

Youth services at breaking point

Introduction

Youth services are crucial to communities across the UK. By building trusting and supportive relationships with young people, helping them make decisions about their lives, and developing their confidence and resilience, youth workers and youth support workers are invaluable in ensuring young people can play a positive role in society.

These services also prevent a variety of problems occurring further down the line, which saves other parts of the public sector and the wider economy large amounts of money. Youth services help with employment, training and education, potential mental health issues, and act to prevent alcohol and substance abuse, as well as crime and anti-social behaviour.

But the UK's youth services have come under repeated attack since 2010, and new research carried out by UNISON reveals the situation isn't improving.

Between 2010 and 2016, an estimated £387 million was axed from youth services across the UK. By the end of the current financial year (2018/19), there will have been a further £13.3m cut, with the loss of nearly 900 youth workers, and the closure of 160 youth centres.

This means that between 2010 and 2019, youth services will have suffered cuts of £400m. This is a colossal amount of money, and will have meant the loss of more than 4,500 youth work jobs and more than 760 youth centres since 2012.

Background to the research

In September 2018, UNISON issued a freedom of information (FoI) request to all local authorities in the UK that provide youth services – county councils, unitary authorities, metropolitan authorities, and London boroughs. The FoI asked what has happened to youth services in the years 2016/17 and 2017/18, and in the current financial year (2018/19). Questions covered budgets, staffing levels and youth centres. Of the relevant local authorities, 101 responses were received.

This report is the latest in a long-running series of UNISON investigations into the state of the UK's youth services. We reported on similar FoI requests in 2016 (covering 2014-16) and in 2014 (covering 2012-14), and also carried out research into cuts over the 2010-12 period. This means we have almost a decade of data about the state of youth services since the coalition took power in 2010.

Findings

Across the three financial years covering 2016-19, youth service budgets have been cut by £13.3m. Combined with data from UNISON's previous research, a total of £400m has been cut from youth services since 2010.

Table 1: Total cuts in youth service spending 2010-19

2010/11	2011/12	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Total 2010-19
£62m	£137m	£41m	£24m	£85m	£38m	£4m	£6m	£3m	£400m

What funding cuts mean

Between 2012 and 2016, 3,652 local authority youth work jobs were lost. Between 2016 and 2019, a further 892 jobs have disappeared. This means that 4,544 jobs have been axed from local authority youth services between 2012 and 2019.

At least 160 youth centres have closed their doors between 2016 and 2019. Combined with the 603 that shutdown between 2012 and 2016, at least 763 youth centres have disappeared since 2012.

Although these cuts have taken place right across the UK, some regions have been hit particularly hard. In the South West, more than 30 youth centres have closed, with the loss of over 200 jobs. The North West, South East and West Midlands all saw 20 or more youth centres go, while the North East, South East and Yorkshire & Humberside areas each lost more than 100 youth work jobs.

Table 2: The collapse of youth services in the UK, 2012-19

	2012/13	2013/14	2014/15	2015/16	2016/17	2017/18	2018/19	Total 2012-19
Youth work jobs lost	1,126	864	894	768	431	245	217	4,544
Youth centres closed	175	184	126	118	64	65	31	763

What youth workers are saying...

In June 2018, UNISON carried out a survey of 21,000 local government workers around the extent and impact of the cuts. A total of 310 youth workers responded.

Key findings:

- Less than one in five (17%) think the quality of services has improved in the past two years
- Just half (53%) think that the council is delivering quality services
- Seven in ten (73%) say local residents don't receive the help and support they need at the right time
- Nine in ten (90%) say cuts have an impact on their work
- More than four in five (84%) are not confident about the future of local services
- A similar number (82%) say jobs have been cut
- Seven in ten (71%) aren't confident in the financial situation of their employer
- More than half (53%) are thinking about leaving their job for something less stressful
- Two in five (41%) are thinking about leaving their job for better paid work
- Seven in ten (74%) don't feel secure in their job
- A similar number (70%) are working beyond their contracted hours.

The findings suggest young people are increasingly being put at risk by the cuts, as these youth workers who responded to the survey explain:

"Premises have been significantly cut so many young people aren't aware how to access the service, leaving many of them potentially at risk."

Liverpool

"Children's centres and youth services have been closed down for a few years so early intervention support is no longer available. The early help team now only does targeted work and high-end work for families already in crisis. We see more families reaching crisis point, whereas a few years ago support would have been offered much sooner to prevent situations reaching that point. This is about to get much worse as there are huge cuts on the way. Up to 70% of the early help team will be made redundant."

Solihull

"More young people are suffering with mental health issues and it is escalating. More are taking their own lives and local authorities cannot respond. This is because they don't have the funding to employ and deliver a universal accessible service. As a result CAMHS [Community and Adolescent Mental Health Services] are relying on local authority targeted services to carry out work that staff aren't qualified to deliver."

Sutton

UNISON's vision for the future

Radical change is needed if youth services are to be saved and allowed to flourish. UNISON would like to see:

Fair and full funding for youth services

The government has cut funding to youth services by £400m since 2010, which means spending on local authority youth services is a fraction of what it was a decade ago. This is no surprise given the billions of pounds of central government funding that has been

withdrawn from local authorities. There needs to be an urgent review of the local government funding framework, and of the funding that goes into it. If austerity really is coming to an end as the government claims, it must ensure local authorities get the funding they need to carry out vital work immediately.

A statutory duty to provide youth services

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. As a result, real youth work is being lost. When youth services go, benefits to young people and communities are lost – along with the resulting savings in intervention services further down the line. Local authorities must have a genuine duty to provide universal, open access youth services, backed up by the necessary resources.

Listen to young people and staff

It's vital young people are involved in and consulted on decisions affecting the services they receive in order for them to be successful. Local authorities should trust their trained, experienced youth workers to provide in-house solutions. Youth services should be directly provided, not privatised or outsourced.