

Guidance for Local Authorities on Providing Youth Services



October 2022

A guide to the statutory duty and sufficient levels of local youth services

Foreword

During COVID19, the role of youth workers was classified as an essential key worker role. At a time of critical expenditure on public services and the escalation of young people's needs from the Covid pandemic, NYA's updated guidance seeks to clarify the steps a local authority can take to fulfil its statutory duty to improve young people's well-being with a local offer of activities and facilities. A formal review of the statutory guidance, underway in 2022-23, will build on the government's National Youth Guarantee of equitable access to regular youth work and out of school activities. In line with the statutory duty, the purpose is to improve young people's wellbeing, in their skills for life and work, and mental and physical wellbeing.

What is expected of local authorities? The statutory duty is for local authorities to secure educational and recreational leisure time activities and sufficient facilities for such activities. With young people spending 85% of their waking hours outside of the school-day each year, they want and need somewhere safe to go in the community, with friends and for activities, supported by a trusted adult. This is analogous to local authorities securing sufficient school places, whether delivered directly, commissioned, funded or fulfilled by others, in that area. These youth work activities are purposeful, with outcomes to improve young people's well-being. Therefore, the activities and facilities need to be sustained and maintained, over the long term.

What should the youth offer look like? The statutory duty and guidance supports universal, open access provision. This also underpins the government's National Youth Guarantee for regular, weekly youth work and out of school activities. Targeting might take place by locating activities and facilities in communities of greatest need and to ensure equitable access across communities. This is different from but complementary to targeted services or youth work embedded as part of a multi-agency approach to meet specific needs with social work, youth justice, policing, schools or health services. The open access provision, whether leisure or recreational, that includes youth work provides a gateway to specialist, targeted support for young people without stigma. This supports place-based, youth work in community settings.

What needs to be done? Under the statutory duty, the local authority has a leadership and coordination role. Crucially, to meet the requirements of the statutory duty, we recommend the local authority has a clear strategy and publishes a plan on how it will secure a local youth offer with equitable access across communities. The plan will be a result of local needs assessment, consultation and design with young people, and published for scrutiny and accountability. Should the local authority determine in any given year some activities are not reasonably practicable it would need to show how it expects to fill in any gaps and recover the plan in subsequent years. If charges are introduced for some activities and the use of facilities, the local authority should say how it would ensure equitable access particularly for vulnerable young people and marginalised communities. This planning process can support the local authority make the case for increased national funding in priority areas, and additional support from local partnerships with other statutory and voluntary services.

Why youth work? As the foundation of the youth offer, youth work provides the contextualised safeguarding essential for *educational* leisure time and recreational activities. Youth work is supported by a curriculum to improve young people's wellbeing. It provides national standards for working with adolescents as a distinct stage of life for emotional, physical, psychological and cognitive development; providing early help (improving life chances) and agency (healthy choices and relationships). This gives broader scope for youth work and leisure time activities, for example in sport, arts, and culture and community settings, a part of the youth offer. Where youth work supports also the consultation, engagement and involvement of young people, and the potential of local youth partnerships.

After a decade of cuts to local youth services exceeding 70%, and at a time of increased need and demand for youth services, it is not reasonable to further cut such services. Youth workers play an important role in supporting young people and local youth services provide an essential service.ⁱ However, there are great variations between local authorities on current levels, or lack, of youth services. Therefore, this guidance sets out the practical and reasonable steps a local authority should take in line with the statutory duty to secure youth services that meet young people’s needs, and to be sustainable over the long term.



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This guidance is published by National Youth Agency (NYA), as the professional, statutory and regulatory body (PSRB) for youth work and youth services in England, to provide greater clarity and consistency for the understanding of local authorities’ statutory duty to secure and support access to quality local youth services.

Key Summary

- i. There is a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient youth services in their area.**
This guidance focuses on the positive role local authorities can play in the provision of those services. A priority for all local authorities should be to strengthen and maintain the quality of youth services to support young people’s wellbeing. Government is expected to hold local authorities to account where services are not functioning to a sufficient level and base-line of quality provision.
- ii. Universal, open-access youth services ensure a base-level of quality provision for all young people.**
Universal youth services should be accessible in community settings, with clear pathways to targeted or specialist provision. Local authorities must publish a clear statement of what a sufficient youth offer is (activities and services) in their area and an index of current provision. School catchment areas provide a proxy to ensure access at a local level. The focus should be on the level and quality of services, in line with NYA guidance, **not** whether a youth service is delivered.
- iii. As the national body (PSRB), NYA sets standards for youth services’ quality and sufficiency.**
Each service requires at least two full-time equivalent, professional qualified youth workers located in each secondary school catchment area as a proxy for access, with a team of at least four youth support workers (level 3) and assistants (level 2), alongside skilled volunteers with relevant training, including safeguarding. This will be supported by a youth workforce strategy for recruitment and training across local authority, voluntary and community sector organisations and other agencies as part of that offer.
- iv. Upper tier local authorities hold the duty and need to ensure planning is not undertaken in isolation.**
They should include other authorities, agencies and services in their area, bringing together the public, private, voluntary and community sector. To be effective this requires a ten-year strategy and a six-year planning cycle to secure a sufficient baseline of youth services and qualified workforce, sustained over the long term. This includes alignment of government funding over that period.
- v. There needs to be an annual plan to ensure open access and accountability for youth services.**
Planning for youth services should be based on open access for young people to interact on a regular basis, across communities, in a place-based approach. This may be adjusted to increase the level of contact and regular use a part of a local authority strategy for its youth offer, inclusive of services directly delivered, commissioned by or run independently from the local authority.
- vi. Robust data needs to support a public health approach for young people’s wellbeing.**
Typically funded for young people 13-19 years of age and up to 24 years for those with learning difficulties, youth services are regularly accessed and need to plan for use by young people from ages 8 and 11 years old. Further consideration should be given to a continuum of provision for all young people up to 24 years of age, aligned to other services.
- vii. Youth services must include the active involvement of young people in decision-making.**
Meaningful engagement of young people in the co-production, location and delivery of services is essential to ensure access, relevance and regular use of youth services.

Additional resources are available from the Local Government Association and National Youth Agency to support quality standards, commissioning, participation, a youth work curriculum and outcomes frameworks for young people and youth services.

A National Youth Sector Census run by NYA is a self-reporting database for local authority and voluntary youth services which can support of and investment in youth work in England.

Statutory guidance

As the national body for youth work, NYA is providing additional guidance to clarify expectations for local authorities and provided youth services. The pandemic amplified the needs of young people and the essential role of youth services. Therefore this guidance aims to focus attention on **the positive role local authorities can play in the provision of youth services**, as part of the local budget-setting and planning cycle, and to inform the government's decision-making for investment in youth services.

In 2022-23, post-pandemic, the government is reviewing statutory guidance for local authorities on providing youth services, related to Section 507B of the Education Act (1996), as amended by the Education and Inspections Act (2006), which sets government expectations for (upper tier) local authorities when securing services and activities for people aged 13 to 19, and those up to age 24 with learning difficulties, with the purpose of improving young people's well-being. Consultation was issued from October to December 2019, but government review has been delayed due to COVID-19. However, **there remains a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient youth services in their respective areas**.

Every local authority in England must, 'so far as reasonably practicable', secure for qualifying young persons in the authority's area access to:

- a) Sufficient educational leisure-time activities which are for the improvement of their well-being, and sufficient facilities for such activities; and,
- b) Sufficient recreational leisure-time activities which are for the improvement of their well-being, and sufficient facilities for such activities.ⁱⁱ

Since this duty was last reviewed in 2012, there have been many changes to how youth services are delivered and funded. This period has seen a 70% reduction in youth service spending by local authorities. It is left to local authorities to decide what constitutes 'sufficient' youth services provisions and to consider the needs of young people within their areas, where 'sufficient' is judged in terms of quantity. The term 'reasonably practicable' is described as 'depending on the specific circumstances of the local authority', including, 'its resources, capabilities and other priorities'.

Many elected representatives, supported by the Local Government Association, are keen to see the statutory guidance clarified and to secure resources for greater levels of youth service provision. Just as local authorities are accountable to secure sufficient school places in their area, they must also ensure access to quality youth services. This, in turn, supports the community fabric upon which voluntary sector youth services can thrive. However, without significant investment, youth services – vital lifelines for many vulnerable or disadvantaged young people – are under threat.

Access to quality youth services

Youth services provide peer-group activities and trusted relationships, supported by professionally qualified youth workers and skilled volunteers. They harness the skills of young people not fulfilled by formal education and provide safe places for young people to learn together, be supported, and to have fun. There is a great heritage of voluntary provisions services alongside local authority delivered or commissioned services. This collective impact ensures that no young person is 'left behind'.

With 85% of a young person's waking hours spent outside of school and formal education, where the loss of youth services is pronounced, vulnerable young people in particular are falling prey to loneliness, poor mental health and fear of youth violence or at risk of exploitation. In areas investing in youth services, we see a positive commitment to young people's inclusion in decision-making, community engagement and increased life skills.

Universal, open-access youth services are important to ensure there is a base-level of quality provision for all young people. Open-access services provide early help as an essential part of a public health approach for young people's well-being. This includes community-based support and prevention in areas such as youth violence, school exclusions and mental health, and providing a vital bridging role between families, multi-agency working, wider partnerships and community groups.

Youth services provide safe spaces and activities that young people need, want and value; with additional support provided for more disadvantaged young people to access leisure activities and learning experiences from which they would otherwise be excluded.

Under the statutory duty or guidance, there is no standard for the level or type of youth services that should be evident in a local authority area. However, a national inquiry and cross-party report (April 2019)ⁱⁱⁱ called for **a minimum level of youth services on a per head of youth population basis**, and to establish a clear baseline and core funding to ensure access to quality youth services in a local authority area. The government review of current statutory guidance was launched following this report. The baseline for local youth services is set out in section 4, below.

Local conditions mean that producing a one-size-fits-all description for what offered services look like on the ground will be of limited value. Therefore, a local authority should specifically consider whether its current provision in its area, through all providers not necessarily run or funded by a local authority, is sufficient to meet the needs of young people. If not, the local authority is failing in its duty. **Government must be prepared to intervene where services are not functioning at a sufficient level** by providing the resources and funding necessary for ensuring that a provision is sustainable.^{iv}

Scale and reach

The pandemic exacerbated the challenges faced by young people and risks intensifying vulnerabilities and inequalities that can last a generation. It has highlighted the loss or reduction of youth services in local authority areas across the country, as cited in recent cross-party reports and inquiries, and has been identified as a factor in young people's declining wellbeing, particularly concerning mental health, loneliness, youth violence and exploitation. For over a decade, local authority budgets have been increasingly consumed by statutory services like social care. Meanwhile, we risk placing too many demands on schools and colleges and increasing burdens on formal statutory services that are unable to cope with spiralling demand.

Robust data supports a public health approach to improve young people's well-being and secure youth services across population cohorts at an upper-tier, local authority level. This includes a place-based approach and a framework of outcomes for young people across communities. The nature and type of delivery will vary by location within the priorities identified by local needs to adapt and build on current youth services.

Planning for youth services should be based on 100% universal access of which 80% will be in contact with youth services. This is inclusive of youth services directly delivered, commissioned by or run independently from the local authority in their area. **An estimated two-million young people take part in a youth service at least once a week**, including youth clubs, uniformed organisations and other organised community groups. This equates to over one-third (35%) of young people within the secondary education age range (ages 11–19), and 10% supported by targeted, specialist youth services. A formal review of the statutory guidance, underway in 2022-23, will build on the government's National Youth Guarantee of equitable access to regular youth work and out of school activities. In line with the statutory duty, the purpose is to improve young people's wellbeing, in their skills for life and work, and mental and physical wellbeing.

The statutory duty and guidance currently covers those aged 13 to 19 years, and those up to 24 with learning difficulties. This has been the basis upon which many youth services have been funded. However, youth services usually cover all young people within the secondary education age range (ages 11–19) for planning per head of youth population. Further consideration should be given to the accessibility of youth services for those as young as 8 years old, closely aligned to children's services for adolescents. Additional consideration may be given to a continuum of provisions for individuals up to 24 years old that might include community-based volunteering, advice and counselling, and employment services co-located in community hubs, colleges and job centres (youth hubs).

A sufficient level of youth services

Just as local authorities are accountable for securing sufficient school places in their respective areas, they need to ensure access to quality youth services. **Local authorities must publish a clear statement of what a sufficient youth work offer is for activities and services in their area and how they plan to secure it.**

For assessing current and future demands for youth services, local authorities can use pupil planning areas that provide information about the number of registered pupils and the capacity of schools in their respective areas. This supports access to local youth services in a geographically defined area that is already the basis for local authority planning to secure sufficient school places, and by which other determinant facts can be calculated by households and population, including levels of deprivation and need. Whereas current guidance considers a sufficient level of service activity on a quantitative basis, to be effective, the **quality** of local services needs to be ensured through the application of standards for qualifications, training and skills, including safeguarding and volunteers.

The quality of activities available should include young people in determining what constitutes a sufficient level of local service offerings.

Each youth service requires that at least two, full-time equivalent professionals who are JNC qualified youth workers be located in a secondary school catchment area, along with an equivalent team of at least four youth support workers, and trained volunteers, to ensure minimum access to quality youth services.

Like schools that have a clear structure of professional roles and ratios – of senior management, teachers, teaching assistants and supporting services like specialist teachers and school counsellors – there should be standard expectations for the ratio of professional youth workers, volunteers and other professionals with youth work skills. NYA Practice Standards should be applied to all local provisions supported by a local authority.

The creation of secure and permanent, full-time, JNC-qualified youth work positions is a national priority which requires government funding, training bursaries, work placements and employment opportunities. That needs to be matched with a full-time equivalence of part-time staff, split 30:70 between qualified youth workers and youth support workers (level 3) and assistants (level 2). This can be augmented by volunteer youth workers, following appropriate safeguarding and skills supported through the youth service.

To fulfil the statutory duty all local authorities should produce a clear index of current open-access provisions across local authority, voluntary, community and private sector providers. This can be achieved through a local audit of such provision that is place-based as part of a public health approach to improve young people's wellbeing. It can be supported by local authority peer reviews and self-reporting of data through the National Youth Sector Census, administered by NYA.

Statistics on the numbers of young people should be published, alongside the capacity of professional, qualification-led youth services in each area, including population forecasts. Robust data across population cohorts requires an intersection of needs by gender, race and ethnicity, disabilities and other protected characteristics that are essential for removing barriers and creating opportunities for all, without discrimination or geographical inequalities. Further resources and quality standards are provided by NYA as the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body for youth services in England; see section 7, below.

Reasonable and practicable implementation

Each local authority area is starting from a different baseline. In many areas, there is little or no direct service provided by the local authority for open-access youth services, nor (for some) employment of qualified youth workers for universal, targeted or specialist services. Many areas will nonetheless have a vibrant voluntary and community sector providing services and support to young people. There is often an interdependence between voluntary youth services and local, authority-commissioned services or small grant funding, which can provide an incomplete patchwork of such services within a local authority area. A consistent approach that reflects local needs and priorities is required to secure high-quality universal, open-access youth services.

Local authorities retain statutory responsibility and will therefore set the direction of local youth services, including the location where youth services are delivered, and how services are commissioned or funded. This can include cross-sector work and funding for open access services from other agencies, such as health, sports, leisure, policing, education and housing organisations. That approach should be supported by a government commitment to and strategy for youth services including, for example, a public health approach to improve young people's well-being, for cross-departmental support, high level reporting and accountability to Parliament.

For sustained youth services designed to last beyond the funding cycles of specific programmes or local authority terms of office, there should be **a minimum ten year strategy for supporting and sustaining open-access youth services and a six year plan to secure and grow those services**. This supports the current guidance, which covers young people aged 13 to 19 years, and recognises incremental increases in regular use of services by young people from ages 8 and 11 years. To be effective the local authority must work with regional youth work units, local youth partnerships of voluntary and community organisations providing services and support in their area.

The requirement of an annual plan will account for what is reasonably practicable within the delivery of the ten-year strategy, for year-to-year adjustments based on needs-assessments, and for current provisions and resources. However, where budgets and resources may be constrained, the local authority has a duty to secure

youth services 'for qualifying young persons' in its area. This ensures that planning is not undertaken in isolation from other agencies and services. **There should only be exceptional circumstances where it is not practicable for local authorities to secure services due to insufficient 'capabilities and other priorities'**.

The recommended sufficiency level represents the core baseline, as the foundation for guaranteeing access to quality youth services, facilities, staffing ratios, training and employment. This includes opening career pathways and volunteer opportunities across a diverse range of providers that are necessary for an ecosystem of community-based youth work to flourish. It aligns closely with wider provisions and interventions linked to local partners in multi-agency working and community groups, including out-of-school activities. This also provides for a democratically accountable community base, ensuring access to quality youth services down to a neighbourhood level.

Guiding principles

Nationally securing open-access youth services that are sustained over the long term requires a realignment of government funding that can be devolved or locally ring-fenced. Meanwhile the duty to secure youth services is held by upper-tier local authorities. In determining what is reasonably practicable to secure a sufficient level of youth services, there are some guiding principles for making the most effective use of all available funding and assets, alongside young people themselves.

- **There must be an annual plan with clear statements** regarding who is setting out to achieve what aims, set against a statement of the use of both local/national government and voluntary sector resources.
- Local authorities need to ensure that **planning is not undertaken in isolation from other agencies and services** to ensure access, resources and accountability for shared outcomes and collective impact for young people by bringing together public, private, voluntary and community sectors to secure youth services.
- **Services should be easily available via universal, open-access settings** with clear pathways to targeted or specialised provisions for increasing uptake and minimising stigma.
- Local authorities, in partnership with voluntary sector organisations or local youth partnerships, should determine how best to use resources and **secure longer term, ring-fenced funding** to achieve desired outcomes.
- This must include **active involvement from young people in the co-production of services** that are accessible, reaching beyond current service users to ensure the greatest relevance and meaningful engagement.
- To secure access to quality youth services, there should be a **clear recognition and consistent application of standards** for qualifications, training and skills for the professional and volunteer youth workforce.
- Furthermore, there is **an outcomes framework for young people to support planning and delivery of services**, published by the Centre for Youth Impact and Local Government Association. This framework is adopted by NYA as the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) for youth work in England.
- Implementation of the 2020 National Curriculum for Youth Work should be ensured through the local authorities' duty to ensure sufficient youth services for vulnerable young people.

The focus of what is reasonably practicable should be on the level of services, in line with NYA guidance, **not** whether a youth service is delivered. To secure access to quality youth services may require:

- More digital youth services in some areas to ensure 100% access and 80% contact for young people.
- Consideration of transport links and the location of youth services to ensure access, particularly where secondary schools' catchment areas may overlap.
- Opening community facilities as part of the renewal of high streets - not on the outskirts of communities - and, where appropriate, use of school and college sites.
- Priority for youth services where there is greatest need, like neighbourhoods representing the lowest 40% of the Index of Multiple Deprivation (IMD).

- Scaling up existing provision services in some areas, including voluntary services and other providers to train and recruit JNC qualified youth workers
- Making provision to up-skill volunteers and to employ or help secure placements for youth work apprenticeships, including use of schemes like the Apprenticeship Levy and youth work bursaries.
- Capital projects could consider refurbishment, co-location and use of community assets and facilities not requiring new or purpose-built youth centres in each local area.

Conclusion

When young people feel valued and see the difference made in their communities and their lives, they experience a greater sense of belonging, leading to a more cohesive society. As a nation we need a clear commitment for young people to be safe and secure, treated fairly, confident in and ambitious for their future. As the national body for youth work in England,

NYA is calling for a bold and ambitious plan for youth services, with increased government funding and ring-fenced by local authorities and within local youth partnerships. To maximise opportunities for young people, it is necessary to invest in 'upstream', open-access youth services that will have a significant impact on improvement outcomes and life chances, with long-term savings.

To help build the body of evidence on needs, outcomes and impact of local youth services, NYA is committed to the **National Youth Sector Census** of youth work activities in England. First published in 2021, this is an initial three year programme of annual returns for self-reported data. This requires the support and of local authorities and voluntary youth services and will help make the case nationally for investment in youth services and locally for commissioning and partnerships.

Resources

National Youth Agency

[A Guide to Commissioning Outcomes for Young People](#)

[Providing Quality Services for Young People](#)

[Hear By Right youth participation and practice](#)

[Education and Training Standards for Youth Work](#)

[Youth Work Curriculum](#)

[National Youth Sector Census](#)

Local Government Association

[Six Key Principles for Effective Youth Services](#)

[LGA Must Know For Youth Services](#)

Centre for Youth Impact

[A Framework of Outcomes for Young People](#)

References

ⁱ NYA is the Professional, Statutory and Regulatory Body (PSRB) for youth work and services in England. This includes professional qualifications and national occupational standards ["youth work"] and services for young people in their personal, social and educational development ["youth services"], across a diverse range of services, providers and settings where professionals and volunteers work with young people ["youth workers"] through the developmental phase between childhood and adulthood ["youth" or "adolescence"].

ⁱⁱ Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities on Services and Activities to Improve Young People's Well-being; this is statutory guidance issued by the Secretary of State for Education under Section 507B of the Education and Inspections Act 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs, year-long youth work inquiry, final report (April 2019).

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