



# Final Report of the Youth Provision Task and Finish Group



## **Chair's Foreword**

*Young people, families and professionals repeatedly tell us they want more affordable constructive recreational activities for young people. They know, and research shows, that youth services can support a broad spectrum of positive outcomes for young people, their families and our community.*

*The recommendations in this report collectively advocate for a more cohesive and collaborative ecosystem of youth provision in which Lewisham's diverse network of youth work providers and their partners work together in a coordinated manner for the well-being of our young people and community.*

*The Council needs to clearly define its role in relation to youth services so that all stakeholders know what they can expect of it. And there needs to be someone who is responsible for providing strategic leadership to the sector: representing and advocating for the sector, coordinating and supporting it and leveraging the skills, knowledge and relationships of the myriad of organisations providing youth services in the borough.*

*Children and young people have the right to rest and leisure and to engage in play and recreation appropriate to their ages. This needs to be reflected in youth centre's locations, layouts and timetables.*

*Open access provision needs to be sustained as the focal point of our youth work ecosystem. It enables young people to voluntarily receive low-cost, unintrusive and preventative support, socialise and be exposed to positive role models in a non-stigmatic way.*

*Providers' service-user data should be joined up to enable the strategic lead for youth services to identify which groups do and do not use youth services and work with the sector to make services more attractive and accessible to those who do not.*

*We need to make the system more navigable for young people, their families and those who work with them. We can do this by creating a single accessible source of information on the local offer and by promoting the entire offer to young people and their families in the ways they want.*

*Youth services must be focused on their specific participants' needs and aspirations and delivered by trusted, skilled and relatable professionals. Their evaluation must be proportionate and not involve methodologies which are ignorant to the complex nature of young peoples' lives and how youth work works.*

*We need to bring in more external philanthropic and grant funding and, to attract such funding, we should spread our limited funding more widely and provide additional support to youth service providers.*

*Thank you to everyone who took the time to give the evidence essential to our review, particularly those who accommodated delays and cancellations caused by the various elections during it.*

*Finally, I would like to acknowledge and thank those who chaired this review before me: Cllr Edison Huynh, who proposed the review, and Cllr Oana Olaru, who succeeded Cllr Huynh.*

**Cllr Dawn Atkinson**  
**Chair of the Youth Provision Task and Finish Group**

# Membership of the Task and Finish Group



Cllr Dawn Atkinson (Chair from 24 July 2024; member from 27 March 2024)



Cllr Yemisi Anifowose



Cllr Laura Cunningham



Cllr Pauline Dall (member from 24 July 2024)



Cllr Hau Yu-Tam

NB: Cllr Edison Huynh was a member of, and chaired, the Task and Finish Group from its establishment until 27 March 2024, when he was appointed as Cabinet Member for Culture and Communities; Cllr Oana Olaru-Holmes was a member of the Task and Finish Group, and chaired it from 27 March 2024, until 10 July 2023 when she was appointed as Cabinet Member for Refugees, Safer Lewisham and Equalities.

## **Contents**

Chair's Foreword	2
Membership of the Task and Finish Group	3
Purpose and structure of the review	5
Context	8
Recommendations	16
Key findings	18
Monitoring and ongoing scrutiny	31
Sources and background documents	31
Report author and contact details	32

## Purpose and structure of the review

### The scope of the review

1. Following its establishment by the Overview and Scrutiny Committee in July 2023, the Youth Provision Task and Finish Group undertook research and stakeholder engagement. It formally met and agreed the scope of its review on 20 September 2023.
2. The Task and Finish Group agreed its intended outcomes to be:
  - a. understand and capture the views and needs of young residents;
  - b. understand youth work and the benefits it can deliver;
  - c. understand and evaluate the local offer;
  - d. identify challenges and good practice; and
  - e. identify and recommend feasible options to increase youth provision participation and impact in Lewisham and ensure the offer is responsive to young people's needs.
3. The Task and Finish Group agreed its focus would be on youth work according with the National Youth Agency's definition:

*'Enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social, emotional and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential.'*
4. The Task and Finish Group agreed the following preliminary lines of enquiry to guide its evidence gathering:

#### Phase 1 (problem definition)

1. What is the local and national policy context?
2. What benefits can youth services deliver?
3. What do young people want and need from youth services?
4. What youth provision is available in Lewisham and how is it funded?
5. How does the system of youth provision in the borough operate and what is the Council's role within it?
6. Who stands to benefit the most from participating in youth provision?
7. Who currently participates, and what are the barriers to participation, in youth provision?

#### Phase 2 (solution definition)

8. How can participation in youth provision be increased in Lewisham, particularly by those who stand to benefit the most?
9. How should the local system of youth provision operate and what should the Council's role in it be?
10. How can the local offer be improved to better meet the needs and aspirations of young people in Lewisham, particularly the most disadvantaged, now and in the future?
11. How can youth provision improvement be funded?

### Evidence gathering

5. Shortly after the Task and Finish Group began its review, Children and Young People's Services launched a corporate review of youth provision (the 'corporate review' herein). As much of the Task and Finish Group's and corporate review's intended stakeholder

engagement and research would have been duplicative, it was agreed that the Task and Finish Group and corporate review would collaborate in their evidence gathering – consulting one another on their plans, avoiding duplicative engagement with the same individuals and organisations where possible, sharing findings and, in some cases, jointly undertaking evidence gathering.

6. Key sources of evidence provided by the corporate review which inform the findings and recommendations in this report are:
- A survey of young people
  - A series of focus groups with young people
  - A youth work provider survey
  - A survey of parents and carers
  - Two youth service stakeholder roundtable events.

## Written evidence

7. Between 10 October 2023 and 31 December 2023, the Task and Finish Group ran a public call for evidence. Throughout its review, the Task and Finish Group proactively wrote to experts and stakeholders seeking their views on the issues it was considering. It should be noted that only a relatively small proportion of the organisations the Task and Finish Group sought to engage responded to it.
8. The Task and Finish Group received written submissions from the following individuals and organisations:

Lewisham Council's Children and Young People's Services

Youth First

Cllr Luke Sorba

Lewisham Youth Theatre

[A resident]

Cllr Susan Wise

Cllr Liz Johnson-Franklin

Cllrs Liam Curran, Peter Bernards, Chris Best, Sophie Davis, Billy Harding and Jack Lavery

Dr Tania de St Croix, Senior Lecturer in the Sociology of Youth and Childhood, King's College London

The Albany

Millwall Community Trust

OnSide

XLP

London Borough of Ealing Youth Service

Grove Park Youth Club

Manchester City Council

Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance

Young Brent Foundation

National Lottery Community Fund

Young Ealing Foundation

City Bridge Foundation

London Borough of Southwark

## Oral evidence and site visits

9. The Task and Finish Group held the following discursive oral evidence sessions:

<b>Witness(es)</b>	<b>Organisation</b>
Cllr Barnham (Cabinet Member for Children and Young People), Pinaki Ghoshal (Executive Director for Children and Young People), Sara Rahman (Director of Families, Quality and Commissioning), Marcus Isman-Egal (Youth Services Consultant) and Shaba Dachi (Interim Head of Prevention and Early Help).	Lewisham Council
Dr Gulen Petty (Interim CEO) and Aminata Swaray (Interim Joint Head of Operations)	Youth First
Victoria Shaskan (CEO) and Molly Cox (My London Project Manager)	Lewisham Youth Theatre
Dr Tania de St Croix (Senior Lecturer in the Sociology of Youth and Childhood)	King's College London
Marcus Isman-Egal (Youth Services Consultant)	Lewisham Council
Rob Clayton (Chair of the Grove Park Building Preservation Trust), Errol Donald, (Creative Arts and Culture Consultant and Creative Well-being Practitioner), Diana Monkhouse (Trustee and Director of Grove Park Building Preservation Trust) and Tia Guttensohn (Creative Well-being Lead)	Grove Park Youth Club/Grove Park Building Preservation Trust
Colin Brent (Youth Service Area Team Manager)	London Borough of Ealing
Chris Murray (Chief Executive Officer)	Young Brent Foundation
Lewisham Young Advisors	Lewisham Young Mayor's Office

10. The Task and Finish Group undertook the following visits:
- Lewisham Youth Theatre
  - XLP Bus (in Deptford)
  - Youth First detached delivery in Lewisham town centre
  - TNG Youth Centre, Sydenham
  - Legacy Youth Zone Croydon
  - Grove Park Youth Club.
11. On 12 January 2024, the Task and Finish Group received a briefing (in conjunction with the Children and Young People and Safer Stronger Communities Select Committees) on the work of the Council's Violence Reduction Team and Youth Justice Service.
12. The Task and Finish Group's ability to hold oral evidence sessions and conduct site visits was severely inhibited by pre-election restrictions on publicity between 1 February and 7 March 2024 (for the Lewisham Mayoral by-election), 19 March and 2 May 2024 (for London Assembly and Mayoral elections) and 31 May and 4 July 2024 (for the general election).

# Context

## Defining youth work

- 13. There is no single settled definition of youth provision or youth work. There are overlaps between youth work and other fields such as formal education, social work, health, justice, sports, guidance and counselling, and culture.
- 14. However defined, youth work is usually described in terms of a way of working with young people with an underpinning purpose.<sup>1</sup> A study undertaken for the European Commission identified three distinguishing features of youth work: a focus on young people, personal development and voluntary participation. The study found that, despite a variety of definitions, the following characteristics were frequently cited when describing youth work across EU Member States, which at the time included the United Kingdom:<sup>2</sup>

Chart 1: Youth Work logic model

Youth work offers young people **meaningful activities** based on young people's needs and interests. Key features of the methods used by youth work are:

Non-formal learning	Participatory or experiential pedagogy	Relationship-based activities (learning as a social activity with others)	Mentoring and/or peer support
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Youth work aims at young people's **personal development**. In particular, it leads to:

Self-determination	Self-confidence	Self-esteem	Socialisation
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Personal development should lead to:

Empowerment	Emancipation	Tolerance
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These should in turn result in

Participation in democratic societies	Prevention of risky behaviour	Social inclusion and cohesion
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- 15. As aforementioned, for the purpose of this review, the Task and Finish Group adopted a definition used by England’s national youth agency, which describes the key purpose of youth work as being:

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<sup>1</sup> Marshall et al., ‘Research to inform youth work strategy’ (Welsh Government, 2021) <https://www.gov.wales/research-inform-development-youth-work-strategy>  
<sup>2</sup> Dunne et al., ‘Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union’ (European Commission, 2017) [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf)

*[To] enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social, emotional and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential.<sup>3</sup>*

16. The NYA's National Youth Work Curriculum explains:

*[youth work] differs from other services in that it is voluntary for young people to engage with youth work, and the process starts from where young people are at, their interests, goals and experiences; focusing on personal and social development through a strengths-based (asset) approach. Youth work is a form of education pedagogy; it provides non-formal education and offers informal learning opportunities.<sup>4</sup>*

## Types of youth work

17. **Open** or open-access youth provision is any youth provision in which young people participate voluntarily and are free to come and go. It will usually be open to any young person regardless of their needs, background or position in society – also known as 'universal' provision – but can be restricted to certain groups, particularly ones who do not readily engage in mainstream provision, while still being categorised as 'open'.
18. **Targeted and specialist youth work** support young people on the basis of specific needs or personal characteristics, such as race/ethnicity, special educational needs or risk of violent offending.
19. The varying activities that constitute youth work can be broadly grouped into the following categories:
- Awareness raising and campaigning
  - Information and counselling
  - International development and civic volunteering
  - Leisure-based courses and activities
  - Project activities (self-organised)
  - Street work and outreach work.<sup>5</sup>

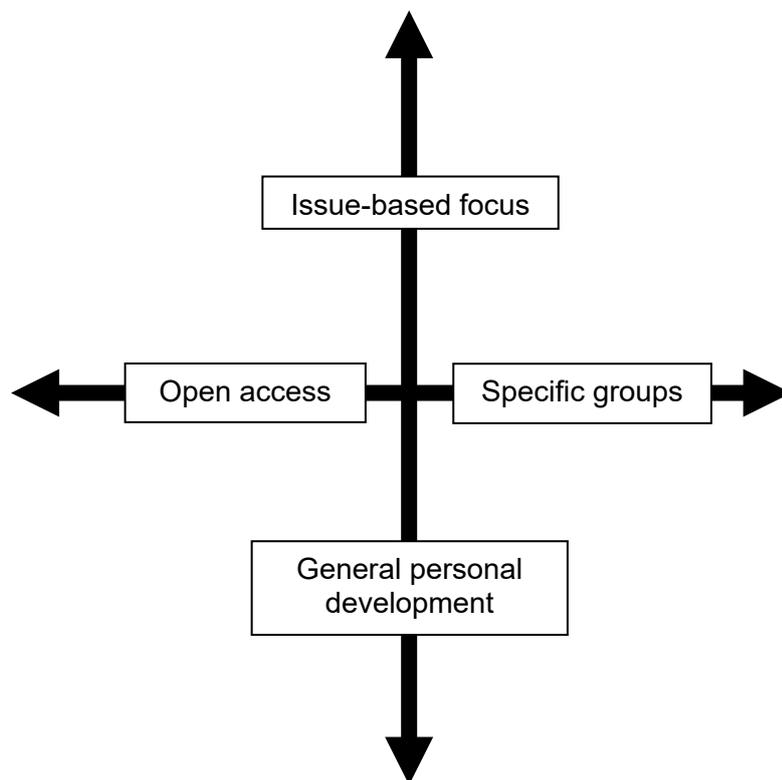
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<sup>3</sup> National Youth Agency, 'Youth Work in England: Policy, Practice and the National Occupational Standards' (2020) <https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/assets.nya2.joltrouter.net/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/24093154/NOS-documents-0723.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> National Youth Agency, National Youth Work Curriculum (2020) <https://s3.eu-west-1.amazonaws.com/assets.nya2.joltrouter.net/wp-content/uploads/20210414232918/5.3.1-0923-NYA-Youth-Work-Curriculum-DIGITAL1.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> Dunne et al., 'Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union' (European Commission, 2017) p. 66 [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf)

Chart 2: Typology of youth work<sup>6</sup>



20. The lateral axis above represents who may use a youth provision. Provisions open to any young person (universal services) would fall at the far left of the axis, for example a youth club open to any young person aged 13 to 19. The narrower the eligibility criteria of a provision (i.e., the more targeted), the further right on the axis it would sit.
21. The vertical axis above represents the objectives of a youth provision. Provisions with very specific objectives (more specialist), such as re-engaging young people in education, would sit nearer the top of the axis. Provisions with more-general objectives, such as improving young people's confidence, would sit towards the bottom.

### The benefits of youth work

22. A focus on developing positive interpersonal relationships can have long-term benefits for young people. Effective engagement between youth workers and a young person can support positive outcomes across a range of areas, including self-confidence, which is an important predictor of other longer-term outcomes, including improved educational participation and attainment. In recent years, positive relationships have increasingly been described as impacts themselves, beyond being simply part of the fabric of good youth work.
23. The most apparent evidential gaps are regarding the extent to which the potential outcomes of certain provision translate into actual impact. The nature of the evidence around open-access youth work is qualitatively different to more-targeted provision, for which the evidence-base is more extensive.<sup>7</sup>
24. Many organisations strongly underline that activities are based on young people's needs and interests, rather than a pre-defined programme. Many emphasise that, to

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<sup>6</sup> Dunne et al., 'Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union' (European Commission, 2017) p. 54 [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> 'Research to inform development of the youth work strategy' (Welsh Government, 2021) Social research Number 01/2021, <https://www.gov.wales/sites/default/files/statistics-and-research/2021-01/research-to-inform-development-of-the-youth-work-strategy.pdf>, p. 18

have the desired impact, youth work activities must be enjoyed by young people.<sup>8</sup>

The impact of open access

25. A 2020 literature review regarding the potential impact of open access youth work grouped the most frequently mentioned impacts into seven categories:<sup>9</sup>

<b>Table 2</b>	
<b>Category</b>	<b>Impacts</b>
Society	Social cohesion, taking initiative, influencing local decision-making, building networks with wider community, increased volunteering, cultural awareness and inter-cultural relations, political engagement, increased voting, active citizenship, inclusion of migrant youth, feeling safer in the neighbourhood, wanting to 'give back', anti-racist work, empowerment.
Personal development	Self-esteem and confidence, personal identity, problem solving, social skills, conflict resolution, teamwork, creativity, raised aspirations, broadened worldview and beliefs, knowledge of self, self-control, discovering strengths, responsibility, self-determination, dealing with setbacks, strategic thinking.
Relationships	Trusting, non-judgemental, feeling believed in, feeling heard and listened to, feeling supported, acceptance, feeling like a 'family', long-term, positive role models, peer networks, mutual, person-centred and individual approach, different to teachers and parents, respect, overcoming isolation, building capacity for positive relationships in future.
Employment and education	Training, developing networks, developing social capital, entrepreneurialism, improving job chances, developing hard and soft skills for the workplace, voluntary or paid opportunities, guidance and signposting, developing noncognitive skills, improved formal educational attainment, assistance with applications, preventing early school leaving.
A safe place to be	Supportive environment, non-judgemental space, a place to get away from home and tensions elsewhere, a place 'not like school', a place to socialise and have fun, a place accessible for free where they will not be excluded, a safe space away from challenges in the community, a 'second home', a place to just be, a sense of belonging.
Skills development	Opportunities to try new things, developing hard and soft skills, building core competencies, fostering social skills, participating in music, dance, craft, art or sport activities, participating in life-based learning not always taught at home including cooking, learning to present, organise, communicate and lead.
Health and wellbeing	Bridge to other services and keeping young people connected to them, reducing detrimental and risky behaviours (e.g., substance abuse), providing a place of respite and sanctuary, enabling good decision making and considering risk, preventative approach (e.g. gang activity), increasing self-care.

<sup>8</sup> Dunne et al., 'Working with young people: the value of youth work in the European Union' (European Commission, 2017) p. 66 [https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report\\_en.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/assets/eac/youth/library/study/youth-work-report_en.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Hill, 'Open Access Youth Work: A Narrative Review of Impact' (King's College London, 2020) <http://www.youthworkunit.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Open-access-youth-work-review-Phoebe-Hill-1.pdf>

26. The impacts identified above are not necessarily of equal value. E.g., in one study reviewed, young people enjoyed the different activities available to them and to develop new skills but ultimately viewed the activities as an opportunity to spend time with youth workers and friends. The impacts are also not necessarily discrete and will frequently overlap.
27. The impacts above are focused on how individual young people have been impacted by provision and do not consider the impact on a young person's wider context, such as their family or community, which are important considerations.
28. Not all the impacts of youth work are positive. There can be negative consequences of bringing together the 'riskiest' young people.
29. The literature review identified the following factors as contributing to impact:

#### *Relationships*

As a factor for success, it is specifically the relationship between youth work and young person.

Many young people engage in youth work at least partly because the relationships are qualitatively different from those in more formal education settings. Young people who struggle to trust adults may feel more comfortable in youth work settings than in more formal ones. This means youth work relationships can be particularly powerful, sometimes constituting a young person's first 'chosen' relationship with an adult – and yet they are also fragile, particularly in the early stages.<sup>10</sup>

#### *A safe place to be*

Young people benefit from having a space in which to develop a peer network and where they would not be excluded. Open access provisions represent a place to belong, and for some young people, a place to get away from home and other challenges.

#### *Long-term work*

It is important to young people that relationships are built on trust and respect, a necessarily long process. There is a statistically significant positive relationship between length of participation and self-control, empathy and communication.

#### *Stimulating activities*

Structured opportunities that are flexible to the needs of young people provide a pathway for participation and can be an initial 'hook' to engagement.

#### *Place-based youth workers*

Place-based youth workers who have knowledge of about the local area and the social, economic and cultural realities of the young people they work with is important. One study describes how young people felt they had more in common with their youth workers than their teachers, in the sense that many come from similarly working-class backgrounds and communities, with young workers typically being former service users themselves.

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<sup>10</sup> De St Croix, 'Youth work, performativity and the new youth impact agenda: Getting paid for numbers?' (2018) *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(3), 414-438  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02680939.2017.1372637>

### *Openness*

The cost-free access and welcoming culture of youth services is highlighted, with participants valuing the being made to feel welcome, even if only occasionally attending, as well as the option to attend infrequently itself.

### *Flexibility*

Alongside offering structured activities, the need to start where young people are 'at' is also a factor: provision must evolve, adapting to the needs and interests of young people. For example, in one study, a hip hop music project took seriously the young people's preferred form of expression, and the means through which they wanted to articulate their challenging life circumstances.

### *Autonomy*

Also important is the involvement of young people in decision-making processes and giving them autonomy. This requires a commitment to power sharing between the young people and adults that is based on voluntary relationships.

### *Joined-up approach*

The strength of links and networks between youth workers and other services, including young people's families, schools, social services, the police and local community, is also a factor. When the three domains of family, community and school are joined up, evidence shows that participants experience outcomes such as higher levels of social skills learning, greater self-efficacy, higher levels of community service, and greater cognitive competence. This involves actively building partnerships to enable effective outreach to young people at risk.

### *Boundaries*

Young people appreciate being in a setting with appropriate boundaries, which leads to shared expectations that people would abide by the rules, and those that did not would be asked to leave for a set period of time. This leads to mutual respect between young people and youth workers and contributes to young people's experiences of youth clubs as safe places to be. This principle can be hard to follow as it risks compromising the relationship between the youth worker and young person.

## The Council's key statutory duties<sup>11</sup>

30. The Council's key statutory duties regarding youth services are found in section 507B of the Education Act 1996 (as amended).
31. For the improvement of the well-being<sup>12</sup> of residents aged 13 to 19 years (or up to 24 years for young people with Special Educational Needs or Disabilities (SEND)) ('qualifying young people'), the Council must, as far as reasonably practicable, secure sufficient:
  - educational leisure-time activities,
  - recreational leisure-time activities, and

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<sup>11</sup> Education Act 1996, section 507B

<sup>12</sup> Education Act 1996, paragraph 507B (13)(a): "well-being", in relation to a person, means his well-being so far as relating to— (a) physical and mental health and emotional well-being; (b) protection from harm and neglect; (c) education, training and recreation; (d) the contribution made by him to society; (e) social and economic well-being.

- sufficient facilities for those activities.<sup>13</sup>
32. In exercising those functions, the Council must take steps to ascertain, and must take into account, the views of qualifying young people about:
- positive leisure-time activities and facilities for such activities in the borough;
  - the need for any additional such activities and facilities; and
  - access to such activities and facilities.
33. The Council must publicise up-to-date information about positive leisure-time activities, and facilities for such activities in the borough.<sup>14</sup>
34. In September 2023, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport issued new statutory guidance on the provision of services by local authorities for the improvement of young people's well-being.<sup>15</sup>

## Relevant Council policy

35. Relevant priorities from the Council's [Corporate Strategy](#) include:

### Children and Young People

- We will continue the fantastic work of the last four years, supporting our schools to improve and increasing the opportunities for young people in Lewisham.
- We will ensure the most vulnerable children are protected from harm, driving improvement in children's social care and aiming to reduce the number of children coming into care through earlier targeted support for families in crisis.

### Safer Communities

- We will reduce the number of young people who enter the criminal justice system, focusing on prevention and expanding our trauma-informed approach, championed by our Youth Offending Service.
- We will continue to focus and develop our successful public health approach to youth violence, aiming to tackle knife crime and reduce sexual exploitation across the borough.

### Open Lewisham

- We will actively listen to our residents, being responsive to their concerns and communicative in our approach. We will co-design services with those affected by them and ensure strong consultation processes that reach out to people whose voices are seldom heard.

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<sup>13</sup> Under subsections 507B (7) and (8) of the Education Act 1996, before acting for the purpose of satisfying the duty set out above, the Council must consider whether it is expedient for that action to be taken by another person and, where it considers it so, take all reasonable steps to arrange for such a person to take that action. The Council must consult such persons as it considers appropriate as to whether it is expedient for the proposed action to be taken by another person.

<sup>14</sup> Education Act 1996, Subsection 507B (10)

<sup>15</sup> Department for Media, Culture and Sport, 'Statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people's well-being' (27 September 2023) <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/statutory-guidance-for-local-authorities-youth-provision>

## Health and Wellbeing

- We will learn from our Birmingham and Lewisham African and Caribbean Health Inequalities Review, aiming to mitigate and ultimately end, structural racism and discrimination as a driver of health inequalities.
  - We will collaborate with other organisations to deliver the places, activities and programmes our residents need to feel empowered to live a physically active lifestyle.
36. Youth provision has connections with many council strategies, including the [Lewisham Education Strategy](#), [Prevention and Early Help Strategy](#), [Violence Reduction Approach](#), [Play Strategy](#) and Youth Justice Plan. A young people's participation strategy and an updated extra-familial harm strategy are being developed.
37. The Families Quality and Commissioning division has been reviewing and updating Lewisham's strategy on extra-familial harm in line with the public health approach to youth violence. In line with the vision to develop a more integrated service for adolescents, Children and Young People's Services has recently bought together the Youth Justice Service and Safe Space Social Work Teams, and the aspiration is to strengthen the early support offer to children and young people in this cohort.

## Local authority youth services

38. In the ten years from 2011, local authority funding for youth provision fell from more than £1 billion to £408.5 million. In London, over £240 million was cut from youth services and over 30 youth centres closed.
39. Since 2010, Lewisham Council has made savings of over £229 million. In 2014/15, following a restructure in the preceding year, the Council's youth service had a budget of £3.46 million. In the following year, many of the service's functions were 'spun out' to form Youth First.
40. Today, various Council services deliver targeted and specialist youth services, the Young Mayor's Team delivers civic engagement and participation for young people, and Youth First delivers commissioned youth and adventure play services. In 2021, the Lewisham Young Leaders Academy was established by the Council to provide supplementary education for Black and dual heritage children; the Academy is now sustained by external funding. The Council spends approximately £1.25 million on commissioned youth services annually and has distributed £2 million in grant funding to youth service providers.

## Recommendations

**Recommendation 1:** That the borough's independent providers be nurtured and supported, and their individual characters preserved.

**Recommendation 2:** That –

- in accordance with legislation and statutory guidance, the Council review the needs of children and young people and the sufficiency of the youth offer in relation to those needs;
- publish its findings and the rationale for the steps it takes in response to them; and
- periodically review and update that assessment and, if appropriate, the offer.

The assessments should expressly consider –

- the needs of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and the suitability of the offer in relation thereto;
- the geographic distribution of services; and
- the ages that will be best served by youth services and commissioned youth services, with particular regard paid to the statutory 'qualifying' cohort relative to children younger than it, and the attractiveness and suitability of the offer to older young people.

**Recommendation 3:** That the Council should clarify its role in relation to youth services and there should be a clear strategic lead for youth services in the borough, the functions of which should be developed in collaboration with the sector but are suggested to include –

- promoting good practice and collaboration;
- advocating for the benefits and resourcing of youth services;
- providing support and challenge to providers re organisational management (e.g. governance, safeguarding and finances);
- maintaining a directory of youth provision and promoting the offer;
- quality assuring providers;
- facilitating referrals;
- representing young people and the sector at relevant panels and strategic fora and to council services and other public bodies;
- hosting networking events for local providers;
- accessing and distributing funding;
- providing income maximisation support, including promoting funding opportunities;
- providing training and development opportunities; and
- developing a centralised pool of staff and volunteers and enabling coordinated recruitment.

**Recommendation 4:** That a local infrastructure organisation with a clear relationship with the Council should be created to act as the local strategic lead for youth services and provide enabling support to providers.

**Recommendation 5:** That the Council or strategic lead for youth services should provide an online directory into which approved youth providers can upload their offer and timetables and which can be filtered in accordance with service user needs, characteristics, interests, availability, etc.; the entire local offer should be better advertised in accordance with a communications plan co-designed with stakeholders; and outreach workers should signpost young people to the entire local offer.

**Recommendation 6:** That open-access youth services should be safeguarded and placed as the focal point of the local youth system, complementing targeted and specialist services delivered by the Council, commissioned providers and independent providers.

**Recommendation 7:** That –

- recognising children’s right to play, rest and leisure contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Council should ensure there is at least one youth centre, from which a range of providers can deliver a variety of youth services, in each of the borough’s four children’s service delivery areas;

and to maximise reach and participation,

- youth centres should be made more physically attractive to young people;
- youth centres should be used primarily to deliver youth services according with the National Youth Agency’s definition of youth work and great care should be taken, if other services are to be provided from them, that this does not prejudice centres’ attractiveness to young people;
- youth centre opening hours should be increased; and
- non-sessional timetables should be considered at individual-centre level.

**Recommendation 8:** That private or grant funding should be sought in order to provide substantial meals to attendees of youth clubs.

**Recommendation 9:** That Council-funded youth services should be reserved for young people who live in the borough, or have strong ties to it, in the first instance.

**Recommendation 10:** That the Council and strategic lead for youth services should, via commissioning arrangements and sectoral leadership, promote youth work planning and provider management that is youth-led with adult input under structured arrangements which are appropriate to participants ages and needs and co-designed with them.

**Recommendation 11:** That open access youth work objectives should be developed at service level with service users to reflect participants’ needs and wishes; planning should be dynamic and flexible to meet young people’s fluid needs and interests; and when the Council or strategic lead for youth services wishes for specific outcomes to be delivered, they should commission specific projects for those purposes.

**Recommendation 12:** That the Council or strategic lead for youth services should, in collaboration with independent providers, develop a common service-user data- and practice-recording approach or system to enable young people’s needs to be better understood and gaps in provision and barriers to participation identified and addressed.

**Recommendation 13:** That the Council or strategic lead for youth services should promote youth work evaluation that is co-designed with young people and practitioners, light-touch, flexible, collects only necessary information/is proportionate and causes minimal harm to practice and service users; and only metrics such as service participation and reach, participant satisfaction and the consistency of practice with sectoral standards should be used as standardised performance indicators.

**Recommendation 14:** That the Council or strategic lead for youth services should work with the sector and partners to develop and fund formal training and development and career-progression opportunities for youth workers, whether employed by the Council or commissioned or independent providers.

**Recommendation 15:** That the Council or strategic lead for youth services provide income maximisation support to youth service providers; the Council should distribute youth service funding to a broad range of providers to help them attract match funding from other sources; and philanthropic funding should be sought to support providers.

## Key findings

### Youth service providers

#### Youth first

41. The largest provider of youth services in the borough, and largest recipient of Council funding for youth services, is Youth First, which was established as a mutualised community benefit society when the Council 'span out' its youth services in 2016. In 2022, Youth First became a charitable incorporated organisation.
42. Under its current contract with the Council, worth approximately £1.25 million per annum and awarded in 2021/22 for four years, with the option for a further two, Youth First is commissioned to deliver open-access youth work, targeted one-to-one support and group work. The three commissioned delivery modes are:
  1. A flexible, fun, safe educational and engaging universal offer at core sites across the borough that meet an appropriate Youth Quality Mark.
  2. Outreach support and engagement that responds flexibly to the changing needs of young people in the borough.
  3. A targeted offer for more vulnerable young people and families, including 1:1 case holding and themed session delivery.
43. Youth First's organisational objectives are to:
  - Deliver high-quality lasting youth work interventions.
  - Generate secure sufficient, diversified income to stabilise and grow.
  - Be the 'go-to' for insight and partnerships in youth work.
  - Swiftly respond to precise impact data.
  - To exemplify a self-starting, professional, collaborative culture where the best youth-workers want to work.
44. In 2022/23, Youth First secured £559,167 in non-local authority funding from a range of sources including the Greater London Authority, Mayor's Office for Police and Crime, government departments, local housing associations and charitable organisations.
45. Senior representatives from Youth First provide a youth services perspective at fora including Multi-Agency Child Exploitation meetings, I-Thrive partnership meetings, Safer Neighbourhood Board meetings, etc. However, Youth First's capacity to engage with such fora is diminished by senior leadership reductions driven by the need to make savings in recent years.
46. The delivery of adventure-play services across four estate-based sites is commissioned separately from Youth First and was being recommissioned during this review, following the adoption of a new Play Strategy by the Council in 2023. A new contract was awarded to Youth First for a minimum term of five-years in June 2024.

#### Youth First's impact

47. Youth First assesses its impact using annual feedback services, ongoing focus groups, co-produced projects, attendance and membership data, and case studies and other qualitative data. Agreed goals and the Outcome Star, a co-produced measure, are used to evaluate the impact of mentoring.
48. In the 2022/23 academic year, Youth First engaged 2,299 young people and its sites were used 44,779 times by 1,756 young people – the further 543 young people were engaged by Youth First's outreach team.

<b>Table 3: Youth First services user demographics</b>			
	<b>Individuals Accessing Universal Provision</b>	<b>2020/21, 21/22 and 2022/23</b>	<b>2016 to 2022</b>
<b>Gender</b>	Number of males	57%	59%
	Number of females	34%	39%
	Nonbinary <sup>16</sup>	0%	0%
	Currently Unknown	9%	2%
<b>Age</b>	Between 8-11	25%	32%
	Between 12-15	44%	36%
	Between 16-18	21%	13%
	Over 18	11%	6%
<b>Declared disabilities<sup>17</sup></b>	TBC	15%	12%
	Physical impairment	3%	7%
	Sensory impairment	2%	6%
	Mental health condition/ Emotional Wellbeing and Mental Health conditions	36%	35%
	Learning disability/difficulty	44%	52%
	Long-standing illness or health condition		
<b>Ethnicity</b>	White	22%	25%
	Black African/Black Caribbean/Black British	46%	40%
	Asian/Asian British	3%	3%
	Mixed/multiple ethnic groups	16%	14%
	Prefer not to say / unknown	10%	17%
	Other	3%	1%

49. Youth First's 2023 summer survey found that:

- 82% made new friends
- 63% wellbeing (health, fitness etc) improved
- 74% 'feel happier'
- 72% 'more confident in myself'
- 70% more confident with others
- 73% felt accepted
- 77% can come to a youth worker for advice
- 82% have a positive relationship with a youth worker
- 68% have learnt new skills
- 79% feel safe and welcome.

<sup>16</sup> A small number of users identify as nonbinary.

<sup>17</sup> 25.5 per cent of service users had a declared disability in the first half of the 23/24 financial year, 8 per cent were unknown.

## The Council's targeted and specialist offer

50. Specialist youth provision to support young people with specific needs is available in relevant council services, including children's services, the Youth Justice Service and the Violence Reduction Team.

## Independent youth services

51. Lewisham has a large, dynamic ecosystem of youth providers far beyond Youth First and other well-known providers.
52. In response to a youth provision mapping survey run between October and December 2023, 68 organisations identified themselves as providers of youth services in Lewisham. There are likely to be further youth work providers who did not respond to the survey. Of those 68,
  - 54 provide universally accessible services
  - 49 provide targeted services
  - 53 are place-based
  - 18 work across the whole borough, and
  - 49 conduct outreach in the community.
53. The respondents identified their primary offers as:
  - Emotional well-being – 31
  - Sports – 30
  - Mentoring – 26
  - Generic youth work – 23
  - Arts – 22
  - Other – 20
  - Employment training – 17
  - Crime/offending – 14
  - Counselling/therapeutic – 6
54. The independent providers the Task and Finish Group engaged, be that directly or indirectly via the corporate review, all presented with different philosophies, objectives and ways of working but were all clearly passionate about helping young people. Collectively, they offer a spectrum of provision far beyond that which could be practically delivered or commissioned by a single organisation. While this report later proposes a more cohesive and collaborative system with clear leadership, the Task and Finish Group wants to be clear at the outset that this must not be to detriment of the individuality of Lewisham's independent youth providers, which are often staffed by people volunteering their time and resources for the well-being of our young people.

**Recommendation 1:** That the borough's independent providers be nurtured and supported, and their individual characters preserved.

## The sufficiency of the offer

55. Over 22,400 young people aged 13 to 19 live in Lewisham.
56. As aforementioned, the Council is under a duty to assess the sufficiency of the youth services available in the area. The current and former statutory guidance both state that this should begin with an assessment of the needs of the young people residing in the borough. The guidance also suggests that local authorities document and publish their assessment of local needs for youth services and the rationale for their actions.
57. At the outset of this review, there was a no recent assessment of young people's needs and the sufficiency of youth services offer in relation thereto available, although

Children and Young People's Services has since begun that assessment.

58. The Task and Finish Group heard during its review that, while most provisions are available to young people with special educational needs or disabilities, there is insufficient provision specifically for them and that open youth services can be unsuitable for young people with sensory needs.
59. Some older young people are not enticed by the current youth offer and services have struggled to re-engage older young people who became disengaged during the pandemic.
60. During the first half of the 23/24 financial year, the age profile of Youth First service users was:
  - 8 to 11 years – 44 per cent
  - 12 to 15 years – 42 percent
  - 16 to 18 years – 9 per cent
  - Over 18 years – 4 per cent
  - Unknown – 1 per cent.
61. The Task and Finish Group heard from a number of providers and experts that it is generally easier to engage pre-teens and younger teenagers than older ones and notes that, under the age breakdown provided by Youth First above, the largest group of Youth First service users is now the 8 to 11 cohort.
62. However, it is often the older cohort of teenagers who are most in need of youth services and with whom the most challenging and impactful work can be undertaken. The corporate review's engagement with parents supports the prioritisation of resources to teenagers.
63. How, if at all, youth services are age segmented should be determined by providers in consultation with their stakeholders, particularly young people. However, the Task and Finish Group notes the following:
  - Broader age ranges increase safeguarding risk and require higher staffing ratios.
  - In areas where a broad range of ages frequently socialise together, age segmenting services may be artificial.
  - What appeals to pre-teens and younger teenagers is less likely to appeal to older teenagers, and the very presence of younger teenagers may make a provision less appealing to older teenagers – and vice versa.

**Recommendation 2:** That –

- in accordance with legislation and statutory guidance, the Council review the needs of children and young people and the sufficiency of the youth offer in relation to those needs;
- publish its findings and the rationale for the steps it takes in response to them; and
- periodically review and update that assessment and, if appropriate, the offer.

The assessments should expressly consider –

- the needs of young people with Special Educational Needs and Disabilities and the suitability of the offer in relation thereto;
- the geographic distribution of services; and
- the ages that will be best served by youth services and commissioned youth services, with particular regard paid to the statutory 'qualifying' cohort relative to children younger than it, and the attractiveness and suitability of the offer to older young people.

## Connecting the Lewisham system

64. This review and the corporate review found young people to be desirous of an exceptionally broad and diverse range of activities and support which it would not be practicable for a single organisation to provide.
65. The borough lacks a clear strategic lead for youth services. Some view it as being the Council, others Youth First, and many do not know who it is.
66. Local providers do not know who each other are but would like to so they can work together, support one another and refer to one another. There is a clear desire among providers to become better networked and more collaborative, the process of which has been initiated by the roundtables held by the corporate review.
67. There needs be a strategic lead for youth services in the borough to coordinate activity, support independent providers and create a collaborative culture. The Council's role should also be clearer so that the sector knows what it can expect of it.

**Recommendation 3:** That the Council should clarify its role in relation to youth services and there should be a clear strategic lead for youth services in the borough, the functions of which should be developed in collaboration with the sector but are suggested to include –

- promoting good practice and collaboration;
  - advocating for the benefits and resourcing of youth services;
  - providing support and challenge to providers re organisational management (e.g. governance, safeguarding and finances);
  - maintaining a directory of youth provision and promoting the offer;
  - quality assuring providers;
  - facilitating referrals;
  - representing young people and the sector at relevant panels and strategic fora and to council services and other public bodies;
  - hosting networking events for local providers;
  - accessing and distributing funding;
  - providing income maximisation support, including promoting funding opportunities;
  - providing training and development opportunities; and
  - developing a centralised pool of staff and volunteers and enabling coordinated recruitment.
68. In some local authority areas, there is an external youth services infrastructure organisation to provide sectoral leadership and an interface between the sector and the Council and other organisations that work with young people, such as health services, education and the police. Infrastructure organisations can comprise a handful of staff and be established at little cost to the Council and eventually become self-sufficient.
  69. It is likely that the Council would need to provide seed funding for an infrastructure organisation, but in the longer term it may be beneficial for such an organisation to become wholly self-funding in order to further its independence from the Council; better enabling it to act as an independent voice for young people and youth work providers.
  70. The John Lyon's Charity (now via the Young People's Foundation Trust) has been establishing young people's foundations to provide localised youth work infrastructure. The Council may wish to explore establishing a young people's foundation.

**Recommendation 4:** That a local infrastructure organisation with a clear relationship with the Council should be created to act as the local strategic lead for youth services and provide enabling support to providers.

### Promoting the offer

71. Young people, parents and professionals do not know what youth provision is available. This is despite the Council being subject to a statutory duty to publish up-to-

date information about positive leisure-time activities, and facilities for such activities, in the borough. [Islington Borough Council](#)'s directory is a good example of such a directory.

72. Commendably, Youth First has been maintaining a [directory of services for young people](#) on a discretionary basis. However, in its current form, this does not provide a sufficiently detailed and manipulable source of information for young people and their families. It is likely that some form of approval process will be necessary to ensure providers meet safeguarding requirements before their offers are advertised in such a directory.
73. Youth First outreach workers currently hand out business cards with QR codes linking to Youth First's timetable. However, there is not a nearby provision for young people in all areas of the borough. This practice could be improved to direct young people to the broader directory of youth services once established.
74. In addition to not knowing what is on, many young people do not even know what youth services are.

**Recommendation 5:** That the Council or strategic lead for youth services should provide an online directory into which approved youth providers can upload their offer and timetables and which can be filtered in accordance with service user needs, characteristics, interests, availability, etc.; the entire local offer should be better advertised in accordance with a communications plan co-designed with stakeholders; and outreach workers should signpost young people to the entire local offer.

### **Working with the education system**

75. Youth work – with its flexibility, informality, holistic intent and initiation from a young person's current position – is distinct but complementary to formal education. Youth work can support formal education by supporting young people to maintain engagement or re-engage in their education, supporting young people to navigate the challenges they face, providing mentoring opportunities, being present in young people's lives and offering enrichment outside of school and supporting young people's development of hard and soft skills.
76. What makes formal education and youth work complementary also makes them contradictory. Therefore, it may not be highly effective for youth workers to be present in school settings where pedagogies will conflict; that is not say it would not be beneficial, only it is likely not the best use of limited resources. Moreover, the young people who stand to benefit the most from youth work may not be present, or may be less likely to engage with workers, in formal education settings.
77. Similarly, schools are not the optimal locations for youth work delivery due to their association with formal education and the potential reticence of young people disengaged from their education to engage in youth services in the school setting.
78. Youth providers told the Task and Finish Group that the receptiveness of schools to hosting outreach delivery or promoting their offers was highly variable, but in general primary schools are more receptive to engagement and collaboration. It is likely that the introduction of a single voice for the local youth sector in a strategic lead and the development of online directory of provision will make engaging schools and communicating the offer easier.

### **Open-access provision**

79. In the context of austerity and reduced funding for local authorities, there is a key tension between the provision of universal and open provision and more targeted and specialist provision. The former can be more expensive in absolute terms and harder to measure than the latter, which can more readily show progress against specific measures over a limited period of time.

80. Research undertaken by the Task and Finish Group and corporate review found that both parents/carers and young people want more safe spaces for young people from different backgrounds to socialise and receive support. This was also a finding of the consultation undertaken as part of the strategic needs assessment informing the borough's Serious Violence Strategy.<sup>18</sup>
81. Young people, while highly valuing constructive activities and projects, also express a clear desire for the youth offer to provide opportunities for socialisation and relaxation – described by one young person as opportunities for 'idle enjoyment' – without pressure to participate in purposive activities and projects.
82. The review found the following regarding the value of open provision:
- Under Article 31 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, children and young people have a right to rest and leisure and to engage in play and recreational activities appropriate to their ages – as is recognised in the Council's [Play Strategy](#). The provision of accessible, open youth provision furthers that right.
  - Open is usually cheaper per user than targeted provision.
  - Open access participants often include young people with significant needs; participants should not all be assumed to have low levels of need.
  - Open is more preventative; it enables larger numbers of young people to socialise, access recreation and receive support before their needs reach a level where they may access specialist or targeted provisions.
  - Open access can enable young people without known needs or who do not/will not engage with other services or institutionalised interventions to access support and recreation.
  - Sustained engagement in open-access provision can enable the identification or disclosure of 'hidden needs', which can be addressed by skilled youth workers or referral to other services.
  - Open access provides a place for young people to be 'stepped-down' to from more acute services.
  - Open-access provision is usually place-based, which, along with the voluntary nature of participation, situates it within the context of young people's lives and communities.
  - Open access provides a rare opportunity for young people to have entirely *voluntary* relationships with positive adult figures.
  - Participating in universal and open provision is non-stigmatic unlike highly targeted and specialist provisions.
  - Open access and targeted/specialist provision are not mutually exclusive; with sufficiently skilled staff, the latter can occur within the context of the former.
  - Open access offers longer-term support and relationships than short-term targeted or specialist interventions, which is proven to support better long-term outcomes for young people.
  - Open access offers the often-isolated young people who use targeted or specialist services a place to connect with peers.

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<sup>18</sup> Lewisham Council, 'Serious Violence Duty Strategic Needs Assessment [draft]' (January 2023) <https://councilmeetings.lewisham.gov.uk/documents/s113069/Appendix%203%20-%20DRAFT%20Strategic%20Needs%20Assessment.pdf>

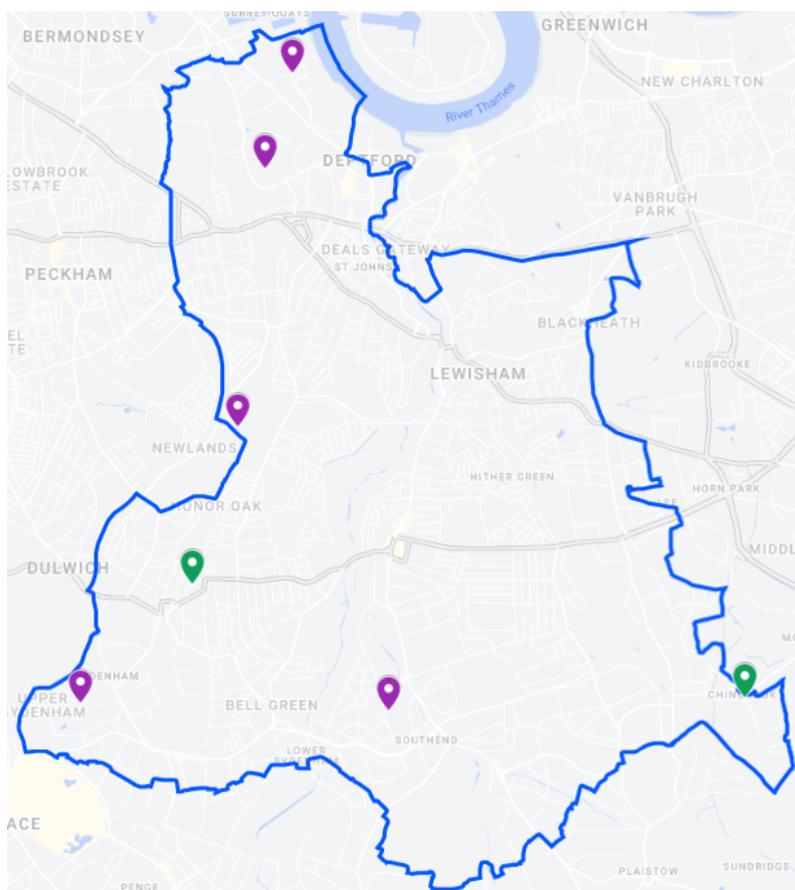
- Open access services can support young people to develop the confidence and agency required to engage with more targeted/specialist services.

**Recommendation 6:** That open-access youth services should be safeguarded and placed as the focal point of the local youth system, complementing targeted and specialist services delivered by the Council, commissioned providers and independent providers.

### Youth centres

83. Youth First operates five council-owned youth centres: Bellingham Gateway; Honor Oak Youth Club; Riverside Youth Club; TNG Youth and Community Centre; and Woodpecker Youth Club. The youth centres are located in the borough's areas of highest deprivation. However, large parts of the borough – two of the four delivery areas used by children's services – do not have a Youth First centre (see chart 3 below). The further from a Youth First site a young person lives, the less likely they are to participate in Youth First's services. Just because those areas are not the most deprived in the borough, that does not mean that young people with significant needs do not live there and young residents there would not benefit from accessing youth services or are not entitled to rest and leisure and to engage in appropriate play and recreation.
84. There are also independent, community-run youth centres in Grove Park Youth Club (a Council-owned youth centre saved from demolition and reopened by the local community) and Rockbourne Youth Club, Forest Hill, (which the review received positive feedback about but was unsuccessful in engaging).

Chart 3: Distribution of youth centres: Youth First in purple, independent in green



85. Independent providers told the corporate review of the difficulties they faced in finding spaces from which to deliver youth work in borough and the Task and Finish Group notes the Labour manifesto commitment to youth hubs reaching every community during the 2024 general election.

86. The success of Grove Park Youth Club, at which free-of-charge youth provision is now available from multiple providers five days a week at zero cost to the Council (beyond the provision of a building at a nominal rent to the Grove Park Building Preservation Trust which in turn maintains and, in fact, improves it for the Council) provides a locally proven, low-cost model the Council could follow to increase access to universal youth services.
87. There is a significant disparity between the quality of the different youth centres in the borough – in terms of the physical buildings. Young people, particularly older ones, want their youth centres to be atmospherically and aesthetically attractive and contain multiple spaces. They are simply not attracted to large halls lit by white light.
88. The Task and Finish Group heard repeatedly from young people and professionals that, in order to maintain youth ownership and distinction from other public services, youth centres should ideally be used overwhelmingly for the delivery of youth services and not be multi-functional service delivery hubs, despite the financial attractiveness of that approach.
89. Many young people find the limited opening hours and sessional timetables of youth centres to be prohibitive of their participation and want youth centres to be available when it suits them/when they need them, including on weekends.
90. In other places, some youth centres adopt a long-opening-hours non-sessional approach – e.g., they open from 3.30 pm until 9 or 10 pm five days a week – so that young people are free to come and go when suits them.

**Recommendation 7:** That –

- recognising children’s right to play, rest and leisure contained in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, the Council should ensure there is at least one youth centre, from which a range of providers can deliver a variety of youth services, in each of the borough’s four children’s service delivery areas;

and to maximise reach and participation,

- youth centres should be made more physically attractive to young people;
- youth centres should be used primarily to deliver youth services according with the National Youth Agency’s definition of youth work and great care should be taken, if other services are to be provided from them, that this does not prejudice centres’ attractiveness to young people;
- youth centre opening hours should be increased; and
- non-sessional timetables should be considered at individual-centre level.

Providing meals for attendees

91. Approximately 16 per cent of parents and their children experience low or very low food security in Lewisham.
92. The Task and Finish Group repeatedly heard of the importance of the availability of food to young people attending youth centres. However, the substantiveness of the food available to youth centre attendees has, understandably, declined in recent years due to funding pressures. The Task and Finish Group appreciates that providing meals is likely not possible within current budgets but considers that this would be an attractive proposition for external funders.

**Recommendation 8:** That private or grant funding should be sought in order to provide substantial meals to attendees of youth clubs.

**Participation by non-Lewisham residents**

93. During its review, the Task and Finish Group heard that one local youth provision was frequently significantly oversubscribed but approximately 80 per cent of its attendees

were not Lewisham residents. The Task and Finish Group's view is that any young person should be welcome at Lewisham's youth services but young people who do not live in the area should not be participating in Council-funded services at the expense of locally resident young people.

**Recommendation 9:** That Council-funded youth services should be reserved for young people who live in the borough, or have strong ties to it, in the first instance.

## Planning, monitoring and evaluation

### Planning

94. It is a fundamental tenet of youth work that it begins where young people are: i.e., is based on young people's needs and desires. The Task and Finish Group has found Lewisham's providers to be engaged in good practice regarding the involvement of young people in planning their offers and activities, with different organisations adopting different approaches reflective of their contexts, staff and service users.
95. It should not be assumed that young people are able to communicate their views and needs on request. Appropriate processes should be in place for that purpose: the methodology employed to engage young people in the planning of activities and management of providers should be suitable to their ages and abilities (they should not be disempowered by being expected to act like little adults or go into imposing adult spaces) and make clear to them what it means to share their views and how their views will be acted on.
96. There is a preference among providers for youth steering fora to be self-selecting, to avoid selection processes becoming popularity contests, and to allow young people to participate fluidly, so as not to overburden them.
97. The Task and Finish Group also recognises the value of adult input into the planning of youth work, hearing during its review of how adults can guide young people to engage in activities they would not have otherwise proposed due to their more limited life experience. Young people also highlighted the value of adult/professional input to the corporate review.
98. There is a key distinction between being youth-led and youth-run. Youth work providers and projects should be youth-led in that young people are being genuinely heard and their views and needs being reflected in activities and how an organisation operates. Organisations should not be youth-run in the sense of young people being required to take on adult responsibilities in addition to the pressures they already face. For example, young people should lead the development of the aims and content of a project, but not be responsible for organising the project – unless they want to/it is conducive to their aims. A useful analogy drawn by witnesses was a company board, which would be expected to set the direction of an organisation but not to undertake the operational delivery of that vision.

**Recommendation 10:** That the Council and strategic lead for youth services should, via commissioning arrangements and sectoral leadership, promote youth work planning and provider management that is youth-led with adult input under structured arrangements which are appropriate to participants ages and needs and co-designed with them.

99. The idea of a borough-wide theory of change – a logic model setting out the objectives (intended outcomes and impacts) of youth services and the steps to be taken to achieve them – was raised during the review. While encouraging providers to plan their provision methodologically can result in more purposive services, support impact evaluation and promote critical reflection, there are important issues associated with theories of change.
100. Young people's needs and aspirations frequently change and can sometimes only

become apparent during youth work practice. No matter how co-designed a theory of change is, it is unlikely to fully reflect the needs of the young people participating in a specific setting or project at a particular point in time.

101. Furthermore, theories of change requiring the delivery of measurable outcomes can diminish the ambition of providers by leading them to focus on more directly deliverable and measurable outcomes than less proximate, more complex, but potentially worthier, ones influenced by a greater number of inputs. For example, a project intended to challenge racism cannot directly reduce racism in society in any definitively provable sense so the intended outcome for the project might become improving confidence, which is more measurable and influenceable; and in the process the original intent may be lost.
102. A high-level, permissive theory of change which provides a framework within which providers can develop their objectives and practice in collaboration with young people could be positive.

**Recommendation 11:** That open access youth work objectives should be developed at service level with service users to reflect participants' needs and wishes; planning should be dynamic and flexible to meet young people's fluid needs and interests; and when the Council or strategic lead for youth services wishes for specific outcomes to be delivered, they should commission specific projects for those purposes.

### Monitoring

103. At present, local providers use a range of systems to record service user information attendance, support received, outcomes and practice observations. Pulling that data together would provide better insight as to the needs of the borough's young people and which groups do or do not use youth services, enabling barriers to participation and gaps in provision to be identified and addressed and service reach and impact to be better assessed.

**Recommendation 12:** That the Council or strategic lead for youth services should, in collaboration with independent providers, develop a common service-user data- and practice-recording approach or system to enable young people's needs to be better understood and gaps in provision and barriers to participation identified and addressed.

### Evaluation

104. In the context of reduced funding for public services, services, particularly discretionary ones, are increasingly required to prove their worth as they compete for scarce funding. Nationally, this resulted in youth service providers being required to undertake onerous data collection, be responsible for delivering outcomes affected by a multitude of inputs and which they cannot directly control and apply inappropriate evaluation methodologies including validated assessment tools.
105. Standardised evaluation approaches do not reflect the holistic, informal, flexible and relational nature of youth work and can undermine the development of trusting relationships with young people and lead workers to favour the young people who are more measurable or easier to work with. This is especially the case with open youth work.<sup>19</sup>
106. In its review, the Task and Finish Group did not identify any cases where inappropriate evaluation techniques were being used voluntarily by providers. However, in some cases, funders required the use of methods which were not appropriate to the context.

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<sup>19</sup> De St Croix, 'Youth work, performativity and the new youth impact agenda: Getting paid for numbers?' (2018) *Journal of Education Policy*, 33(3), 414-438  
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/02680939.2017.1372637>

The Task and Finish Group was told that providers should challenge the necessity, appropriateness and proportionality of evaluation requirements which seem onerous or inappropriate.

107. The Task and Finish Group did not identify a single approach to evaluation that would suit all providers and their contexts. In the open youth work context, evaluation should be primarily a reflective, discursive evaluation of the quality of the process and its impact that is co-designed and tested with young people.
108. Academic research and the Task and Finish Group's engagement with providers and experts supports evaluation approaches which are collaborative, flexible and dialogical and suited to the young people in question in the context at that point in time. Options might include:
  - Group conversations
  - Flipchart sheets with questions, post-its, coloured pens
  - Creative methods (e.g., video/audio/photography)
  - Fun activities to rate statements/questions
  - Human thermometer (hands indicate level of agreement)
  - Anonymous suggestion box
  - 'Speed-dating' conversations between young people and funders
  - Storytelling
  - Simple, flexible questionnaires
  - Staff debriefs and reflection.<sup>20</sup>
109. Impact can be effectively demonstrated through the longitudinal review of workers' notes about young people's participation, case studies and sampling.
110. Quantitative data is nevertheless of great value in understanding services: for example, the number and characteristics of participants and attendance frequency provide insight into how appealing and inclusive services are. However, it must be considered alongside sensitively collected qualitative data.

**Recommendation 13:** That the Council or strategic lead for youth services should promote youth work evaluation that is co-designed with young people and practitioners, light-touch, flexible, collects only necessary information/is proportionate and causes minimal harm to practice and service users; and only metrics such as service participation and reach, participant satisfaction and the consistency of practice with sectoral standards should be used as standardised performance indicators.

## Workforce

111. Formal youth work qualifications range from NVQ Levels 2 to 7 (a new Level 5 qualification is being developed by the National Youth Agency):
  - Level 2 – youth support worker (apprenticeship/certificate)
  - Level 3 – youth support worker (diploma or apprenticeship)
  - Level 4 – modular Certificate in Professional Development (youth work) for people who already work with young people
  - Level 6 – professional youth worker (bachelor's degree or apprenticeship)
  - Level 7 – professional youth worker (post graduate diploma or master's degree)
112. The Level 2 and 3 qualifications are aimed at staff volunteering in youth work settings.

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<sup>20</sup> De St Croix et al, "Capturing the magic": grassroots perspectives on evaluating open youth work' (2022) Journal of Youth Studies, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13676261.2022.2150540>

Many young people transition from youth service users to staff or volunteers.

113. At present, it is difficult for most providers to find professional youth workers, afford to formally train staff and offer hours and remuneration sufficient to retain staff.
114. The incentives for people to train as youth workers have diminished due to the high costs of youth work degrees and the limited pay and career progression offered to youth workers.
115. Youth workers frequently end up taking on additional part-time work, the hours of which prove incompatible with youth work's unsociable hours, or simply leaving for more lucrative work – Youth First told the Task and Finish Group that they lose staff to supermarkets despite paying Joint Negotiating Committee wages.
116. Due to the challenges of finding and retaining youth workers, many providers are utilising staff who are not formally trained/qualified youth workers. This is proving successful. However, it does potentially limit the capabilities of providers; the more advanced formal training received by professional youth workers can better enable the identification of needs, enable better support to be provided and enable higher need young people to be supported more effectively in open settings.
117. Historically, conversion courses were available to train people already adept at working with young people in the youth work pedagogy. At the beginning of 2023, the National Youth Agency introduced a new Level 4 Certificate in Professional Development for youth workers and other professionals working with young people to increase their youth work skills and knowledge.
118. Lewisham is fortunate to be home to one of the universities still offering youth work qualifications and the Council or strategic lead should work with them to provide training opportunities for youth workers and people who want to become youth workers.
119. A better networked local ecosystem of youth work providers could make it easier for youth workers to find employment and for providers to find staff to sustain their services. In other areas, youth workers from different providers mutually support each other's delivery, sustaining their provisions at a lower cost. Creating staff and volunteer pools is recommended in recommendation 4. There may also be scope for providers to work together to offer cumulatively attractive employment opportunities.

**Recommendation 14:** That the Council or strategic lead for youth services should work with the sector and partners to develop and fund formal training and development and career-progression opportunities for youth workers, whether employed by the Council or commissioned or independent providers.

## Attracting external funding

120. At present, the Council's core funding for youth services is concentrated on commissioned services, plus the Young Mayor's Team. A number of independent providers receive grant funding from the Neighbourhood Community Infrastructure Levy programme. Most receive grant funding from national or regional funders.
121. In the current system, providers can feel like they are competing with one another for scarce grant funding. Providers have expressed a desire to work together by sharing knowledge with each other and making joint funding bids. However, they often lack the capacity or capability to do so.
122. The Council, or strategic lead for youth services, could play an impactful role by providing income maximisation support: facilitating knowledge sharing, promoting funding opportunities, arranging expert training, and funding or providing professional support for joint funding bids. The Task and Finish Group heard that even relatively small amounts of Council funding, whether that be revenue or grant funding, can act as a seal of approval and help providers to attract external funding.

123. The Task and Finish Group engaged with organisations which are successful at securing philanthropic funding from individuals and organisations. For example, it visited a large youth centre in another borough, the construction and operation of which had been contributed to financially by large businesses based in London and some private individuals. The Task and Finish Group heard there are likely to be people with ties to the borough and London-based companies willing to contribute to the borough's youth services.

**Recommendation 15:** That the Council or strategic lead for youth services provide income maximisation support to youth service providers; the Council should distribute youth service funding to a broad range of providers to help them attract match funding from other sources; and philanthropic funding should be sought to support providers.

## Monitoring and ongoing scrutiny

124. As the overview and scrutiny committee with responsibility for youth services, the Children and Young People Select Committee may wish to scrutinise the implementation of the executive response to the Task and Finish Group's recommendations.

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## **Report author and contact details**

Report drafted on the behalf of the Task and Finish Group by Benjamin Awkal, Scrutiny Manager, [benjamin.awkal@lewisham.gov.uk](mailto:benjamin.awkal@lewisham.gov.uk)