

**THE
DAMAGE**



A future at risk
Cuts in youth services

THE DAMAGE

Introduction

Youth services do a vital job in our communities. The benefits they provide for young people are real and long-lasting.

While many other public services step in when problems occur, youth services prevent so many of those difficulties from occurring in the first place. Youth services help young people to lead positive lives as members of society.

By building up relationships of trust and support with young people, working in their communities, helping them make their own decisions about their lives, and developing their confidence and resilience, youth workers play invaluable roles supporting young people.

Youth services are the workers who help young people develop as individuals, get more education, find work, and play positive roles in society.

But among the various sources of support for young people that have been undermined and cut since 2010, youth services are perhaps the most misunderstood. This report examines what youth services and youth workers do, describes and analyses what has happened to funding for youth services in recent years, and discusses the impact of funding cuts. It also looks to the future, predicting the likely outcome if youth service cuts continue, and also makes positive recommendations.

Young people today

The continued reduction in youth services has come at a time when those services are most needed. The risk of child poverty and material deprivation in the UK at a time has risen in recent years, and as children become young people, thousands fail to receive any kind of economic support to get into the labour market. By 2015, almost a third of people (32.6%) in the UK aged under 18 UK were at risk of poverty or social exclusion, while 10.5% were experiencing material deprivation. By contrast, the corresponding figures for older people were 18.1% and 1.9%.¹ While the figures for both groups are alarming, it is clear that deprivation is far more acute among young people. And yet it is this group which has borne the brunt of the government's austerity agenda, with the Education Maintenance Allowance cut, higher education tuition fees trebled to £9,000, and housing benefit slashed. In the period February-April 2016, 27.7% of 16-17 year olds and 11.9% of 18-24 year olds were unemployed,² compared with 4.7% of 25-34 year olds, 3.2% of 35-49 year olds, and 3.6% of 50-64 year olds. The unemployment rate for everybody aged 16 and above was 5%. Unemployment is a much bigger problem for young people than for anybody else.

The problem is particularly acute for young black people – over the period from December 2015 to February 2016, the unemployment rate among black 16-24 year olds was 27.5%, more than double the rate for young white people.³

Young people's expectations of work as a means of improving their quality of life and making a valued contribution to society and the economy have also been hit through legally-enshrined age discrimination in the minimum wage legislation. Age-related minimum earnings – reinforced by the recent introduction of a further age-related level of the minimum wage (now renamed the national living wage) – serve only to add to young people's perceptions that they are worth less to society than their older colleagues. The low level of the actual minimum wage also has an impact on young people's ability to grow into independent adults.

Meanwhile, a survey conducted by the Local Government Association in 2015 found that 90% of English councils had cut services for teenagers. As Vicky Foxcroft, the MP for Lewisham, Deptford, told the House of Commons earlier this year: "If we look at what happened from 2013 to 2014 alone, we see figures from the Department for Education showing a cut of more than £103m from youth services. Children's social care – cut; family support services – cut; adoption services-cut; youth justice teams – cut; Sure Start centres – cut; child protection services – cut; and looked-after children services – cut. The list goes on and on. More and more young people are falling through the gaps left by a lack of services. The choices that this government is making are damaging young people's life chances, worsening their mental health, and increasing the possibility of them getting into trouble, as they are open to abuse and potentially at risk of becoming involved in serious youth violence."

Background

In 2014, UNISON published a report on the damage to youth services and young people caused by the government's cuts, drawing on Freedom of Information (Fol) data and a qualitative survey of UNISON members working in youth services.⁴ Two years on, we have conducted another Fol survey, drawing on data for a further three years of council budgets, and once again we have surveyed people working in youth services, asking them about the impact of those cuts on young people and their communities.

1 *Young People at Risk: Challenges and Policy Options for the UK*, Sage, 2016

2 *Youth Unemployment Statistics*, House of Commons Library, June 2016, and Office for National Statistics data

3 *Unemployment by Ethnic Background*, House of Commons Library, April 2016

4 *The UK's Youth Services: How Cuts are Removing Opportunities for Young People and Damaging Their Lives*, UNISON, 2014

The results make clear that the cuts have continued to hit youth services, and they have got far deeper. Along with other cuts, the attacks on youth services will make young people's lives more precarious, offer them fewer prospects for decent education and employment, and less support as they seek to make their way in the world.

5 *The UK's Youth Services: How Cuts are Removing Opportunities for Young People and Damaging Their Lives*, UNISON, 2014

How bad has it been? Youth service cuts in recent years

This report is based on two pieces of research, carried out by UNISON in 2016.

- A FoI request issued to all local authorities in Great Britain that provide youth services – county councils, unitary authorities, metropolitan authorities, and London boroughs. We asked what had happened to youth services in the years 2014/15 and 2015/16, and what plans they had for the future of youth services, using key quantitative indicators of youth service provision: budgets, staffing levels, youth centres and places for young people. We received FoI responses from 180 out of 210 relevant local authorities.
- A survey of UNISON members working in youth services, asking for their views on the impact of changes in youth service spending on young people, communities, and the public.

Since 2010, nearly every local authority has made cuts in its youth services. The overwhelming majority (93%) of youth service employees told us that the local authority they were employed by had cut services since 2010. And our FoI results show that in the last two years alone, a majority of authorities had made cuts: 58% cut youth service spending in 2014/15, and 55% did so in 2015/16. Across the two years 2014-16, almost half the authorities in the UK had made cuts in both years.

The cuts in youth services in the two financial years 2014/15 and 2015/16 amounted to £123m. When added to figures from previous UNISON research, we estimate that between April 2010 and April 2016, £387m was cut from youth service spending across the UK.⁵

Total cuts in youth service spending, 2010-2016

2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	TOTAL
£62m	£137m	£41m	£24m	£85m	£38m	£387m

The financial year 2014/15 was a particularly bad year for councils' youth service spending. The total cut was £85m. Two authorities, Lancashire and Liverpool, were forced to cut more than £2m each, while Essex, North Lanarkshire, Devon and Staffordshire all reduced spending by more than £1m. The following year, 2015/16, saw a further £38m in cuts, with Kent, Leeds and Staffordshire all removing more than £1m from their youth service budgets.

The survey comments provide an indication of the ways in which the cuts have been implemented. While some authorities have opted to focus on youth centres, others have favoured an approach based on re-structuring. Typically, this will involve re-designing jobs, often merging youth work with other very different services like social work, and so

reducing the number of specialist roles held by qualified youth workers, as well as cutting overall employment levels. When this happens, with a corresponding loss of job cuts and reduced specialisms, the value and benefits of youth services are reduced substantially. Many youth service workers report that councils are increasingly ending ‘open access’ youth services – those services that any young person can engage with – while more targeted services may remain.

6 *Children and Young People Now*, 22 June 2016, <http://www.plymouthherald.co.uk/county-council-tenders-out-contract-for-all-eight-youth-centres/story-29433035-detail/story.html>

The data provided by local authorities backs up the views of survey respondents on the state of youth services across the UK. Analysis of our FoI data reveals that:

- Around 1,660 youth work jobs were lost between 2014 and 2016, following the loss of almost 2,000 posts between 2012 and 2014. The majority were part-time workers.
- Between 2014 and 2016, 244 youth centres were closed, on top of the 359 that were closed in the previous two years, bringing the total to over 600.
- Almost 98,000 youth service places for young people were cut between 2014 and 2016, in addition to the 41,000 that had gone between 2012 and 2014.

The collapse of youth services in the UK

	2012-14	2014-16	Total 2012-16
Youth work jobs lost	1,991	1,661	3,652
Youth centres closed	359	244	603
Places for young people cut	40,989	97,909	138,898

Many youth service workers also report that youth service cuts have increased the likelihood of services being outsourced to private companies, voluntary organisations or social enterprises. For example, in June 2016, Devon County Council, which had already cut £1.3m from its youth service budget in 2014/15, announced plans to outsource its entire youth service, stating that by doing so, it could avoid having to make further cuts. It also made clear that an employee-led social enterprise would be created so it could bid for the work alongside other bodies. However, it is not clear how transferring provision will save any money.⁶

But it’s not all doom and gloom. In Southwark, for example, a recent campaign run by young people themselves has been successful in over-turning plans that would have meant the loss of a youth centre and 80 youth work jobs, as well as the conversion of the other seven youth centres in the borough into more generic leisure centres.

Yet the threat of future cuts remains, and our FoI results suggest more of the same for youth services in the years to come. Not all the local authorities that responded were in a position to tell us about their future plans.

But already, we can report that in the year 2016/17 and beyond, there is likely to be at least £26m more cuts in youth service spending, the loss of around 800 more jobs, more than 30 youth centres closed, and 45,000 more youth service places for young people removed. This will only be the tip of the iceberg.

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One respondent to our survey summed up the situation in their own local authority: “A number of our universal youth service staff are currently under threat of redundancy. Decisions have already been made to completely cut the universal service at the end of May 2016. Their council’s priority is making money and the message that the young people are getting is that they are a financial drain and of no value. Short term decisions being made now to save a bit of money will actually cost a lot more in the future as more and more young people enter the social care system.”

What have the cuts meant for young people, their communities and the public?

We asked respondents to our survey how cuts had affected the provision of youth services in their areas – what changes had been made?

Bearing out our FOI findings, the vast majority (82%) reported that their services now employed fewer staff, while more than three-quarters (76%) said that some services had been stopped altogether. More than eight in ten (84%) reported that youth clubs had closed – this was significantly up on two years previously, when just over half (52%) had reported that cuts had led to youth club closures. More than half reported a reduction in outreach services. These findings seem to suggest that, increasingly, local authorities are less able to absorb cuts in central government funding. Two years ago, almost half of all authorities were able to avoid closing youth clubs and cutting outreach work. Now barely any councils are able to spare their youth clubs from the axe.

Those youth work staff who remain in post face a series of reorganisations (58% reported changes to job roles) and higher workloads (64%). As a result 69% say they now find it more difficult to provide services for young people.

But what does all of this mean for young people? Our figures have borne out the results of reports from elsewhere, that deprivation among young people is on the increase.

We asked survey respondents how they felt cuts in youth services and other relevant services were having an impact on young people:

- **80% said they thought young people feel less empowered**
- **71% said it was now harder for young people to stay in formal education**
- **65% said young people were finding it harder to get jobs**
- **77% reported increased mental health issues among young people, and 70% a rise in increased alcohol and substance abuse**
- **83% reported increased crime and anti-social behaviour.**

Most strikingly, the overwhelming majority (91%) said the cuts were having a particular impact on young people from poorer backgrounds. More than half said there were particular problems for young black people, young LGBT people, and young women. So it appears that the cuts have hit precisely those who often need youth services the most. Moreover, while some respondents told us that open access youth services have been cut while those targeted at particular groups have been protected, many others told us that specialist services aimed at young women, young black people, young lesbian, gay bisexual and transgender people, and young disabled people had all been cut. The biggest cause for alarm in this context may be young women and girls; 57% of respondents told us that youth services for women and girls had been affected. One said: “A girls’ club has been cut which

had regular attendance of over 60 young Muslim girls. Youth centres closed in areas with high ethnic communities. Provisions for LGBTQ are now non-existent.”

7 *Tired of Hanging Around*, Audit Commission, 2009

Comments made by other survey respondents paint a picture of increasing isolation and lack of support for young people, who they feel are being increasingly ignored and devalued – even demonised according to one respondent – by society.

“Social isolation raises social anxiety and depression in young people. Young people are not being empowered to engage in the community and are becoming withdrawn from society. They are losing opportunities to interact with their peers especially those not in mainstream school or school leavers. Older teenagers are missing out on support with independence skills, new experiences and opportunities to become engaged with their communities.”

Other respondents point to the impact on young people from poorer backgrounds in particular, who may not qualify for targeted support – which some local authorities have tried hard to protect – and who are consequently being hit particularly hard, with mental health problems a real risk for many young people. Some respondents reported the increased risk of young people being caught up in gangs and even (according to one respondent) grooming, but more broadly, it is clear that young people feel ever more frustrated, unsupported, and alienated.

We also asked respondents about the impact of youth service cuts on the general public. A large number pointed out an increasing breakdown between young people and the wider population. As youth services disappear, and as young people struggle to get the support they need to access the jobs market, for some crime and anti-social behaviour are the obvious next step, and we will see what one respondent described as “Breakdown in relationships between the generations.”

Youth service cuts also have the effect of shifting the burden onto other public services, which actually have to spend far more money resolving the problems that in previous years youth services would have headed off at the pass. An Audit Commission report in 2009 on the benefits of sports and leisure activities in preventing anti-social behaviour among young people estimated that a young person in the criminal justice system costs the taxpayer over £200,000 by the time they are 16. But one who is given support to stay out of trouble costs less than £50,000.⁷ Increases in mental health, substance abuse and anti-social behaviour are bound to increase the pressures on statutory services like social care and child and adolescent mental health services. These are added burdens which could be avoided – or at least mitigated – if youth services were maintained.

The future

It is clear that the future of youth services is bleak, unless the cuts in central government funding for councils can be arrested and reversed. The £26m of further cuts that we already know about will just be the start, and indeed several individual local authorities reported plans to cut more than £1m from 2016/17 onwards – Enfield (£1.64m), Leeds (£1.47m) and Birmingham (£1.01m), for example. Lots of local authorities are planning a review of their youth services, which as we have seen, often leads to a re-structure or outsourcing.

On the prospect of a re-structure, one survey respondent predicted: “Targeted early prevention work will be swallowed up by children’s social care – youth work professionals will become social work support service and lose their professional identity.”

On the possibility of their service being tendered out to the private or voluntary sectors, one respondent said: “The government appears hell bent on using voluntary agencies to deliver services. Cheaper doesn’t always mean better!”

But it is clear that local authorities have resorted to both these options because the funding is simply not there any more. One respondent to our survey summed up the situation: “Staff have trained and gained qualifications over the years for a reason. It isn’t just a job that anyone can pick up. Young people are the next generation and need the correct support, advice and direction. This cannot just be delivered by anyone.”

So as councils remove preventative services like youth services, all of the impacts of youth service cuts previously described will be exacerbated. In the words of one survey respondent: “I understand that the council has to save a lot of money, but getting rid of preventative and universal youth services will just create issues further down the line.”

Conclusions and recommendations

“These young people will have nowhere to turn, there will be no-one who is qualified or trained to help support them with the issues they have. This will lead to more anti-social behaviour, gangs, depression and poor mental health in young people, and increased work for the police forces that have also been cut. Truancy will rise, school results tables will be poor and homelessness could rise. Parents also need to know that their children are safe and not getting into drugs, drinking alcohol or being bullied. A youth centre is a safe place where young people are confined to one place where they can hang out, receive the support and advice/leadership they may need. That might be boosting their confidence, learning new skills and being taught about risks. Our centres and staff help young people by working with other agencies putting them in touch with counsellors, finding them somewhere to live, keeping them out of trouble with the police, helping to turn lives around and giving them a positive future.”

Survey respondent, 2016

The extent of the cuts in youth services has been made devastatingly clear. And the impact of those cuts are deep and broad. Youth services help young people find their way in society, gain employment, get an education, avoid mental health issues, and make a positive contribution to their communities. Investment in services for young people, and in fair pay and treatment for youth work staff, will reap dividends for the whole of society, making real savings in social care, social security and the criminal justice system.

Central government funding for local authorities has been slashed since 2010, and by 2021, with the abolition of the revenue support grant, authorities will be left to sink or swim on their own, relying on business rates and council tax revenue. There will be less to spend in poorer areas where the need for support services is greater. Clearly, councils have difficult decisions to make, but while urging the government to change course and fund councils properly, we would also want to impress on local authorities the value and benefits of investing in these vital public services.

UNISON would like to see:

— **Young people involved and consulted**

Government at all levels should involve young people in the decisions that affect their services. As one of our survey respondents put it: “We’re having more cuts to services next year and local young people want to keep services going. They are the ones who need to be listened to and involved in consultations with cuts more.” The example of Southwark shows the power of young people when they’re given the opportunity to articulate their own needs.

— **A statutory duty to provide youth services**

The current rules allow youth service provision to be merged into other services and be provided as part of a broad package of educational and social care measures. These services are vital and the professionals who deliver them are excellent, but real youth work is being lost in such reorganisations. When youth services go, the benefits to young people and communities are lost, along with the savings they provide in intervention services at a later date.

— **Fair and full funding for youth services**

A statutory duty to provide youth services is no good at all without the necessary resources. The reality is that while different local authorities are making different decisions and setting different priorities – with some doing more than others to protect youth services – the local government spending cuts are universal, and they come from central government. Ministers may point to the National Citizen Service as an example of alternative provision, but that initiative is a world away from a permanent open-access youth service delivered in a community. We need proper funding from the government for proper youth services. In UNISON’s view we need a new, fairer system of taxation, with a 50% tax on bankers’ bonuses above £25,000, a ‘Robin Hood’ tax on financial transactions, and measures to tackle tax avoidance and evasion, which could earn as much as £90bn a year in revenue. Councils should be allowed to raise council tax, in line with their status as locally elected leaders, without being constrained by Westminster.

— **Services saved and kept in-house**

For their part, councils should devolve power to council-employed staff to work collaboratively with the communities they serve. They should avoid outsourcing, employ their own staff and trust their expertise. Youth workers themselves know best how they can support young people.

— **Fair pay**

The UK government should change its policy on pay restraint, ensuring that public service workers receive pay increases which meet the rise in the cost of living. Their spending power will boost local economies, create additional tax revenue and benefit savings for the Treasury, and kick-start a sustainable recovery. Working within sector-wide pay bargaining systems, councils should make sure that the lowest paid employees receive no less than the living wage.

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This UNISON report is one in a series of studies looking at some of the vital services provided by councils. In it we explore the long-term damage to the public and to the economy caused by ongoing austerity cuts.

UNISON has more than a million members delivering essential services to the public. Services that protect, enrich and change lives. We want to see changes that put people before profit and public interest before private greed. Join our campaign to create a fairer society.

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