National Youth Agency

Standard Qualification Framework (SQF) for Youth Work

Overview



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Section 1:

Overview of the SQF



1.1 Purpose of the Framework

The Standard Qualification Framework (SQF) for Youth Work establishes a clear, coherent, and progressive structure for youth work education and professional development. It provides a shared reference point for learners, employers, and providers, ensuring consistency in expectations, quality, and outcomes across the sector.

The framework defines what it means to develop as a youth work practitioner—from first engagement at an introductory level through to advanced professional and strategic leadership roles. It supports the development of a confident, skilled, and values-driven workforce capable of responding to the evolving needs of young people and communities.

At its core, the SQF aligns youth work learning with professional practice, ensuring that knowledge, skills, and behaviours are directly connected to real-world application.

1.2 What Problem the SQF Solves

The youth work sector has historically been characterised by:

- Variability in qualifications and training routes
- Lack of clarity around progression pathways
- Inconsistent expectations across roles and levels
- Limited alignment between education and practice

The SQF addresses these challenges by:

- Creating a **clear progression pathway from Level 1 to Level 6, and flexible points of entry**
- Defining **consistent expectations at each level**
- Aligning qualifications with **professional roles and responsibilities**
- Bridging the gap between **training, practice, and workforce needs**

It provides a simplified, accessible structure that removes confusion and strengthens the professional identity of youth work.

1.3 Who the Framework is For



Students and Learners

- Understand progression routes into and within youth work
- Develop confidence in what is expected at each stage
- Identify clear pathways into employment and advanced study



Employers

- Define workforce roles and expectations with clarity
- Support staff development and progression
- Ensure consistent standards across teams



Education and Training Providers

- Design curricula aligned to sector expectations
- Ensure progression between levels is meaningful
- Map learning to real practice requirements

1.4 Key Principles



Progression

The SQF provides a structured journey from introductory engagement to advanced professional practice, with each level building on the last.



Professionalisation

The framework supports youth work as a recognised profession, with defined standards, responsibilities, and ethical expectations at each level.



Consistency

By aligning qualifications, roles, and expectations, the SQF ensures consistency across the sector while allowing flexibility in delivery.



Practice-Based Learning

Learning is grounded in real youth work practice, ensuring relevance and applicability.

The Standard Qualification Framework

L1	L2	L3	L4	L5	L6
Reflective Practice					
Social Justice (Entry level)					**Social Justice** (Professional youth worker)
Evaluation and Impact (Entry level)					**Evaluation and Impact** (Professional youth worker)
Leadership and Management (Entry level)					**Leadership and Management** (Professional youth worker)
Relational Practice (Entry level)					**Relational Practice** (Professional youth worker)
Developing Youth Work Practice (Entry level)					**Developing Youth Work Practice** (Professional youth worker)
Professional Responsibility (Entry level)					**Professional Responsibility** (Professional youth worker)
Continuous Professional Development, Specialist Training					

Section 2:

How the Framework Works

2.1 The Levels (1–6)

The SQF consists of six progressive levels, each aligned with increasing complexity, responsibility, and professional autonomy:

- **Level 1:** Introduction and awareness
- **Level 2:** Entry-level practice under supervision
- **Level 3:** Independent delivery with guidance
- **Level 4:** Advanced support and emerging leadership
- **Level 5:** Senior practice, leadership, and complexity
- **Level 6:** Professional practice and strategic leadership

Each level builds on the previous, increasing depth of knowledge, critical thinking, and responsibility.

2.2 Progression Pathway

Introduction → Support → Delivery → Advanced Practice → Leadership → Professional / Strategic

Progression is not just about knowledge—it reflects the ability to:

- Apply learning in real contexts
- Make informed decisions
- Take responsibility for practice and outcomes
- Influence and lead others

2.3 Role of NOS, Learning Outcomes, and Practice

The framework is underpinned by:

- **National Occupational Standards (NOS)** – defining what practitioners must be able to do
- **Learning Outcomes** – outlining what learners should know and demonstrate
- **Practice Requirements** – ensuring real-world application

As learners progress, they move from:

- **Awareness → Application → Analysis → Leadership → Strategy**

This reflects increasing professional responsibility and autonomy.

Section 3:

The 6-Level Journey



Level 1: Introduction to Youth Work

Who it's for

- Individuals new to youth work
- Young people and volunteers exploring the field

What learners can do

- Understand the purpose of youth work
- Demonstrate basic communication and relationship-building
- Recognise safe practice

Nature of roles/responsibility

- Observational or low-responsibility roles
- Requires close supervision

Key themes

- Introduction to youth work
- Safe practice
- Communication and relationships
- Awareness of social context

Level 2: Youth Worker

Who it's for

- Entry workforce and volunteers
- Individuals new to active youth work roles

What learners can do

- Support delivery of activities
- Build relationships with young people
- Apply safeguarding and basic procedures

Nature of roles/responsibility

- Works under supervision
- Contributes to delivery rather than leading

Key themes

- Safe practice
- Participation and engagement
- Reflective practice
- Supporting programme delivery

Focus: Safe practice, relationships, participation

Outputs: Contributes to delivery, follows safeguarding, reflects with support

Level 3: Youth Worker

Who it's for

- Practitioners delivering regular youth work activity

What learners can do

- Plan and deliver sessions
- Engage young people independently
- Reflect and improve practice

Nature of roles/responsibility

- Works independently with guidance
- May support or supervise Level 2 roles

Key themes

- Planning and evaluation
- Group work and community engagement
- Relational practice
- Managing safe environments

Level 4: Youth Worker

Who it's for

- Practitioners in significant or full-time roles

What learners can do

- Plan and evaluate programmes
- Analyse information and adapt practice
- Support teams and projects

Nature of roles/responsibility

- Increasing responsibility
- Supports and mentors others

Key themes

- Programme design
- Leadership in teams
- Anti-oppressive practice
- Professional reflection

Level 5: Youth Worker

Who it's for

- Experienced practitioners in leadership roles

What learners can do

- Lead projects and teams
- Manage complexity and risk
- Apply theory across contexts

Nature of roles/responsibility

- Leadership and management
- Supervises staff and teams

Key themes

- Leadership and management
- Evaluation and impact
- Social justice in practice
- Professional judgement

Level 6: Professional Youth Worker

Who it's for

- Qualified professional youth workers

What learners can do

- Lead strategy and organisational development
- Influence policy and sector direction
- Integrate theory, research, and practice

Nature of roles/responsibility

- Strategic leadership
- High-level decision-making

Key themes

- Strategic leadership
- Systems thinking
- Evaluation and impact
- Professional accountability

Section 4:

Themes Across All Levels

4.1 Core Themes

The SQF is built around six core themes that run through every level:

1 Social justice

Social justice is at the heart of youth work and reflects the profession's commitment to equality, inclusion, participation and human rights. Across the SQF, learners develop an understanding of how social, economic, cultural and political inequalities affect young people's lives and opportunities. Early levels focus on recognising fairness, discrimination and inclusion in everyday practice, while intermediate levels develop the ability to actively apply anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory approaches. At the highest levels, practitioners critically analyze systems of power, privilege and inequality, leading rights-based, intersectional and transformative approaches that challenge structural barriers and promote collective action, participation and social change.

2 Relational practice

This approach recognises that meaningful relationships are the foundation of effective youth work. The SQF supports learners in developing the communication, empathy, trust-building and reflective skills needed to work alongside young people in ways that promote wellbeing, learning, identity development and agency. Learners begin by establishing positive, professional relationships and progress to managing complex group dynamics, partnerships and multi-agency relationships. At advanced levels, relational practice becomes a sophisticated pedagogical and ethical endeavour, informed by theories of human development, relational learning, emotional literacy and critical reflection, enabling practitioners to navigate complexity, conflict, power and professional boundaries with confidence.

3 Leadership

Leadership within youth work is understood as the ability to influence, enable and support positive outcomes for young people, colleagues and communities. The SQF recognises leadership as a developmental capability that begins with supporting others and contributing effectively within teams. As learners progress, they develop the skills to lead programmes, projects, volunteers and staff, while understanding organisational culture, supervision, governance and service delivery. At the most advanced levels, leadership extends to strategic planning, organisational development, partnership working, systems leadership and sector influence, enabling practitioners to navigate complexity, lead change and shape the future direction of youth work.

4 Evaluation and impact

Evaluation and impact ensure that youth work remains reflective, accountable and responsive to the needs of young people. Throughout the SQF, learners develop the ability to understand, measure and articulate the difference youth work makes. Early learning focuses on recognising outcomes, gathering feedback and contributing to review processes. At intermediate levels, practitioners design and implement evaluation activities, use qualitative and quantitative evidence, and apply findings to improve programmes and practice. Advanced practitioners critically engage with evidence, impact frameworks and knowledge production, leading participatory, ethical and strategic evaluation processes that inform organisational learning, policy development and sector-wide improvement.

5 Professional responsibility

Professional responsibility underpins safe, ethical and accountable youth work practice. Across all levels, learners develop an understanding of safeguarding, professional boundaries, conduct, accountability and reflective practice. At introductory levels, this focuses on awareness of roles, responsibilities and safe working practices. As competence develops, practitioners apply legal, ethical and organisational frameworks within increasingly complex situations, exercising sound professional judgement and accountability. At advanced levels, professional responsibility involves leading ethical decision-making, governance, safeguarding culture, quality assurance and professional standards, while modelling integrity, supervision, accountability and commitment to the ongoing development of the profession.

6 Developing youth work practice

Developing youth work practice sits at the centre of professional growth and reflects the continuous development of the knowledge, skills, values and behaviours required to work effectively with young people. At **Levels 1–2**, learners focus on understanding the purpose and values of youth work, developing basic communication and engagement skills, contributing to activities, and recognising the importance of participation, inclusion, safeguarding and reflective practice. They begin to understand their role in supporting young people's learning, wellbeing and personal development. At **Levels 3–4**, practitioners apply youth work theory and principles within a range of practice settings, designing and delivering programmes, building purposeful relationships, facilitating participation, evaluating outcomes and adapting their practice in response to evidence and reflection. They develop professional judgement, increased autonomy and responsibility for supporting individuals, groups and projects. At **Levels 5–6**, practitioners demonstrate advanced professional capability by critically analysing and advancing youth work practice. They integrate theory, research and evidence to inform strategic decision-making, lead quality improvement, supervision and workforce development, and contribute to innovation, policy, organisational learning and sector-wide development. At these levels, youth workers play a significant role in shaping professional practice and promoting excellence across the youth work profession.

Reflective practice

Reflective practice is the thread that connects every aspect of youth work and underpins development across all six SQF themes. Effective youth workers continually learn from their experiences, relationships, decisions and interactions with young people, using reflection to improve their practice, strengthen professional judgement and maintain alignment with youth work values and ethics. Throughout the SQF, learners are encouraged to examine their own beliefs, assumptions, behaviours and impact, recognising how these influence their work with young people and communities.

At Levels 1–2, learners develop an awareness of reflective practice as a tool for reviewing experiences, identifying learning and supporting personal development. They begin to consider how their values, attitudes and experiences influence their interactions with young people and how feedback can be used to improve future practice. At Levels 3–4, practitioners engage in more structured and critical reflection, using supervision, reflective models, evaluation findings and professional standards to analyse practice, challenge assumptions and adapt their approaches in response to the needs of young people and communities. At Levels 5–6, reflective practice becomes critically reflexive and professionally transformative. Practitioners integrate personal, professional, theoretical and ethical perspectives to navigate complexity, exercise professional judgement, lead learning cultures, support the development of others and contribute to the ongoing advancement of youth work practice and the profession itself.



4.2 Development Across Levels

Social Justice

- Level 1–2: Awareness of fairness and inclusion
- Level 3–4: Applying inclusive practice
- Level 5–6: Leading anti-oppressive and systemic change

Relational Practice

- Level 1–2: Building basic relationships
- Level 3–4: Managing group and professional relationships
- Level 5–6: Advanced relational and pedagogical practice

Leadership

- Level 1–2: Supporting others
- Level 3–4: Leading activities and small teams
- Level 5–6: Leading organisations and strategy

Evaluation and Impact

- Level 1–2: Understanding outcomes
- Level 3–4: Evaluating sessions and programmes
- Level 5–6: Designing and leading evaluation frameworks

Professional Responsibility

- Level 1–2: Awareness of safeguarding and conduct
- Level 3–4: Applying professional standards
- Level 5–6: Leading ethical practice and accountability

Developing Youth Work Practice

- Level 1–2: Developing awareness of youth work principles, roles and responsibilities.
- Level 3–4: Applying youth work theory, values and methods to support young people's learning, participation and development.
- Level 5–6: Advancing professional practice through leadership, innovation, research and sector development.

Reflective Practice

- Level 1–2: Reviewing experiences and recognising personal learning
- Level 3–4: Critical reflection to improve practice and professional judgement
- Level 5–6: Critical reflexivity, professional leadership and the development of others

4.3 Why This Matters

This thematic approach ensures:

- Continuity across levels
- Depth of learning rather than repetition
- Alignment between education and practice

Section 5:

Benefits for Different Audiences





Students

For students and learners, the SQF provides a clear and transparent progression pathway from initial engagement with youth work at Level 1 through to professional and strategic practice at Level 6. At each stage, learners can understand what knowledge, skills, behaviours and responsibilities are expected, enabling them to make informed decisions about their learning and career development. The framework supports progression between qualifications, employment opportunities and higher-level study, while recognising the transferable skills that youth work develops, including communication, leadership, relationship-building, safeguarding, reflective practice, project management and community engagement. These skills have value not only within youth work, but across education, social care, community development, health, justice and other people-focused professions. By linking qualifications to real practice and professional roles, the SQF helps learners identify meaningful career routes and understand how they can progress from volunteer and support roles to advanced leadership and professional youth work positions.

- Clear progression pathway
- Transferable skills across sectors
- Defined career routes



Employers

For employers, the SQF provides a common framework for workforce development, recruitment and professional standards. It establishes clear expectations about the capabilities, responsibilities and level of autonomy associated with each qualification level, making it easier to design roles, support progression and identify workforce development needs. The framework aligns learning with the National Occupational Standard, QAA Benchmarks, Apprenticeship KSBs, and the realities of contemporary youth work practice, helping employers to build a workforce that is competent, reflective and responsive to the needs of young people and communities. By providing a shared language for skills and professional development, the SQF supports consistency across organisations, strengthens quality assurance processes and creates clearer pathways for supervision, mentoring, leadership development and succession planning. This contributes to a more confident, capable and sustainable youth work workforce across the sector.

- Consistent workforce standards
- Clear expectations by level
- Stronger workforce development

Providers

For education and training providers, the SQF offers a coherent structure for curriculum planning, qualification development and quality assurance. The framework clearly articulates how learning should develop across levels, helping providers design programmes that build knowledge, skills, critical thinking and professional responsibility in a logical and progressive way. The six core themes, underpinned by the seventh theme of reflective practice, provide a consistent framework for curriculum design while allowing flexibility in delivery and specialist content. By aligning qualifications with occupational standards, sector expectations and workforce needs, the SQF helps ensure that learning remains relevant, practice-focused and responsive to the changing landscape of youth work. The framework also strengthens progression between courses and qualification levels, reducing duplication and supporting smoother transitions between further education, higher education, apprenticeships and professional practice.

- Clarity in curriculum design
- Alignment with sector needs
- Improved progression between courses



Section 6:

How to Use the Framework

6.1 As a Curriculum Design Tool

- Align courses to levels and themes
- Ensure progression in learning
- Map learning to practice

6.2 As a Workforce Planning Tool

- Define roles and responsibilities
- Structure staff development
- Support career progression

6.3 As a Progression Map

- Guide learners through the system
- Clarify next steps
- Support transitions between roles

Section 7:

Where to Find Full Standards

View the full framework here

The SQF provides a high-level overview of youth work qualifications and progression.

Full learning outcomes and indicative content will be available in the full technical specification available through each of the awarding organisations that hold the qualifications. You can find a list of awarding organisations here. Full apprenticeship standards can be found here for level 3, and here for level 6.

All levels in the SQF have been constructed with reference to the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work.

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Registration No. 2912597
Charity No. 1035804