he was like, 'Yeah, where you pulled me to one side and said, you told me some home truths and I was going through some issues, like, at home with my parents and stuff, and that really helped and, yeah, I was getting an apprenticeship and now I'm working for my dad's company and, yeah, not too bad money as well. And I

come down here Saturday nights with my friends,' and I was like, 'That's amazing to hear, I'm so pleased.'

First, it is important to note that Nicholas's example is dated, as several years had passed since seeing the young person and the interview for this thesis. Nicholas (YDW) took decision-making power from this young person through the enforcement of boundaries within the centre. Nicholas (YDW) intervened because he perceived the young person as being destructive to the space, impacting the comfort and safety that he perceived *other* young people may feel.

To consider Nicholas's (YDW) example within the context of Figure 3, which details the relationship between reflexivity and vulnerability, Nicholas's decision to speak to the young person he perceived as disruptive was a reflexive approach to the events that transpired in the youth centre space. The youth centre where Nicholas's example transpired is a voluntary space. If Nicholas had allowed the young person he perceived as disruptive to continue acting in that manner, there could be future consequences for the youth centre. The first could be that other young people may not feel comfortable within a space being dominated by disruptive behaviour, and therefore they may choose not to attend at certain times or at all. Further, there may be vulnerabilities or hidden disabilities that the youth workers have considered in relation to other young people present that may not be well known to the other attendees of the space.

The approach to move among the rungs of the ladder is adaptive to the real (systemic mechanisms) and actual (events interacting) levels of critical realism. Lack of enjoyment of the youth service by young people or a drop in attendance numbers could impact the ability of Sunshine Youth Service to continue to receive

funding from the local authority or outside funders. With this in mind, neoliberal values that have remained within English policy (Farrall et al. 2022) continue to impact the empirical (human observation) practice of youth work.

When it comes to actually implementing new activities, the rungs of Hart's Ladder were about the negotiation of how much of a project is inspired and decided by young people in relation to adults (Hart 1992; 2008). A common critique of co-production and participatory practice is that the desires of young people are heard, and then funnelled through the interpretations of what adults think they want (Pearson 2022; Percy-Smith 2010; 2014). However, both co-production and the ladder should consider if a project planned in co-production or within the higher rungs of the ladder is able to be funded. It is important to note that only the perception of participation was able to be considered, as all data is contextualised within the views and opinions of those working with or in partnership with Sunshine Youth Service. Alex's ideal view of participation, and Nicholas's example of limiting participation were reflections of their values, practice, and perception of youth work, not of the experience of young people. However, even within an ideal view of participation or co-production, funding continued to underpin Sunshine Youth Service and the ability of the youth workers to encourage and act upon the voice of young people. It matters not if young people suggest an activity or help to design a new programme if the adults within Sunshine Youth Service are not able to secure funding for it.

7.4 The creation of space and COVID-19

Through navigating the interplay of personal youth worker conceptualisations of a youth space, the role of participation, and the balance of funding, Sunshine Youth Service also had to cope with developing a new way to deliver services during the COVID-19 lockdowns. When the UK went into lockdown, Sunshine Youth Service was placed in a similar situation to many different sectors and organisations in society. The service was expected to immediately stop all in person activity and move into an online format (IfG 2021). Nicholas (YDW) reflected on this time:

> I've seen us be able to adapt very quickly, in times of crisis. And seeing a wider team pulled together with very few resources and sort of come up with something that works for everyone. So from a personal point of view, I've been very impressed with colleagues and management.

According to Wilson (2018) and Van Breda (2018), a crisis, such as COVID-19, placed the youth service in a vulnerable position. The actions of Sunshine's youth workers and youth service employees demonstrated resilience in the presence of a crisis. This resilience, for Nicholas (YDW), inspired feelings of teamwork about the adaptations that they were able to make to the service. However, as much as the participants gave each other credit for how they handled the unfolding crisis of COVID-19 at the beginning of the lockdowns, there was an interruption to the service. The way in which they encouraged and garnered participation from young people shifted. Anya (YDW) reflected on the shift from in person responsibilities:

> I think that we ended up completely changing how we work with young people, because a lot of our stuff is based on face to face work. And it's going to see them in their schools, see them in their local areas, or seeing them in our youth centres

and stuff like that, obviously, where everything closed down, we weren't able to do that. So we had to quickly come up with a way of still interacting with those young people, still providing that support. And we ended up doing … online sessions … sessions such as, based on music, D&D, gaming sessions, like Minecraft sessions, it was just trying to find new ways of interacting with the young people, but on an online platform.

In line with the policy for lockdowns at the start of COVID-19, the switch from a physical space to one that was all online consisted of sessions that were primarily a reflection of what the youth workers *perceived* to be of interest or useful to young people, rather than directly from young people themselves. The planning of activities from the perspective of the youth workers is not incompatible with Hart's Ladder, rather it simply falls within varying rungs. Much like Josh (YDW) detailed that he may give a young person an activity to do if they were to attend the youth centre not know what they want to do, Sunshine youth workers had to quickly choose new activities to put on offer for the young people at the start of the lockdowns. The activities at the start of the lockdowns could be within the rung assigned but informed (Hart 1992). This rung is the lowest of the participatory rungs, and stipulated that young people understand the project, they are aware of their role within the project and why, they have a meaningful role as opposed to decorative, and they are able to volunteer to participate after being made aware of the aforementioned details (Hart 1992).

Within the context of COVID-19, the participatory framework of the ladder or co-production was limited. Sunshine Youth Service had to act quickly to put out new activities without a delay in provision for the young people. In relation to co-production, Pearson (2022) defined flimsy forms of co-production as some kind of

input between a user and a professional. In this instance, the requirement of input is not necessarily being met. The youth workers relied on their interpretations of what they considered to be of interest to young people within the first iteration of activities in the lockdowns. From a participatory standpoint, these may operate within a rung of Hart's Ladder, but they are not necessarily co-production.

While the initial establishment of these online programs was not necessarily reflective of the active voice of young people, and therefore fell within a lower rung of participation, their opinions were considered when adapting which sessions were most useful, and would be kept through future lockdowns. Alex (YS) suggested that the first few weeks of lockdown were overloaded with options:

> We probably ran too many initially, we set up a whole host of different online opportunities that we advertised probably about the first week or two of lockdown. This is in March. And these ranged from, I would say a mixture of support type sessions … to more things that were just about fun and engagement … which, I'll be honest with you, were much more successful.

The value of youth work for young people to be empowered through voice and participation are an integral aspect of youth service (NYA 2021e; Ord & Davies 2018). In many instances, young people who attend a youth centre voluntarily were able to use their voice in the simple way of choosing whether or not to attend or return to the centre at all (Davis 2015; Mason 2015; Morrison et al. 2019). During the first few weeks of lockdown, the voice from young people was limited, and Sunshine Youth Service staff tried to guess what the young people wanted. Sunshine Youth Service was committed to offering *something* to young people as opposed to *nothing*; therefore, youth workers interpreted the voice of young people through their actions. The use of 'thickeners' has been noted within

work with young people to allow for influence through small decisions (Klocker 2007; Morrison et al. 2019). These 'thickeners' were necessary in instances where the voices of young people may be limited. In the first few weeks of lockdown, rather than young people *actively* giving opinions, the youth workers *interpreted* the choices of young people and which activities they chose to attend. In this way, the youth workers and youth service employees chose to 'thicken' the provision by altering the online sessions based upon the ways in which young people had decided to attend.

When considering the first few weeks of lockdown, it is important to consider why youth workers and the youth service shaped their sessions in the ways they did. Schön (2017) described reflection-in-action in a variety of ways, stating that it happens frequently, and change happens over longer periods of time. However, Schön (2017) also noted that change can occur in response to a large event. In this case, the first lockdown in response to COVID-19 forced the youth service into a complete reconsideration of how to deliver services without any in-person contact. The youth workers and youth service employees adapted through the reflexive consideration of how the service could operate without the use of in-person activities.

7.5 The challenges of shaping a new space for Sunshine Youth Service

While the initial period of lockdown allowed for young people to participate in new ways, it was not an easy time for youth workers or the youth service. Alex (YS) commented that the first few months of the lockdowns did not have guidance that he felt was specific for youth services, but the NYA did put out information during

this time that could be useful for youth service organisations. While the youth service team was able to act quickly and set up sessions for young people and adjust the sessions to what the young people wanted, this time was filled with uncertainty. Uncertainty about when youth work would return to in-person, and uncertainty about the young people who either did not like the online format, or were unable to access online sessions. In the initial phases of lockdown, reflection-in-action (Schön, 2017) was made in a hierarchical manner through the youth service. As indicated by Alex (YS):

> It forced me to be more authoritarian than I would normally like because that's not how I normally like to work, but I recognized that that's what some of the staff needed, was a more … authoritative approach … a more active role … whereas I would normally be more about trying to support staff to make their own decisions and to try to rise to the challenge. You can't do that when the buildings on fire.

This reflection to the first lockdown is an example of reflection-in-action, as Alex (YS) was forced to make decisions in the immediate, which, according to Schön (2017), can be triggered by large events. In this case, the pandemic instigated a quick change. Alex's (YS) decisions to act in an authoritarian manner shaped the space of youth services in the early days of the lockdowns. According to Sack (1980), Gans (2002), and Tuan (1979), the properties of a social space impact the feelings and experiences of those who experience it. The virtual space of online offerings for young people was shaped by the initial pandemic guidelines, while the manner in which they were chosen and delivered was shaped through an authoritarian response.

In relation to a critical realist framework the COVID-19 pandemic would be within the real (structural mechanisms) level. The shift to all online provision

would have been within the actual (events interacting) level, and Alex's actions to decide how to handle the lockdowns among staff was within the empirical (human observation level). To recall Chapter Six, Figure 3 detailed reflexivity and vulnerability of young people and the youth service to help demonstrate the way that Sunshine Youth Service operated for individual participants. These ideas operate in this instance as well. The onset of the pandemic and the start of lockdowns forced Alex (YS) to consider the vulnerability of the service and the vulnerability from a new perspective, and within an unfamiliar upset to society. Further, the service itself was within the transformation of liminality, an in-between (Murphy & McDowell 2019) of function and being shut within unfamiliar lockdown rules (Kim 2023). The liminality of the pandemic was through the embodiment of space, as the physical space that existed was replaced by the virtual (Bell 2021). For Alex, these factors influenced his reflexive decision to behave more authoritatively than he normally would. His decisions about his behaviour as part of the Sunshine Youth Service team worked to help shape the creation of space within the wider youth service through the COVID-19 lockdowns.

The themes of resilience and adaptability were embedded within the experiences of participants from Sunshine Youth Service. As defined by Wilson (2018) and Van Breda (2018), resilience is the outcome of vulnerability, when the alternative is risk. In this case, the vulnerability of the pandemic forced Sunshine Youth Service to either find ways to be resilient, and adapt to the current issues, or to risk not providing for young people. When the decade before the pandemic was marked by the closure and cuts of youth services across England (YMCA 2020), the risk for Sunshine Youth Service expanded from further funding cuts to closure. In a time that participants described as being without comprehensive or clear

guidance, the youth workers and youth service employees of Sunshine used a form of reflexive practice to turn the vulnerability and uncertainty of the pandemic into a new way of working.

Sunshine Youth Service displayed resilience and adaptability, both in terms of how the employees approached their job roles with young people, but also in the way that they used the voice and participation from young people to shape the sessions that could be provided. Marcel (SC), noted this period of initial lockdowns:

> I guess the way that [the youth service] were able to move to online contact with young people, I think, was commendable … and can only have been the consequence of them being quite resilient … in other ways. So, they had the resources to deploy, to providing online sessions. And … the impression I get is they did that extremely well. They did it quickly. And the sessions that they were able to provide were useful to [Sunshine's] young people. So I think that's been probably quite a feather in their cap and all credit to them for organising that as rapidly as they did.

Processes of resilience and adaptability were underlined with uncertainty and anxiety, as was noted in Horton (2016) in regards to repeated austerity cuts upon youth service. For Sunshine Youth Service, there were a few identifiable moments that help to explain the ways in which, as a team, the participants were able to adapt to the uncertainty of COVID-19 and the lockdowns. Their adaptability was demonstrated through the quick development of online activities and the modified options through both passive and active participation of young people. While this does pose as a 'feather in their cap,' as stated by Marcel (SC), it is partially explained through the continuous state of uncertainty that underpins the culture of youth services in the UK. The resilience of Sunshine Youth Service through the

lockdowns can be at least partially attributed to the adaptability they had to endure following the funding cuts over the decade leading up to COVID-19. The safety, liminality, and opportunity of the youth service was already shaped through uncertainty for a decade leading up to the pandemic, allowing for Sunshine Youth Service to reflexively adapt to the new lockdown restrictions.

7.6 The dynamic between youth workers and young people during COVID-19

The role of participation within youth work was central, as has been discussed in this and in previous chapters. In relation to Hart's (1992) Ladder of Participation, higher rungs of participation occur when youth workers manage and run the centre. There is negotiation of participatory power between young people and youth workers engrained within the service, as was demonstrated through Nicholas's (YDW) examples of shaping the new physical centre to the ideas of young people, as well as taking power away from young people he perceived to be disruptive. Within Hart's Ladder and co-production, there can be room to shift into different degrees of participation and production. However, the COVID-19 lockdowns presented new ways in which participatory power shifted between youth workers and young people. When using digital technology, young people had a larger online presence and community that was not able to be accessed by Sunshine Youth Service, as noted by Josh (YDW):

Our service, specifically, has been so far behind young people for so long. We'll never catch up. And we should never try to be at the same level, because then young people will just go to the next thing. But instead of being 10 steps behind, which I sometimes feel we are, we can be two or three. And that makes a

considerable difference in terms of what you offer to young people. And if they choose to access you, if you're old and stale, and you know, they recognise the bygone era of youth as just being a classical open up space, instead of recognising the opportunity of what it could be.

Josh indicated that part of why he thought Sunshine Youth Service did not move onto some kind of provision online sooner was due to bureaucratic red tape. To reiterate, Sunshine Youth Service was partially funded by the local authority at the time of data collection. The delay in Sunshine Youth Service to utilise an online space for youth work was not due to a lack of trying from the youth workers. The onset and subsequent lengthy lockdowns of COVID-19 forced the youth service to adapt to using online spaces to work with young people, which opened up a new way of working. The new online format for Sunshine Youth Services served in one way to balance the negotiation of participatory power. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the initial move online did not utilise direct co-production from young people; however, the introduction of an online space opened up new opportunities to begin exploring participation within an online space. Nicholas (YDW) commented on participation online:

Those who weren't accessing our- our youth centres … were … happy to sort of attend our virtual sessions, because they felt like it was more of a safe space behind the screen. COVID has forced us to kind of move to this more sort of virtual support, you know, teaching or what have you, and actually, 'cause that option wasn't there in the first place, maybe we were missing a section of society, specifically young people.

The introduction of using an online space was implemented quickly, and did not go through consultation with young people. The lack of consultation with young people does not mean that provision online did not meet the needs of young

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people. In Nicholas's opinion, some young people felt safety in being able to be behind a screen. New young people were able to access the youth service in the liminality of a virtual safe space. Through the lockdowns, Sunshine Youth Service was able to strengthen the use of an online space. Josh (YDW) spoke about the use of online gaming:

> We have a group of I think about eight to twelve young people that come on every week now, and they access our gaming sessions. And between lockdowns, we managed to migrate them, which is the first time we've done this from an online meeting- they'd never met each other before at all … And then I think between the first and second lockdown, we had like a brief reprieve of like four to five weeks, managed to get them into one of our youth clubs to run the gaming club in a physical space, started expanding it, because we never expected them to come. But they did. And I think that was more because they have the cohesiveness of a group, and they came together as a community. And we took that community and put them in a physical space. And then obviously we hit more lockdowns, but they've migrated back online and they're still together.

Though the youth service planned the initial activities online, the young people were able to demonstrate participation through their voluntary attendance in both online and in-person activities related to online gaming. The youth workers were able to offer an activity that was of interest to some young people, and provide them with a virtual space where they can all interact together. Flannery and colleagues (2021) noted that online groups for young people with health related vulnerabilities were a positive way to keep in contact with each other as well as professional support systems through the lockdowns. Howard (2017) considered the co-production of art in a digital space with youth workers, and the way this encouraged creativity but also unity and support among the young people. The

ability of services like Sunshine Youth Service to switch to an online format and continue to deliver programmes to young people was noted as a type of best practice in response to the lockdowns (Lavizzari et al. 2020). In this way, the digital gaming space observed by Josh through the lockdowns reflected the findings of unity, support, and positivity from Flannery and colleagues (2021) and Howard (2017).

The use of online gaming as a type of virtual space had benefits beyond the ability of Sunshine Youth Service to adapt to an online setting. In Josh's (YDW) quote, he was referring to the young people playing Minecraft. Minecraft is rooted within the active participation of the player. Minecraft is world-building, where the user is in control of where to build, what to build, and with which tools. Minecraft was previously considered as a valuable learning tool for young people, serving as a way in which young people may learn and practice basic concepts about science, technology, engineering and mathematics (STEM) (Lane & Yi 2017).

Through the documented benefits of gameplay, as well as the decision making components of Minecraft, the young people involved with these gaming sessions were able to have their development and participation with the service embedded in an online format. The online gaming description from Josh (YDW) could arguably be within the higher rungs of Hart's Ladder of Participation. This is because the young people were able to partake in an activity that the youth workers arranged, in an online space monitored by the youth workers, but they were able to take control and shape their involvement with the games, as well as the gameplay itself, through their own decisions (Hart 1992). Pearson's (2022) idea of co-production as a form of transformation is also applicable to the use of

Minecraft. In an abstract way, Minecraft is built around co-production from the player. While Josh (YDW) would have needed to be present within the session, the young people had the autonomy to pick to build what they wanted, in the biome they wanted. Not only is the online space liminal in that it exists in an in-between (Murphy & McDowell 2019), but it is also liminal as the entire world in Minecraft is able to be transformed into the vision of the player(s). The online gaming community that was built within Sunshine Youth Service would not have been possible in the same way without the forced usage of online sessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The voluntary participation of young people within the Minecraft session is particularly important, as young people interested in the online gaming do not necessarily *need* to play online with Sunshine Youth Service. There are other ways in which to play Minecraft with other people in a social manner. However, through the participation of young people within the online games provided by Sunshine Youth Service, the youth workers are able to provide a virtual space in which the young people are able to interact with one another, and are able to do so in way that attempts to recreate the safety of the physical space in a virtual world (see Chapter 6). The elements of Hart's Ladder as well as co-production are embedded within both the features of the gameplay, as discussed above, as well as within the choice of Sunshine Youth Service to provide Minecraft as an activity. Co-production is intended to help build lasting relationships (Cowan et al. 2021). Williams and colleagues (2021) noted that co-production during a pandemic required a focus on building relationships as well as appropriate tools to support an online format. If these prerequisites by Williams and colleagues (2021) were able to be met, playing video games in a group of peers can boost mood and peer relationships (Adachi &

Willoughby 2017). Further, the skills acquired through gaming, such as cognitive and perceptual skills, transfer into reality as well (Blumberg et al. 2019).

Research by Renick and colleagues (2021) identified youth workers as needing to have a deep knowledge of the culture the young people and their needs within the area. Similarly to Dungeons and Dragons discussed in Chapter 6, Josh also demonstrated an awareness of the interests of the young people in relation to Minecraft. Renick and colleagues (2021) argued the liminality of the space of youth services expanded to both the young people who use the youth services as well as the workers within it. These authors use the term 'critical bifocality', which was originally defined by Weis and Fine (2012) as a theoretical commitment to the links between structural organisations and the practice that impacts the ways in which young people and their families conceptualise their own circumstances. Renick and colleagues (2021) expand this definition of the term 'critical bifocality' to describe the ways in which youth workers must observe, operate, and participate within youth services, but also within the societal structures around them.

Youth service employees must have an understanding the local contexts and structures that underpin youth services, as well as the interaction between them (Renick et al. 2021). From this, youth service employees themselves experience the liminality of youth work, through the transformation, rethinking, and reinventing of their work and the ways in which it operated (Renick et al. 2021). Just as Josh manufactured a liminal space in which the young people were able to interact and participate in world-building in a non-physical setting, he himself was working within the same liminal space. For Josh, liminality was in the way he acted as an adult who had an aim to listen and implement the desires of young people, while also within the constraints of wider societal structures. This was not

dissimilar to the way in which the youth service reflected upon their experience of austerity, and the way austerity was embedded with historically rooted patterns. However, the use of an online space added an additional layer to the in-between nature of youth work through online Minecraft sessions. Josh was implementing practices that were necessary to the liminal nature of the COVID-19 fluctuating lockdowns. Youth work had to continue and exist within the in-between of no physical contact, but as close to normal as possible. In this way, conceptualisation and creation of a youth space was within a state of liminality, as it was in a transition to being online, or an in-between state of youth work (Jaynes 2020; Land et al. 2014; Murphy & McDowell 2019; Reid 2017; Wood 2012).

7.7 Online support sessions in the lockdowns

In addition to the use of an online space to build a gaming community, the young people helped to shape support sessions within the youth service. Theresa (YS/SC) detailed a way in which young people influenced one of the online sessions:

> We started to deliver all these online projects, and then they were sharing that, you know, one person would stick around and just want to talk to just that one youth worker, they wouldn't want to talk to everyone, so part of it was we developed a programme- so I developed a programme called 'Talk to a Youth Worker', which was- it was bookable appointments that these young people could make, to speak 2 to 1 to a young- to the young person, so it could be maybe there's been problems in their family, maybe they're not doing well in school, maybe they're having anxiety, you know, it could be anything, or they could be part of regular programming, and they just missed having a sense of socialisation.

At times when Sunshine Youth Service was all online, young people were not able to have what Jim (SC) would call 'small conversations'. These 'small conversations' are exchanges that easily happen in person when people are able to casually approach and speak to one another. In a youth centre, this could be a young person going up to a youth worker to ask to have a chat, or a youth worker approaching a young person to see how everything is going. In an online space, this was more challenging to do. As Theresa (YSMF/SC) stated, this could be a young person saying they would like to chat with the youth workers while on the Teams or Zoom call that has other young people present. The 'Talk to a Youth Worker' sessions were developed as a way in which to compensate for a lack of 'small conversations' in an online youth work setting.

Through the development of the Talk to a Youth Worker sessions, the young people are able to still have a 'small conversation' without notifying all the other young people present within an online group event. The use of Talk to a Youth Worker sessions helped to give power back to the young people in an online space, as they are able to ask for 'small conversations' discreetly. Further, simply the creation of the session is a demonstration of the importance of youth power and voice to the youth service, as the entire concept of Talk to a Youth Worker was developed out of the input of the young people.

Lewis (YDW/PW) described a time when the Talk to a Youth Worker session impacted a specific young person:

> When we started talking to her, she wouldn't turn a camera on. So I'd just be talking to her initials, you know, on the screen, and try to build relationship, which is not easy. Having those per- I say personal relationships, obviously, with appropriate boundaries in place, but those personal relationships with young

people is quite a lot, and quite a huge part of what we do, building trust and things like that. But meeting this young person online, it took her four weeks before she felt confident enough to turn on camera … And then continuing to talk to her, she was going through quite a dark period, and now we seem to be through that dark period, and out the other side … And about four weeks ago, she came along to our service wide team meeting … and spoke about her experience of using the youth service, so for someone that wouldn't turn their camera on to talk to me, to somebody that would then sit there in front of 27 other youth workers and tell them how, how much we've helped her.

In this instance, the Talk to a Youth Worker sessions provided a safe space to this young person through accessing support online, replicating the values of youth work listed earlier in this chapter. The addition of Talk to a Youth Worker is also an example of a thickener (Klocker 2007; Morrison et al 2017), where the young people were able to influence the centre. It also could arguably be an element on Hart's Ladder of Participation (Hart 1992), as the young people were able to express their desires to the youth service employees, and it was through the adult that these desires were able to come to fruition within the centre.

Talk to a Youth Worker, Dungeons and Dragons, and Minecraft are all examples of Sunshine Youth Service providing online services wherein the young person and youth workers appear to have worked well together. However, this is not always the case. Through the lockdowns, there were times when the dynamic in an online space was not beneficial to the young person or the youth worker. Michelle (YDW) gave the example:

There's been a young person whose said they feel like taking their own life over COVID, and obviously had to report that and get them the support that they need; however, trying to follow that up, and be there for that person is difficult when we

can't see them. Whereas normally we'd you know- we'd been following it up, we'd be meeting them, they'd be coming to youth club, there'd be that ongoing support, that's been difficult.

Michelle's example detailed the barriers that accompanied the youth space being online. Nicholas (YDW) elaborated on this point:

The nature of how people feel about engaging online, and how free they feel they can speak, and things like that. And who might be kind of in the background, they might not wanna talk about certain things with a parent, you know, in the house and stuff like that, so it has it's restrictions; whereas, young people come into a youth centre and it's like, there's no one there other than a youth worker, and they're gonna not pass judgement.

The closure of the physical space may have impacted the ability of some young people to participate. This infringed upon the values of safety documented within youth work (Jackson 2015; Nolas 2014; NYA 2021f), as some young people may have felt more safe being online, but there were also those who may have felt they were unable to participate in youth work safely from their home. Cowan and colleagues (2021) highlighted a similar point. These authors detailed that Minecraft was a tool in which to consider co-production through the lockdowns; however, it is completely dependent upon the young person being able to access the game session from their home. While this was one concern, Nicholas also detailed that the issue could be that the young person *could* participate, but chose not to.

Although there is literature to suggest digital communication was vital during the lockdown periods of the pandemic (Zinn 2021), Sunshine Youth Service must consider whether or not people want to use online activities as a form of communication. For instance, the drop in attendance implies a few possibilities.

Young people in the Sunshine area may have wanted to attend in-person, or may not have been able to access online. This will be further discussed in the next section.

7.8 Youth work emergent from the lockdowns

Youth workers in Sunshine detailed a vision of a new frontier toward the use of online work. Julie (YDW) described the use of an online platform as the, ''...new age of youth work,'' and Josh (YDW) commented that young people were able to identify a physical youth centre as a, ''...bygone era.'' However, as stated previously, Alex (YS) noted that, through the lockdowns, there was a drop in young people contacted by the youth service.

Going into the second round of interviews through August and September 2021, all lockdown restrictions in the UK had been lifted in the previous July (Brown & Kirk-Wade 2021). In Autumn 2021, Sunshine Youth Service was operating in a way that resembled pre-COVID-19 lockdowns. Youth workers and youth service employees discussed the reality of online work when in-person youth work was able to continue without restrictions. There had been a larger push from young people to go back to in-person. To elaborate on Julie's (YDW) words described earlier:

> I actually thought it might be, you know, the new age of youth work, we'd have online stuff going, but it seems that from what I see in conversations with young people, they definitely want the face to face. They prefer the in-person stuff.

Participants who worked within Sunshine Youth Service spoke about the benefit of an online space, but also what was desired by the young people as social distancing restrictions lessened, and eventually ended. As has been a prominent

theme in this chapter, the voice and participation of young people is central to youth work; therefore, the voice of young people was the deciding factor in whether online or in-person sessions would run after the lockdowns ended.

Anya (YDW) elaborated about what she believed both online and in-person provision would be able to give to young people as activities returned to mostly in-person:

> I would think of a youth centre, or you would think of a youth club. But now, I think a lot of us- a youth space to us is now just somewhere where that young person feel safe enough to talk, and safe enough to be involved with youth services, which now is either their bedroom, or their Nan's house or the park down the road. I mean, so we've fully taken advantage of everything we can to create that ... Would I say a youth space it just the centre? No, but do I think it's the best type of space? Yeah, probably.

Anya's (YDW) opinion of the physical space of a youth centre was mirrored within the actions of the young people, and their expressed desire was to return to in-person activities in Autumn 2021.

Even though the use of online space perhaps was used less in September 2021 than the youth workers and youth service employees thought it might be when they were first interviewed, it had still evolved the way in which youth work was conceptualised. Josh (YDW) detailed this evolution as:

> We shouldn't be working session to session, that we should have more oversight of our delivery, and alternative ways to deliver and if something stops. But I think that's a triangle of like detached work, centre base work, and online work, and moving about in that triangle. And if any one of them is cut off for whatever reason, you have the other two, and if any two are cut off for any reason, we have that other one.

Josh (YDW) felt that prior to the lockdowns, there was no room for adaptability within the youth service and how the programs were run. The pandemic forced the youth service to innovate. Instead of having a duality of offers between centre based and detached youth work, there was now a realistic third option. This third option, online youth work, allowed for preparedness in the event that in-person work were ever to be shut down again, or to accommodate young people who had activities they would like to run online. The development of these sessions for potential future use is important for two reasons. First, the young people helped to inform the sessions, such as through the development of Talk to a Youth Worker. The input from young people to help craft the sessions aligns with the values of youth work (Davies 2021; NYA 2021e). The participatory voice of young people with Sunshine Youth Service also helped to address literature that found young people felt youth centred activities during the lockdowns were focused on adult interpretations of the wants of young people (Day et al. 2020; UK Youth 2021). Secondly, youth workers reported feelings of uncertainty, frustration, and new challenges with the lockdowns (Batsleer et al. 2020a; 2020b; Batsleer et al. 2021). Through the adaptation to use online youth work, the current practice of youth work can add a virtual youth centre space as needed. The potential for future transitions online, in times of crisis or by choice, will be slightly easier given the practices adapted through the lockdowns. The triangle inspired by Josh (YDW) is detailed below in Figure 4.
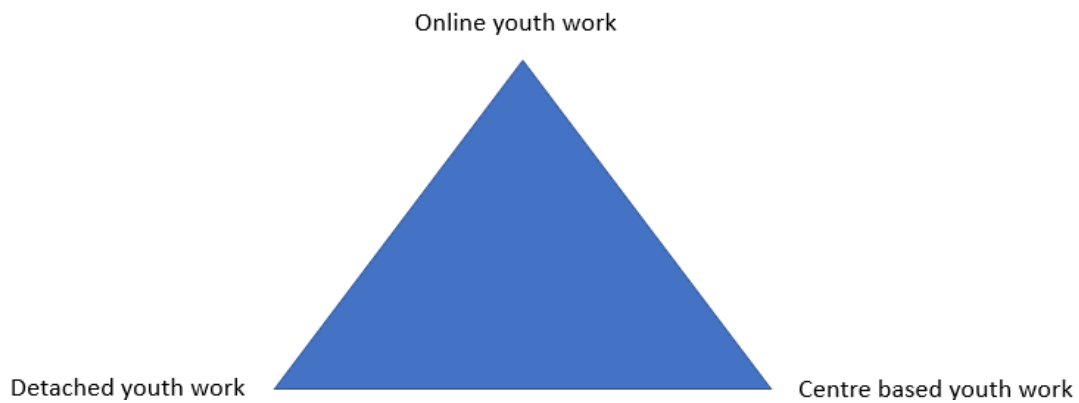
Figure 4: A triangle of youth work: Lessons from the COVID-19 lockdowns

Figure 4 helps to visually represent the three types of youth work that are now realistically able to be carried out by youth workers, even in a time of national lockdown. If both detached and centre based were removed, online can be used as well.

7.9 Conclusion

The concept and creation of space within Sunshine Youth Service is rooted within values that the youth workers hold within their practice as a youth worker. Safety and liminality tie into the value of opportunity. These values help to provide a foundation in which young people were able to attend a space that was centred about participation and voice of the young people who attended. The participation was contextualised within Hart's Ladder of Participation as well as the idea of 'thickening' engagement and co-production. The implementation of lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic challenged the creation of space within Sunshine Youth Services; however, a history of uncertainty and adaptability helped to allow the participants to continue to create space in a virtual setting that, in their opinions, remained reflective of the values of their youth work as a practice. Even though much of youth work returned to in-person once the lockdown restrictions were

lifted, it is undeniable that the creation of a youth centre space was shifted for the future of Sunshine Youth Service.

Chapter 8

Conclusion

This thesis has considered the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns impacted one youth service in England. This was both in terms of how youth workers and wider youth service roles (i.e. management; funding; Information, Advice, and Guidance team) conceptualised, implemented, and adapted the service in response to changing restrictions, as well as the perception of those outside of the service and their experience of working in partnership with the youth service. This was explored through the changing economic, political, and social contexts before the pandemic itself, and the impact of these upon Sunshine Youth Services during COVID-19. The participants also speculated about the future of youth services. The ways that youth service professionals conceptualised and created space within youth services for young people during COVID-19, and the ways the youth service professionals managed and conceptualised vulnerability during COVID-19 were also explored.

These questions were valuable to consider within the context of policy regarding funding. Youth services in England were disproportionately impacted by previous austerity measures and neoliberal policy (Farrall et al. 2022; Mason 2015; YMCA 2020). From the time period of the 'golden age' (Ord & Davies 2018, p. 37) of youth services in the 1960s through to the financial crash of 2007/2008, youth services in England went from a focus upon voluntary open access youth work with funding from local authorities, to decreased funding with a focus upon targeted practice (Bradford & Cullen 2014; Cooper 2018; Hughes et al. 2014). Austerity measures implemented in response to the financial crash impacted the youth

service, with the closure of many centres and limited funding for local authorities (UNISON 2019; Youdell & McGimpsey 2015).

Just prior to the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020, the government had promised funds for youth services across England. These funds were ultimately delayed for years, and the total promised amount decreased over time (YMCA 2022). After the COVID-19 lockdowns, there were rumours of the reintroduction of austere measures (UNISON 2022), which instigated reason to be concerned for the survival of youth services in England. Concern for the survival of youth services in England was amplified by a represented misunderstanding of the importance of youth services by governmental and structural powers. For example, during her time as the Minister for Civil Society, Baroness Barran verbally expressed the importance of open access youth services, but followed up these statements by vocalising that there is a need for investment in residential and targeted provisions (Hayes 2021b). The Baroness posed that it is not possible to fund everything, and funding toward the youth service should be focussed on innovation (Hayes 2021b). These comments were made during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdowns, a time marked by a shift into online only provision.

As demonstrated through the empirical chapters, Sunshine Youth Service managed to shift online very quickly, determined to not skip provision for the young people in the area. In this way, Sunshine Youth Service, and other youth services across England that were also able to adapt, were able to do so through an innovative approach to a whole new practice of youth work. Given these comments, combined with the slash in funds given to youth services (DCMS 2022a), and the impact of previous austere measures upon youth services, this thesis has

deduced that youth services in England have been in an increasingly precarious situation, without stable financial support from policy makers.

Overall, this thesis has analysed the ways in which youth services operated during the lockdowns. This has been illustrated through detailing those who worked within the service, the ways in which they worked with the wider community, and the ways in which youth workers conceptualised and acted upon guidelines for youth work in England. Future research and policy can make use of this case study toward fair and consistent treatment of youth services. After all, based upon the research findings, it is not useful for policy makers to state or acknowledge that youth work is important, this must be reflected in tangible actions and policy. Funding promised to youth services needs to be distributed in the promised amount and acknowledge the expertise of youth services to use the funding as needed.

The remainder of this chapter will focus upon summarising key points from the preceding chapters, with emphasis upon the contributions of this work to wider academic literature. The chapter will then move on to policy and practice implications, and the way in which the data led to these conclusions. The data used for this thesis was a lens to the way society moved forward, as it provided a detailed insight into the provision and functionality of one youth service in the south of England in the form of a case study through a global crisis.

8.1 Contributions

The empirical chapters provided novel contributions to academic knowledge in relation to youth work as a practice, and the wider idea of youth

services. As discussed in Chapter 3, this is in relation to sociology, but also other disciplines like geography or children and youth studies. Through the empirical chapters, various themes emerged that influenced this thesis the most. Firstly, the pattern of austere policies since the 1980s (Farrall et al. 2022; Mason 2015) had a continued impact through the pandemic lockdowns. Austerity emerged as a key theme in all of the empirical chapters. Specifically, austerity was contextualised as a contributing factor to the precarity of youth services across decades of policy through a critical realist framework. Fletcher (2017) previously detailed a way in which to visualise critical realism in the form of an iceberg, and Soriano-Rivera (2017) contextualised austerity within critical realism in relation to single mums. This thesis built upon these past works by considering critical realism in relation to youth services within the context of austerity. The understanding and application of critical realism was expanded in this thesis, as it was applied to youth services and patterns of austere policy in England.

The participants, who were employed within Sunshine Youth Service or within Sunshine Council, articulated their knowledge of the actual (events interacting) level as well as alluded to the real (systemic mechanisms) level through their empirical, personal standpoints (Fletcher 2017; Soriano-Rivera 2017). Through considering austerity and youth services through a critical realist framework, the perspectives of the participants were able to be pieced apart and understood in relation to each other, but also considered across the different levels. Participants who had worked in Sunshine Youth Service for longer within both organisational and youth facing roles, recalled times of more guaranteed financial support for the youth service as well as the anticipated dwindling of support. The nature of this environment helped to inform their pragmatic,

resilient, and innovative approach to supporting young people during COVID-19. The approach of the youth service employees in relation to years of funding cuts and the pandemic lockdowns built upon past research that considered anticipation of the impacts of austerity (Anderson 2010; Massumi 2007), as well as the feelings that austerity evoked within individuals (Hitchen 2021; Jupp 2022). Some participants expressed an element of hope for the future of funding for youth services, as they had worked hard to be considered useful during the lockdowns. As mentioned in Chapter 6, policy during the COVID-19 lockdowns identified youth workers as being key-workers. This change made Anya feel as if the youth service was taken seriously by the government but also within other youth focussed organisations like schools. The usefulness could then, in their opinion, possibly correlate to more recognition from the government in the form of secure funding. However, these kinds of sentiments were often followed by expressed anticipation for further cuts.

This research built upon the conceptualisation of critical realism by Fletcher (2017) as an iceberg. While Fletcher (2017) originated the iceberg design as a way in which to visualise the levels of critical realism, this thesis expanded this idea to include an analysis of the applicability for youth services. The contribution of Fletcher (2017) was also expanded further to consider the levels of critical realism in relation to austerity and youth work, but also the feeling of austerity (Hitchen 2021; Jupp 2022). In this way, there were entrenched feelings of austerity that continued to influence youth work policy through its history on the real (systemic mechanisms) level, but also entrenched feelings that were felt through the lockdowns by participants within the empirical (human observation) level.

The theme of austerity in a critical realist framework also largely addressed the research question: In what ways did changing economic, political, and social contexts impact youth services during COVID-19? The levels (real, actual, empirical) of critical realism were used to situate economic, political, and social contexts within England since the late 1800s to modern day (Bradford & Cullen 2014; Davies 2009; Farrall et al. 2022; Hughes et al. 2014; Mason 2015). These were contextualised to demonstrate the impact of historic policies rooted in austerity upon the youth service during the pandemic lockdowns. Specifically, it was argued that economic, political, and social contexts have evolved over time to lead to the precarious funding (Farrall et al. 2022; Hughes et al. 2014; Mason 2015) that was experienced by Sunshine Youth Service, and youth services across England more broadly, just prior to the lockdowns. Social stigma around state spending, young people, and the working class were argued to have prevailed through the last century (Hall et al. 2000; Mills 2013; Tyler 2013), impacting political platforms and policy, which then directly related to the economic stability of services like Sunshine Youth Service (Ord & Davies 2018).

The theme of austerity, and the feelings related to austere policies that were deeply embedded within the participants related to the second most prominent themes of vulnerability and reflexivity. The exploration of vulnerability and reflexivity built upon the application of austerity and youth services in relation to a critical realist framework through a deeper consideration of the empirical (human observation) level. Through the exploration of vulnerability and reflexivity, this thesis addressed the research question: In what ways do youth service professionals manage and conceptualise vulnerability during COVID-19? While the vulnerability of young people who used Sunshine Youth Service was expected to be

a theme within this thesis, as it was a central research question, there were elements that were unexpected. First was the relationship of vulnerability to a reflexive practice for the youth service. Second, was the vulnerability of the youth service itself.

The interconnected nature of reflexivity and vulnerability within Sunshine Youth Service during the lockdowns allowed for insight into a new understanding of how youth workers shifted their practice in relation to widespread vulnerabilities during the crisis of the pandemic. This relationship between vulnerability and reflexivity was observed through the perceptions of Sunshine Youth Service staff upon their relationship with the young people they work with, and the precarity of the service. While these observations were rooted in the COVID-19 lockdowns, the participants also spoke about the reflexive practice of youth work in relation to the needs of young people in the decades they had worked in Sunshine Youth Service prior to the lockdowns. This included the the service in relation to austerity, and the application for additional funding which impacted Sunshine particularly after the policy that drastically cut funding through the 2010s (UNISON 2019). In this way, the employees within Sunshine Youth Service already had a reflexive practice embedded within their approach to youth work and were able to apply this to the lockdowns of COVID-19.

The analysis of the participants' practice of youth work before and through the lockdowns will be valuable to wider academic literature as it details the approach of youth workers through a time of crisis that impacted the entire world. Specifically, this thesis builds upon Archer's (2003; 2007; 2012) considerations of reflexivity in a youth focussed community setting (Iacono et al. 2021; Seal 2021). This thesis also builds upon the work of Batsleer and colleagues

(2020a; 2020b) in relation to the experience of being a youth worker through COVID-19. Sunshine Youth Service had to adapt to immediate changes to in-person work and find a way to continue to deliver their service to young people. Through the use of Figure 3, I devised a way in which to consider the practice of youth work through a global crisis. Sunshine Youth Service was able to adapt through reflecting and reflexively acting upon their responses to the service existing within a crisis for a decade prior to the lockdowns. In this way, Sunshine Youth Service was able to continue to function and provide support because of the way that the employees had to continually adapt to the crisis of cutbacks over the years leading up to the pandemic lockdowns. Future research may be able to use Figure 3 to consider how individual youth service organisations moved on from the lockdowns, or ask youth service employees to reflect upon their practice of youth work during the lockdowns.

Vulnerability was considered through the definition that everyone had a possibility of being vulnerable through the pandemic lockdowns (Albertson Fineman 2021; Brown et al. 2017; Tisdall 2017); however, there was also influence from the findings of Forbes-Mewett and Nguyen-Trung (2019). These authors noted that definitions tended to consider whether or not a person could cope with stressors that made them vulnerable. Therefore, vulnerability was contextualised within a reflexive consideration of the individual young people within Sunshine Youth Service, and if they needed additional support through the pandemic lockdowns.

The reflexive approach to vulnerabilities that may have needed support was not the only type of vulnerability that impacted the approach of the youth workers. The youth workers and the wider staff of Sunshine Youth Service also had

to reflexively consider the vulnerability of the service. In this way, the approach that considered everyone to have potential to be vulnerable through the pandemic extended to the potential of Sunshine Youth Service as a whole to be vulnerable. The approach to vulnerability within Chapter 6 expanded upon the perspective of both Albertson Fineman (2021) as well as Forbes-Mewett and Nguyen-Trung (2019), where there was acknowledgement that the pandemic had made everyone vulnerable, and Sunshine Youth Service focussed on how they could help the young people and sustain the service. This was not an unfamiliar practice, as Sunshine Youth Service employees had to cope with the vulnerability of the service by continually reflexively adapting to funding cutbacks in the decade prior to the pandemic.

The feelings surrounding austerity, such as anxiety, anticipation, uncertainty (Hitchen 2021) expanded into the pandemic (Kim & Asbury 2020; Pickersgill 2020). The consideration of the relationship between vulnerability and reflexivity expanded the narrative around austerity within a critical realist framework. These themes together provided context to the social and political nature of working in youth services during the COVID-19 lockdowns, as well as a deeper understanding of the practice of youth work in relation to both young people and the stability of the service.

The final research question focussed upon the conceptualisation and creation of space through the pandemic lockdowns. The themes that emerged from participants conceptualised the youth workspace as a place of safety, liminality, and opportunity. These ideas were not dissimilar to previous literature. Previous literature wrote about youth centres and youth spaces as being places of safety (Jackson 2015; Nolas 2014; NYA 2021f), as well as a liminal space (Renick et al.

2021). The safety of the space was demonstrated through the ways in which the participants commonly described their role as youth workers. The liminality of the space was noted through the use of an online space, but also through the knowledge of the youth service employees in relation to local contexts, structures, and how they interact. The liminal space in this way had previously been referred to as critical bifocality (Renick et al. 2021; Weis & Fine 2012). Within this thesis, it was rooted within the ways that youth workers transformed their practice based upon the larger cultural and structural contexts that surrounded youth work.

Jackson (2015) presented the idea of an 'almost home' (p.34), which implied an in-between of home and the community. In-between was previously conceptualised as a way in which to consider liminal spaces (Murphy & McDowell 2019; Wood 2012). Participants within this thesis described their vision of a youth space as a home from home or 'almost home' as well. While these values helped to demonstrate the approach of the participants to their role within the youth service, the creation and management of the youth spaces was also rooted within participation. Participation has been a value within youth work since the first iterations in the 1800s (Davies 2009; Muirhead 2020). In this thesis, these values were part of a practice that was reflexively rooted within consideration for the needs and vulnerabilities of the young people as well as the service. Given the theme of vulnerability within youth services, participation from young people was limited to the needs that the young people have, as well as the resources of the service.

During the lockdowns, participation from young people as well as the vulnerability, both in terms of the service and the young people, were impacted by policies around in-person work. The restrictions for in-person work hindered the

ability for youth workers to be able to reflect upon the needs of the young people, as well as their reflexive decision-making of how to provide services. However, the policies also opened new opportunities for the ways in which Sunshine Youth Service was able to provide support and provision for young people. The Figure presented in Chapter 7 detailed a description from Josh (YDW) of Sunshine Youth Service being able to operate within a triangle of options. These options were detached youth work, centre-based youth work, and the new addition of online youth work.

The triangle of options is a contribution to previous literature within primarily sociology, but also youth studies in relation to youth services and youth work (such as Horton 2016; Jackson 2015; Nolas 2014; Ord & Davies 2018), as Sunshine Youth Service did not operate online sessions prior to the pandemic. The pandemic lockdowns shifted the way that Sunshine Youth Service was able to meet with young people. The ability to meet online became an option that Sunshine Youth Service kept for young people past the lockdowns, through to the date of submission for this thesis. Since all COVID-19 restrictions were lifted, Sunshine Youth Service continued to provide a small number of online sessions weekly. Future research could consider the shift to allow online programming within youth services where it did not exist prior to the pandemic, and consider how the online space helps or hinders the practice of youth work.

The themes across the empirical chapters worked to capture the climate that surrounded youth work and youth services in England, and the ways in which Sunshine Youth Service had been impacted prior to and during the pandemic. Through the empirical chapters, this thesis has woven a narrative that reflects upon the history of youth work in England, and also considered this in relation to a

modern-day crisis in the form of the pandemic lockdowns. Together, these chapters detailed the practice of youth work within Sunshine from a wide scope of policy impacts, through to the specific values that individual youth workers embed within their practice. This thesis contributes to wider literature around the lasting impact of austere measure (Anderson 2010; Bevan 2023; DCMS 2022a; Farrall et al. 2022; Hitchen 2020; Horton 2016; YMCA 2020; 2022), and the lockdowns upon youth services (Batsleer et al. 2021; Loades 2020; McGeachie 2020; Warf 2020).

8.2 Implications for policy

Through the empirical chapters, there were numerous points that detailed the way policy impacted youth services in England. For example, to briefly reiterate from Chapter 5, this change in policy is in addition to the landmark shift of youth workers to a key worker status during January 2021 (Simpson 2021). Prior to this change, youth work was in a situation of navigating COVID-19 guidelines in addition to providing service to young people in time marked by universal crisis. Youth workers like Anya felt that the switch to key worker status demonstrated a recognition of the importance of youth work, and felt that the change in status led to other organisations, like vulnerability panels, taking youth work more seriously.

While policy has advanced through the last century, considering youth work within a critical realist framework, as well as a reflexive approach to vulnerability as a practice of youth work lends credibility to reevaluating post-COVID-19 policies in relation to youth work and youth services. Within the critical realist framework, it was argued that stigmatisation within the real (systemic mechanisms) level overarch political decision making, and policy considerations that exist within the actual (events interacting) level. The critical realist

framework presented through this thesis is in relation to the specific trends and themes noted through policy, political rhetoric, and public perception in regards to general youth services and young people since the late 1800s. These patterns of policy were considered in the levels of critical realism within the themes of austere values and the relationship with the youth service. The provision of more funding for youth services as defined in this thesis would directly challenge these themes and levels of critical realism that have been woven through English policy and the empirical findings of this thesis. Comprehensive funding for youth services would necessitate new theoretical considerations toward the relationship of austerity and youth work in the 2020s. Specifically, a shift in funding would challenge the systemic underpinnings of the real level, the policy on the actual level, and the lived experience within the empirical level.

The present narrative of stigma toward topics like young people and the welfare state would indicate that this kind of shift in policy is not likely. As noted in Chapters 2 and 3, stigma of young people in England has a lengthy history, with policy across the decades aimed to correct problem behaviours (Ord & Davies 2018; Tyler 2013). In this way, young people have been viewed by adults in an overwhelmingly negative manner, from moral panics in the 1950s (Bradford & Cullen 2014) through to targeted approaches and measuring outcomes in the early 2000s (Cooper 2018; DES 2002). The use of a critical realist framework allows consideration of the persistence of these views in modern times. It is important to reiterate that young people are not *always* perceived in a stigmatising manner. For example, to recall back to Chapter 2, the Youth Review highlighted the use of young people's voice and participation in co-creating youth-focussed programmes (DDCMS 2022). However, as noted by Tyler (2013) as well as Morrison and

colleagues (2019), the use of terms like vulnerability can potentially be a means to continue to stigmatise and therefore limit the voice and co-creation of young people.

The emphasis of vulnerability is critical to this thesis, as it emerged as a prominent theme through participants' narratives and it was a common term through COVID-19. In this way, vulnerability can be a classification but also a stigma, which leads back to the sigmatisation of young people as a systemic mechanism within the real level. Perhaps the critical realist framework presented in this thesis could provide a clearer insight for policy-makers in relation to deeply rooted public perception toward young people, while also allowing insight toward how to move forward in a way that breaks from the stigma. As presented in this thesis, one way to break this stigma is rooted within the reflexive approach to vulnerability in Figure 3 from Chapter 6. This visual representation makes the use of vulnerability clear, as a potential need for support to stressors, but it also acknowledges that vulnerability is not a constant state, but instead the reflexive practice of youth work is a way in which to help provide appropriate support.

Through the use of Figure 3, this thesis contributes to an understanding of youth work, vulnerability within the practice, and an approach to de-stigmatise vulnerability in relation to young people. The de-stigmatisation is through the consideration that vulnerability is adaptive, ever-changing, and different for everyone, it is not a definitive state. If Figure 3 were used as a way to consider the practice of youth work, but also the use of vulnerability within youth work, the empirical (human observation) level and the actual (events interacting) level perceptions of youth service could be influenced, as it is a clear way to understand

youth work. The shift of perceptions on these levels could then influence the real (systemic mechanisms) level in which perpetuating societal stereotypes exist.

Breaking the systemic cycle embedded within a critical realist lens to youth services is important to ensure the survival of youth services in England, and practical policies could be a first step to this process. One potential approach could be to expand to include youth services, as defined in this thesis, as statutory. The definition included within post-COVID-19 policy discussed in Chapter 2 (DCMS 2023) is not comprehensive enough to enforce programmes like Sunshine Youth Service to be included within the statutory requirement. As noted in the findings of this thesis through participants like Nicholas and Anya, as well as in past literature by McCardle (2014), there are times when youth workers feel their roles are misunderstood. In addition to having a common understanding of youth work within a definition, this thesis also provides a basis to consider the practicality of the roles of youth workers and the wider youth service within Figure 3.

Through the use of the Figure 3 in Chapter 6, there is an analysis of the role of youth workers in relation to understanding the role of youth work within the lives of young people, but also as a practice. In this way, Figure 3 helps to provide a clearer understanding of youth work, and therefore could be used as further clarification within future definitions as well. Future policy could define youth services with more specific clarity, while also acknowledging the reflexive practice that youth workers must constantly engage in toward the vulnerability of the young people they see. While movements like shifting youth workers to have key worker status help to demonstrate more understanding in relation to the role of youth workers, Figure 3 more clearly details the ways in which youth workers navigate helping young people cope with challenging situations on a consistent,

reflexive basis. The reflexive practice was notably demonstrated within the creation of a digital space to provide provisions for young people. While the specific implications of the development of a triangle of youth work spaces was discussed in the previous section, it is noteworthy to address here as well. Sunshine Youth Service, as well as youth services across England, used a reflexive approach to consider a practical way to continue to provide support and address vulnerabilities for young people. This was prior to youth workers being given key worker status, and demonstrated the adaptability of youth workers to a crisis, but also the ways in which the young people that attended Sunshine continued to be at the forefront of decision-making by the youth service staff.

However, the addition of services like Sunshine Youth Service as statutory would place more pressure upon an already stretched local authority management. The central government must work to further break the systemic belittlement of youth services by allocating more funding to local authorities in order to ease the additional duties of adding youth services as a statutory service. The addition of further funding is an idea that was directly addressed within data collection, as participants within the youth service like Alex and Theresa, as well as those outside the youth service like Marcel, spoke at length about the benefits of direct funding from the local authority. While the proposition of youth services to be given more funding is not unique to this thesis, the support behind it from the participants in this thesis is novel. This thesis argued that youth services like Sunshine are adept at managing crisis. While the cuts to funding were a crisis to the survival of youth services across England, Sunshine Youth Service was a case study into the crisis of cuts but also the crisis of a global pandemic that completely shifted the way of working across the country. Through the crisis, a focal point of

data collection was the difficulty of funding and the barriers that funding posed throughout the COVID-19 pandemic. In this way, the support of this thesis to suggest additional funding is directly tied to the narratives of the participants and the findings of this thesis.

Through the use of a critical realist framework and the development of Figure 3, the findings of this thesis reasonably lead to the conclusion that statutory policy for youth services as defined in this thesis as well as more funding for local authorities would allow Sunshine Youth Service to rely less on external funding sources, and therefore have less pressure to accommodate the expectations of external funders upon the youth service. Instead of providing funding aimed toward the values of an external funder (such as those from the YEF and YIF presented in Chapter 2), the youth workers and youth service would be able to return to a more open access format, where the young people would be able to have more control over what activities take place within the youth centres, both in the physical and virtual space. This practice for Sunshine Youth Service is realistic, as participants like Alex and Nicholas reflected upon the years prior to austerity with fondness, where they were able to really embed their own work within the co-creation of young people. For Sunshine Youth Service, the addition of more funding is not a hypothetical pipe dream, it would be returning the service to function in a way that many of the participants can easily recall.

Policy for youth services that would make services like Sunshine statutory, and ring fenced for funding would open the door for other policy implications. The use of an online space demonstrated the way that less barriers to youth work could transform the way that youth services in England operate. In the case of Sunshine Youth Service, the addition of an online space in response to the

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lockdowns allowed for the service to bypass red tape that had previously prevented them from having activities online. The online space allowed young people who had not previously used a youth centre to experience the programmes in a virtual format. The case study of Sunshine Youth Services was unique because it occurred during a pandemic, but also because Sunshine Youth Services had the ability to move online. Reynolds & Charraighe (2022) noted that many youth services across England did not have the infrastructure to move their programmes online. The possibility for Sunshine to continue to adapt reflexively to the vulnerability of their young people with innovative approaches would be more achievable within a statutory funded environment. While the local authority did have red tape for Sunshine Youth Services, these changes would eliminate the burden of additional organisational barriers upon the service.

As detailed in the findings of this thesis, a triangle approach to youth work allows for an entirely new virtual space to be explored. The use and benefits of the triangle to Sunshine Youth Service reasonably leads to a policy recommendation to allow youth services to include digital infrastructure. The inclusion of provision for digital infrastructure would allow for a pre-made alternative in a time of crisis, expand the youth provision, and also serve to propel youth services forward with the interests of young people. At the same time, the youth service would be able to help expand the knowledge of young people in relation to digital literacy. While many young people may be adept at using technology, Adjin-Tettey (2020) noted that it is important to remember not all young people are digitally literate. This could be for a multitude of reasons, such as a lack of resources or a lack of interest. However, the addition of an online space for all youth services across England would open the opportunity for young

people who only wished to attend online to be included, and for young people without digital literacy to be engaged. The inclusion of policy for youth services to be online and in-person would also allow new opportunities for youth services to engage in a co-production, participatory practice of youth work (Di Paola 2021).

One point that participants in Sunshine Youth Service had for online provisions after COVID-19 restrictions ended was that they had to move most things back to in person because it was what most young people wanted. Being rooted within co-production and participation from young people, it was important to reflect these desires in the programmes post-lockdown. However, it is important to note that just because many young people who were already involved within the service wanted to return to in-person does not mean that this is representative of young people in the community. It is vital to recall that there were young people who initially felt comfortable online prior to attending in person. In order for services like Sunshine Youth Service to truly co-produce and allow for young people to have a participatory role in the service, there must be room for online provision. Otherwise, a whole subsection of young people may be at risk of being excluded. Much like the above recommendations, the reality of online provision will be best achieved through services like Sunshine being made statutory and being included in ring fenced funding.

8.4 Final remarks

This thesis argued that critical realism was a useful way in which to consider the relationship between youth service and austerity. As the idea of more funding for youth services does not seem likely (Hoddinott et al. 2022), future research or literature could consider a critical realist framework as presented in

this thesis in relation to the ways in which government policy regarding youth services continues to move forward. This could be especially potent, considering the National Audit Office (2022a) critiqued that the government did not understand the relationship between risk factors and adverse circumstances with vulnerable young people. It could be useful to continue to examine government policy in relation to austerity, and austerity-like policies, while also considering the systemic reasoning behind *why* youth services continued to be impacted, when authors predict that other services like defence will not be cut, but possibly have an increase (Hoddinott et al. 2022). The work of Soriano-Rivera (2017) as well as the history of youth work presented through this thesis created a basis to consider the real (systemic mechanisms) level of critical realism to be rooted within stereotypes of young people and those from working class backgrounds, as well as negative attitudes toward government spending. However, it was stated earlier in this thesis that this does not necessarily mean these are the only real (systemic mechanisms) level elements that could impact youth services. Future authors could explore other potential systemic mechanisms that were outside the scope of this thesis.

These topics will continue to be important to examine, as the ways in which the youth service were directed and funded had a relationship with the ways in which programmes like youth work were able to deliver to the young people in their area. In relation to vulnerability with young people, the policy from the DCMS (2023) could increase the strain upon youth services like Sunshine Youth Service. This could be through the expectations from the policy for youth services to demonstrate efforts toward understanding the needs of the young people in the community and gathering external funds. Future research could take the

vulnerability diagram presented in Chapter 7 and apply it to research considering the vulnerability of young people from the perspective of youth workers within the context of a vulnerable service. Research from this perspective could be used in conjunction with a critical realist framework to build upon the contributions of this thesis. It is possible that the vulnerability diagram presented in this thesis could help bridge some of the understanding between open access and targeted youth work. This is because the diagram works in a way that assumes all young people in a service could be vulnerable, or could become vulnerable in the future depending on their ability to cope with a stressor, while also incorporating the reflexive nature of youth workers to approach vulnerability within their practice.

The introduction of a third, online space through the lockdowns introduced a new way in which youth services could operate. The continued impacts of austerity and a focus on prevention in youth work policy had previously created an environment where Sunshine Youth Service was accustomed to adapting to precarious situations. For Sunshine Youth Service, the move to an online space was achievable through a reflexive approach to the vulnerability of the service presented by the pandemic. The use of an online space allowed Sunshine Youth Service to explore new ways in which to deliver services, including support for the vulnerabilities presented with young people during the lockdowns. Future research could continue to consider the use of an online space within youth services post-COVID lockdowns. Future research could also consider the conceptualisation of youth service as safe, liminal, and as one of opportunity across the three different delivery methods (youth centre, detached, online). To build upon this thesis, future research could specifically consider the role of the space within youth services in the context of the vulnerability diagram, and the ways in which youth

workers navigate vulnerability in a reflexive manner in relation to the spaces of delivery in a post-lockdown manner. It is difficult to view the data in this thesis outside of the view of COVID-19, as the pandemic and lockdowns shaped the research questions and data collection. However, the contributions of this thesis could be applied in scenarios that are not rooted within the lockdowns as a way in which to consider the role of youth services through a crisis (austerity combined with the pandemic), and the way that these crises may or may not continue to shape the service after the lockdowns have ended.

Within the wider community, programmes like those within Sunshine Youth Service worked to give young people a space in which they have influence and autonomy while also building life skills. Participants like Josh (YDW) were innovative and worked toward bringing their programmes up to date with current technology and trends with young people. Josh's approach was balanced by the approach of someone like Michelle (YDW) who aimed to help young people with additional needs feel safe and at-home when they were participating within the programmes in Sunshine. On the other side, Alex (YS) worked to ensure that the programmes that were planned had enough funding to function, and that Sunshine Youth Service did not take on too many tasks. The data provided for this thesis supports that the youth workers and youth service employees within the Sunshine area were adaptive and innovative to challenging situations, while balancing the needs of the young people with the resources of the service in growing precarity.

The data from this thesis would support that the state of policy prior to and during COVID-19 fostered anxiety and stress among those working within the service, and limitations to their practice of youth work. These feelings were in addition to the responsibility of the youth workers to act in a manner aligned with

preventative and targeted techniques. Through the time-frame of data collection, these elements were within a context of national crisis due to the pandemic. Without fundamental changes to policy and funding for youth services, they are at risk to cease to exist. Within the Sunshine Local Authority, the loss of Sunshine Youth Service would be drastic. The youth workers within the Sunshine area aimed to help young people learn and develop in a manner that was inspired by the young people themselves. They embed their practice within a place of safety and trust in light of numerous constraints.

The contribution of this thesis to contextualise youth work within a critical realist framework directly advances a social understanding of *why* youth services in England have had such fiscal and policy based turmoil, specifically with emphasis upon the last decade. Neoliberal values that have seeped through policy since the Thatcher era have constrained services like Sunshine Youth Service to the point where they are struggling to provide a fraction of the service they were able to in the 2000s. In this way, the stigma of youth services as a place just to play games, as recalled by Nicholas, is perpetuated. This highlights the value of Figure 3 as a way to demonstrate the practice and functionality of youth workers. Ideally, the future of youth services will be able to evaluate the real (systemic mechanisms) of youth work policy as embedded within a reflexive approach to vulnerability. However, until distinct and strong changes are made within the central government's approach to youth services, the resilience to crisis and fragility of youth services in England will continue to be a focal point for youth work based literature.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Interview Questions for Participants

- Tell me a bit about yourself

    - Follow up: job title

    - Follow up: brief description of the job roles

    - Follow up: when did you start working at your organization

    - Follow up: was this a different role?

    - Follow up: how does your organization work with youth services or youth centres

- What made you want to get involved with your current role?

    - Follow up: Tell me about your experiences working with youth services

    - Tell me about your experiences working with at risk young people

- Can you tell me a positive experience about working with young people?

    - Follow up: A negative one?

    - Follow up: One that is in-between, not necessarily positive or negative?

- Do you have an experience working with vulnerable young people?

    - Follow up: tell me about your experience with this work

- What is your vision for success in relation to your work? Please elaborate with a story or example if that is helpful

    - Follow up: Can you detail a time in which your vision of success was not achieved?

- How is [Sunshine] as a setting for youth work?

- Tell me about the physical space of a youth centre

    - Follow up: what do you think this provides young people

- Does your service use risk assessments with young people?

    - Follow up: if yes, in what way?

    - Follow up: tell me about your opinion regarding the use of this risk assessment, what are the benefits or drawbacks?

    - Follow up: if no, why not?

- Does your service receive funding?

    - Follow up: does this funding impact the delivery of service

    - Follow up: is there an impact with different economic and political contexts on your service? If yes, in what way?

    - Follow up: from your opinion, how has funding been impacted by COVID?

- Tell me about COVID and your work

    - Follow up: a story about a positive or negative experience

    - Follow up: How did your work change during lockdown?

    - Follow up: did this impact young people? How?

    - Follow up: Tell me about the function of your service as of today

Appendix 2: Information and Consent Form

Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form

What is the purpose of the research?

This research is concerned with the impact of changing economic and political contexts upon youth services working with vulnerable young people during COVID.

What are the research methods?

This consent and information form is intended to address the observation of virtual youth service activities, such as staff meetings and online gaming with young people. These observations will be recorded in field notes by the researcher. All names of adults will be replaced with a pseudonym and names of any young people will not be recorded at all. These field notes will also be kept within an encrypted file on a device that is only accessed by the researcher. After the completion of the degree, the data will be kept in an encrypted file for 7 years, when it will be deleted.

Are there any risks involved?

As a participant, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and have a right to anonymity and confidentiality. Your name and organisational details will be kept confidential. No one will read the field notes other than the PhD researcher. Some of what is done or said within the observations may be used in the PhD thesis, academic articles or other publicly available material, but your name and your organization will not be associated with anything you say or do. Different organisations may be identified generally (ex. Police force, public sector, etc.); however; pseudonyms will be used for the names of participants as well as any organisational departments. Should you choose to withdraw from the study, all of the field notes from your actions or things you have said will be deleted, and nothing you have contributed will be included within analysis or written work. You can withdraw your data from the study completely up until the time of data analysis. This is to ensure that data analysis is able to commence. If you choose to withdraw, please email the PhD researcher at the email listed below. You are not obligated to give a reason for the withdrawal.

University of Kent privacy notice:
https://research.kent.ac.uk/researchservices/wp-content/uploads/sites/51/2018/05/GDPR-Privacy-Notice-Research.pdf

Has this study been ethically approved?

This study has received ethical approval.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the PhD researcher, contact details below.

The name and contact details of the PhD researcher and supervisory team within the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Research at the University of Kent can be found below:

Elise Wynkoop, ew409@kent.ac.uk

Dr Eleanor Jupp, e.f.jupp@kent.ac.uk

Dr Tara Young, t.l.young@kent.ac.uk

Dr Erin Sanders-McDonagh, e.sanders-mcdonagh@kent.ac.uk

Consent Form

Please read the statements below and indicate YES or NO for each statement to detail your consent.

- I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and confirm that I am happy to take part. YES/NO

- I have been given contact details for the researcher in the information sheet. YES/NO

- I understand that taking part is entirely voluntary, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without having to explain my reasons for doing so. YES/NO

- I understand that the observations will be confidential and that all field notes will not be read by anyone but the researcher. YES/NO

- I understand that portions of the observation may be used in publications, but that efforts to anonymize these will be made so that other people cannot identify me as the participant. YES/NO

- I understand that the nature of my organisational affiliation may be associated with any quotation or summary used (e.g. youth work, local council) but other identifying details will be removed. YES/NO

- I understand that the data I provide will be used for analysis and subsequent publications that will be written into an internal report, and may be publicly available, and I am happy for this to happen. YES/NO

- I understand that illegal activities disclosed in the observations that have not already been reported will be disclosed to the appropriate authorities, such as imminent harm to children or acts of terrorism. YES/NO

Please provide the information below if you are still happy to take part in this research:

Name: _____

Organisation: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Youth work in a pandemic:

Austerity, space, vulnerability and risk wi̇   services

Research Information

What is the purpose of the research?
This research is concerned with the impact of changing economic and political contexts upon youth services working with vulnerable young people. This project will also examine the ways that the pandemic has impacted youth services and youth work.

What will I be asked to do?
The PhD researcher will be observing youth service activities, such as the staff meetings and some activities with young people. As a participant, you do not need to do anything in particular, just attend and work as you normally would.

How will the data be recorded?
The observation of youth service activities, such as staff meetings and online gaming with young people, will be recorded in field notes by the researcher. All names of adults and young people will be replaced with a pseudonym. These field notes will also be kept within an encrypted file on a device that is only accessed by the researcher. After the completion of the degree, the data will be kept in an encrypted file for 7 years, when it will be deleted.

Statement of anonymity and confidentiality
As a participant, you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and have a right to anonymity and confidentiality. Your name and organisational details will be kept confidential. No one will read the field notes other than the PhD researcher. Some of what is done or said within the observations may be used in the PhD thesis, academic articles or other publicly available material, but your name and your organization will not be associated with anything you say or do. Different organisations may be identified generally (ex. Police force, public sector, etc.); however; pseudonyms will be used for the names of participants as well as any organisational departments. Should you choose to withdraw from the study, any observations involving you will not be included within analysis or written work. You can withdraw your data from the study completely up until the time of data analysis. This is to ensure that data analysis is able to commence. If you choose to withdraw, please email the PhD researcher at the email listed below. You are not obligated to give a reason for the withdrawal.

University of Kent privacy notice:
https://media.www.kent.ac.uk/se/5138/Research-privacy-notice-May-2019.pdf

Has this study been ethically approved?

This study has received ethical approval.

If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the PhD researcher, contact details below.

The name and contact details of the PhD researcher and supervisory team within the School of Sociology, Social Policy and Social Research at the University of Kent can be found below:

Elise Wynkoop, ew409@kent.ac.uk

Dr Eleanor Jupp, e.f.jupp@kent.ac.uk

Consent Form

Please read the statements below and fill in the information that follows to indicate your consent to participate.

- I have understood the details of the research as explained to me by the researcher, and confirm that I am happy to take part.
- I have been given contact details for the researcher in the information sheet.
- I understand that taking part is entirely voluntary, and I have the right to withdraw from the project at any time without having to explain my reasons for doing so.
- I understand that the observations will be confidential and that all field notes will not be read by anyone but the researcher.
- I understand that portions of the observation may be used in publications, but that efforts to anonymize these will be made so that other people cannot identify me as the participant.
- I understand that the nature of my organisational affiliation may be associated with any quotation or summary used (e.g. youth work, local council) but other identifying details will be removed.

- I understand that the data I provide will be used for analysis and subsequent publications that will be written into an internal report, and may be publicly available, and I am happy for this to happen.
- I understand that illegal activities disclosed in the observations that have not already been reported will be disclosed to the appropriate authorities, such as imminent harm to children or acts of terrorism.

By filling in your information below, you consent to the above statements and agree to participate.

Name: _____

Job title: _____

Do you agree to participate?

Yes

No

Appendix 4: Table 2, list of participants in observations

Pseudonym	Role
Ruby	YDW
Anthony	YDW
Maggie	OTYS
Paula	YDW
Jennifer	OTYS
Jane	YDW
Elias	YDW
Veronica	YSM
Marcus	OTYS
Kimberly	OTYS

Appendix 5: Coding Framework

Related to research questions:

COVID (D)

Personal

Work

Key-workers

From home

Guidelines

Funding (D)

Structure

Applying for

Application of

Political impact (D)

Structure (D)

Social impact (D)

Structure (D)

Social perceptions (D)

Of youth work

Of youth workers

Of young people

Space (D)

    Safe

    Liminal

    Other

    Online

    Physical

    Expectations of

    Funding impacts on space

Risk (D) (IV)

    Conceptualised

    Management

Vulnerability (D) (IV)

    Conceptualised

    Management

Outside Research Questions:

Resilience (D) (IV)

    COVID

    Funding cuts

    Job role

Adaptability (IV) (D)

    NYA

    COVID

Increased power (D)

    Young people

    Youth workers

Lessened power (D)

    Young people

    Youth workers

Participation (IV)

    By young people

    Limits

Frustration (EM) (IV)

Stress (EM) (IV)

Joy (EM) (IV)