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The Impact of Fourteen Years of UK Conservative Government Policy on Open Access Youth Work

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Abstract: This article reviews the impacts of the UK Conservative Party's government policies on 'open access youth work' since 2010, giving particular attention to the period since 2018 and to impacts in England. After clarifying the practice's distinctive features, it outlines the 'austerity' demolition of its local provision and—amid continuing wider financial pressures—changes in the role and contributions of the voluntary youth sector. It lists a range of 'gesture' funds for financing responses to young people's needs and interests as the government has defined them and uses the Youth Investment Fund (YIF) as a case study of how this money has been made available and allocated. Initiatives taken by the Department of Digital, Media, Culture and Sport (DCMS) are then examined: its Youth Review, National Youth Guarantee, review of the statutory guidance to local authorities, and support for 'youth volunteering'. Two key developments are then considered that, by early 2024, were diverting and inhibiting an even partial sustained reinstatement of the lost open access youth work facilities. One, at the policy level, is the redefinition of 'youth work' by governments and by some within the youth work sector itself as a wide range of out-of-school practices with young people; the other, at the point of delivery, is the on-going difficulties in recruiting youth workers, especially those with direct practice experience. Finally, two possible tentative suggestions for some reinstatement of open access youth work provisions are then discussed.

Keywords: young people; youth policies; youth work; youth services; (informal) education; austerity; voluntary youth sector; National Youth Agency

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1. Introduction

This paper is based on secondary research and critically examines the UK Conservative Party's government policies on youth work, since 2010, focusing mainly on the period 2019–2023. It is based on a range of government reports and a variety of commentators from throughout the field of youth work It systemically analyses a range of youth work specific policy initiatives and funding streams. It assesses the impact on youth work, with a particular focus on open access youth work. This impact is mainly discussed in relation to England as responsibility for youth work (and education as a whole) is devolved to the national assemblies of Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland. The paper begins with a clarification of what is meant by open access youth work. It then discusses the wider policy context of 'austerity' [1] before presenting a detailed examination of the youth-work-specific policies and their impacts.

2. Defining 'Open Access Youth Work'

'Open access youth work' is regarded as a distinctive practice with young people. This distinctiveness is defined by Davies [2] as an interplay of three key features:

- Young people's choice to become involved—their voluntary participation.
- Youth worker interventions, which start from the identities, interests, and concerns of these young people as they would define them.

- Its implementation through inter-personal processes, which, respecting their wider community and cultural contexts, seek to build trusting relationships with them as individuals and with and through their significant peer groups.

Davies [2] also emphasizes other features—often shared with other practices—which also shape open access youth work's approaches and methods. These include the following:

- A commitment to tipping balances of power in young people's favour, both within the open access youth work provision itself and more widely within society.
- A focus on how young people feel as well as what they know and can do.
- As an explicitly educational practice, encouraging and supporting young people to discover their untapped potential and to explore wider current and future possibilities for themselves.

Many of these features are echoed by other commentators such as Schild et al., [3], Ord [4], Jeffs and Smith [5], and more recently in 2014 by the Council of Europe [6].

The in-built, open-ended nature of this practice has made its impacts and outcomes difficult to measure in the ways that current policymakers and funders so often demand. [4,7]. However, research commissioned by the National Youth Work Charity UK Youth, published in November 2022 [8], provided evidence of its positive 'wider societal benefits' with, for example, a 'direct economic value' estimated at GBP 5.7 billion and an indirect value of at least GBP 3.2 billion. The latter, it concluded, resulted from improved health (including mental health), increased youth employment and education, and reduced spending on criminal justice costs and 'anti-social behaviour'. Research by the National Youth Agency (the de facto governing body for youth work in England) published in November 2023 also, more negatively, indicated a 10 per cent increase in crime by 10–15-year-olds after 2010 in London boroughs most affected by youth centre closures [9].

3. 'Austerity' and Its Impacts—Immediate and On-Going

Despite this evidence of its value, in advance of actually meeting the young people who engage, a practice with the starting points outlined above can offer few guarantees that it will meet key government policy priorities often shaped by constraining neo-liberal ideas. At the core of this paper, therefore, is the proposition that, over these years, when open access youth work has not been treated as entirely disposable, it has been seen as replaceable by wider, often less 'open', conceptions of the practice—for example, by targeted one-to-one youth support [10] where youth workers have a case load of young people who they meet on a weekly or monthly basis to offer advice, information, and guidance or youth work programmes with the aim of developing life skills such as those run by the Prince's Trust to which young people are often referred to by adults such as parents or teachers [11].

3.1. Demolishing (State) Open Access Youth Work

Its disposability was particularly demonstrated during the decade after 2010 when open access youth work facilities funded by the national and local state across England (the main focus of this paper) were largely eliminated [1]. In the context of on-going reductions in the central government's financial support for local government organizations (known as local authorities or councils, but across Europe these would be more widely referred to as municipalities), the overall local councils' youth service budgets in this period fell by GBP 1 billion and their spending per young person by, on average, from GBP 136 to GBP 54 [12]. Cuts such as these continued throughout the decade—in 2017–2018, for example, compared to the previous year, by GBP 32 million [8], resulting in the closure of 760 youth centres and the loss of 4500 youth work posts, 139,000 youth service places, and at least 35,000 h of 'outreach work' in the UK [13,14]. Student numbers on approved youth and community work courses that year also fell—from 1300 in 2009–2010 to 432 [15].

At the time of writing, the impacts of past austerity policies on open access youth work in England still being felt, often severely [16]. Newer cuts are also continuing to have their effects [17]. Here, the crucial context is that, between 2010 and 2020, local authorities

in England lost GBP 0.6 to the pound of their government funding. In 2019–2020, the central government Treasury's Revenue Support Grant was due to be cut by a further GBP 1.3 billion or 36 per cent, resulting the following year in a GBP 3.9 billion funding gap [18]. In September 2023, one of the unions that supports youth work, Unison, was still reporting a GBP 3.5 million 'hole' in local authorities' finances [19], even though by late that year in England they had sold GBP 15 billion worth of public assets. A growing number were declaring themselves bankrupt, including Birmingham, the largest local authority in Europe, and Nottingham, which, with a budget deficit of GBP 50 million, announced in December 2023 that it would be closing an adventure playground and a play and youth centre [17,20].

3.2. 'Gesture' Funding

For open access youth work, a piece of (albeit negative) evidence of continuing 'austerity' has been the failure of the Conservative Government into the 2020s to make any sustained move—or even explicit commitment—to reinstate the majority of the 760 lost local facilities. Instead, the government has offered at least twelve 'gesture' funds targeting 'youth issues' such as 'violent crime', 'hotspots', 'youth loneliness', 'youth unemployment', and 'arts and sports', one at least of which failed to deliver [21].

For open access youth work, perhaps the most significant of these 'gesture funds' has been the Youth Investment Fund (YIF)—a Conservative 2019 General Election commitment [22]. Over five years, from April 2020, this was to provide GBP 560 million to '. . . help to build 60 new youth centres across the country, refurbish around 300 existing youth facilities, and provide over 100 mobile facilities for harder to reach areas' [23]. This fund represented just over half of the GBP 1.1 billion post-2010 cuts to local authority youth services and was identified to reinstate a fraction of them.

Repeated delays in releasing the Youth Investment Fund money generated more than one 're-launch' of the fund. With COVID adding significantly to government financial pressures, fears were even expressed that it might be used for other priorities, with National Youth Agency's Chief Executive suggesting at one point that it had actually 'gone missing' [24]. Two years after the fund was supposed to have become active, in May 2022, only GBP 12 million had actually been used—'fast-tracked' to 418 youth projects for just 'small-scale capital improvements such as providing new laptops to youth groups . . . and improving transport'—so that, by August 2022, GBP 368 million still apparently remained unallocated [25]. Evidence also emerged from the Yorkshire and Humberside region that, though the Youth Investment Fund money was supposed to be targeted towards 'pockets of deprivation', these could actually be located in 'areas of greater wealth' rather than in the 'disadvantaged' areas where 'historic disinvestment in youth work' had occurred [26].

By August 2023, GBP 160 million had been allocated to build some of the promised new youth centres and to refurbish old ones [27]; significant proportions of the Youth Investment Fund money also continued to be targeted towards other key government priorities. These included youth work programmes such as the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme and the National Citizens Service, which, in 2022, received 30 per cent of the Youth Investment Fund's GBP 560 million [27], the creation of new youth volunteering opportunities, and a reduction in uniformed youth organisations' waiting lists. A, perhaps, particularly revealing example of where the government's youth work priorities lay was the inclusion in the latter of the armed services' Cadet Force—described in the Conservative Government's February 2022 policy white paper 'Levelling Up' as a 'transformative opportunity' for school students [28,29].

4. Government Policies and Initiatives

4.1. The Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Youth Review and National Youth Guarantee

Although, over this period, the government never explicitly committed itself to the full reinstatement of the lost open access youth work facilities, it did take some youth-

work-focussed initiatives. One of the most significant was a 'Youth Review' [30] led by the Department of Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport which—with at least some implicit messages on how the government understood youth work—had, by then, taken over responsibility for 'youth services' from the Department of Education.

An early joint announcement of the review by the Treasury and the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport explained its briefly as:

> *. . . outlining a clear direction for the out-of-school youth agenda (to 2025), including considering the next steps on the Youth Investment Fund and the National Citizens Service programme* [30]

Its broader aims were set to include:

> *'. . .* ***level-up opportunity*** *across the country'; 'develop (young people's)* ***skills for work and life****; and 'support* ***mental and physical health and wellbeing****. (Emphases in the original)* [30].

In their over 6000 responses to the review, the under-25s surveyed highlighted the value they placed on the opportunities 'youth services and youth clubs' provided to, for example, 'have something fun to do after school/in the holidays/on weekends', 'make new friends', 'learn new skills', and '. . . meet people from different backgrounds. . .'. The academics who also contributed to the review stressed the importance of accessible and long-term funding for 'universal services' and that capital funding should be '. . .small-scale, flexible and locally determined', so that it could be used where appropriate for 'pop-up or modular builds' [30] (p. 7).

Though without specifically mentioning youth work, the Government Department for Digital, Culture, Media, and Sport (DCMS) explained its own aspirations as:

> *. . . to create more opportunities across the country, so that every young person has access to a trusted adult . . . through regular clubs and activities, adventures away from home and opportunities to volunteer*. [30] (p. 8)

It also noted the 'significant role' this provision plays for an estimated 450,000 young people '. . . not known to other services' [30] (p. 5).

Committing itself to taking the lead 'in enabling effective youth participation in decision-making at all levels', the DCMS proposed to develop a 'Youth Sector Strategy', which it said would '. . . provide clarity on the government's role in supporting youth services'. This was to include seeking 'greater alignment . . . to maximise and coordinate funding opportunities for the youth sector' within the DCMS itself and across government more broadly. The strategy was to be implemented through a new National Youth Guarantee, which, drawing on the Youth Investment Fund's GBP 560 million, would provide what were here described as 'up to 300 new and refurbished youth spaces and services' targeted towards 'the country's most left behind areas' [30] (p. 1).

However, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's responses had some significant underlying shortcomings. One, given the depth of the cuts to open access youth work since 2010, was the limited funding being made available through the Youth Investment Fund to implement the key National Youth Guarantee commitments. Another concerned the rhetorical nature of the review report's references to the government's wider 'Levelling Up' agenda. This was illustrated in its Levelling Up white paper [28], also published in February 2022, whose Executive Summary managed just two mentions of young people and 'youth services', one of which—reflecting an often dominant negative 'youth' stereotype—promised '. . . to make sure 16- and 17-year olds who commit crimes pay their community back with visible labour to improve the local environment'. The paper also failed to make any acknowledgement of how a decade-plus of cuts had all but removed the contribution open access youth work could have made to realising some of the 'Levelling Up' aspirations for young people [29].

4.2. 'Reviewing' the Statutory Guidance to Local Authorities

Another Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport commitment in this period, made in July 2019, was to strengthen its statutory guidance to local authorities on their duty to provide youth work [31]—last updated in 2012. Over the years, this has often proved confusing and even ineffective, not least because the original 1944 Education Act, which first sought to give the practice a statutory basis, had not actually named youth work (or even, as it was then labelled, youth leadership). Instead, it had talked only of '. . . adequate facilities for . . . leisure-time occupation . . . and recreative activities . . . for persons over compulsory school age' [32].

Despite subsequent revisions, a 2014 survey had revealed that, in their decisions on youth services funding, only just over 42 per cent of local authorities were applying the guidance 'all of the time' [33]. This often, it seems, was because—especially when they needed to cut budgets—it provided a convenient 'get-out' clause: these services need to be 'secured' only 'so far as is reasonably practicable' [34,35]. To address this ambiguity, in October 2020, the National Youth Agency had proposed that:

> . . . Each service requires at least two full-time equivalent, professionally (university degree level) qualified youth workers located in each secondary school catchment area for access, with a team of at least four youth support workers (level 3) and assistants (level 2), alongside skilled volunteers [36].

Also delayed by the pandemic [37] and meriting only a two-sentence reference in the *review* report [30] (p. 9), updated guidance was finally released in September 2023 [38]. This required local authorities to make a 'youth offer' focused on providing 'services to improve young people's well-being' for all 13–19-year-olds and 20–24-year-olds with learning difficulties or disabilities. As well as opening up opportunities for them to reach their full potential, the offer was also intended to:

> '. . . *make an important contribution to other objectives, such as economic, social and environmental improvements, community cohesion, safer and stronger neighbourhoods, better health and increased educational attainment and employment*. [38]

Proposed ways for achieving these objectives included local authorities ensuring 'the right mix of open access services and targeted services', the introduction of 'digital offers', and a requirement to 'consult and take into account the views of young people in their area'. The latter was to be focused especially on those 'facing particular barriers to accessing sufficient provision, such as disadvantaged young people and vulnerable young people'.

However, without removing the 'acting reasonably' clause and the risk, therefore, of it being used to justify cuts, the new guidance also explained that its application 'will depend on the specific circumstances of the local authority . . .' [38]. It, thus, prompted some critical responses from the field, including from the director of one voluntary organisation who asked: 'Who will be checking whether (the guidance's) "musts" are delivered this time around' [38].

4.3. Youth Volunteering

One of the more high-profile examples in this period of the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's encouragement of 'youth work', as it understood it, was the substantial financial support it gave to 'youth volunteering'. Much of this was focused on the '#iwill campaign'—launched in November 2013 by the Prince of Wales following an 'independent review' initiated by Prime Minister David Cameron [39]. In 2020, #iwill adopted a 'Power of Youth Charter' as 'a framework to empower more young people to make a positive difference'. By 2021, its overall aspiration was to 'encourage 1.7 million more young people to make helping others a habit for life', with its 'broader goals' by then including '. . . supporting young people from low-income backgrounds and Black and ethnic minority groups' [40,41].

To celebrate its tenth anniversary in 2023, #iwill adopted 'This is me' as the overall theme for its annual 'Power of Youth Day'. This focused young people and its supporters

and partners on four questions, which included the following: 'Are you including young people in board meetings or decision-making forums?' and 'Are you creating conditions for young people to explore new ways to shape change?' [40,41]. As a prompt to 'imagine what the next decade will look like for youth social action', over seven days in November, young people and #iwill partners hosted online and in-person events to explore 'the next big thing'. Sessions included a workshop on 'Removing barriers to youth social action' and a 'Deaf Awareness' training event.

Government funding for youth volunteering initiatives generally and for #iwill, in particular, increased significantly over this period. In August 2021, for example, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport committed GBP 4 million for an International Youth Day; a year later, in partnership with the National Lottery, it allocated a further GBP 12 million for 'youth social action'; and, in 2022, it agreed that GBP 4 million of Youth Investment Fund money should be used to 'create tens and thousands of new . . . opportunities' [30]. By July 2022, the combined government and lottery funding for #iwill was estimated to total GBP 66 million [42–44].

In its September 2020 Levelling Up Our Communities paper, the government also endorsed the notion of 'paid volunteering' [28,45,46]—a proposal said to have been received positively by Prime Minister Boris Johnson. This was explained as 'a structured programme' to 'subsidise under-employed young people to work on a range of social and environmental projects' through which they could '. . . build their skills and their sense of public duty'. Still often framed by neo-liberal ideas, government motivations for such 'investment' included the assumption that 'a national full-time volunteering programme . . . could boost the UK economy by up to GBP199 million a year' [47].

5. The Role of the Voluntary Youth Sector

Post-COVID Financial Pressures

Driven also, in part, by the neo-liberal thinking and, in particular, by a perceived need to reduce the role of 'the state', throughout this period the government sought to locate the voluntary youth sector within its wider 'civil society' strategy. This set out a '. . . ten-year vision for how government can work with and support civil society to improve lives and create a fairer society for all'. In pursuit of 'social value', it committed itself through this to '. . . unlock potential, and—where possible—convene, catalyse and fund activity to support people within communities who, together, can make a real difference' [48].

Examples, by 2019, of youth-focused provisions, which ministers said had benefited from the strategy, include the National Citizens Service (NCS), which, in the previous year, had attracted 100,000 young people; 'uniformed youth groups in disadvantaged areas', which had made a GBP 5 million 'investment' for creating over 10,000 new places; three new youth voice pilot projects; and, using GBP 90 million from dormant bank accounts, projects 'to support the most disadvantaged young people into meaningful employment' [49]. In June 2022, a Local Capacity Building Fund was also set up to support 8–10 local partnerships of statutory and civil society organisation working with young people in areas qualifying for YIF money [50].

However, other evidence emerged from, for example, the National Youth Agency, the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, and New Philanthropy Capital of a range of unresolved issues across the voluntary sector [51–53] with the Law Family Commission on Civil Society going so far as to suggest there had been a 'collective failure to properly value what civil society delivers' and to label the charitable sector as 'undervalued and overlooked' in national decision-making [54] (p. 9).

The financial pressures on the voluntary youth sector had some particularly severe impacts. By October 2020, following the COVID lockdowns and greatly reduced membership, the Scout Association was having to consider closing at least 500 (7 per cent) of its 7300 groups [55]; moreover, UK Youth considered cutting fourteen posts at its Avon Tyrrell residential centre, which, the previous year, had been used by 71,000 young people [56,57]. Usage did recover and demand increased; for example, Girlguiding saw a significant in-

crease [58,59]. However, by early 2021, the often-substantial reductions in income of 83 per cent of organisations in England was forcing over half of them to cut or plan to cut both provision and staffing [60]. In mid-2023, for example, Girlguiding announced plans to close five of its UK activity centres that—as they were now being used by less than 10 per cent of its membership—were no longer financially sustainable [61].

Although pointing to government allocations to the sector of GBP 750 million since the COVID-19 crisis hit, in December 2020, Conservative Government Culture Secretary Oliver Dowden had to acknowledge that in 'the early stages of the pandemic . . . Whitehall didn't know as much about civil society as we thought we did' [62].

Two months later, as the financial pressures continued, hundreds of the UK's biggest charities wrote to the Prime Minister of the Conservative Government calling for emergency government support for the sector [63]. Yet, by late 2023, as many organisations struggled on the brink of insolvency (not least because they were having to subsidise underfunded local authority contracts) [64], all that the government could offer was a 'promise' to make money available to charities 'as soon as we can' [65].

In this period, despite such severe financial constraints, the government chose in proactive ways to encourage the development of two young-people-focused 'voluntary' initiatives outside—indeed in some ways in competition with—the 'traditional' voluntary sector: the National Citizenship Service [66] and the OnSide Youth Zones [67]. Both, moreover, were given sometimes substantial state funding (national and local) at a time when public finances were under such pressure.

6. The National Citizens Service

As its 'experiences account for a significant portion of the government's National Youth Guarantee' and its 2022–2023 budget included GBP 49.2 million of 'Grant-in-Aid' [68], the National Citizenship Service could be regarded merely as a state-provided provision. However, operating as a trust, it also needs to be considered as a (significant) contributor to the voluntary youth sector.

The stated aim of the scheme's 'redesigned' four-week residential programme, implemented from January 2023, was to deliver 'community experiences . . . (both) open to all and targeted to specific groups'. This was set within an overall vision of enabling young people '. . . to become world ready and work ready—through growing their confidence, independence and skills' and to have '. . . resilience and wellbeing', 'an impact on the world', and 'respect and tolerance for difference and diversity'. Actual delivery now occurred in the form of a residential stay, community-based activities, and/or online learning—a choice that could include 'opportunities for volunteering and social action' and for 'social mixing' [69].

By December 2023, over 120,000 young people had participated in a 'National Citizenship Service (NCS) experience' [69], including 21 per cent who were eligible for free school meals, 9 per cent who had a 'Special Educational Need or Disability', and 33 per cent from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic backgrounds. Over 100,000 had also engaged with content on its blog—an increase of over a third on the previous year. Using both contracting and grant funding, a new NCS strategy for 2023–2025 adopted a commissioning delivery model of working with over 300 partners to 'build capabilities and strengthen collaboration with the (wider) youth sector'.

Though clearly valued by some young people, National Citizenship Service was not designed to fill the gap left by the loss of the many locally accessible community-based open access facilities. For one thing, far from providing year-round opportunities, its core offer was a one-off, time-limited experience. And—especially as it was still open only to 16- and 17-year-olds—it was never going to reach the approximately one million 8–25-year-olds, that the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services had reported in 2013, were then using their local youth club [70].

The OnSide Youth Zones

As a much more recent arrival on the youth work scene, OnSide was registered as a charity in 2008 [71]. By mid-2023, it had raised GBP 118 million to set up a 'network' of eighteen 'Youth Zones' across the UK and a further GBP 11 million to support their programmes; it had created 1550 new jobs and volunteering opportunities; and it had trained 483 workers and volunteers on its 'Talent Academy' programme [72].

Its vision was to 'empower' 8–19-year-old local young people and up to 25-year-olds with a disability [73] 'to lead positive fulfilling lives by providing access to incredible spaces and excellent youth work, delivered by outstanding people, where they are needed the most' [74]. At the Bristol Youth Zone, for example, more than 20 activities were to be available every evening including 'employability training';, and at its Crewe Zone, a wide range of sports and arts facilities including a recording studio and rooftop 'kick pitch' were available [75]. It also created a 'Stronger Sisters' programme aimed at 'helping to raise aspirations' [76] and 'Culture of Health' [77]; 'Get a Job' [78]; and 'Active Youth' projects [79]. By mid-2023, its zones were recording 650,000 'visits' by 50,000 young people [80].

Crucial to its funding have been commitments to '. . . strengthen relationships with government and the youth sector' and '. . . to develop robust outcome measures' [81], (p.9), with the latter drawing on feedback 'stories' from young people and partner organisations [80] (p. 3). As well as having what it calls its '. . . unique private sector input', OnSide has attracted funding from the Youth Investment Fund, the National Lottery, and trusts and foundations [74], (p. 7), [75,82,83]. Despite their growing budget pressures, local authorities have also made substantial financial contributions, with Basildon Council agreeing to contribute GBP 4.1 million [84] and Barnsley Council GBP 4.5 million towards construction costs [85] and Croydon Council GBP 300,000 for three years' running costs [86]. As is always likely with such developments, questions nonetheless remain regarding how the on-going revenue and maintenance costs of such developments will be met.

Here too, many young people will no doubt have welcomed having access to these high-quality facilities. However, from an open access youth work perspective, three questions are worth posing for debate:

1. For those thousands of young people now using a Youth Zone, how effectively is OnSide fulfilling its aspiration of providing 'dedicated youth worker support' through worker and young person relationships shaped by young-people-led, process-driven open access youth work approaches? On this, OnSide has offered two albeit indirect and somewhat contradictory responses: the Zones 'aren't youth centres as you may know them' [72], (p. 4); but, in 2021–2022, twenty-three of its workers gained the Level 3 Youth Work Diploma [72], (p. 21). Nonetheless, the question remains: how much space does the zones' declared activity-focused approach leave for those often on-the-wing, off-the-cut, personally exploratory conversations that are at the heart of youth work practice?
2. What priority should funders give to the OnSide approach when this is set alongside the academics' recommendation to the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport's Youth Review for 'small-scale, flexible and locally determined' facilities such as 'pop-up or modular builds' [30], (p. 7)—say, a youth café in a local shop or a youth shelter in a local park? This is a question, moreover, with particular relevance for more isolated and often deprived rural locations where young people's access to and use of such a facility is likely to be highly constrained.
3. How impressed might local councillors or officers be by a modest 'pop-up' proposal if an OnSide offer of a multi-million pound 'high quality', 'state-of-the-art' Youth Zone in their city centre is also on the table?

7. The Challenge of Reinstating Open Access Youth Work

In England, in this period, commitments to reinstating effective forms of open access youth work provision [87–91] have been diverted or inhibited by two developments. One has been the moves by policymakers, funders, and some within the youth work sector

itself to extend the conception of youth work to embrace programmes often shaped by pre-defined agendas and outcomes that may even require young people's participation. The other, at the delivery level, is the difficulty of attracting applicants with any previous first-hand experience of open access youth work into vacant full- and part-time youth work posts.

7.1. Reconceptualising Youth Work

An early example of how the meaning of 'youth work' was being extended came in July 2019 in the National Youth Agency's 'Update' on the routes to youth work qualifications. This noted that 'professionally validated youth work qualifications are being applied across a large number of sectors' and that, therefore, 'youth work and its methods are . . . well recognised and supported across a wide range of applications' [51]. By January 2023, a Level 4 Certificate in Professional Development (equivalent to the first year of university-level study) was available, aimed, in part, at those 'who wish to make use of youth work methods in the services they offer, such as social workers, police officers, those working in the emergency services and teachers' [92].

In September 2023, the Conservative Government's revised statutory guidance to local government authorities or councils gave top-down support to this widened notion of youth work and its facilities. These, it stated:

> . . . make an important contribution to other objectives, such as economic, social and environmental improvements, community cohesion, safer and stronger neighbourhoods, better health and increased educational attainment and employment [38].

Driving these developments have been some key youth policy concerns and priorities.

7.2. Youth Violence and Crime

By 2019, the Conservative Government's Ministry of Justice was monitoring a London Metropolitan Police 'Divert' project which, using GBP 300,000 from the Home Office (the government ministry which has oversight over policing and border control), had assigned youth workers to police stations to support young people and their families caught up in the justice system [93]. The project was later integrated into a wider 'Violence Reduction Unit' (VRU) programme using a 'public health' approach to combating knife crime [94]. With an initial extra GBP 550,000 from a Lord Mayor's fund, the London Units—later complemented by a pilot 'Engage' project [95]—were briefed to double the 'dozens of youth workers' in the capital's police stations: 'intervention coaches', by May 2022, were reported to have 'supported away from violence' more than 300 10–18-year-olds [96,97]. The programme was extended across England, including by voluntary bodies such as Redthread [98], with the Home Office allocating GBP 70 million to eighteen VRUs by mid-2022 [99,100]. By the following September, the fund had provided GBP 7.9 million over three years for youth workers to be embedded in London A&E departments to support young people injured by violent crime [101].

In March 2021, NYA also made the case for 'a whole system approach for youth work' to tackle young people's involvement in 'county lines' drug activities [102]. Its proposals attracted wider support—for example, in November 2022, from Anne Longfield, the former Conservative Government-appointed Children's Commissioner for England (whose role is to 'promote and protect the rights of children, especially the most vulnerable, and advocates for their views and interests' [103]). She recommended that, by 2027, an 'army' of 10,000 additional youth workers be recruited to staff an England-wide network of 1000 Sure Start 'community hubs' for teenagers [104–106]. Though not specifically followed up by the government, in response to a prediction that the number of children in custody in England and Wales would rise by 2024 [107], in March 2023, it published an 'Anti-social Behaviour Action Plan' which promised 'an extra one million hours of youth services in areas with the highest rates of anti-social behaviour' [108].

7.3. Attending School; Getting a Job

In the aftermath of the pandemic lockdowns, a 2022 Centre for Youth Justice report revealed that, by the autumn term of 2020, 'schools with the most disadvantaged intake (had been) 10 times as likely to have a class-worth of severely absent pupils' [109]. An exchange at a Conservative Government's Education Select Committee meeting had, by then, pointed to youth work's potential for improving educational attainment [110], while a National Youth Agency report had recommended 'an urgent package of support to deploy youth workers for summer schools, detached/outreach youth work and activities in schools' [111,112]. The National Youth Agency then launched a cross-political-party review in 2022 [113,114], whose brief was later outlined as including a focus on 'the collaboration of youth work with schools' [115].

The publication of the review's report—whose recommendations included 'integrating youth work values and approaches in initial teacher training. . .'—coincided with the announcement that, following consultation with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, the National Citizenship Service and the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme (a national voluntary sector youth work organisation) were to carry out a study into the links between schools and local youth work provisions [116,117].

Youth work was also seen as able to help improve young people's employment prospects, which had been further damaged by the pandemic. Five national organisations, including the Prince's Trust, published a report in July 2021 sub-titled 'Building an Opportunity Guarantee'. Drawing on the government's 'Levelling Up' rhetoric, this provided substantial evidence of how 'young people have been hit worst by the labour market crisis' and recommended a 'continuing roll out (of) "Youth Hubs" [118].

7.4. Mental Health

Well before the pandemic, youth workers had been seen as making valuable responses to young people's growing mental health problems; by February 2020, for example, the Young London Mayor's Fund provided GBP 45 million to train youth workers and others in '"first aid" mental health [119].

As evidence emerged of youth workers' concerns about the COVID impacts on young people's 'well being', the national voluntary sector charity UK Youth was awarded GBP 10 million in early 2022 to support young people struggling with mental health issues [120–122]. Within three weeks of the Fund's launch, applications from 1000 organisations totalled GBP 30 million a year, leading the UK Chief Executive to highlight that youth workers '. . .spot the signs that a young person is experiencing difficulties and . . . seek help if they need it' [123]. In August 2022, these pressures prompted the Back Youth Alliance to call for a GBP 300 million government Youth Potential Fund to train 10,000 more qualified youth workers and 30,000 volunteers and increase young people's access 'to local clubs and activities. . .' [124,125]. This approach was given further grounded credibility by the evaluation of a pilot project that placed two psychologists in Bruce Grove Youth Cub in Haringey. This evaluation concluded that locating mental health workers in a youth club 'takes the stigma away from mental health' and 'enabl(es) them to reach young people who would not normally trust mental health services' [126,127].

8. Recruiting Youth Workers

A second significant obstacle to reinstating open access youth work facilities and practices has been continuing difficulties in attracting people with previous practice experience to apply for youth work posts. This has to be seen as a legacy of the post-2010 austerity 'exodus of professional and skilled youth work staff', the decline in the number of youth and community work qualification courses, and the resultant 45 per cent fall in student enrolments [25,128].

Supported by an initial government allocation in July 2019 of £500,000 for 550 training bursaries [129], the National Youth Agency responded to these gaps by revising and extending full- and part-time qualifying routes, including creating youth work appren-

ticeships. Although recruitment to courses has recovered a little from the record low in 2019/20 [130], the systemic problem of the breakdown in the role local communities play in the development youth workers [131] is largely unacknowledged, particularly at the policy level. Key here has been the disappearance of what in the past had been a—possibly the—main route into all aspects but especially 'professional' youth work. Though varying from individual to individual and often encouraged by careful on-the-job nurturing and training, its key stages were as follows: joining a local youth club as a young person; then, as one became an older teenager, taking on responsibilities as a 'senior member'; taking on a volunteering role; in time, becoming (and possibly training as) a 'voluntary helper' or part-time worker; and then, for some, opting to train and qualify for youth work as a full-time job [132,133].

Given the, at best, much reduced opportunities for people to get this kind of first-hand experience of open access youth work and to internalise its distinctive ways of carrying out its educational and developmental approaches, how do we now convince them that open access youth work might fit with their career aspirations?

9. Two Questions Remain

A variety of evidence is available that youth workers based in open access youth work settings can and do support young people facing the pressures outlined earlier, many of whom may be unknown to other agencies. As the 2020 National Youth Agency report 'Hidden in Plain Sight', for example, argued, this is made possible by the fact that:

> '. . . (as) youth workers are skilled at engaging young people who are often off the radar of the authorities . . .(they) are not seen as authority figures; thus, they are able to build trusting relationships with young people that are sustained over many months' [133]

These approaches then allow young people's lives 'as they are lived' to be explored and supported in more telling ways than through their (sometimes forced) participation in prescribed programmes pre-designed to 'fix' them. The developmental outcomes from these 'open access' interactions between a young person and youth worker, though hard to 'measure', can then be significant and lasting.

Given this, two questions seem to merit consideration:

- At the practice level: How crucial for enabling these opportunities and then for a young person's positive use of them is the fact that, in these settings, she or he will have chosen to be involved?
- At the policy level: How often is a council under severe financial pressure being diverted from setting up, for example, a small local project that young people can join voluntarily and whose goals and approaches are then open to being shaped by them—when an alternative is to embed their youth workers in projects with very different starting points, because these come with, sometimes substantial, government funding?

10. Future Possibilities?

After over fourteen years of Conservative Government assaults on public services overall, what future does the array of government policies outlined in this article promise—or allow—for the development, or even perhaps the very survival, of 'open access youth work'—a marginal provision with very limited political leverage? When the realities are faced honestly, the prospects are not exactly encouraging, not least because, whether it is labelled as such, another period of austerity seems to be pending, including under a possible future Labour government.

One of the key features of the realities over the period covered by this article has been that any new funding that has been on offer has been limited and has often only materialised after long delays—if at all. Little of this money has been used in any systematic way to reinstate open access youth work provision. Based in in local spaces and places

where young people choose to meet, this—without preconditions—would prioritise their starting points and, through carefully negotiated trusting relationships, focus on their concerns and on tapping into their potential.

Many workers and their managers and organisations do, of course, remain deeply committed to this practice. However, as this article has sought to evidence, over the past decade and a half the interplay of two dominant features of the overall 'youth services' policy climate has changed how 'youth work' is understood—and delivered. One has been the continuing effects of deep cuts to open access provisions; the other involves the government's preoccupation with 'investing' most of the little money that is available in initiatives whose agendas and approaches are not only very different from open access youth work but end up undermining it.

Articles such as this may promote some debate (and even possibly action); it, therefore, seems important to (very tentatively) make two, albeit rather rhetorical, proposals:

1. Supported by grounded evidence, including from young people themselves, forcefully and unapologetically we continue to make the argument for open access youth work as a distinctive youth-focused practice. This is especially true because of its location outside agencies and programmes that many young people engage with reluctantly or hesitantly and may even view with suspicion. The distinctiveness argument also needs to highlight how the features that define the practice mean that for some young people, including ones unknown to other services, it is an acceptable and indeed attractive route for seeking personal and collective support and development unavailable elsewhere.
2. On these grounds alone, it, therefore, seems vital that those of us committed to open access youth work practices organise and campaign for the fullest possible reinstatement of the facilities that across England, under the huge financial pressures of 14 years of Conservative Government, have been progressively eliminated.

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