



Briefing for Members of Parliament speaking in the General Debate on Youth Services

Wednesday 24th July 2019

Introduction

Youth work is a transformative tool in society, aiding social mobility and giving young people somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to. Accessible and inclusive youth centres – such as OnSide Youth Zones – provide the canvas on which youth work can take place, attracting and retaining young people from a range of backgrounds.

It is not the only tool to be used. But equally it's power to intervene early in young people's lives, to uncover complex social issues and to work with that young person, their family, peer group and other local agencies, cannot be ignored or underfunded any longer by central government.

Nearly 85% of young people's time is spent outside of schoolⁱ, and much of their learning takes place outside of the classroom. Children's extra-curricular experience, and the quality of the activities on offer in their communities, are therefore crucial to their development from early years right up to adulthood.

Yet nationally youth work as a profession is in decline. According to the Local Government Association, councils in England and Wales have had to reduce spending on local youth services from £652 million in 2010/11 to £352 million in 2017/18 as a result of government funding cutsⁱⁱ. Over 600 youth centres have closed since 2012. During that time an estimated 1,600 youth work jobs have been lostⁱⁱⁱ. In London alone, since 2012 cuts have removed 46 per cent of funding from London council youth services.^{iv}

OnSide Youth Zones are committed to reversing these trends. Youth Zones are based on a voluntary relationship with young people where informal education can be hugely powerful; through providing the safe space in a high-quality aspirational environment, support and opportunities for young people to learn through activities, informal relationships, friendship and association.

Recommendations to Government

To rejuvenate the youth work sector and ensure its role for generations to come we make the following recommendations to government:

- We welcome a review of statutory guidance of youth work at a local level. We look forward to working with the government on this review to highlight the transformative impact of youth work in local communities.
- However, the challenge goes beyond ensuring a more robust statutory duty. Most importantly, we work with councils across the country and know the financial pressures they are under. A renewed statutory duty without sufficient funding for youth work on the ground would further burden councils, to the detriment of young people.
- Therefore, a renewed statutory duty must be coupled with secure funding for youth work and youth centres, which benefits young people both today and across future generations. The government should review current levels of spending and funding level as well as commit to a full cost-benefit assessment of youth work at a national level.
- There must be greater transparency of youth work provision at a local and national level. We agree with the APPG for Youth Affairs call for there to be both a Minister for Youth Work to represent the sector at the heart of government; and a portfolio holder at local council level who is responsible for discharging the statutory duty to deliver youth work for all young people.
- Solely council run youth services isn't the answer. This approach leaves youth services vulnerable to future austerity programmes at a national and local level. The government would benefit from promoting a flexible, community-led approach to delivering youth work, with the private, public, voluntary and community sectors working in tandem to ensure youth work provision exists in their area and responds to local needs/priorities.

Key stats on OnSide Youth Zones

- By the end of the year there will be 13 Youth Zones open, with a further 8 open or in development by 2021. All of these Youth Zones are in some of the most deprived communities in the country.
- We have more than 530 Patrons, comprising both private sector companies and individuals, providing revenue funding, and have raised over £170 million capital and revenue investment since our inception over a decade ago.
- We work at the heart of disadvantaged communities creating state of the art youth centres (Youth Zones), which provide space for youth workers to help young people grow and reach their potential. We are enablers of social mobility, and the proof is in the work we do.
- A survey with Youth Zone stakeholders shows that over 90% agreed that we strengthened local communities by bringing young people together and supporting them.
- 3 out of 4 young people attending our Youth Zones recorded an increase in self-confidence (77%) and friendships (75%).
- 66% of our young members feel more confident about getting the qualifications/experiences needed to progress in life. 64% reported working harder in school and college; and 55% feel less likely to want to miss school or college.
- 97% of our stakeholders consider Youth Zones to improved young people's physical and mental health.
- Research with Youth Zone members found that 95% of young people said they felt safe at their Youth Zone – offering a space to escape negative community issues such as gang violence.

What are OnSide Youth Zones?

OnSide is a pioneering, national charity with one simple aim – to build a national network of state-of-the-art Youth Zones that provide safe and inspiring places for young people to go in their leisure time. Each Youth Zone provides thousands¹ of local young people aged between eight and 19, or up to 25 with a disability, affordable access to sports, arts and leisure activities and dedicated support, seven days a week, 52 weeks a year, giving young people somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to.

Across the country we currently have 12 Youth Zones open, with a further Youth Zone opening in Croydon in September. By end of 2021 we will have a further 8 either open or in development. Our ultimate aim is simple: to ensure that all young people who need a Youth Zone in their community, have one.

Each Youth Zone works in partnership with young people, the local community, local businesses and the local authority in a cross-community collaboration between public, private and voluntary sectors. We have more than 530 Patrons, comprising both private sector companies and individuals, providing revenue funding, and have raised over £170 million capital and revenue investment since our inception over a decade ago.

Youth Zones are life changing places. The vast majority of our members report higher attainment in school; increased confidence with career prospects; more frequent exercise; and increased emotional intelligence and resilience – key drivers of social mobility. We explore the extent of our positive work in the rest of this briefing.

We build character, friendship and community

We work at the heart of communities

The importance of physical space in the community for health and wellbeing cannot be understated. In an age when young people are so well connected via social media, they have never been so isolated from physical communities. Research suggests that young people feel loneliness more than any other age group. Almost half of young people aged 16 to 24 say they feel often or very often, compared to less than a third of 65-75 year olds^v. Youth Zones help repair the disconnect between people and place.

Most of our Youth Zones are in some of the most deprived parts of the country. The Manchester Youth Zone is in the most deprived local authority nationally, and Zones in Blackburn with Darwen and Wolverhampton are within the most deprived 10% of the country^{vi}. In such areas we are working against the grain of declining physical community space, such as libraries, youth centres and children's centres, by offering vibrant Youth Zones equipped for the 21st Century. A survey with Youth Zone stakeholders shows that over 90% agreed that we strengthened local communities by supporting young people, made a positive contribution to community cohesion and raised pride in the local area.^{vii}

Youth Zones also do not work in isolation, they are a key part of their community and work in partnership with a network of public and voluntary sector organisations. Close partnership working enables the multiplier effects of joint working and resources to have greater impact, with each organisation strengthening each other's work. Youth Zones are based in the communities in which they serve and work to enrich the community as a whole, rather than focusing solely on individual benefits.

¹ Average membership per-Youth Zone across the network is approximately 3k

Fostering relationships

It is well evidenced that young people growing up in poverty have narrower social networks. They are not able to draw from the same resources and support of families who are 'well-off', which consequently entrenches low-aspiration and slows down social mobility^{viii}. Conversely, having mixed social networks – consisting of people from different ethnic and material backgrounds – helps aid social mobility and reduce the risk of entrenched poverty later in life.

The Joseph Rowntree Foundation^{ix} state the answer lies in initiatives which encourage greater use of mixed social networks and which break down social isolation. Youth Zones do exactly that. They are primarily located in areas of high levels of deprivation. They succeed in engaging a broad cross-section of young people and have a positive impact on their members and the communities they serve.

Research shows that over two thirds of Youth Zone members nationally report being better at mixing with people who are from different backgrounds because of attending a Youth Zone^x. There is a clear rise in the number of friends our young members have by a Youth Zone, from 66% for those who have been members for up to 6 months rising to 82% amongst those who have been members for 2 years or more; and confidence in a group situation, up from 55% in the first 6 months to 73% for 2 years plus.

This impact is felt most strongly among young people who attend a Youth Zone longer-term, between 1 and 2 years, and those who attend on a regular basis, more than once a week. Analysis shows no difference by gender, ethnicity and age, suggesting that the benefits apply to all members.

Our Youth Zones don't just attract young people from disadvantaged backgrounds: young people often travel from more affluent parts of the area to attend, which promotes social mixing.

"They have a "family" atmosphere that is not only welcoming but supporting right the way through from young people to CEO" Youth Zone Stakeholder

Building resilience and self-confidence

The non-cognitive aspects of a young person's development – for example perseverance and self-esteem - are gaining greater traction in the social mobility debate. Levels of self-esteem among pre-teen children has been evidenced as determining earnings by the time they are in their mid-20s^{xi}.

Research suggests that young people growing up in lower income families will have lower non-cognitive development, which is a contributing factor (education being the primary one) to young people not achieving higher paid jobs as adults.^{xii}

Youth work helps build resilience and confidence by developing trusted relationships, offering guidance and non-formal mentoring and helping young people develop a passion in sport, art or other activities.

3 out of 4 young people attending our Youth Zones recorded an increase in self-confidence (77%) and friendships (75%).

"It is a vital resource for young people and a real lifeline for children who need wider support than their family circumstances can provide. In a time of statutory services reductions for children's services, the model provides much needed support for our children from all walks of life." Youth Zone Stakeholder

“I just have more of a social life, met lots of people, do lots of different activities, I have fun with my friends & learn new things” As a result, “I feel it has helped me grow which made me think more sensibly & behave better in general.” Youth Zone Member

We Raise aspirations and achievement in education and employment

Our impact data points towards our youth work model playing a significant role in helping raise the bar for young people’s school attendance and aspiration.

66% of our young members feel more confident about getting the qualifications/experiences needed to progress. 64% reported working harder in school and college; and 55% feel less likely to want to miss school or college.

We also surveyed schools with a high density of young members attending a Youth Zone. These schools reported improvement in Attainment 8 Scores. 17 of the 20 schools for which there was data had improved their performance or had seen less decline than the national average.

Our data also suggests that our work is felt most positively among parents whose children are eligible for free school meals. Over a third of parents with children attending a Youth Zone and in receipt of free schools meals reported that their child is more likely to not miss school/college, worker harder and enjoys school/college more, compared to before they started attending the Youth Zone.

Case study

Courtney, 17, was referred on to the ‘Get a Job’ programme by staff members at the Youth Zone who thought she would benefit from the structure of the course and the opportunity to build her confidence and self-esteem. Having worked hard and maintained her attendance throughout the six weeks, Courtney was offered a two-day work experience placement at Allied Scaffolding and impressed the team so much she was offered an apprenticeship. Courtney completed her scaffolding apprenticeship, receiving two awards in the process, before going on to her dream job in retail.

“Mahdlo (Youth Zone) have helped me through so much this past couple of months. Not just helping me get this brilliant apprenticeship but making me smile when my head drops and I feel low, helping me learn skills and techniques to help me secure and keep a job and helping me build confidence and self-esteem. The Get a Job course made me realise that I can do things just as well as everyone else. Like this job – I wasn’t going to take it because I thought everyone would judge me because it’s a ‘man’s job’, but at the end of the day I can do it just as well as everyone else! I’m on an excellent wage, I enjoy the job I do and everyone there is lovely.”

Courtney

We Improve health and wellbeing amongst young people

The link between poverty and health outcomes among children is stark^{xiii}. Poor physical and mental health is likely to hold back social mobility. For example, the Social Mobility Commission have concluded that those in social housing are less likely to find employment as they are more likely to have a mental health condition, disability or other health condition. Individuals in these circumstances are more likely to struggle to move social classes without a combination of health and social support^{xiv}.

In the UK, nearly 1 in 5 children are living in poverty, with those from the most deprived backgrounds experiencing much worse health compared with the most affluent. In 2015/2016, 40% of children in

England's most deprived areas were overweight or obese, compared to 27% in the most affluent areas.^{xv} Youth Zones provide young people with access to high quality sport and gym equipment, including climbing walls – all overseen by expert, trained coaches who motivate and help train young people. They're a guaranteed way of keeping young people physically and mentally active outside of school hours (and away from their smart phone and video consoles).

The emotional well-being of children is just as important as physical health and with depression, anxiety and other disorders affecting children and young people rightly gaining much more attention and understanding among stakeholders. Good mental health helps young people develop the resilience needed to cope with life's challenges and OnSide's goal to help young people lead healthier, happier lives has never been more important.

Youth Zones provide a basis for tackling poor physical mental health through both our youth work model and the activities we offer. Research shows that 97% of our stakeholders consider Youth Zones to improved young people's physical and mental health. Parents of our young members felt the same way, with the majority feeling that their child's physical health had improved since they started attending a Youth Zone.

“Doing more sport which makes me want to do more. My diet has changed. I'm eating healthier foods so can do more sport. I'm happier, fitter, healthier.”

“I'm more alert, feel happier, I'm around people like me.”

“I feel more energetic. It makes me run more, I'm more tired when I get home so my sleep is better.”

We create a safe space for young people to grow

A key feature of our Youth Zones is that they offer a safe place for young people free from fears of bullying or negative influences in their community, such as gang activity or involvement in anti-social behaviour. Research with Youth Zone members found that 95% of young people said they felt safe at their Youth Zone, 4% said 'sometimes' and 1% did not feel safe. The feeling of safety was universal across different genders, ages, ethnicities and eligibility for free school meals. 92% considered that they had a trusted adult who they could speak to about any issues within the youth zone. Anecdotally, we know that incidences of anti-social behaviour have decreased in an area where a youth zone has been built.

Notions of safety are key to breaking down the habit of knife carrying. Our young members who have carried knives report that they do so because they don't feel safe; and it is proven that if you carry a knife your chance of becoming a victim or perpetrator of a stabbing drastically increases.

OnSide Youth Zones are a contributor to the Serious Violence Taskforce, and through this group we emphasise the importance of prevention as a means of tackling violent crime. As the Serious Violence Strategy acknowledges, prevention, as early as possible, is key to tackling the triggers that lead to these activities in the first place.

As well saving a life, and bringing countless other social benefits, preventing knife crime is of significant economic importance. Using Home Office figures it is possible to estimate that a single homicide in the UK can cost £2.2 million.

Giving a young person the space to go to escape gang culture creates opportunities to engage with them and divert them from a path of crime – it has far better outcomes for everyone concerned. It is the lack of opportunities that young people face that is the fundamental driver of gang and knife

crime involvement^{xvi}. Not only does carrying a knife drastically reduce the chances of social mobility, it is a lack of social mobility in deprived communities that drives this trend in the first place. Creating positive alternatives through the power of youth work serves to breakdown this relationship.

We believe strongly that our Youth Zones offer a perfect example of creating belonging. Young people thrive when they know they are understood, and when they feel that there is a secure relationship with others – whether this is other young people, or adult role models. Our Youth Zones therefore create an alternative community for young people away from gangs.

“The staff are amazing and want the very best for the youngsters. They go above and beyond to truly make a difference to young people’s lives - especially those who are disadvantaged.”

“Some people make me get into trouble, but I am a lot better now: I have more friends and fun.”

“I’m not in as much trouble, it keeps me busy, and I have more confidence.”

Concluding remarks

This briefing provides evidence of the transformative effect of youth work on young people and communities, with an emphasis on how OnSide Youth Zones aid social mobility. But for us and other youth work providers to reach our potential we need serious action from central government.

We support the key recommendations made by the All Party Parliamentary Group on Youth Affairs, in particular: the need for the government to urgently review funding across the youth work landscape; review the statutory guidance on local authorities to ensure every young person in their area has access to youth work; to guarantee the discharge of this duty by mandating councils to appoint an elected member to oversee youth work; and to ensure that youth work has a voice at the heart of government by creating a relevant Ministerial post.

We welcome the government’s recent (10th July 2019) decision to review the statutory guidance around youth work. We call on the government to extend this review to include a full scrutiny of current funding for youth work, how it has changed over the last decade and what is needed to ensure young people today and tomorrow have the opportunities in their communities to step-off the treadmill of social mobility.

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