

Written evidence submitted by Dr Tania de St Croix

Call for evidence

Impact of Covid-19 on DCMS sectors

Dr Tania de St Croix, King's College London

As the Principal Investigator of the ESRC funded research Rethinking Impact, Evaluation and Accountability in Youth Work, I am writing in relation to the immediate and long-term impact of Covid-19 on the youth work sector.

From our ongoing in-depth qualitative research and through our networks, it is highly evident that the sector has been heavily affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and lockdown, in particular in the following ways:

- Reduced monetary resources, both directly (e.g. many organisations rely heavily on rental income or grants and contracts that have now been cancelled) or indirectly (e.g. organisations that were expecting renewal grants or were planning significant bids are affected by the widespread suspension of all grants that are not directly related to Covid-19). This has led to a reduction in service, capacity and confidence.
- Reduced staff resources, due to illness, furlough decisions or caring responsibilities. This is particularly acute given how much the youth work sector relies on volunteers and sessional (part-time) youth workers often on short-term contracts or working / volunteering as youth workers alongside other jobs, including substantial numbers working in care and other keyworker positions.
- Highly increased demand in terms of the needs of young people in relation to issues including family relationships; young carers; bereavement and fear of bereavement; particular issues for young disabled people and young people with health conditions; abuse and neglect; conflict with friends or family; online bullying and grooming; risky and/or illegal social and physical contact; police attention; vulnerability to mental health challenges, sparked or exacerbated by the current situation; vulnerability to affects of current events including Covid 19 itself as well as racist police brutality and high profile transphobic discourses; high levels of uncertainty around education, employment and their futures; missing social contact, loneliness and isolation; disadvantages due to cancelled exams and unconscious bias by teachers in relation to disadvantaged groups.
- However, while youth workers know this need is there, and they are responding creatively in a variety of ways (online, through delivered resources and care packages, and through detached youth work), there is a general feeling that it is very difficult to respond effectively – because of lockdown / physical distancing restrictions and a lack of resources.
- Many young people cannot access online provision because of a number of barriers including no internet, limited or inconsistent internet, no phone or device, no memory on phone/device to install apps, shared devices, not having their own room or quiet space, not feeling comfortable on online platforms due to anxiety or past experiences of online bullying, not being allowed by parents and carers to access online provision, additional

learning or physical access needs that make online provision challenging, not being in touch with their workers because they have limited engagement with social media for some of the reasons above.

- Uncertainty and substantial restrictions around what can be offered to young people, even where capacity exists.
- Uncertainty of what might happen in the short-term and long-term future.
- High levels of stress and anxiety amongst youth workers and managers.
- Many organisations were already vulnerable and are now endangered.

The sector has greatly appreciated the intention that the announced investments in youth work are due to continue and support through NYA, Federation for Detached Youth Work, Regional Youth Work Units, Centre for Youth Impact and others in sharing resources and research findings.

The long term needs of the sector will include:

- A need to scale up youth work to meet the intensified needs of a generation of young people who have been affected by the pandemic and lockdown.
- This includes a continued need for youth workers to create environments for social and peer connection – they will need support and guidance on how to do this safely and inclusively. A focus on the rebuilding of open youth work, attended by young people by choice and on their terms, is vital.
- Organisations and youth workers need support in building technological competence and resources.
- Young people need support in accessing digital provision.
- There is a clear need for the sector to focus on the implications of the Black Lives Matter movement – in terms of both:
 - supporting and renewing existing traditions of anti-racist and anti-oppressive youth work, including Black-led and Black empowerment youth projects and anti-racist work with young people of all ethnicities and backgrounds; and,
 - challenging institutional racisms within youth organisations and the youth sector more widely. For example, Black and Minority Ethnic workers are often over-represented in the lower paid and less secure youth work jobs and less represented in managerial and senior positions; there has been a diminishing focus on anti-racism and anti-oppressive practice due to a greater focus on casework and support; and there are ongoing issues of explicit or implied deficit perspectives and ‘white saviour complex’ in the history and present of youth work.