

Guidance for Local Authorities on Providing Youth Services



October 2020

A guide to the statutory duty and sufficient levels of local youth services

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Youth workers play an important role in supporting young people and youth services provide an essential service.¹ This report summarises recommendations for local authorities on providing these services, in line with statutory guidance. It should be used by local authorities, commissioned services, voluntary sector providers and young people to secure youth services that meet young people's needs, and to be sustainable over the long term.

This guidance is published by National Youth Agency (NYA), as the professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) for youth work and youth services in England, to provide greater clarity and consistency for the understanding of local authorities' statutory duty to secure and support access to quality local youth services.

To fulfil the statutory duty requires increased government funding, ring-fenced by local authorities and within local youth partnerships. There are great variations between local authorities on current levels, or lack, of youth services. Therefore, this guidance sets out the practical and reasonable steps a local authority should take to level-up youth services whether they are directly delivered, funded or independent of the local authority.

Key Summary

- i. There is a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient youth services in their area.**

This guidance focuses on the positive role local authorities can play in the provision of those services. A priority for all local authorities should be to strengthen and maintain the quality of youth services to support young people's wellbeing. Government is expected to hold local authorities to account where services are not functioning to a sufficient level and base-line of quality provision.
- ii. Universal, open-access youth services ensure a base-level of quality provision for all young people.**

Universal youth services should be accessible in community settings, with clear pathways to targeted or specialist provision. Local authorities must publish a clear statement of what a sufficient youth offer is (activities and services) in their area and an index of current provision. School catchment areas provide a proxy to ensure access at a local level. The focus should be on the level and quality of services, in line with NYA guidance, **not** whether a youth service is delivered.
- iii. As the national body (PSRB), NYA sets standards for youth services' quality and sufficiency.**

Each service requires at least two full-time equivalent, professional qualified youth workers located in each secondary school catchment area for access, with a team of at least four youth support workers (level 3) and assistants (level 2), alongside skilled volunteers with relevant training, including safeguarding. This will be supported by a youth workforce strategy for recruitment and training across local authority, voluntary and community sector organisations and other agencies as part of that offer.
- iv. Upper tier local authorities hold the duty and need to ensure planning is not undertaken in isolation.**

They should include other authorities, agencies and services in their area, bringing together the public, private, voluntary and community sector. To be effective this requires a ten-year strategy and a six-year planning cycle to secure a sufficient baseline of youth services and qualified workforce, sustained over the long term. This includes alignment of government funding over that period.
- v. There needs to be an annual plan to ensure access, resources and accountability for youth services.**

Planning for youth services should be based on universal access, of which 80% of young people will be in contact with youth services, some 35% will interact on a regular basis, and 10% supported by targeted, specialist youth services. This may be adjusted to increase the level of contact and regular use a part of a local authority strategy for youth services, inclusive of open-access services directly delivered, commissioned by or run independently from the local authority.
- vi. Robust data needs to support a public health approach for young people's wellbeing.**

Typically funded for young people 13-19 years of age and up to 24 years for those with learning difficulties, youth services are regularly accessed and need to plan for use by young people from ages 8 and 11 years old. Further consideration should be given to a continuum of provision for all young people up to 24 years of age, aligned to other services.
- vii. Youth services must include the active involvement of young people in decision-making.**

Meaningful engagement of young people in the co-production, location and delivery of services is essential to ensure access, relevance and regular use of youth services.

Additional resources are available from the Local Government Association and National Youth Agency to support quality standards, commissioning, participation, a youth work curriculum and outcomes frameworks for young people and youth services.

1. Statutory guidance

As the national body for youth work, NYA is providing additional guidance to clarify expectations for local authorities and provided youth services. There are exceptional circumstances currently of COVID-19. However, the pandemic also amplifies the needs of young people and the essential role of youth services. Therefore this guidance aims to focus attention on **the positive role local authorities can play in the provision of youth services**, as part of the local budget-setting and planning cycle, and to inform the government's Spending Review.

In 2020–21, the government is reviewing statutory guidance for local authorities on providing youth services, related to Section 507B of the Education Act (1996), as amended by the Education and Inspections Act (2006), which sets government expectations for (upper tier) local authorities when securing services and activities for people aged 13 to 19, and those up to age 24 with learning difficulties, with the purpose of improving young people's well-being. Consultation was issued from October to December 2019, but government review has been delayed due to COVID-19. However, **there remains a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient youth services in their respective areas**.

Every local authority in England must, 'so far as reasonably practicable', secure for qualifying young persons in the authority's area access to:

- a) Sufficient educational leisure-time activities which are for the improvement of their well-being, and sufficient facilities for such activities; and,
- b) Sufficient recreational leisure-time activities which are for the improvement of their well-being, and sufficient facilities for such activities.²

Since this duty was last reviewed in 2012, there have been many changes to how youth services are delivered and funded. This period has seen a 70% reduction in youth service spending by local authorities. It is left to local authorities to decide what constitutes 'sufficient' youth services provisions and to consider the needs of young people within their areas, where 'sufficient' is judged in terms of quantity. The term 'reasonably practicable' is described as 'depending on the specific circumstances of the local authority', including, 'its resources, capabilities and other priorities'. This is considered in the context of COVID-19 in section 3 clarified in section 6, below.

Many elected representatives, supported by the Local Government Association, are keen to see the statutory guidance clarified and to secure resources for greater levels of youth service provision. Just as local authorities are accountable to secure sufficient school places in their area, they must also ensure access to quality youth services. This, in turn, supports the community fabric upon which voluntary sector youth services can thrive. However, without significant investment, youth services – vital lifelines for many vulnerable or disadvantaged young people, which have been **recognised as essential, key services in response to COVID-19** – are under threat.

2. Access to quality youth services

Youth services provide peer-group activities and trusted relationships, supported by professionally qualified youth workers and skilled volunteers. They harness the skills of young people not fulfilled by formal education and provide safe places for young people to learn together, be supported, and to have fun. There is a great heritage of voluntary provisions services alongside local authority delivered or commissioned services. This collective impact ensures that no young person is 'left behind'.

With 85% of a young person's waking hours spent outside of school and formal education, where the loss of youth services is pronounced, vulnerable young people in particular are falling prey to loneliness, poor mental health and fear of youth violence or at risk of exploitation. In areas investing in youth services, we see a positive commitment to young people's inclusion in decision-making, community engagement and increased life skills.

Universal, open-access youth services are important to ensure there is a base-level of quality provision for all young people. Open-access services provide early help as an essential part of a public health approach for young people's well-being. This includes community-based support and prevention in areas such as youth violence, school exclusions and mental health, and providing a vital bridging role between families, multi-agency working, wider partnerships and community groups.

Youth services provide safe spaces and activities that young people need, want and value; with additional support provided for more disadvantaged young people to access leisure activities and learning experiences from which they would otherwise be excluded.

Under the statutory duty or guidance, there is no standard for the level or type of youth services that should be evident in a local authority area. However, a national inquiry and cross-party report (April 2019)³ called for **a minimum level of youth services on a per head of youth population basis**, and to establish a clear baseline and core funding to ensure access to quality youth services in a local authority area. The government review of current statutory guidance was launched following this report. The baseline for local youth services is set out in section 5, below.

Local conditions mean that producing a one-size-fits-all description for what offered services look like on the ground will be of limited value. Therefore, a local authority should specifically consider whether its current provision in its area, through all providers not necessarily run or funded by a local authority, is sufficient to meet the needs of young people. If not, the local authority is failing in its duty. **Government must be prepared to intervene where services are not functioning at a sufficient level** by providing the resources and funding necessary for ensuring that a provision is sustainable. This requires significant investment in 'upstream', open-access and targeted youth services in response to COVID-19 and as part of the government's spending review.

3. The impact of COVID-19

COVID-19 exacerbated the challenges faced by young people and risks intensifying vulnerabilities and inequalities that can last a generation. It has highlighted the loss or reduction of youth services in local authority areas across the country, as cited in recent cross-party reports and inquiries, and has been identified as a factor in young people's declining wellbeing, particularly concerning mental health, loneliness, youth violence and exploitation. For over a decade, local authority budgets have been increasingly consumed by statutory services like social care. Meanwhile, we risk placing too many demands on schools and colleges and increasing burdens on formal statutory services that are unable to cope with spiralling demand.

A priority for all local authorities should be to strengthen and maintain youth services, where it is safe to do so within government guidelines, through the pandemic.⁴ These services directly support young people in their communities, wrap-around services for schools and colleges, and peer groups to engage in activities that build skills and employability. Additionally, they can provide public health education and safety messages concerning COVID-19. Youth services also provide early intervention or the prevention of social care involvement. It should be rare and exceptional for youth workers to be redeployed within a local authority area plan, and local authorities will be accountable for such decisions.

Robust data supports a public health approach for young people's well-being to secure youth services across population cohorts at an upper-tier, local authority level. This includes impact and a framework of outcomes for young people. The nature and type of delivery will vary by location within the priorities identified by local needs to adapt and build on current youth services. After cuts exceeding 70% by local authorities in less than a decade, and at a time of increased need and demand for youth services, it is not reasonable to further cut such services. However, during this pandemic, when provisions are most needed, over one-million young people have gone missing from youth services.⁵

Too many young people have had little or no contact with youth workers while living in potentially risky and unsafe environments outside of school or college. Simultaneously, the scale of needs has increased three-fold. There are over one-million young people with known needs and vulnerabilities that have been amplified by the pandemic, and an estimated two million with emerging needs triggered or caused by COVID-19.⁶

4. Scale and reach

Planning for youth services should be based on 100% universal access of which 80% will be in contact with youth services, 35% will interact on a regular basis, and 10% will be supported by targeted, specialist youth services. This is inclusive of youth services directly delivered, commissioned by or run independently from the local authority in their area. **An estimated two-million young people take part in a youth service at least once a week**, including youth clubs, uniformed organisations and other organised community groups, which equates to over one-third (35%) of young people within the secondary education age range (ages 11–19).

The statutory duty and guidance currently covers those aged 13 to 19 years, and those up to 24 with learning difficulties. This has been the basis upon which many youth services have been funded. However, youth services usually cover all young people within the secondary education age range (ages 11–19) for planning per head of youth population. Further consideration should be given to the accessibility of youth services for those as young as 8 years old, closely aligned to children’s services for adolescents. Additional consideration may be given to a continuum of provisions for individuals up to 24 years old that might include community-based volunteering, advice and counselling, and employment services co-located in community hubs, colleges and job centres (youth hubs).

5. A sufficient level of youth services

Just as local authorities are accountable for securing sufficient school places in their respective areas, they need to ensure access to quality youth services. **Local authorities must publish a clear statement of what a sufficient youth work offer is for activities and services in their area and how they plan to secure it.**

For assessing current and future demands for youth services, local authorities can use pupil planning areas that provide information about the number of registered pupils and the capacity of schools in their respective areas. This supports access to local youth services in a geographically defined area that is already the basis for local authority planning to secure sufficient school places, and by which other determinant facts can be calculated by households and population, including levels of deprivation and need. Whereas current guidance considers a sufficient level of service activity on a quantitative basis, to be effective, the **quality** of local services needs to be ensured through the application of standards for qualifications, training and skills, including safeguarding and volunteers. The quality of activities available should include young people in determining what constitutes a sufficient level of local service offerings.

Each youth service requires that at least two, full-time equivalent professionals who are JNC qualified youth workers be located in a secondary school catchment area, along with an equivalent team of at least four youth support workers, and trained volunteers, to ensure minimum access to quality youth services.

Like schools that have a clear structure of professional roles and ratios – of senior management, teachers, teaching assistants and supporting services like specialist teachers and school counsellors – there should be standard expectations for the ratio of professional youth workers, volunteers and other professionals with youth work skills. NYA Practice Standards should be applied to all local provisions supported by a local authority.

The creation of secure and permanent, full-time, JNC-qualified youth work positions is a national priority which requires government funding, training bursaries, work placements and employment opportunities. That needs to be matched with a full-time equivalence of part-time staff, split 30:70 between qualified youth workers and youth support workers (level 3) and assistants (level 2). This can be augmented by volunteer youth workers, following appropriate safeguarding and skills supported through the youth service.

To fulfil the statutory duty all local authorities should produce a clear index of current open-access provisions across local authority, voluntary, community and private sector providers. This can be achieved through a local audit of such provision to support a place-based approach, alongside a public health approach, to improve young people’s wellbeing.

Statistics on the numbers of young people should be published, alongside the capacity of professional, qualification-led youth services in each area, including population forecasts. Robust data across population cohorts requires an intersection of needs by gender, race and ethnicity, disabilities and other protected characteristics that are essential for removing barriers and creating opportunities for all, without discrimination or geographical inequalities. NYA is committed to a national census of youth work and youth services that will require support from government and local authorities. Further resources and quality standards are provided by NYA as the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body for youth services in England; see section 7, below.

6. Reasonable and practicable implementation

Each local authority area is starting from a different baseline. In many areas, there is little or no direct service provided by the local authority for open-access youth services, nor (for some) employment of qualified youth workers for universal, targeted or specialist services. Many areas will nonetheless have a vibrant voluntary and community sector providing services and support to young people. There is often an interdependence between voluntary youth services and local, authority-commissioned services or small grant funding, which can provide an incomplete patchwork of such services within a local authority area. A consistent approach that reflects local needs and priorities is required to secure high-quality universal, open-access youth services.

Local authorities retain statutory responsibility and will therefore set the direction of local youth services, including the location where youth services are delivered, and how services are commissioned or funded. This can include cross-sector work and funding from other agencies, such as health, sports, leisure, policing, education and housing organisations. That approach should be supported by a government commitment to and strategy for youth services including, for example, a public health approach to young people's well-being, for cross-departmental support, high level reporting and accountability to Parliament.

For sustained youth services designed to last beyond the funding cycles of specific programmes or local authority terms of office, there should be **a minimum ten year strategy for supporting and sustaining open-access youth services and a six year plan to secure and grow those services**. This supports the current guidance, which covers young people aged 13 to 19 years, and recognises incremental increases in regular use of services by young people from ages 8 and 11 years. To be effective the local authority must work with regional youth work units, local youth partnerships of voluntary and community organisations providing services and support in their area.

The requirement of an annual plan will account for what is reasonably practicable within the delivery of the ten-year strategy, for year-to-year adjustments based on needs-assessments, and for current provisions and resources. However, where budgets and resources may be constrained, the local authority has a duty to secure youth services 'for qualifying young persons' in its area. This ensures that planning is not undertaken in isolation from other agencies and services. **There should only be exceptional circumstances where it is not practicable for local authorities to secure services due to insufficient 'capabilities and other priorities'**.

The recommended sufficiency level represents the core baseline for guaranteeing access to quality youth services, facilities, staffing ratios, training and employment. This includes opening career pathways and volunteer opportunities across a diverse range of providers that are necessary for an ecosystem of community-based youth work to flourish. It aligns closely with wider provisions and interventions linked to schools, health services and council wards, contributing to the development of multi-agency working and partnerships with community groups, including out-of-school provisions. This also provides for a democratically accountable community base, ensuring access to quality youth services down to a neighbourhood level.

In determining what is reasonably practicable to secure a sufficient level of youth services, there are some guiding principles for making the most effective use of all available funding and assets, alongside young people themselves.

Guiding principles

- **There must be an annual plan with clear statements** regarding who is setting out to achieve what aims, set against a statement of the use of both local/national government and voluntary sector resources.
- Local authorities need to ensure that **planning is not undertaken in isolation from other agencies and services** to ensure access, resources and accountability for shared outcomes and collective impact for young people by bringing together public, private, voluntary and community sectors to secure youth services.
- **Services should be easily available via universal, open-access settings** with clear pathways to targeted or specialised provisions for increasing uptake and minimising stigma.
- Local authorities, in partnership with voluntary sector organisations or local youth partnerships, should determine how best to use resources and **secure longer term, ring-fenced funding** to achieve desired outcomes.
- This must include **active involvement from young people in the co-production of services** that are accessible, reaching beyond current service users to ensure the greatest relevance and meaningful engagement.
- To secure access to quality youth services, there should be a **clear recognition and consistent application of standards** for qualifications, training and skills for the professional and volunteer youth workforce.
- Furthermore, there is **an outcomes framework for young people to support planning and delivery of services**, published by the Centre for Youth Impact and Local Government Association. This framework is adopted by NYA as the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) for youth work in England.
- Implementation of the 2020 National Curriculum for Youth Work should be ensured through the local authorities' duty to ensure sufficient youth services for vulnerable young people.

Nationally securing open-access youth services that are sustained over the long term requires a realignment of government funding that can be locally ring-fenced. This will provide for educational leisure-time activities that are complementary to formal education and statutory services, and for the improvement of their well-being. Meanwhile the duty to secure youth services is held by upper-tier local authorities.

To guide local decision-making there should be a 10-year strategy, 6-year plan and annual statement on the use of both government and voluntary resources. It would be reasonable to expect some variance from year to year in particular as we emerge from the pandemic and challenges from the global recession that has impacted the capacity of local authorities. However the focus of what is reasonably practicable should be on the level of services, in line with NYA guidance, **not** whether a youth service is delivered.

To secure access to quality youth services may require:

- More digital youth services in some areas to ensure 100% access and 80% contact for young people.
- Consideration of transport links and the location of youth services to ensure access, particularly where secondary schools' catchment areas may overlap.
- Opening community facilities as part of the renewal of high streets - not on the outskirts of communities - and, where appropriate, use of school and college sites.
- Priority for youth services where there is greatest need, like neighbourhoods representing the lowest 40% of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).
- Scaling up existing provision services in some areas, including voluntary services and other providers to train and recruit JNC qualified youth workers
- Making provision to up-skill volunteers and to employ or help secure placements for youth work apprenticeships, including use of schemes like the Apprenticeship Levy and youth work bursaries.
- Capital projects could consider refurbishment, co-location and use of community assets and facilities not requiring new or purpose-built youth centres in each local area.

7. Conclusion

When young people feel valued and see the difference made in their communities and their lives, they experience a greater sense of belonging, leading to a more cohesive society. As a nation we need a clear commitment for young people to be safe and secure, treated fairly, confident in and ambitious for their future. As the national body for youth work in England,

NYA is calling for a bold and ambitious plan for youth services, with increased government funding and ring-fenced by local authorities and within local youth partnerships. To maximise opportunities for young people, it is necessary to invest in 'upstream', open-access youth services that will have a significant impact on improvement outcomes and life chances, with long-term savings.

Resources

National Youth Agency

[A Guide to Commissioning Outcomes for Young People](#)

[Providing Quality Services for Young People](#)

[Hear By Right youth participation and practice](#)

[Education and Training Standards for Youth Work](#)

[Youth Work Curriculum 2020](#)

[Managing Youth Sector Activities and Spaces During COVID-19](#)

Local Government Association

[Six Key Principles for Effective Youth Services](#)

[LGA Must Know For Youth Services](#)

Centre for Youth Impact

[A Framework of Outcomes for Young People](#)

References

¹ NYA is the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) for youth work and services in England. This includes professional qualifications and national occupational standards [“youth work”] and services for young people in their personal, social and educational development [“youth services”], across a diverse range of services, providers and settings where professionals and volunteers work with young people [“youth workers”] through the developmental phase between childhood and adulthood [“youth” or “adolescence”]. See www.nya.org.uk

² Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities on Services and Activities to Improve Young People’s Well-being; this is statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State for Education under Section 507B of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.


³ All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs, year-long youth work inquiry, final report (April 2019).


⁴ NYA Managing youth sector activities and spaces during COVID-19.

⁵ Youth Sector Standard: developed by Centre for Youth Impact (CYI) with NYA and other partners to gather consistent data and generate shared insight across the youth sector as a whole.

⁶ NYA produced a series of reports and evidence through COVID-19, including ‘Out of Sight? Vulnerable young people: COVID-19’, April 2020.

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