

Swingeing cuts to youth services since 2010 are the result of an ideological drive to target support at

# Decade of cuts: the policies that

## YOUTH WORK



By Bernard Davies,  
youth work  
campaigner and  
writer

The draft report of the all-party parliamentary group (APPG) on youth affairs, published in October 2018, was blunt: “Open-access youth services have all but disappeared in some areas”. Where such losses were “pronounced”, it concluded, there were “concerns for ‘overlooked’ young people who do not meet the threshold for targeted interventions”.

In my book *Austerity, Youth Policies and the Deconstruction of the Youth Service in England*, I trace these developments over the past decade and how they were shaped by their wider ideological and youth policy contexts. The starting point is 2007/08 and a financial crisis whose legacy for young people, according to one commentator, represented a “fundamental breach of what used to be the social contract”.

### Services under pressure

The crisis also brought continuing turmoil for public services, which left local authority youth services especially vulnerable. Even under New Labour, they had been labelled “the patchiest, the most unsatisfactory of all the services”.

Within a month of becoming the coalition government’s youth minister, Tim Loughton – now the APPG treasurer – described them as “leaving a lot to be desired” and, the following year, told a parliamentary select committee that their annual funding of £350m equated to “large slugs of public money”.

Against this background, and with statutory guidance laying down that youth services only be provided “as far as is reasonably practicable”, since 2010 they have disappeared off most councils’



PHOTOGRAPHEEU/ADOBE STOCK

Many youth workers believe youth work plans are being viewed as a way to reduce knife crime and mental health problems

priority list. With pressures on children’s services generally intensifying and the Treasury’s Rate Support Grant for local authorities all but disappearing, research by Unison showed that £387m had been cut from youth service budgets between 2010 and 2016, resulting in 3,652 youth work jobs lost and 603 youth centres closed since 2012.

That could mean that up to 800,000 10- to 18-year-olds no longer have the option of regularly attending or testing out a local youth work facility.

Yet in this same period, often substantial sums of public funding were being found for other youth programmes, for example:

**“£387m cut from budgets has resulted in 3,652 youth work jobs lost and 603 centres closed since 2012”**

- Between 2016 and 2020/21, the government set aside £1.2bn for the National Citizens Service (NCS) – even though by 2018 it was reaching only 12 per cent of the eligible age group. The government’s own figures also showed that by then, it was receiving 95 per cent (£634m) of its youth services’ funding.
- Repeated funding allocations were made, too, to Step Up To Serve, set up by the government in 2013 to encourage 10- to 20-year-olds to take on worthy but usually “safe” forms of social action such as litter collection and marching in Remembrance Day parades.
- The OnSide programme for implementing a country-wide network of state-of-the-art youth buildings was also underpinned by significant amounts of state funding. For example, two years after cutting its youth services’ budget by £1.75m and making 140 staff redundant, Wolverhampton Council provided £3m to develop and run a local “youth zone”.
- From 2012/13 to 2016/17, some

£70m of public money was allocated to uniformed youth organisations – some with a long youth work tradition, some linked to the armed forces and police.

### Ideology at work

While unapologetically “hands-off” as local youth services were closed down, the government found money for these particular schemes and organisations, it seems, mainly because they were trusted to deliver on two of its bottom-line requirements. One – as its now all-but-forgotten 2011 Positive for Youth policy paper constantly demanded – was a readiness to target the “at risk”, “deprived” and “vulnerable”. The other – echoed by the vice-chair of the APPG – was their focus on training young people’s “character”, nurturing their up-by-your-bootstraps qualities of “resilience” and “personal responsibility” and ensuring they acquire the “life skills” needed to become “contributing” workers, parents and citizens.

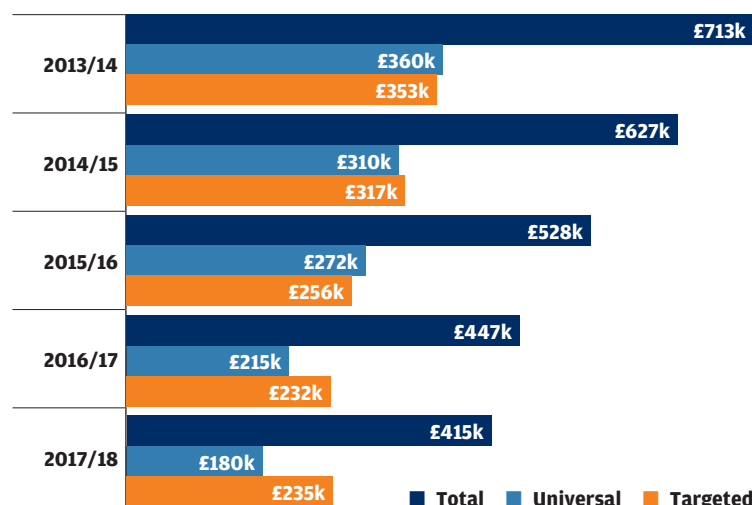
In this ideological climate, on these measures the youth work

disadvantaged young people, with little prospect of any change, says youth work expert and author

# have dismantled youth work

## CHANGES IN COUNCIL SPENDING ON YOUTH SERVICES OVER FIVE YEARS

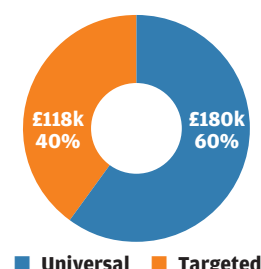
### Council spending on services for young people



### Total fall in spending



### Breakdown of spending reductions



Source: Section 251 outturn data for England, Department for Education

## APPG RECOMMENDATIONS

- Creation of a high-level strategy supported by government and a lead role for the local authority to ensure access to sufficient, quality youth work provision in an area
- A review of spending on services, reinstating the local authority audit previously funded by government and carried out by the NYA
- Development of a workforce strategy and renewed standards for youth work by 2020, including skills and support for volunteers
- Inclusion of young people in decision-making and democratic engagement, to be listened to and have their views respected

Source: *The Role and Sufficiency of Youth Work, Youth Work Inquiry interim findings, APPG for youth affairs, October 2018*

provided by local authority youth services was seen as far less reliable. As defined by the In Defence of Youth Work forum's "cornerstones", this assumed that young people could choose to engage; that its informal educational activities would start from their interests; and that attention would be given to their here-and-now as well as to their "transitions". For neo-liberal policymakers, these young people and process-led approaches offered too few guarantees of achieving their pre-defined and measureable outcomes.

### Wider government policies

If only indirectly, wider post-2010 policies also had their impacts. For many councillors, David Cameron's Big Society aspirations helped legitimise their resort to volunteers to replace the experienced and trained paid staff they were making redundant. Ministers often also pointed to the government's "localism" strategy which, by claiming to delegate power downwards to councils and communities, justified their constantly repeated mantra that

"decisions on levels of spend on services for young people are best left to local people".

Post-2010, a series of low-cost, time-limited government "gesture policies" did in effect acknowledge the gaps left by youth service closures. Indeed, one launched in 2014 – the Delivering Differently for Young People scheme provided 10 local authorities with up to £50,000 each to explore a "full range of alternative delivery models that lie between in-house delivery and traditional outsourcing".

### What next?

While the government's Civil Society Strategy, published last August, recognised "the transformational impact that youth services and trained youth workers can have", its practical commitments barely went beyond promising a review of its statutory guidance on youth services.

The Labour Party has gone further, promising to provide a "quality youth service" if elected, one that is education-based, protected in statute and has dedicated ringfenced funding.

For youth workers, however, some of these proposals come with a caution: that youth work is being seen as needed mainly to reduce knife crime and mental health problems. Important though these issues are, as starting points they offer no guarantee of a revival of youth work as informal education focused not on young people's defects, but on realising their collective and personal potential.

Nor do the APPG report's recommendations take into account the past often uncomfortable fit between this "on-the-wing" practice and local youth services' increasingly bureaucratic and managerial structures. To do this, the vacuum created by the cuts would need to be treated as an opportunity, particularly to re-imagine fundamentally what might be reinstated as local state provision, such as:

- In light of the over 30 per cent reduction of NCS's recruitment targets, reallocating to this task at least 30 per cent (£360m) of its £1.2bn budget.
- Developing decision-making structures and procedures,

perhaps linked into lower tier councils, which give an authentic voice to young people and practitioners and which work constructively with "critical friends" from the voluntary and community sector.

- Providing flexible local "youth spaces" such as shop fronts and small meeting rooms which are responsive to young people's peer group, community and cultural identities.
  - Re-establishing training opportunities, both as national routes to qualification, and locally for the part-timers and volunteers who still do most of the face-to-face work.
  - Adopting evaluation procedures that work with, rather than in conflict with, the practice's person-centred approaches.
- Starting from where we are now, all a very big ask.



● Bernard Davies is the author of *Austerity, Youth Policies and the Deconstruction of the Youth Service in England*, published by Palgrave