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# Youth work and prevention



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## Summary

Government has a key role to play in preventing harms but it has **consistently failed to prioritise prevention with funding and policy focus**. Youth work is a **quintessential example** of a preventative intervention. It is proven to have **positive outcomes for young people** in the short term (including improved mental health, educational attainment, and reduced crime and antisocial behaviour). And young people who engage in youth work become **happier, healthier, and wealthier adults** than those who do not. Despite being an effective preventative service, government **funding for youth work has reduced dramatically** (by at least 60%) since 2010. The increasing scale and severity of young people's needs **requires a major response** from national and local government.

This briefing **recommends a range of steps** that government can take to make preventative services – including youth work – more accessible and sustainable.

### ***What is youth work?***

Youth work comprises various services, support and activities aimed primarily at people aged between 11 and 18. The defining characteristic of youth work is that participation is active, voluntary, informal and based upon building a relationship between a trusted adult (or adults) and a young person to support their emotional and social development. Youth work provision can either be universal or targeted at groups with specific needs.

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## Introduction

The election of a new government provides an opportunity for UK government to shift to a preventative approach to public services that seeks to address and manage citizens' problems before they reach crisis point. This would reap financial and political benefits by helping tackle the crises in the NHS, criminal justice, youth services and beyond – and lead to happier and healthier lives for millions.

Youth work is a quintessential example of a preventative service. Providers aim to support a variety of positive outcomes for young people. This includes those that are realised in the short term – like developing essential skills from teamwork and emotional regulation to public speaking, and improving physical and mental health.<sup>1</sup> But it is also designed to help avoid negative *future* outcomes, such as young people going on to be involved in crime or antisocial behaviour, or being outside education, employment or training (NEET).<sup>2</sup> This means that, if successful, youth services can reduce future demand for social services, the criminal justice system and welfare.<sup>3</sup>

This briefing, which draws on a substantial Institute for Government and UK Youth report on taking [a preventative approach to public services](#), sets out:

- the evidence base for youth work as a preventative intervention
- how funding has changed in recent years
- the barriers to preventative youth spending.

It concludes with our recommendations for how government can bring about a shift towards preventative spending.

## Youth work works

**"I am the best me thanks to youth work." – Hassan, young person<sup>4</sup>**

The evidence base for the benefits of youth work is strong. In 2023, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS) commissioned three projects to assess the impact of youth services, the *Youth Evidence Base*. One research project analysed five longitudinal datasets to assess the impact of youth work on individuals over the course of their lives. It found a "clear association" between regular youth club participation and improved education, health and wellbeing (as well as reduced negative behaviour such as crime) in the short term across the studies. It also found strong evidence that these effects were sustained long-term into adulthood.<sup>5</sup>

People who engaged in youth work as teenagers were more likely to be happy, healthier and wealthier adults compared to those from the same socio-economic background who did not have access to youth work.

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Analysis of the Next Steps Study – a cohort study of people born in 1989 and 1990 – found a statistically significant increase in weekly sports participation and reduced alcohol consumption for youth club participants compared to a matched group at age 16.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, some 46% of youth club participants had a higher education qualification at age 25, compared with 38% of the matched group.<sup>7</sup>

Another project, the Millennium Cohort Study (MCS), covering people born between 2000 and 2002, found positive short-term outcomes with youth club participants having lower rates of unauthorised school absences and shoplifting than the matched group.<sup>8</sup> Youth club participation also had a statistically significant link to good health, educational qualifications and having a paid job at age 17.<sup>9</sup> The MCS mainly covered young people from more affluent backgrounds who already had good health and educational outcomes at the time they were in youth clubs. There is an argument, therefore, that youth club participation reinforced rather than caused positive effects for this group of young people later on in their lives.<sup>10</sup>

**“The work of a youth worker in school can complement and enhance the more structured aims of education across multiple areas. Youth work in school is not just about being there at times of crisis but also about building positive relationships and trust. It provides a supportive function that seeks to prevent some of those crisis situations from ever reaching that point.” – Youth worker, Oasis Waterloo Hub<sup>11</sup>**

The second Youth Evidence Base report involved a systematic literature review of 77 studies from around the world, with a focus on youth work studies with an experimental or quasi-experimental design. Despite the relatively low quality of some of the literature, the review concluded there was “convincing evidence to show that youth activities have beneficial impacts for young people across a range of personal, social, educational, and economic outcomes”. It found that the quality of interventions varied, but that evidence of impact was strongest for youth workers delivering mentoring and summer employment schemes.<sup>12</sup> These findings are in line with earlier reviews by the Youth Futures Foundation into interventions to improve youth employment,<sup>13</sup> and by the Youth Endowment Fund into violence reduction programmes for young people.<sup>14</sup>

The third study looked at the impact of youth work on local areas, analysing the effect of cuts to youth services on young people’s outcomes a year later.<sup>15</sup> The study found that a reduction in youth work expenditure led to a statistically significant increase in cases of weapons possession, bike theft, shoplifting, and in the proportion of young offenders who reoffend.<sup>16</sup> It did not find evidence for short-term changes in either education or health outcomes linked to cuts in youth work, although the study only evaluated the impact of interventions over a short period of time.<sup>17</sup>

**“It’s another space I choose to go to, another person you can talk to, it’s access to opportunities I wouldn’t have even known existed. It’s boosted my confidence massively. It’s like my second home.” – Liv, young person<sup>18</sup>**

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A separate working paper analysed the impact of youth centre closures in London on young people's outcomes between 2010 and 2019. It found that the closure of a youth centre is linked to a 10% increase in the number of crimes, particularly drug-related offences, committed by 10- to 18-year-olds living nearby.<sup>19</sup> In addition, youth centre closures disproportionately affect outcomes for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, since youth centres are more likely to be located in deprived areas that lack alternative recreational services for young people.<sup>20</sup>

In an earlier 2022 study, UK Youth and Frontier Economics estimated that the indirect economic benefits of youth work amounted to £3.2 billion.<sup>21</sup> Of that, roughly £1.7bn results from better health outcomes for young people (with mental health the single largest area for savings) and reductions in substance abuse, obesity and teenage pregnancy rates.<sup>22</sup> The remainder comes from lower rates of knife crime and antisocial behaviour and increased employment and educational attainment for youth work participants.<sup>23</sup> They consequently calculated a high return on investment for youth work for the government at £6.40 for every £1 of government funding.

This study highlighted the importance of effective cross-sector collaboration because many of the positive outcomes from youth work were also important to other professionals working with young people – such as employment, educational attainment and health outcomes.<sup>24</sup>

***Case study: Together as One/Aik Saath, west London***

Together as One/Aik Saath supports young people awaiting therapy from Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS). Each participant is paired with a dedicated youth worker, who offers personalised support to address pressures in young people's lives. Many participants are discharged from the programme before commencing therapy, feeling sufficiently better without having to engage further with CAMHS.<sup>25</sup>

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## Funding of youth work

There is good evidence that youth work is effective at improving outcomes – such as health and education – for those who use it. And there are also wider benefits to the public sector: youth work reduces demand for services such as the NHS and the criminal justice sector. Given the relatively low cost of many of these interventions, preventing demand for those acute services means that youth work represents good value for money for the government. But despite that, there have been substantial cuts to youth spending since 2010; local authorities now spend 60% less in real terms on youth work services than they did at the start of last decade.<sup>26</sup>

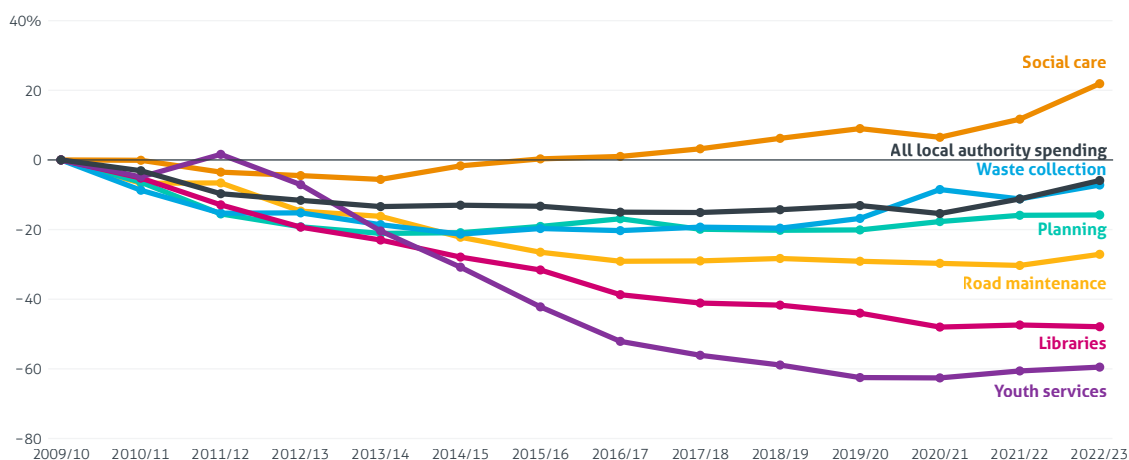
Youth work is provided by a range of different organisations, including voluntary and community sector bodies and local authorities. This makes it difficult to know exactly how much is spent on youth work per year. By one estimate, total annual expenditure equates to approximately £2bn.<sup>27</sup> Of this, around a quarter is accounted for by specific and identifiable government funding for youth work – most of which is spent by local authorities – with wider government funding accounting for a further quarter. The remaining half comes from charitable income, commercial sources and payments by families.<sup>28</sup>

**“Learning isn’t just about access to technical training. It’s about confidence, motivation and other human factors. That’s the amazing role we see youth workers doing! Raising aspirations and encouraging young people. That needs to go around any training course.” – Sarah, Microsoft**

Local authorities have had a statutory duty to provide “sufficient” youth services for “qualifying young people” since 2007.<sup>29</sup> The government has periodically updated that guidance, most recently in 2023.<sup>30</sup> That update included further clarification on what the government means by a “sufficient” service. It outlined a view that local authorities should publish an assessment of their area’s need for youth services and how the services they offer meet that requirement.<sup>31</sup> As with other statutory services – for example, local authorities have a statutory responsibility “to provide a comprehensive and efficient library service for all users”<sup>32</sup> – a legal duty does not guarantee that local authorities do not cut spending and reduce the quality and accessibility of the services that they offer.

As noted, between 2009/10 and 2022/23, local authority total expenditure on services for young people declined by 60% in real terms,<sup>33</sup> though some organisations estimate that the true extent of cuts is even greater.<sup>34</sup> Those cuts were large even by the standards of other local authority provided services. In comparison, local authorities cut spending on waste collection by 7.2% and on libraries by 47.9%. Local authorities cut their total spending by 5.9% in real terms across that period.

Figure 1 **Change in spending on selected local authority services, by service, since 2009/10 (real terms)**



Source: Institute for Government analysis of DLUHC, 'Local authority revenue outturns', 2009/10–2022/23 and DfE, 'Section 251 returns' 2009/10–2022/23. Notes: This shows total expenditure on these services. "All local authority spending" excludes spending on education services, police, fire and rescue services and public health. "Social care" is a combination of adult and children's social care. Where possible, Covid spending has been excluded from the data.

### **Case study: Be Inspired**

Be Inspired is a youth organisation based in Croydon and south London that specialises in youth work with young people involved in or at risk of involvement in serious violence and crime. It works closely with several councils, including Croydon, Merton, and Hammersmith and Fulham, particularly to support young people who are considered at 'high risk' of being entrenched in gangs, violence and crime. This includes directly supporting young people involved with gangs, sharing information with other local services and delivering training on gang awareness to young people and professionals working with young people. Local authority referrals – for example, via youth offending teams – are the main pathway to Be Inspired's services for these young people.<sup>35</sup>

### **Youth work exemplifies some of the common barriers to preventative spending**

Those cuts have led to real harms to young people. They have also likely exacerbated financial pressures on other public services. This has happened for some of the same reasons that the government cut spending on other preventative services.

### **Acute pressures crowd out preventative spending when budgets are tight**

Long-term investment is required to realise the full benefits of youth work. Many of the positive outcomes discussed above accrue over the course of years or even decades. Youth work is also rarely a service that is provided in response to urgent demand. Those characteristics made it particularly susceptible to cuts in the last decade.



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“Young people who have taken the courage and grit to ask us for mental health support could only get minimal support; this is a profound pity, as early intervention can prevent mental health scarring. ” – *Youth worker*<sup>36</sup>

Throughout the 2010s, the government protected spending on services that were relatively more acute while cutting the more preventative services. This is because cutting spending on those acute services – for example, accident and emergency in hospitals, taking children into care in children’s services, or homelessness relief services – may lead to immediate, very visible and often unpopular declines in performance. In contrast, the effects of cutting spending on more preventative services, such as youth work, may take years to materialise and therefore carry a lower political cost.

There is also a distributional effect of these cuts; as local authorities withdraw or reduce services, more affluent families are able to continue to access them privately for their children. It is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that politicians choose to cut spending on prevention. The political cost of deteriorating acute services far outweighs the possible benefit of spending on youth work that may appear after they have left office.

***Political incentives are not aligned with delivering youth work***

Preventative services often require the collaboration of multiple organisations to design and deliver, and are provided by a wide constellation of providers across the public and voluntary sector. Policy is made by departments across Westminster, including the Department for Education (DfE), DCMS, the Home Office and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government (MHCLG). Benefits from spending by those departments accrue to other departments, including the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP) and the Department of Health and Social Care (DHSC).

This makes it difficult for politicians to directly control, or even determine, the level of provision of youth work. A lack of control incentivises politicians to focus elsewhere, on services over which they have more direct control and influence.



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## Recommendations

“I’d sunk. I lost all my confidence, began suffering from anxiety, put on weight, and stopped going out. It felt like it was all over. I am a different person now with a whole new set of skills that make me totally employable.”

– *ReachUp programme participant*<sup>37</sup>

### Investment in youth work requires political prioritisation

Ministers and other politicians must lead from the front. Some of the most enduring and well-funded preventative programmes – such as Sure Start, launched by New Labour, and the Supporting Families Programme from the coalition – have benefited from high-level political support.

That support served a number of purposes. First, it provided the necessary impetus for the government to launch them in the first place. Second, political support meant that those programmes were able to weather early questions about their performance. Some of the first evaluations of both Sure Start and the Supporting Families Programme found that they were not making sufficient progress towards their goals; without political support, those evaluations might have sounded the death knell for those programmes. Instead, they carried on and delivered more favourable results over the following years.

Money follows political support. At a national level, increased investment in youth work will require high-level buy-in from the prime minister, chancellor or, ideally, both. At a local level, council leaders can play a similar role.

There are some positive examples of political prioritisation of youth work. As mayor of London, Sadiq Khan has supported youth work, including creating a youth worker-led mentorship programme for young people, which has led to the creation of more than 100,000 mentors.<sup>38</sup>

**“Youth services are key preventative measures, proven to help young people realise their potential. Every single young person deserves access to these services.”** – *Blu, young person*<sup>39</sup>

It is possible that there will be a change in approach at a national level. During the general election campaign, Labour committed to creating a network of ‘youth hubs’ as part of its Young Futures programme. It also committed to increasing funding to employ more youth workers in accident and emergency units and pupil referral units.<sup>40</sup> However, it is still unclear who owns this agenda within government and whether it will be prioritised. There is a risk that, now in power, Labour falls into the same trap as the last government when designing preventative policy: relying on highly targeted, centrally designed programmes rather than funding local areas to design the most appropriate programmes for their populations.

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## Prevention should be embedded into the spending framework

A government committed to taking a preventative approach will want, over time, to substantially increase preventative spending. But doing so will, of course, not be cost free, and will require making trade-offs between spending, taxation and borrowing. The government should restructure decision making on public spending to encourage this shift. To do this:

1. The Treasury should publicly set out criteria for what it believes constitutes 'preventative spending'.
2. Government departments should then propose which service areas or programmes meet that definition, as part of a spending review process.
3. The Treasury and the Cabinet Office should then encourage joint spending bids from departments, as many preventative programmes will require cross-departmental working.
4. The Treasury should determine which bids meet its prevention definition and propose funding allocations in line with that.
5. The prime minister and chancellor should agree to ring-fence that funding, with departments and other public bodies able to shift spending between different preventative programmes – but not outside them.
6. The Treasury and the Cabinet Office should then develop a cross-government prevention strategy, which includes the final decision about which programmes to include in the definition and should be published alongside the spending review. This would also include details on how other policies not captured within a spending definition, such as regulation changes, would contribute towards meeting the government's prevention objectives.
7. Finally, the Treasury should fund thorough evaluations of this preventative spending to build the evidence base.

For youth work specifically, it would help to come to a more concrete and comprehensive spending definition. The amounts discussed above are the totals that local authorities spend on youth work. But that only captures approximately a quarter of the estimated £2bn that is spent on the service in total.<sup>41</sup> The rest of the spending comes from the wider public sector, charitable income, commercial sources and payments by families. A first step to ensuring that youth work is sufficiently funded is to demonstrate the total that is spent and encourage government to protect that amount.

Similar work to understand and protect preventative spending should be undertaken locally. As discussed below, central government could support this by giving local areas greater freedom to design and deliver services.

Youth work providers trying to make the case locally for increased spending on youth work should consider the financial pressures local authorities are under. In particular, the pressure to spend more of their budgets on the most acute, demand-led services

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such as adult and children's social care, homelessness, and special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) provision.<sup>42</sup> Providers may want to make the case for funding in the context of those pressures.

They could, for example, offer evidence of how investment in youth work reduces demand for the more expensive acute services that local authorities provide. And if the benefit accrues to a different part of the public sector – for example, NHS mental health services – they could encourage those services to either subsidise or at least argue for co-funding with local authorities.

### **Adjust the performance framework**

The government should translate its high-level priorities into a clear performance framework, using interim metrics of success when outcomes may take years to materialise. This framework should build on the existing outcome delivery plan (ODP) system.<sup>43</sup>

Key to this is a clear theory for change. This should articulate how practitioners and supporters of youth work expect their programme to change the lives of young people, and what would indicate that they are making progress towards those metrics.

The government should then track progress against those metrics and be open about successes and failures. This should include proper funding of high-quality, long-term evaluations.

### **Support local areas to design and deliver services**

Some of the best examples of a preventative approach to public services have come from innovation on the front line of services. That makes sense. Local leaders are usually better placed than others in government to understand the needs of those living in their area. But too often disincentives in the system – for example, a blame culture that punishes those trying new things – and rising acute pressure mean that local areas find it difficult to protect and shift more funding towards preventative services like youth work.

The government should create the conditions that allow more local areas to innovate and provide the kind of youth work that they think is most appropriate. This should include:

- Longer term, more certain funding settlements for local authorities and other service providers
- Reducing ring-fencing around small pots of money, but putting a broad ring-fence around areas of spending that local areas can use for preventative services
- Designing financial flows that incentivise preventative services like youth work
- Supporting joined-up learning between allied professionals working with young people.

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## Create a more effective accountability and learning system at the local level

Central government can improve local accountability by reforming the Office for Local Government into an Office for Government Improvement and Learning (OGIL) – to enable local and central government to hold one another to account. Key to this would be a beefed-up peer review process and improved information sharing mechanisms to spread lessons from effective innovation.

Local government should also be able to hold central government to account. Youth work policy making is currently far too fragmented across central government. As a result, local authorities often receive duplicated or conflicting guidance for what is expected of them. The development of Labour’s mission-led approach to governing is still relatively nascent, but potentially offers an opportunity for central government to design policy more effectively across departmental silos. OGIL could play a role in highlighting poor practice in central government.

## Conclusion

Most of the changes recommended in this briefing could, with committed leadership, be implemented fairly quickly. If so, the new government could start to reap the financial and political benefits of doing so before the next election. But most importantly – for citizens, as well as future governments – the impact of these changes would be felt for decades through the slowed growth in acute demand for services, and in the happier, healthier lives of millions.

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