

A youth work response to COVID-19: July 2020

Call to mobilise youth workers as key workers

Youth workers have an important role to play in supporting young people. This report summarises key recommendations and the latest research carried out by the National Youth Agency (NYA) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. It calls for lessons to be learned as we emerge from national lockdown, in response to local lockdowns and for sustained support to secure youth services for young people over the long term.

Just at the time when they were needed the most, many youth work projects stopped or become severely restricted due to lockdown. A surveyⁱ of 177 youth organisations revealed more than 300,000 young people have gone off the radar, no longer accessing any form of provision or activity during lockdown. Scaled up to encompass the whole youth sector, this translates to **over one million young people**.

Youth services and activities are only now emerging gradually from lockdown, still heavily restricted in activities they are permitted to carry out with young people under emergency measures and social distancingⁱⁱ. This leaves too many young people at home, out of sight of school and formal services and little or no contact with youth workers in potentially unsafe environments.

We need more youth work, not less. There are over one million young people with known needs that have been amplified by the pandemicⁱⁱⁱ and up to 500,000 young people known to be involved or vulnerable to gangs^{iv}, with real fears for an increase in gang activity and child criminal exploitation as the country emerges from lockdown^v.

In the absence of clear, joined-up government guidance opportunities are being missed to support much needed summer activities in local communities, schools and colleges^{vi}. Without significant investment youth services - a vital lifeline for many vulnerable or disadvantaged young people - are under threat.

Nationally one in five of youth clubs and services will not re-open, more in some regions^{vii}. In turn, too many qualified youth workers were furloughed by youth charities or redeployed to other jobs from local authority youth services, and there are trusted adult volunteers who would normally be helping youth clubs and local groups which are closed. Meanwhile the scale of local authority spending cuts in the wake of lockdown also raises fears for the funding of youth services and the financial sustainability of youth and community groups.

To secure youth services, Government guidance needs to classify youth services as an essential service and mobilise youth workers as part of a clear plan to re-open schools, colleges and alternative provision, and to support vulnerable young people over the summer.

To mobilise youth workers, this must be emboldened by guidance from the Department for Education, Home Office and Ministry for Housing and Local Government to provide clarity on key worker status for youth workers by schools, violence reduction units and local authorities.

NYA is calling for:

- 1. A cross-departmental response from the Government to recognise youth services and as an essential service to provide support to the most vulnerable young people alongside other statutory services, violence reduction units and local authority resilience hubs.**
- 2. Clarity in guidance to classify youth workers as 'key workers'; with significant investment in training and up-skilling of youth workers and trusted adult volunteers in response to COVID-19, including on safeguarding, trauma, bereavement and mental health.**
- 3. An urgent package of support to deploy youth workers for summer activities, the local engagement of youth work professionals alongside schools and detached youth work to take place in parks and open spaces as an adjunct to policing.**
- 4. The mobilisation and up-skilling of trusted adult volunteers, including safeguarding training, and young people as youth support workers making use of government bursaries (Level 1 to 3) and the apprenticeship levy.**
- 5. A Youth Service Guarantee for at least two qualified youth workers and a team of youth support workers for each secondary school catchment area. This can be underpinned by opening up professional learning and career pathways in teaching, social work, policing and youth work.**
- 6. The inclusion of young people with their voices heard in the evidence, decision-making and response to COVID-19, to be treated fairly and ambitious for their future.**

Anne Longfield, Children's Commissioner for England

Over two million children in England are living with a vulnerable family background and over half are at tricky stages in their adolescent lives. Many more have had their lives turned upside down by COVID-19. That's why it's so important to recognise youth workers as key workers, mobilised to reach out to vulnerable young people to provide support and an essential life line during these turbulent times.

Leigh Middleton, NYA CEO

Youth work provides a safe space for young people to go to, things to do and someone to talk to who knows what is needed. Youth services must be enabled, empowered and up-skilled to do more to meet the immediate needs of vulnerable young people through the pandemic and the challenges from the global recession.

As we emerge from lockdown the scale of the task requires the mobilisation of youth workers and related professionals, supported by an army of skilled volunteers and safeguarding training, to make sure those young people have the help they need to recover, make sound choices and get ahead in life. Anything less is selling our young people short.

NYA is the national body for youth work in England (Professional, Statutory & Regulatory Body). For more information visit www.nya.org.uk

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Notes:

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

A survey was carried out with 177 youth organisations April to mid-June 2020, when youth sector activities were coded 'Red' and restricted to permitted levels of online, detached and 1-2-1 sessions with high need young people (outdoors only). 68% reported that more than half of their provision had stopped or paused in lockdown - for 40%, this was 'most' or 'all'. 68% of respondents reported that they were engaging less than half of the young people they had been prior to lockdown. This equates to 300,000 young people no longer accessing any form of provision or activity they had been prior to lockdown, which scales up to over 1 million young people for the sector as a whole.

ⁱⁱ NYA, 'Managing youth sector activities and spaces during COVID-19', regular updates; 'Amber Aware', July 2020

ⁱⁱⁱ NYA 'Out of Sight?', April 2020:

There are over one million young people with known needs that have been amplified by the pandemic and an estimated two million young people with emerging needs triggered or caused by COVID-19, and many more with hidden or unforeseen consequences from the pandemic.

^{iv} NYA, 'Hidden In Plain Sight', May 2020:


500,000 young people are in groups exposed to 'risky behaviour' associated with gangs; 300,000 young people know someone in a gang; 60,000 young people (aged 10-17) identify as a gang member or know a gang member who is a relative.

^v NYA, 'Hidden In Plain Sight', May 2020


^{vi} NYA, 'Time Out', June 2020

^{vii} NYA, 'Out of Sight?', April 2020; UK Youth and Young Manchester surveys, April 2020

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