

Introduction

APPG Youth Affairs led an extensive inquiry on youth work, publishing its final [report](#) and recommendations in 2019. Two years-on, we review progress across statutory and voluntary youth services and youth sector activities, and as we put young people at the heart of Covid-recovery.

1. The case for and role of youth work was made with cross-party support, after a year-long inquiry (2018-2019). There has been significant progress in the role and development of youth work, against our all-party recommendations (April 2019). The report led to the first government-initiated debate on youth work, on the floor of the House of Commons (July 2019), and related manifesto commitments from the parties in the general election (December 2019).
2. The Government acted to restore grant funding for youth work training and qualifications, including bursaries for entry-level youth work; undertook consultation on the statutory duty and guidance for local authorities to secure sufficient youth provision in their area; and announced a new £500m Youth Investment Fund across the parliament for innovation and capital investment, and the development of local youth partnerships.
3. However, Covid-19 stopped much of that progress in its tracks. The government review of statutory guidance halted, and the requirement for local authorities to report on spending on youth services was suspended until 2022. The Youth Investment Fund was subsequently delayed, with the substantive funding now due from 2022. While the nation quite rightly prioritised its response to the pandemic, it overlooked the significant role that youth work could – and would go on to – play, in supporting young people.
4. Defined in legislation as ‘educational leisure time’ or known as non-formal education, at the start of the pandemic youth work was classed as ‘leisure’ and youth centres closed. Many local authority youth workers were redeployed and voluntary sector staff were furloughed, and there has been a large-scale drop in the number of adult volunteers which youth services and charities have yet to recover. Where they could, youth services and related activities moved online, and there was greater reliance on street-based or outreach youth work within Covid-19 restrictions; but overall we witnessed some 1 million young people fall off the radar.
5. At the same time the number of vulnerable young people (aged 8-19 years old) in England rose from an estimated 1 million up to 3 million. The strains on schools, colleges, mental health and social services were also apparent, with national concern for mental wellbeing, education catch-up and loss of socialisation, and the long term impact on a young person’s social development and life chances.
6. The youth sector response was united and consistent, backed by Government, through Covid-19 guidance specific for youth services and out of school activities. This supported the role of youth work as a distinct form of education. As the disproportionate impact on young people became clearer, and the lifting of the first national lockdown, the Government moved to class youth services as an essential service (August 2020) and recognised qualified youth workers as essential ‘key’ workers (January 2021). The Government also provided emergency funding for national and local youth charities, to shore-up provision during the pandemic.
7. There remain significant concerns for young people and challenges to the youth sector in its capacity to respond – whether statutory or voluntary services. DCMS took the initiative to carry out sector-wide consultation including young people in a review of priorities for youth services and out of school activities, as part of its remit. This concluded in June 2021 and will inform the government’s spending review and cross-departmental discussions on the wider role for youth work. The government review of statutory guidance for local authorities will resume in 2021, for April 2022.
8. At the same time, working through the National Youth Advisory Board, the youth sector will publish a longer, ten-year strategy. Meanwhile the Children’s Commissioner for England has completed and will report in September on the Big Ask Survey, with over half a million young people taking part. In tandem, the 2021 National Youth Sector Census will be published by NYA which will map for the first time youth services and out of school activities in England.

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9. Therefore, the APPG will seek further evidence over the summer and review findings with young people on parliament's return from September.

Initial findings

APPG has heard representations from the Local Government Association, office of the Children's Commissioner for England, Duke of Edinburgh's Award, National Youth Agency as the regulatory body, a collective response from the youth sector through the National Youth Advisory Board, and PALYCW university lecturers in youth work.

Further, evidence was provided by young representatives of British Youth Council involved in the DCMS youth steering group, UK Youth #iwill, NYA Young Researchers, and YMCA following consultation with MPs in local constituencies. A hearing was held with young people and the Minister for Civil Society, Baroness Barran, responsible for youth policy in government.

10. As a nation, we need a clear commitment for young people to be safe and supported in the present, confident and ambitious for the future. This includes clear expectations on what young people want and can expect from youth services and the role of youth work.
11. Since 2019 there has been greater confidence in the role and potential of youth work, identified by government in its principle aims to enhance young people's skills for life and work, and mental and physical wellbeing.
12. The DCMS review of youth provision is informed by young people's expectations for regular access to out of school activities, volunteering and social action opportunities, and adventure/ trips. This requires somewhere (safe) to go, something (fun) to do with friends and to learn new skills, and a (trusted) adult who knows what is needed, able to access specialist or targeted services.
13. It includes international exchange programmes to replace Erasmus+, with ongoing discussions between the four UK nations for youth participation, as the alternative Turing Scheme is open to UK organisations from across the formal education and training sectors only.
14. The importance of a safe space for children and young people, outside of school or college, has been stressed by local authorities and young people. This includes safe digital spaces, which is not a substitute for face-to-face provision but has seen increased use and provided additional support for some.
15. However, initial findings indicate 1 in 5 children, rising to 1 in 3 teenagers, are not happy with services and activities in their local area; with a limited understanding and clarity on what could be offered. There is a strong correlation between access to youth provision and poverty, with young people from low income households five times less likely to take part. Yet such out of school activity is one of the top 'asks' by young people.
16. Significantly, through Covid-recovery young people don't feel listened to by politicians, they are feeling lost and let down. We need to find smarter ways to communication with young people to make them feel part of the recovery. Where young people have a sense of belonging, communities are stronger: valuing youth work and the relationships with young people
17. This isn't just about providing out of school activities. It is about education, employment and health; improving life chances and healthy choices. There needs to be increased investment in youth services and youth workers to support that.
18. To be effective this needs to re-engage and focus on what youth services can offer in partnership with other local services; and the role that local youth services have for supporting young people in both statutory and non-statutory settings.
19. However the youth sector is an unstable part of services that run across education and social care. It needs to be put on a surer footing, with committed long term funding at the grass roots, levelling up opportunities across communities.

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20. That lack of stable funding, often a reliance on short term project or programme-led funding, provides insecurity of employment, limited career opportunities, a consequent drop off in the number of university places at degree level for qualified youth workers and low levels of recruitment for youth workers, and insufficient adult volunteers.
21. This includes the need for clarity on the different forms of support, from qualified youth workers to entry-level youth support workers and up-skilled adult volunteers. Where 4,500 youth workers have been displaced in recent years; and a shortfall of thousands of adult volunteers exacerbated by Covid-19 has led to long waiting lists uniformed groups and other voluntary sector activities.
22. There is immediate action required to ensure we don't lose what we have got, just at the time young people need youth work the most. Through Covid-19, 1 in 4 youth charities are at risk of closure. For every £16 cut on local authority services, £1 is youth work. With weak statutory guidance, under review, for local authorities to secure sufficient local services for young people, the estimated total £400m spending is under threat. (Source: NYA)
23. While the main source of funding comes through local authorities, there is interdependency between local authorities and voluntary sector providers, for commissioning or delivery of services, and shared practice or opportunities through local youth partnerships.
24. Yet great disparity exists between areas for funding of youth work. Ignoring extreme outliers, the range is an annual spend of £250 per head to just £25 per head, by local authorities, and divergent needs from urban to rural services.
25. A balance of funding by local authorities on youth provision is from central government and charitable foundations; with local business or fundraising at a local level. Currently, DCMS is responsible for some £350m annual funding for youth work and out of school activities, which includes the substantive part of the new Youth Investment Fund from 2022, the National Citizen Service, and funding from arts, sports and lottery bodies within the department's remit.
26. However there is a disconnect between coordination of current government funding for out of school activities and for specialist and targeted youth services, where the legal responsibilities are largely held by the Department for Education and with local authorities.
27. This has led to a lack of long term investment and an estimated loss of annual expenditure of £1bn on local youth services. In turn, this has led to paucity of evidence about 'what works' beyond short term measures, and a circular argument about levels of funding and evidence of long term impact. We need to break that circle, to invest in youth work and commit to longitudinal studies on outcomes for young people.

Interim conclusion¹

28. The Government has a primary role to ensure the health of the youth sector and a statutory duty for local authorities to secure sufficient youth places and activities across local youth services. This must also recognise that government is not the sole funder, and the youth sector includes a rich heritage of voluntary sector provision.
29. Therefore, it is the quality and impact of youth work that is our primary focus. This requires a commitment for quality youth work and continuous improvement of youth services, including levelling-up opportunities in areas of greatest need or disadvantage.
30. The opportunities to be gained from youth services and out of school activities, including local youth councils and young people's active participation, support upstream funding and long-term investment in youth work, to fulfil our shared aims for young people of skills for life and work, and mental and physical wellbeing.

¹ For further consideration and report-back by APPG members with young people in September 2021.

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31. More can be done to amplify the quality and impact of youth work by better co-ordination and intentional spending across government which includes related departments for Home Office and Department for Work and Pensions in particular, although the strongest dynamic remains between DCMS and Department for Education.
32. Such coordination would support longer term funding and effective use of community resources and assets. To deliver this the youth sector needs to be put on a surer footing, to secure a baseline of open-access provision on which wider youth services and out of school activities can flourish; and for equitable access to specialist provision and statutory services.
33. This includes the role of local authorities for area needs assessments and to secure sufficient provision in an area, and local youth partnerships for a diverse range of providers. It is not about 'picking winners', funding national programmes or large-scale capital projects.
34. We need to sustain youth work, year-round. The priorities are to:
 - End a dependency on short term projects and programme-led funding, with a clear focus on investing in youth workers and adult volunteers, including safeguarding and training.
 - Provide safe places in communities, including digital and green spaces, where young people are and want to be; including small scale capital projects to repair, repurpose and open-up community spaces.
 - Leverage use of community assets and related activities, from sports and arts, and extended use of school sites, to embed and deliver youth work.
35. Fundamentally, it is the quality of the relationship between the young person and youth worker, and skilled adult volunteer that makes the difference. This provides a focus that is inclusive of urban and rural services, statutory, voluntary sector and community groups.
36. Critically, young people have the right to be involved in community development, co-design of services and funding decisions; and to ensure equity of access to quality youth provision.

Draft recommendations

The recommendations are drawn from evidence presented and from the 2019 report, updated.

- a) DCMS has retained the lead for youth services and out of school activities, with a Minister responsible for the health and vibrancy of the youth sector.
 - Now: consideration should be given to this being a dual role jointly held at DCMS and DfE, or for a cross-departmental committee to be chaired by the Minister.
- b) The Government will review the statutory guidance for local authorities to secure local services and youth provision.
 - Now: this must be strengthened with a clear understanding of what is a 'sufficient' level of youth services for a local area, to support local plans and area needs assessments.
- c) Most funding of youth services and related activities is through local authorities, although the picture is inconsistent with a patchwork of youth provision across the country.
 - Now: to be effective, local youth partnerships should be established or developed, and incorporate young people in consultation and decision-making.
- d) A national strategy is needed to recruit, train and sustain qualified and entry-level youth workers, and adult volunteers.
 - Now: this requires long-term funding to create and sustain employment opportunities for youth work, open up career pathways across sectors, and mobilise adult volunteers.
- e) There needs to be a common language and shared outcomes to read across government, research and practice, readily understood by young people, for youth work.
 - Now: new 'light touch' inspection arrangements for youth services will help ensure the quality of youth provision, including safeguarding and equity of access by young people.

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Chair: Jo Gideon MP

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The All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Youth Affairs was established in 1998 to raise the profile of issues that affect and concern young people, encourage dialogue between parliamentarians, young people and youth services, and encourage a co-ordinated and coherent approach to youth policy making. The British Youth Council and YMCA England provide the secretariat for the APPG. www.youthappg.org.uk

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