

Increasing the contribution of volunteers and forming partnerships with other sector providers are two measures councils must develop if they are to make future youth provision available to all, says a leading academic

'Open-access youth work principles must be instilled into all services'

YOUTH WORK

Professor Patrick McGhee, assistant vice-chancellor, University of Bolton, and board adviser at management consultants MetaValue

When discussing and debating the future of universal, open-access youth services, often referred to as open youth services (OYS), it is important to understand two paradoxes: first, when they are most needed, they are least well-funded; and second, the features that make them effective are the very features that make them vulnerable.

Cuts to youth services due to reduced central government funding for local authorities have come at the same time as young people are themselves facing a crisis of employment, housing, education and a lack of protective support through welfare.

Austerity creates a need for care, but also reduces the support. The non-statutory status of youth services and OYS means that on the one hand they are vulnerable to cuts to discretionary spending, while on the other, the design and distinctiveness of OYS means radical new models for delivery are already being explored.

A recent Local Government Association report estimates that English local authorities could face a £3.3bn collective reduction in overall central government funding for local services in 2016/17 – equivalent to 12 per cent of their total budgets.

It predicts this will leave councils facing a funding gap of £9.5bn by the end of the decade. The challenges facing the successful delivery of such services are in some respects the most difficult for a generation.

It is also clear that funding is

not only being reduced; the way the funding is being used is also changing. In 2011/12, targeted youth services accounted for approximately 45 per cent of the overall youth spend; by the end of 2013/14, it had risen to around 52 per cent (see graph).

Overall, spending by councils on youth services has fallen by 22 per cent, with the biggest cuts falling on activities for young people (down 45 per cent) and information and advice services (down 28 per cent). However, support for students, young people's participation and teenage pregnancy services have all increased (see table).

Although different local authorities use different measuring criteria, figures show that there is wide variation in spending levels by councils, particularly in relation to how funding is allocated to youth services; how the impact on jobs, services and clients is being managed; and the shift in funding away from non-statutory to statutory, and from generic to targeted services.

Councils' response to the new funding environment

The Cabinet Office's initiative Delivering Differently for Young People seeks to identify new models of delivery for youth services and has recently funded a series of pilot studies to assess what might and might not work in different local contexts.

This £500,000 programme has provided 10 local authorities with £50,000 each to review a range of new delivery models supporting them to secure services and activities for young people aged 13 to 19 to improve their wellbeing (see box).

The variety of possible models includes public service mutuals; delivering services alongside the voluntary, community and social enterprise sector; partnerships

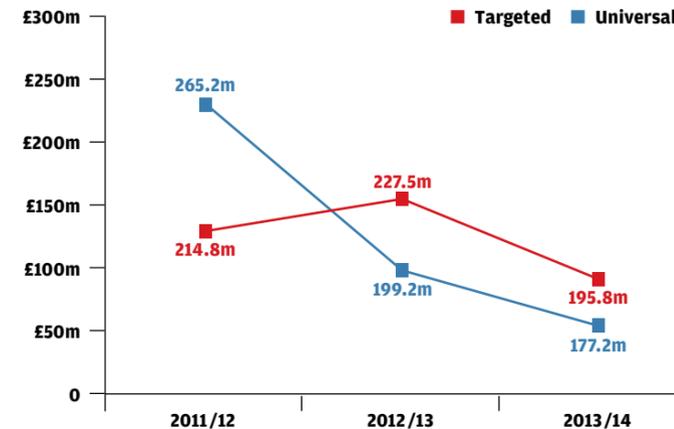
THE FALL IN COUNCIL SPENDING ON YOUTH SERVICES IN ENGLAND FROM 2011/12 TO 2013/14

Breakdown of reported expenditure by local authorities on services for young people 2011-14 and % change over a three-year period

Expenditure by category in £m	2011/12	2013/14	% change
Youth work	156.6m	124.4m	-20.6
Activities for young people	34.8m	18.9m	-45.7
Support for participation in education or training	59.9m	50.2m	-16.2
Substance misuse services	13.7m	13.4m	-2.0
Teenage pregnancy services	6.6m	7.5m	13.9
Discretionary awards	7.3m	1.6m	-78.2
Student support	661,400	1.2m	94.9
Information advice and guidance	50.5m	36.3m	-28.1
Young people's participation	11m	13.3m	21.2
Other	65.1m	50.7m	-22.2
Total	406.6m	317.9m	-21.8

Source: Based on figures from 98 councils that responded to the Cabinet Office youth services survey

Council spending shift from universal to targeted services



SAVINGS FROM INVESTMENT IN YOUTH SERVICES

£1.3bn ESTIMATED SAVINGS from reductions in drug misuse by young people

£490m SAVINGS from increased employment for young parents and their children

£1.4bn SAVINGS from reductions in state health and social care for vulnerable young people over five years

Source: The New Economics Foundation

with community groups; and public-private partnerships.

The programme is ongoing and there is a possibility of a further round of pilots later this year.

Irrespective of the governance and ownership models for new youth services that include OYS, there is a need to consider what the major design issues are which need to be taken into account.

There is generally a lack of well-designed studies comparing like with like. However, there is evidence nationally and internationally that – if managed properly – youth services in

general and OYS in particular can have socioeconomic benefits for young people, their families, their communities and the taxpayer.

Given that so many local authorities and their partners are looking at new models of delivering services, now is the time to consider how best to design OYS and the networks in which they are located.

Partnerships are the way ahead

In the future, there will be a continued push to spin out council services as budgets are increasingly cut.

The role of volunteers will grow considerably and there will be additional new partnerships with local police forces, health trusts, schools and charities as they in turn review and in some cases radically revise how they deliver services.

A unifying theme will be “upstreaming” – delivering earlier interventions in a way that is more cost-effective and sustainable.

In this context, reflection on the key features of OYS is essential to ensure partners have a shared understanding of the challenges of collaboration.

Reviewing the research literature in this area highlights four major issues that commissioners, managers and service providers will need to consider.

First, there is limited high-quality research on assessing what works and what doesn't, but there is enough to draw broad conclusions on what is worth reviewing and considering for implementation.

Second, the key importance of

overall service network design, including specification of the relation between the OYS and other parts of the services for young people.

Third, specific design features of an OYS can be identified which arguably should be prioritised.

Fourth, stakeholder engagement is absolutely necessary.

In terms of overall service network design, it is essential that specific service facilities – whether specialist, generic, targeted or open – have a clearly defined function within the broader “service network”.

Equally, where possible, service networks should be multi-level, co-ordinated, continuous, negotiated with users, provided along a continuum and evidence based.

When it comes to designing the open-access youth service facility itself and setting out its functions, there are some key principles to consider:

● Involve the user constituency and actual users in the design and delivery of services, and in the

research and evaluation of those services

● Know the client constituency beyond understanding any specific clients

● Be open-access and have a wide range of initial access “hooks”

● Have well-defined pathways to future educational achievement

● Have differentiated and “complex” service and support options where necessary

● Staff need to be able to act as inter-service brokers and navigators as well as internal advisers and facilitators

● Staff training should link to the objectives of the facility

● Ensure there is provision for one-to-one support and that staff are trained in validated techniques and approaches

● Have clear support and policies on IT and social media as these are a central part of the lived experience of service users

● Cultivate a positive emotional and cultural atmosphere at the drop-in facility

● At a minimum, ensure basic facilities work reliably for users

● Include community liaison as a central part of the life of the centre.

Stakeholder engagement

In terms of stakeholder engagement design, there are five key principles to consider:

● It is vital to maintain engagement with successful users for continued support and for mentoring and support contributions

● Raise awareness among senior service managers, community leaders, media and educational providers of the lived reality of the work of the centre(s)

● Share best practice with networks of providers nationally and internationally

● Service designers should not be afraid of complexity if it offers a wider and more responsive set of support options, and if advisers can broker high-quality referrals through services

● Consistently seek to assess the effectiveness of service innovations.

Support for young people is arguably needed now more than at any time in the past 50 years. It is clear that if properly designed, managed, staffed and resourced, open access youth services can make a very significant contribution to that need.

In brief, the principles of OYS could be usefully applied to all future youth provision irrespective of the broader delivery and partnership structures.

In the end, the real paradoxes would be to believe that service design can somehow come about by itself or, worse, that user services can be designed without users.

● Professor Patrick McGhee has undertaken a review of open-access youth work as part of the Delivering Differently for Young People programme, the findings from which have been presented to the Cabinet Office

RETHINKING YOUTH SERVICE DESIGN

■ Delivering Differently for Young People is a £500,000 fund designed to support local authorities to rethink the way youth services are delivered and the achievement of positive outcomes for young people

■ It has supported 10 local authorities with bespoke technical, legal and consultancy support to look at the full range of alternative delivery models to build long-term service sustainability

■ The fund is a joint initiative between the Cabinet Office, the Department for Communities and Local Government, the Local Government Association and the Society of Local Authority Chief Executives