

Written evidence from OnSide [CCI0046]

About OnSide: OnSide is a national youth charity that works with local authorities, businesses, communities and local young people to build purpose-built youth centres that we call ‘Youth Zones’, in the UK’s most disadvantaged areas. We bring together young people and their community, local authorities and supporters from the private sector (including businesses and philanthropists) to fund and build each centre, with every Youth Zone staffed by skilled and dedicated youth workers. Every centre is open 7 days a week, including evenings, weekends and schools holidays and offers 20 activities each session, including sports, music and art. Alongside the universal offer, centres also provide targeted support both in house and through external specialist services, creating a seamless link between the Youth Zone and local services.

Generation Isolation: Young people’s lives outside school

OnSide believes that youth clubs and youth workers are an untapped solution to supporting young people with key challenges in life - *‘helping young people make friends and real-life connections; experience opportunities that build confidence and skills for adulthood and gain support from trusted youth workers to help them navigate challenges’*.

There are many reasons that can make a young person vulnerable to crime and exploitation and this includes having a low self-esteem or a lack of belonging. Findings from OnSide’s Generation Isolation annual report¹ (2024) included:

- 44% of young people reported high or very high feelings of loneliness
- 18% of young people spend most of their free time alone
- 48% of young people spend most of their free time in their bedroom.
- 76% of young people spend most of their free time on screens
- 24% of young people spend most of their free time on their smartphone, making it the most time consuming activity outside of school.
- 52% of young people that spend most time on their smartphone would like to reduce this.
- 51% of young people reported high or very high feelings of anxiety

With 85% of a young person’s time spent outside school, the experiences, opportunities and support they are provided during this time plays a vital role. When asked what one thing would improve their lives outside school, the response from young people was clear: Nearly a third (29%) want more affordable leisure activities, almost a quarter (24%) want more safe and fun places to socialise, and 16% want more opportunities to learn skills outside of school. Youth clubs offer all of these and more.

These results also supports findings from the Children’s Commissioner research on children’s involvement in the 2024 riots² that concluded children had identified a lack of youth activities, alongside poverty and limited employment opportunities as underlying vulnerabilities that must be addressed to protect young people from crime and exploitation.

Role of youth clubs/youth work in cohesion

Youth clubs can help young people develop social skills, build confidence, and feel more included in their community. A Youth Zone operates mainly from one centre, rather than having multiple, smaller sites in multiple locations. This is to encourage neutrality and accessibility, attracting young people from anywhere in the area or borough to attend and help them overcome any feelings they must stay within their local ‘territory’. It also means the centre is less likely to be dominated by a local clique or single cultural group and supports community cohesion across the area, from all walks of life, genders and age groups.

Findings from OnSide’s Network Impact Report (2023)³ found:

- 73% of our members feel less isolated from attending a Youth Zone
- A 14% increase in young people’s cohesion as a result of attending open sessions

¹ [Generation Isolation: OnSide's Youth Research 2024 - OnSide](#)

² [Children’s involvement in the 2024 riots | Children's Commissioner for England](#)

³ [OnSide Network Impact Report - OnSide](#)

- A 19% increase in young people's citizenship as a result of attending open sessions
- A 15% increase in young people's self-esteem as a result of attending open sessions
- A 15% increase in young people's resilience as a result of attending open sessions

Findings in Generation Isolation on the impact of youth centres also included:

- 35% of young people who say youth centres make a positive difference say it is because of making new friends/social interactions
- 93% of young people that attend a youth centre say it has made a positive difference to their lives
- 29% of young people say more affordable leisure activities would make the most difference to improve their life outside of school.

However, the research suggested 85% of young people do not attend a youth club, with the Youth Participation Survey commissioned by DCMS⁴ suggesting this figure could be as high as 92%, with only 8% saying they had been to a youth club or centre in the past year.

Youth work

Youth work has the capacity to make a huge impact on young people's lives. It helps young people to think critically about how different areas interact, including within their wider peer groups and community, to challenge their circumstances and enable them to make informed choices about their lives. Workers aim to empower young people to overcome the challenges, disadvantages or obstacles that stand in their way of achieving their maximum potential.

Good youth work is underpinned by contextual safeguarding approaches, where the welfare of young people is paramount. It is uniquely connected to the lives of young people in the context of their peer groups, communities and relationships with other services. Youth workers, therefore, have a responsibility to familiarise themselves with their local context and this provides them a detailed understanding of the local landscape and risks.

By offering young people specialist support, on a voluntary basis which focuses on their individual needs and personal development, youth workers are well-placed to develop positive relationships that have the potential to lead to transformative change. Alongside physical settings, detached youth work, involving engagement with young people where they choose to meet, has also been shown to be effective in building positive relationships with some of the 'hardest to-reach' young people, helping reduce the likelihood of their involvement in risky, dangerous or violent situations, whether as perpetrators or victims.

Funding youth provision

Despite the positive outcomes for young people on a range of issues, local authority expenditure on youth services has fallen 73% in England since 2010-11. This represents a real-term reduction of £1.2bn to youth services, with expenditure remaining flat year on year with levels remaining critically low following more than a decade of cuts. As YMCA's report 'Beyond the Brink?' highlights⁵, council-run youth centres continue to close, and youth workers have fewer hours to support young people. In the past decade, some 643 youth centres have closed, and 1536 qualified youth workers have been lost. To maximise local and national programmes that support community cohesion, long-term and sustainable investment for local youth services will be critical to ensure young people can access support and opportunities they need to thrive.

Membership of OnSide Youth Zones: The Network of Youth Zones⁶ draw members from many different socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Membership diversity varies across the Network, with each Youth Zone seeking to represent its own distinct local community but when considered against the 2021 Census data on ethnicity, membership (as a whole) contains a lower proportion of young people who identify as 'White', over four times as many young people who identify as 'Black, Black British, Caribbean or African' and nearly three times as many young people who identify as being from 'Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups'. Youth Zones also draw young people from some of the most

⁴ [Youth Participation Pilot Survey: Executive summary - GOV.UK](#)

⁵ [YMCA Calls for Urgent Action to Reverse Decline in Youth Services Funding | YMCA England and Wales %](#)

⁶ [Youth Zones Archive - OnSide](#)

deprived areas of England with 47% of members from the 20% most deprived, and 70% of members come from the 40% most deprived parts of the country.

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