

## **Britain's Lost Generation**

### **Government cuts have shattered council youth services and left vulnerable youngsters exposed**

Council-run youth centres have been devastated by government cuts since 2010, with the scale of closures far higher than previously reported, research by UNISON has found.

Freedom of Information (Fol) requests have revealed that 1,243 council-run youth centres across England and Wales were closed between 2010-23. That's almost 500 more than recent estimates. Shockingly, more than four in ten (42%) local authorities admitted they had no council-run youth centre in their area by the end of 2022/23. Many had chosen to support statutory youth services (including the provision of youth centres) through outsourced agencies, or voluntary and private sector organisations.

UNISON's research exposes how youngsters have borne the brunt of local government cuts, leaving a 'lost generation' of youths without access to vital education support, leisure services and safe spaces.

Alongside Fol requests, UNISON has completed a detailed survey of youth services staff. This warns that service closures have left vulnerable youngsters across some of Britain's most-deprived communities isolated and exposed to a rising tide of mental health challenges, anti-social behaviour, drugs, gangs, knife crime and child sexual exploitation.

#### **Background**

Under the Education Act 1996, councils have a legal duty to "secure, so far as is reasonably practicable, sufficient provision of educational and recreational leisure-time activities for young people", and ensure youngsters shape local services. This youth-services duty previously ensured each generation of Britain's youngsters, and the staff and volunteers who assist them, were supported.

According to the Local Government Association (LGA), youth services provide young people with safe spaces, trusted relationships and stop them from being drawn into 'negative situations' such as crime or antisocial behaviour. Two recent Mercury Prize-winning musicians – Little Simz and Ezra Collective – have credited youth centres as crucial outlets for their creativity and development. Meanwhile, campaigns against knife crime and drugs, some led by UNISON members, have praised youth centres for reducing incidents and preventing young people from being lured into gangs.

Upfront investment in youth services, and the staff who provide them, also has an economic value. It helps stop demand for acute services further down the line, boosts education and employment opportunities, and improves mental health for young people.

But since the imposition of austerity begun by the Conservative-Liberal Democrat coalition in 2010, the government slashed council budgets, placing youth services under threat. Recent analysis by the Institute for Fiscal Studies showed council spending on youth services and Sure Start family centres fell by 67% – from £60 per head in 2010/11 to £20 per head in 2019/20. UNISON’s own research has revealed hundreds of thousands of youngsters now have no access to council-run services in their area.

Separately, the YMCA in England and Wales estimates 4,500 youth work jobs have been cut.

A lost generation of Britain’s youth – and the community-based staff who provide vital youth services – are among the biggest victims of government cuts and austerity.

### **How UNISON’s data and information was compiled**

UNISON is the largest union in local government, representing more than 300,000 workers at councils and schools across the UK.

The union sent Freedom of Information requests to the 173 councils with a responsibility to provide youth services across England and Wales – including London boroughs, counties, unitary authorities and metropolitan councils.

The data is based on two key questions:

- How many youth centres previously operated by councils were closed between 2010/11 and 2022/23?
- How many youth centres operated by councils were open at the end of the financial year 2022/23?

The union received the required information from all but two of the 173 relevant councils across England and Wales. Youth services across Scotland and Northern Ireland were not covered by the FoI requests.

Separately, UNISON undertook a qualitative survey of 80 youth services staff around the UK.

### **Top findings from Freedom of Information requests**

- At least 1,243 council-run youth centres were closed across England and Wales between 2010 and 2023. Just 581 council-run centres remained open at the start of April 2022-23.
- In England, 1,036 council-run youth centres were closed between 2010 and 2023. Just 480 remained open in April 2023.
- Across Wales, 207 council-run centres were closed between 2010 and 2023, while just 101 were still open in April 2023.
- A total of 72 local authorities (42%) across England and Wales provided no council-run youth centres by 2023. Of these 57 (33%) closed all their youth

centres between 2010 and 2023. The remainder either did not operate their own centres before this period or did not provide the information.

- Local authorities that no longer provided council-run services included urban Gateshead and Sefton – as well as entire counties, such as Staffordshire, Suffolk and Wiltshire.
- The councils that closed the most youth centres between 2010-23 were: Tower Hamlets (57\*), Gwynedd (49), Birmingham (42), Gateshead (37) and Staffordshire (32).

*(\* Note: Tower Hamlets has subsequently opened several youth centres since the cut-off point for the Fol data.)*

- The areas with the highest number of youth centre closures were Wales (207), West Midlands (201), South East (147), South West (141) and North West (132).
- All types of local authorities have closed significant numbers of youth centres. These include metropolitan councils (337 closures), unitary councils (302), county councils (275) and London boroughs (122).

### **Headline findings from staff testimonies**

UNISON also undertook a qualitative survey of 80 local government staff, including youth services workers. This revealed almost three-quarters (73%) of respondents worked at a council that had closed a youth centre since 2010.

Council staff who responded to the survey routinely warned that closing youth centres, and wider cuts to youth services, has left Britain's youngsters with few local facilities and positive role models, and with a greater exposure to isolation, anti-social behaviour and crime.

Below is a selection of responses to the key question every survey respondent was asked.

### **What council workers say are the consequences of youth centres being closed:**

*"There's been an increase in anti-social behaviour and other criminal activity. Young people are more vulnerable to child sexual exploitation. There are fewer chances to support young people in reaching their full potential."*

*"Many young people have nothing to keep them off the streets away from exploitation, away from potential violence at home. Knife crime has increased. Mental health has been hit due to less social interaction with positive peers and positive adults. Young people are increasingly isolated."*

*"Youngsters are losing their lives."*

*"Councils have routinely messed with youth work provision, leaving workers with nowhere to engage with young people. It's been highlighted by young people frequently."*

*“We’ve seen a large rise in young people being able to easily access substances such as cannabis, prescription medications and Class A drugs.”*

*“There’s an issue with safeguarding – not knowing where young people are. We’ve seen an increase in young people not attending school, and more exclusions. It’s led to a breakdown in community relations, youth offending is up and there are more young people who aren’t in education, employment or training. Bring our youth centres back, run by qualified youth workers.”*

*“Areas without youth centres have higher drugs and alcohol issues and anti-social behaviour is a problem.”*

*“Young people don’t receive early intervention around safeguarding issues, including mental health and abuse at home. Young carers are more isolated. And LGBTQ+ young people are left feeling more alone and at risk of abuse.”*

*“The community has lost a central part of its identity. All ages would mix and participate in community events. They’d see the work that young people had done with staff in planning and delivering those events. Young people felt valued but sadly, there’s been a loss of collective pride for the community.”*

### **Conclusions – what needs to happen now?**

Every young person in Britain should have access to youth services that support their education, offer a wide range of leisure facilities and opportunities to socialise in safe spaces, and develop their creative talents.

Council finances are under huge pressure due to structural underfunding from the UK government since 2010, but local authorities have a legal duty to offer youth services.

Many councils have outsourced responsibility for this statutory duty to agencies, voluntary sector bodies or the private sector. In key parts of the country. It’s meant the end of council-run youth services, just when the UK’s youngsters need local leaders and staff more than ever.

- UNISON is calling on the government to give financial settlements to local authorities that fully fund all locally delivered services without the need for any more of the deep and damaging cuts that have ravaged the UK’s youth services. For councils to have any hope of a firm footing, their future funding must be based on multi-year, long-term settlements. This would allow councils and staff to properly plan and deliver the services their communities need.
- Key to the future is a commitment to rebuild the UK’s crumbling and devastated youth-service infrastructure. The cuts since 2010 have left vast areas without any council-run facilities. There’s a real danger this will create a lost generation of young people isolated from society, vulnerable to exploitation and, through no fault of their own, unable to contribute to the wellbeing and future of their communities.

- Many councils have stopped employing youth workers which has led some universities to stop offering specific degrees related to their roles. That in turn has created a labour shortage for this crucial work. The government must focus resources on youth-service staffing, with relevant training and professional qualifications. That's the way to ensure every council area can create the community mentors of tomorrow and give the chance of a better future for all young people.

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