

Peer Learning Circle Guide for Youth Workers

A practical handbook for youth workers, team leaders and managers

NYA
National Youth Agency

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Peer Learning Circle Guide for Youth Workers

A practical handbook for youth workers, team leaders, and managers

This guide is designed to help you set up and run peer learning circles in youth work settings. Whether you are a youth support worker, project lead, team leader, or manager, peer learning circles can help create a supportive space where staff and volunteers can reflect on practice, share ideas, and learn from each other.
The guide is written in a practical and accessible way. You do not need to be an expert facilitator. Start small, keep the structure simple, and adapt it to suit your group.

What is a peer learning circle?

A peer learning circle is a structured group conversation where youth workers come together to:

- reflect on practice
- explore challenges
- share ideas and strategies
- support each other professionally
- improve the quality of youth work

Peer learning circles are not about being “the expert.” They are about creating a safe and respectful space where everyone can learn together.
Many youth workers carry a lot emotionally. Peer learning circles offer time to pause, think, and reconnect with good practice.

What peer learning circles can help with

Peer learning circles can support:

- confidence in practice
- problem-solving and decision making
- emotional wellbeing and resilience
- communication and teamwork
- reflective practice skills
- professional boundaries
- leadership development
- inclusive and ethical practice

Participants often leave with:

- fresh ideas to try
- reassurance and support
- stronger professional judgement
- a clearer sense of next steps

Who this guide is for

This guide is designed for people working in youth work settings who want to strengthen reflective practice, support staff wellbeing, and improve learning across teams.

It may be especially useful if you:

- support or manage staff and volunteers
- lead projects, programmes, or sessions
- facilitate team reflection or staff development
- want to create calmer, more supportive professional spaces
- are building confidence in leading group discussion and reflective practice

The guide is suitable for:

- youth support workers
- project workers
- volunteers & volunteer coordinators
- team leaders and managers
- organisations wanting to strengthen reflective practice
- partnership working

It works especially well for:

- mixed teams of paid staff and volunteers
- cross-organisational partnerships
- new or developing teams
- staff working in emotionally demanding settings

What this is / is not

This IS:

- a reflective learning space
- a confidential peer support environment
- a space for professional growth and shared practice insight
- participant-led learning grounded in real work

This is NOT:

- supervision or performance management
- counselling or therapy
- a safeguarding decision-making forum
- a space for resolving organisational disputes
- a place for blame and criticism

How to create a peer learning circle

Peer learning circles are for youth workers (paid or volunteer) who:

- want space to reflect on their practice
- are working with complex emotional, relational, or safeguarding contexts
- value shared learning and professional growth
- want to feel supported and less isolated in their work

Group size and format

- recommended size: 5–8 participants (max 10 before splitting)
- duration: 1 – 2 hours (depending on group size and format)
- format: in-person, online, or blended
- frequency: weekly, monthly, or termly depending on need

Setting the Theme

Choose a theme that feels relevant, practical, and connected to real youth work experiences. Themes should encourage reflection and discussion rather than "right or wrong" answers.

Themes can come from:

- current challenges in practice
- team discussions or supervision themes
- issues affecting young people
- staff wellbeing and resilience
- local or national youth work priorities
- participant suggestions

Keep the theme broad enough for different people to connect with it in their own way.

Example themes

- belonging
- boundaries
- trust
- conflict
- mental health and wellbeing
- youth voice and participation
- motivation and engagement

Facilitator role

The facilitator's role is to guide the process, not lead as "the expert." The facilitator helps create a calm, organised, and respectful space.

The facilitator should:

- welcome participants
- explain the purpose of the session
- revisit group agreements
- encourage balanced participation
- keep time and structure
- manage group dynamics respectfully
- notice emotional wellbeing and safety
- help keep discussion reflective rather than judgmental
- hold boundaries and manages flow

Facilitators may need to:

- slow down or pause discussion when needed
- shift from sharing to containment if emotions rise
- redirect advice-giving back into reflection
- support quieter voices without pressure
- hold boundaries around time and depth

Facilitator tools

Use prompts, case examples, media, or questions such as:

- what happened in this situation?
- what feels most important about it?
- what assumptions might we be making?
- what would you try differently next time?
- what support or perspective would be useful?
- what is this teaching you about your practice?

A simple internal structure that works well:

- what's going well?
- what am I stuck on?
- what will I try next?

Using resources to support discussion either as a theme setting or ending



You might use:

- a short poem or quote
- a YouTube clip or short film
- music or song lyrics
- a case study or scenario
- an image or photograph
- a news story or current issue
- youth work research or articles
- a podcast clip
- a reflective question or prompt card

Resources do not need to be complicated. Sometimes a simple question, image, or short piece of music can create meaningful discussion. For example:

“What assumptions am I making from the image above”

Tips

- keep resources short (5–10 minutes maximum where possible)
- avoid overwhelming participants with too much information
- give people time to reflect before discussion
- be mindful of emotionally sensitive or triggering content
- check that resources are accessible and inclusive

Setting up a peer learning circle checklist

Use this facilitator checklist to help plan and organise your peer learning circle.
You do not need everything to be perfect; start simple and adapt as the group develops.

1. Define the Purpose

Tick	Planning Checklist	Notes / Actions
☐	We have agreed on the purpose of the circle.	Purpose:
☐	The purpose has been clearly explained to participants.	
☐	We know whether the focus is reflective practice, shared learning, problem-solving, wellbeing, or practice development.	

2. Identify Participants

Tick	Planning Checklist	Notes / Actions
☐	We have invited the right mix of participants.	Who is involved?
☐	The group size feels manageable (ideally 6–8 people).	
☐	We have considered trust, experience levels, and diversity of perspectives.	

3. Agree the Format

Tick	Planning Checklist	Notes / Actions
☐	We have agreed whether the circle will be face-to-face, online, or blended.	Format:
☐	The format feels accessible and practical for participants.	
☐	We have considered any access needs	

4. Set Timing and Frequency

Tick	Planning Checklist	Notes / Actions
☐	The meeting schedule feels realistic and manageable.	Frequency:
☐	Sessions are planned where possible.	
☐	The session length has been agreed (usually 60–90 mins)	

5. Choose Facilitation Approach

Tick	Planning Checklist	Notes / Actions
☐	A facilitator has been agreed for the first session.	Facilitator:
☐	We know whether facilitation will stay fixed or rotate.	
☐	The facilitator understands their role is to guide discussion, not “teach.”	

6. Decide Themes or Topics

Tick	Planning Checklist	Notes / Actions
☐	We have agreed how themes will be chosen.	Example themes:
☐	Participants have had input into possible themes.	
☐	Themes feel relevant to youth work practice.	

7. Create Ground Rules

Tick	Planning Checklist	Notes / Actions
☐	Ground rules have been agreed together.	
☐	Confidentiality has been discussed clearly.	
☐	Participants know they can pass or step out if needed.	
☐	Expectations around respectful listening and participation are clear.	

8. Plan the Session Structure

Tick	Planning Checklist	Notes / Actions
☐	A simple session structure has been planned.	Resources:
☐	Time has been allocated for check-in, discussion, and reflection.	
☐	The space has been prepared to feel calm and welcoming.	
☐	Chairs are arranged in a circle where possible.	
☐	Any materials/resources are ready.	
☐	We have discussed refreshments	

9. Capture Learning

Tick	Planning Checklist	Notes / Actions
☐	We have agreed how learning will be captured.	
☐	Notes will stay light-touch and confidential.	
☐	Participants can identify actions, ideas, or next steps.	

10. Review and Adapt

Tick	Planning Checklist	Notes / Actions
☐	Time has been built in for feedback and reflection.	
☐	We will regularly review what is working well.	
☐	We are open to adapting the format, timing, or themes.	
☐	We have signposting information	

Setting up a peer learning circle in 10 easy steps (1/2)

Step	Aim	Action	Tip
1. Define the Purpose	Be clear about why the circle exists. A strong purpose helps shape participation, structure, and outcomes.	Possible purposes: • Reflective practice • Shared learning • Problem-solving • Emotional support • Skills development • Practice improvement in youth work	A space for youth workers to reflect on challenges, share approaches, and strengthen practice together.
2. Identify the Right Participants	Choose participants intentionally.	Consider: • Similar roles or mixed experience levels • Shared interest or common challenges • Diversity of perspectives • Trust and willingness to contribute	Ideal group size: • 6–12 people is usually manageable and engaging. Why this matters: • Too large = limited participation • Too small = reduced diversity and momentum
3. Agree the Format	Decide how people will meet.	Options: • In-person • Online • Hybrid	Choose based on: • Accessibility • Travel time • Digital confidence • Budget • Existing work patterns
4. Set Realistic Frequency and Timing	Consistency matters more than intensity.	Recommended: • Monthly, every 6 weeks or quarterly • 60–90 minutes • Protected time during work hours if possible • Avoid overloading already busy schedules • Avoid last-minute planning	Schedule 3–6 months ahead.
5. Choose a Facilitation Model	Decide how sessions will be guided.	Options and best practice: • Fixed facilitator • Rotating facilitator • Co-facilitation	Facilitator responsibilities: • Keep discussion focused • Ensure inclusion • Manage time • Support psychological safety

Step	Aim	Action	Tip
6. Decide the Theme Approach	Clarify how topics will be chosen.	Options: • Pre-set themes • Participant-led themes • A blend of both • A balanced model works well: quarterly focus themes • Space for urgent issues from participants	Examples: • Trauma-informed practice • Managing conflict • Youth participation • Safeguarding dilemmas • Burnout prevention
7. Create Shared Ground Rules	Build trust early.	Agree together on: • Confidentiality • Respectful listening • Equal participation • Non-judgment • Timekeeping • Permission to challenge constructively	This creates psychological safety and stronger discussion quality.
8. Design a Simple Session Structure	Predictable structure helps participation.	Example 90-minute agenda: • Ground rules • Check-in • Topic/input/case study • Group discussion • Key takeaways/actions • Check-out/reflection • Aftercare	If meeting in person, set up the space beforehand so it feels calm, welcoming, and inclusive. Arrange chairs in a circle, with no “front” of the room, to reinforce equality and shared participation. You may wish to place a simple focus piece in the centre of the circle.
9. Capture Learning and Actions	Peer learning circles become more valuable when insights are retained.	Ways to document: • Shared notes • Reflection logs • Resource bank • Action points • Learning themes	Keep records light-touch and confidential where needed.
10. Review and Adapt Regularly	Evaluate what is working.	Every few months ask: • Is attendance consistent? • Are discussions useful? • Does everyone contribute? • What should change? • Adapt: timing, facilitation, themes, group size and format	Strong peer learning circles evolve with participants’ needs.

Core principles

Peer learning circles are guided by the following values:

- **Equality**: every voice holds equal value
- **Curiosity over judgement**: we listen to understand, not to fix
- **Confidentiality**: no identifying details about young people are shared
- **Choice and consent**: participants may pass, pause, or step out
- **Care for wellbeing**: attention is given to emotional and physical impact
- **Professional responsibility**: participants take ownership of what they bring
- **Respect**: Different experiences and viewpoints are welcome
- **Safeguarding**: Will be followed up through organisational procedures

Participants:

1. bring real experiences from practice
2. reflect on what happened
3. identify learning or new understanding
4. decide what they may try differently

This helps turn everyday experience into professional learning.

Useful facilitator phrases to use during the learning circle (Printout)

1. Opening the Circle

Set tone: safety, choice, and clarity

- Thank you for being here; your arrival today is welcome.
- You always have a choice here - you can share, pass, or come back later.
- We're not here to fix each other, but to listen and learn.

2. Setting the Theme / Purpose

Keep it grounded and accessible

- Today we're exploring [theme]—take a moment to reflect on what that means to you.
- There's no right or wrong way to respond; feel free to keep your reflections general or at a level that feels comfortable.
- Share only what feels comfortable; nothing more is needed.

3. Giving Instructions (Clarity + Safety)

Reduce anxiety by being explicit

- Each person will have around 2 minutes to share, and I'll gently let you know when time is coming to an end.
- We'll move around the circle, so everyone has an opportunity to take part.
- We'll listen without interrupting or responding directly, and you can pass at any time.

4. Creating Safety (Ground Rules)

Trauma-informed = choice, predictability, non-judgment

- Speak from your own experience, using "I" statements.
- Listen to understand, not to respond.
- Notice your own capacity—you can step in or out as needed.

5. Transitioning Between People

Keep the flow

- Thank you for sharing, I appreciate that—let's gently move to the next person.
- Take a breath... next person, when you're ready.
- We'll continue around the circle, so everyone has space.

6. Moving Someone On (Time Boundaries)

Kind, firm, and non-shaming

- I'm going to gently pause you there so we can hear from others.
- I want to make sure everyone has a chance to speak.
- Thank you, that feels like a good place to pause.

7. During Conflict or Resistance

Stay regulating, not controlling

- I'm going to pause us so we can keep the space feeling safe for everyone.
- Let's come back to listening to understand.
- Can we return to speaking from our own experience?

8. Supporting Emotional Expression

When someone is vulnerable

- Thank you for trusting the group with that.
- Take your time—we're here with you.
- You're welcome to pause or stop at any point.

9. Encouraging Quieter Voices

Invite, don't pressure

- If you'd like to share, we'd really value hearing from you.
- You're welcome to pass or speak whenever you feel ready.
- We can come back to you if that feels better.

10. Closing the Circle

Reflection + integration

- Let's take a moment to reflect on what you're taking away from today.
- Thank you for showing up and contributing in your own way.
- Take a breath and notice how you're feeling compared to when you arrived.

After care

- If anything came up that feels unfinished, please take care of yourself after this.
- You might want to talk to someone you trust or take some quiet time.
- I'm available after if anyone needs to check in.

Notes / Add resources

Peer Learning Circle Reflection Tool (for participants)		Use this during the session to organise your thoughts, reflect in your own way, and support the group discussion.	
1. Check in How are you arriving today? □ Energised □ OK □ Mixed □ Tired □ Overwhelmed Other:	2. Focus Today's theme or question What comes to mind? Key words, images or links	3. What is going well? Strengths or positive moments What is giving energy? What should continue?	4. What is challenging? What feels difficult or unresolved? What may help? What support is needed?
5. Learning from others One thing I heard and want to remember Useful phrase or question Different view or new idea	6. Next step What do I want to..... Stop: Continue: Start:	7. Check out How am I leaving? □ Positive □ Thoughtful □ Tired □ Need support	Reminder You can pass, pause, write, draw, listen, take a break or return when ready.

Commitment	Wellbeing and signposting	Future themes
One small action before the next circle What will help me do this?	If anything has been raised, take a break and speak to someone trusted.	□ Wellbeing □ Belonging □ Boundaries Other:

Notes, scribbles and doodles

Before you start
Purpose: Reflect on project impact, share learning and identify one action.
Set-up: Circle set-up, group agreement visible, reflection tools available, calm space.
Facilitator role: Hold the structure, keep time, allow silence and check what support people want.
Opening reminder: Explain the purpose, create or revisit the group agreement, and capture shared themes only, not personal or sensitive details.

Time	Session stage	Facilitator prompt/action
5 mins	1. Arrival Check-in	How are you arriving today? What do you need from the group?
5 mins	2. Theme Setting – Impact	What difference has the project made? Use an image, quote, story or outcome to set the theme of the Peer Learning Circle (if helpful).
5–7 mins	3. Quiet Thinking	Participants reflect privately. Use the Peer Learning Circle Reflection Tool to write, draw, note or think, then choose what to share.
15 mins	4. What's Going Well?	Share proud moments, successes, positive impact and what gave you energy. Debrief key themes.
15 mins	5. Challenges	What was difficult? What barriers emerged? Stay curious before problem-solving.
15 mins	6. Open Discussion	Who would like support? Check if they want listening, ideas, support or perspective.
10 mins	7. Learning from Others	What resonates? What could transfer into your own work?
15 mins	8. Action + Close	What do I want to stop doing, continue doing or start doing? Check out with one insight or action.

Facilitator reminders and signposting
Remember: Confidentiality, respect and the right to pass apply throughout.
Do: listen, value every voice, allow silence and keep to time. For sections 4, 5, 7 and 8, allow around 2 minutes per person where possible.
Do not: force participation, rush to solve, dominate or turn this into supervision.
Signposting: Use organisational safeguarding, supervision and wellbeing routes where needed.
Support: Mind 0300 102 1234 | Samaritans 116 123 | Organisation DSO: add local contact.

Before you start
Purpose: Reflect on what belonging means in youth work, share practice and identify one action to strengthen belonging.
Set-up: Circle set-up, group agreement visible, reflection tools available, calm space.
Facilitator role: Hold the structure, keep time, allow silence and check what support people want.
Opening reminder: Explain the purpose, create or revisit the group agreement, and capture shared themes only, not personal or sensitive details.

Time	Session stage	Facilitator prompt/action
5 mins	1. Arrival Check-in	How are you arriving today? What do you need to feel able to take part?
5 mins	2. Theme Setting – Belonging	What helps young people feel they belong? Use an image, quote, story or example if helpful.
5–7 mins	3. Quiet Thinking	Participants reflect privately. Use the Peer Learning Circle Reflection Tool to write, draw, note or think, then choose what to share.
15 mins	4. What Supports Belonging?	Share examples of practice, relationships, spaces or activities that help young people feel welcomed, valued and included. Debrief key themes.
15 mins	5. Barriers to Belonging	What can get in the way of belonging? What might young people experience as exclusion, uncertainty or not being seen? Stay curious before problem-solving.
15 mins	6. Open Discussion	Who would like support with strengthening belonging in their setting? Check if they want listening, ideas, support or perspective.
10 mins	7. Learning from Others	What resonates? What could transfer into your own work? Capture one practical idea or insight.
15 mins	8. Action + Close	What do I want to stop doing, continue doing or start doing to strengthen belonging? Check out with one insight or action.

Facilitator reminders and signposting
Remember: Confidentiality, respect and the right to pass apply throughout.
Do: listen, value every voice, allow silence and keep to time. For sections 4, 5, 7 and 8, allow around 2 minutes per person where possible.
Do not: force participation, rush to solve, dominate or turn this into supervision.
Signposting: Use organisational safeguarding, supervision and wellbeing routes where needed.
Support: Mind 0300 102 1234 | Samaritans 116 123 | Organisation DSO: add local contact.

Template: Peer Learning Circle: [Session theme/title] | Approx. [time]

Before you start
Purpose: [What is the purpose of this Learning Circle? What will participants reflect on or take away?]
Set-up: [Circle set-up, group agreement visible, reflection tools/resources available, calm space.]
Facilitator role: Hold the structure, keep time, allow silence and check what support people want.
Opening reminder: Explain the purpose, create or revisit the group agreement, and capture shared themes only, not personal or sensitive details.

Time	Session stage	Facilitator prompt/action
[time]	1. Arrival Check-in	[Opening check-in prompt. What do participants need to take part?]
[time]	2. Theme Setting	[Introduce the theme. Use an image, quote, story, question or example if helpful.]
[time]	3. Quiet Thinking	[Give private reflection time. Participants can write, draw, note, think quietly or use the Peer Learning Circle Reflection Tool.]
[time]	4. Share Strengths / Practice	[What is working well? What examples, strengths or practice should be shared?]
[time]	5. Explore Challenges	[What feels difficult? What barriers or questions are emerging? Stay curious before problem-solving.]
[time]	6. Open Discussion	[Who would like support from the group? Check whether they want listening, ideas, support or perspective.]
[time]	7. Learning from Others	[What resonates? What could transfer into practice? Capture one insight or useful idea.]
[time]	8. Action + Close	[What will participants stop, continue or start doing? Close with one insight or action.]

Facilitator reminders and signposting
Remember: Confidentiality, respect and the right to pass apply throughout.
Do: listen, value every voice, allow silence and keep to time. For sections 4, 5, 7 and 8, allow around 2 minutes per person where possible.
Do not: force participation, rush to solve, dominate or turn this into supervision.
Signposting: Use organisational safeguarding, supervision and wellbeing routes where needed.
Support: [Add local wellbeing, safeguarding or support contacts.]

Theme, Prompts and Questions for Peer Learning Circles

Theme	Prompt focus	Example questions
Wellbeing	Support, pressure, energy and balance	What supports wellbeing in your setting? What gives energy? What creates pressure?
Participation	Voice, influence and shared decision-making	How are young people shaping what happens? Where is voice strong? Where could influence grow?
Boundaries	Clarity, consistency and safe relationships	Where are boundaries clear? Where do they feel difficult? What helps boundaries feel safe and fair?
Motivation	Purpose, confidence and momentum	What helps people stay motivated? What gets in the way? What would help rebuild momentum?
Conflict	Difference, conflict and constructive challenge	How do we respond when tension appears? What helps repair relationships? What support is needed?
Trust	Reliability, openness and psychological safety	What builds trust in this work? What can damage trust? What would help people feel safer to share?
Youth Work Curriculum	Purpose, learning, values and practice	How does this connect to the Youth Work Curriculum? What learning is happening? How are values showing up in practice?
Youth Work Ethics and Principles	Values, ethical practice, power and accountability	How are youth work values guiding practice? Where do ethical tensions show up? How do we use power responsibly and remain accountable?

Useful CPD courses

Supervising Youth Workers

Aimed at youth work supervisors or team leaders looking to strengthen their leadership and supervision skills. This advanced CPD eLearning course is designed to empower you with the essential tools and knowledge to lead with confidence, foster inclusive practices and support the professional development of your team.

https://nya.org.uk/nya-academy/supervising-youth-workers-building-culturally-competent-reflective-and-effective-teams/

Introduction to Trauma Informed Practice

A short course that delves into the impact of trauma and its far-reaching implications on our mental and emotional well-being. Designed to empower participants with invaluable insights, this course unravels the intricacies of trauma, shedding light on why it leaves indelible marks on our lives. Whether you work directly with young people, alongside them, or within the communities supporting them, this course encourages a holistic understanding of trauma's impact, both on those you serve and on your own well-being.

https://nya.org.uk/nya-academy/introduction-to-trauma-informed-practice/

You can find a full list of NYA CPD courses here.



Further learning and CPD

NYA Practice Resources

- **Raising the Bar, Youth Work Standards** - https://nya.org.uk/document/youth-work-practice-standards/
- **Youth Work Code of Ethics** - https://nya.org.uk/youth-work-code-of-ethics/
- **EEDIB Standards** - https://nya.org.uk/eedib-standards/

NYA Academy

- **Full catalogue of CPD courses** - https://nya.org.uk/cpd/
- **Supervising Youth Workers** - https://nya.org.uk/nya-academy/supervising-youth-workers-building-culturally-competent-reflective-and-effective-teams/
- **Introduction to Trauma Informed Practice** - https://nya.org.uk/nya-academy/introduction-to-trauma-informed-practice/

Session Template Aftercare Signposting

- **MIND Support line:** 0300 102 1234 open 9am to 6pm, Monday to Friday (except bank holidays)
- **Samaritans** on 116 123 (UK-wide) Whatever you're going through, a Samaritan will face it with you. 24 hours a day, 365 days a year