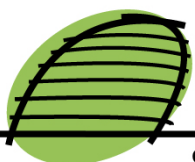


# A LOST YEAR FOR YOUTH WORK?



A briefing by Sian Berry AM  
March 2021



## SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This briefing provides a first look at both the immediate and potential long-term effects of the pandemic on youth services in London.

We are now 12 months into the coronavirus crisis, during which councils have faced a two-pronged emergency: they have had to rapidly adapt services to national restrictions, to help reduce infection rates, while managing on continued squeezed resources.

This briefing is a snapshot of how councils have managed so far, the amount of closure time youth centres saw, and what services they could still provide last year.

The ongoing effects of the crisis on councils means the full data I have requested isn't yet available from all areas of London. But, from responses so far, we can see that almost every council has been forced to drastically reduce face-to-face contact time and move services online.

### Key findings on lockdowns and budgets:

The running total of youth centre closure days from March 2020 until December, is over 12,000 days, or more than 33 years.

Council youth service levels have been dramatically reduced compared with normal years, with an average service level of 62 per cent reported.

Budgets are still squeezed: from 15 councils reporting, at least a further £2 million will be lost from upcoming council budgets 2021-22.



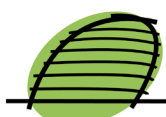
Councils told me they have struggled to keep young people engaged and even aware of what's on offer. Conversely, many young people who rely on the lifeline of youth services don't have the means, either in the form of laptops, Wi-Fi or private home space, to access what councils have been capable of providing.

I hope that the Mayor and central Government recognise the awful situation for London's youth services and young people in light of the pandemic and the damaging legacy of austerity.

Additional, urgent funding is needed, to support youth services in the difficult years ahead.

The damage caused by this lost year of youth work cannot be allowed to cause permanent harm to the lives of our young people.

**Sian Berry AM**  
**March 2021**



## THE STORY SO FAR

For the past five years I have looked at evidence, conducted research and spoken to people on the ground using and running youth services in London. Every year, I have pressured the Mayor and Government to do more to help councils preserve and extend these services.

Austerity policies squeezing council budgets have already left young people in London with far fewer youth services than generations before. Now the pandemic has added incomparable pressures to young people and the councils trying to support them.

This is perhaps the most challenging period in which my research has reported, and it is more vital than ever that young people get the resources they need to recover from this year.

Over this Mayoral term, proposals for funding from City Hall Greens have included an amendment to the Mayor's 2017 budget that would have raised more than £4 million for youth support.<sup>1</sup> This was not taken up and, in 2018, we proposed an amendment using a £20 million budget surplus to put towards youth club facilities and youth workers, and work to prevent youth violence.<sup>2</sup> The Mayor responded to our calls and created the Young Londoners Fund with a £45 million three-year funding pot in his final budget.<sup>3</sup>

In 2019-20 we aimed to build on this success and proposed a funding increase for the Young Londoners Fund. We also called for the fund to be extended for a further year through 2021-22.<sup>4</sup> Last year I asked the Mayor to put £24 million from his Strategic Investment Fund into topping up the Young Londoners Fund.<sup>5</sup>



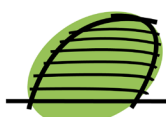
The Mayor made the right call again in response, promising £25 million for programmes for young Londoners.

However, this year the Mayor has indicated that he will no longer provide funding for long-term support for youth services, leaving many programmes relying on the Young Londoners Fund facing a potential cliff edge in 2023.

### GLA: MAYOR BUDGET, 2021-22

8.25 It is not envisaged that the GLA will continue to fund services for young people at the scale that has been made possible by previous one-off allocations, but a £1.5m baseline budget has been included for 2021-22 and 2022-23 to ensure that the GLA can continue to play a strategic role in convening and supporting stakeholders at a London level to support learning and best practice, to ensure that the voices of young Londoners are heard, and to advocate for London's young people.<sup>6</sup>

There is a wealth of evidence for how the pandemic has disproportionately affected young people's education, career prospects and mental health.<sup>7</sup> Now could not be a more crucial time to continue to invest in youth work and give it a more secure future.





## MY FINDINGS THIS YEAR

As in previous years, this work is based on extensive Freedom of Information requests submitted to every London council, asking for data on youth service budgets, youth worker employment, and youth centre provision.

This year, I also wanted to directly investigate how the pandemic has affected youth services.

I asked each council for how long each of their youth centres were closed between the start of the first lockdown and December, and for estimates on what proportion of youth services they were able to maintain during this period. I also asked what they were doing to make young people aware of the services available.

Several councils warned me that they were not able to provide the full information I requested due to staff shortages and changes in working

due to the coronavirus crisis. Hackney Council also suffered a serious cyber-attack and, at the time of request, could not access the relevant data. I will continue to work on obtaining and reporting on the full data as soon as the remaining councils are able to provide this information.

## BUDGETS

We do not yet have a full picture of final council budgets in 2020-21 or plans for 2021-22. The average reduction in budgets overall since 2011-12, when our records begin, remains at close to 50 per cent.

For the coming financial year, information provided so far shows that council youth service budgets in London are set to be cut by a further £2 million.

**Table 1: Council’s planned changes in budgets for 2021-22**

Borough	Planned change in budget from 2020-21 to 2021-22
Barking and Dagenham	£0
Brent	-£130,000
Camden	+£45,574
Croydon	£0
Haringey	-£187,790
Hillingdon	-£168,900
Hounslow	-£30,100
Islington	£0
Merton	-£12,000
Newham	£0
Redbridge	£0
Tower Hamlets	-£1,517,964
Wandsworth	£0
<b>Total (13 councils)</b>	<b>-£2,001,180</b>



## IMPACT OF THE PANDEMIC

Councils had to adapt quickly to the first lockdown. On top of high rates of infection in the community, in the early stages of the coronavirus crisis there was an immediate challenge of not knowing what services were safe for both young people and youth worker staff.

Information on the dangers the virus poses to different age groups, and on methods of transmission, was only just being developed. In the face of these unknowns, many councils shut all youth services.

When youth services did begin to reopen with the first easing of restrictions, the task remained difficult. The varying government guidance on the number of people who could mix, indoors or out, limited the number of clients youth workers could see at any given time.

I visited Legacy Youth Zone in Croydon in the summer and staff told me that, in order to make their spaces available to as many young people as possible, they had to bring in time restrictions and a new booking system.

They acknowledged that while they could still offer a lot of the same services, the experience for young people using the space was very different as they couldn't move freely between spaces and activities.

## DIGITAL EXCLUSION

During the first lockdown and the subsequent tier restrictions, many councils found themselves with youth services largely restricted to digital, online offers.

This flexibility has benefits, but online-only services clearly also present some barriers to access, especially for special educational needs and disabilities (SEND) children.

London Youth revealed in its June 2020 report, *Running on Reserves: The impact of COVID-19 on London's youth sector*, that 47 per cent of youth workers said less than half of young people they worked with had everything they needed at home to engage with activities and services.<sup>8</sup>

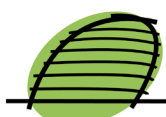
A particular problem was a lack of access to computers, appropriate spaces and insufficient data or WiFi.

As a result, the data provided by councils must be read with this taken into account. Even with online services replacing face-to-face contacts, not all young people previously reached would be able to access them.

“There were issues in lockdown: overcrowding, family breakdown, young people who were sofa-surfing and now sleeping in parks. It had a very serious mental health impact.

“It was very unusual for young people to sleep rough before lockdown. It was very scary for them, they couldn't go to friends because of Covid. Youth services had to link into housing, but this was difficult as lots of offices were shut and young people didn't have phones or access to the internet.”

**Mohammed Rafi**  
Newham Council youth team



## LOCKDOWN SERVICES: THE DATA

### TIME LOST TO CLOSURES

In my Freedom of Information requests, I asked councils how many of their youth centres or services were closed temporarily during the pandemic, and for how long.

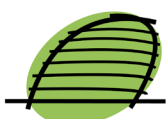
The information I received (from 17 councils) was varied, with some closing all youth centres for several months.

Adding up the total length of youth centre closures from the start of the first lockdown in March 2020 until December, we can estimate **the total lost time due to youth centres being closed is equal to over 12,000 days or 33 years.**

Around 35 days of youth centre opening time was lost for each day since the start of the national lockdown announced by the government on March 23 2020, up to December 2020.

The worst affected council was Hillingdon. Its seven youth centres closed for face-to-face meetings for the equivalent of 2,160 days in total.

As not all councils gave information it is likely that the actual time lost is much greater.<sup>9</sup>



## SERVICES PROVIDED

I also asked councils to estimate what proportion of services they had continued to offer through the pandemic.

**The average reported service level was 62 per cent** (from the 16 councils who provided suitable estimates).

Barnet Council appears to have done best, telling me that 100 per cent of services had been maintained digitally, and that they saw an increase in the uptake of services.

This may be due to the council’s more thorough outreach activity compared with others. This work included physical leafleting, advertising (at bus stops and in community settings), information on the council and youth service websites, as well as social media campaigns.

However, even Barnet Council noted in its response that it saw a drop in attendance for its summer activities.

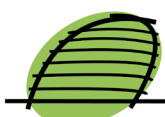
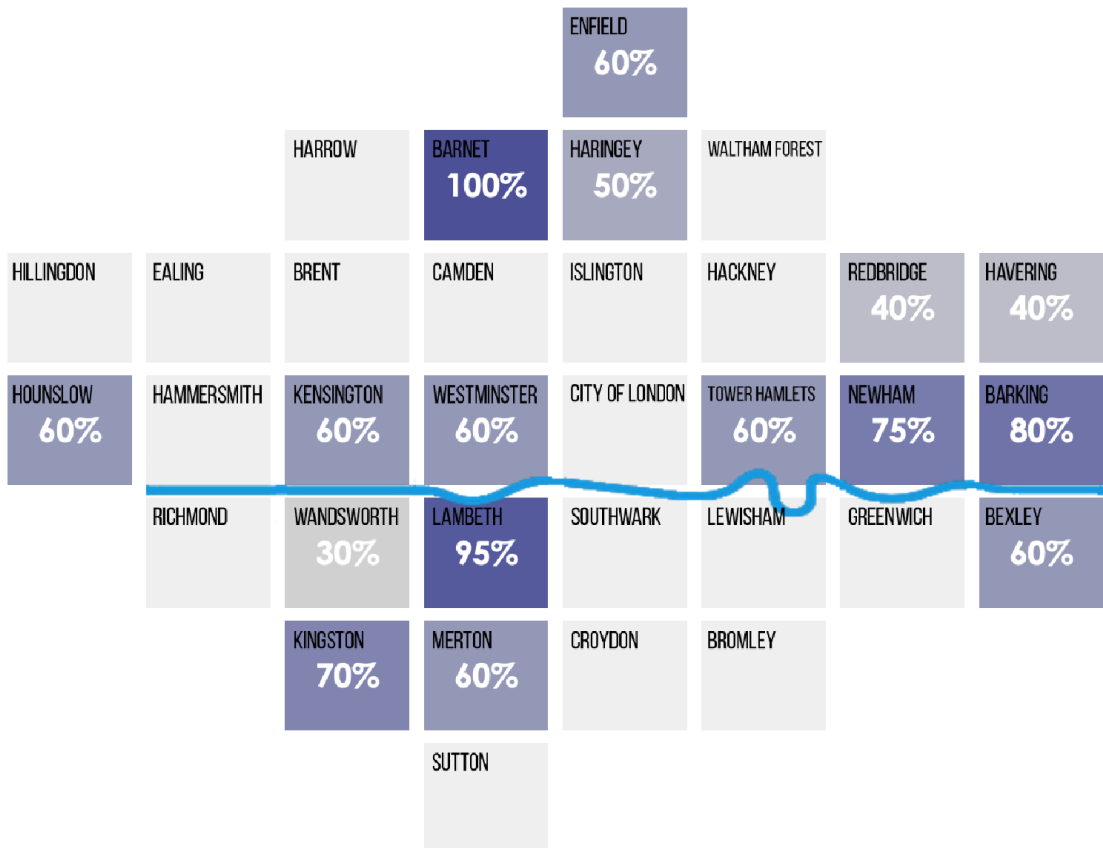
“During lockdown our reach dropped quickly and significantly. Young people would engage but after a few weeks or a month started to withdraw.

“We need to get back out there and see them, even on the streets, socially distanced in a confidential place.

“We cannot replicate physical presence and eye contact.”

**Gemma Wright**  
Newham Council youth team<sup>10</sup>

### Percentage of services maintained during pandemic



## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

I would like to hear more from Londoners about their views on youth service during the pandemic, the impact on services near them, and what councils, the Mayor and Government can do to help.

Please get in touch with me if you have any comments or suggestions.

**Sian Berry AM**, Green Party Member of the London Assembly

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**Joseph Ives**, researcher

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This report sets out my views as an individual Assembly Member and not the agreed view of the entire Assembly.

## References

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<sup>1</sup> City Hall Greens amendment to the Mayor's Final Draft Consolidated Budget 2017/2018. Sian Berry, Feb 2017 <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/londonassembly/meetings/documents/s62220/Green%20Group%20budget%20Amendment.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> City Hall Greens amendment to the Mayor's Draft Consolidated Budget 2018-2019. Sian Berry, Jan 2018 [https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/green\\_group\\_budget\\_amendment\\_final\\_version.pdf](https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/green_group_budget_amendment_final_version.pdf)

<sup>3</sup> Mayor announces a brand new £45million fund to help young Londoners. Mayor of London press release, Feb 2018 <https://www.london.gov.uk/press-releases/mayoral/45million-fund-to-help-young-londoners>

<sup>4</sup> City Hall Greens Budget Amendment 2019-20. Feb 2019 <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly/assembly-members/publications-caroline-russell/publication-caroline-russell-green-group-budget-amendment-2019-20>

<sup>5</sup> City Hall Greens amendment to the Mayor's Draft Consolidated Budget 2020-21. Jan 2020 <https://www.london.gov.uk/about-us/london-assembly/assembly-members/publications-caroline-russell/publication-caroline-russell-city-hall-greens-budget-amendment-2020-2021>

<sup>6</sup> MD2795 GLA: Mayor budget for 2021-22. Mayor of London, Mar 2021 <https://www.london.gov.uk/decisions/md2795-gla-mayor-budget-2021-22#:~:text=This%20budget%20presents%20a%20gross,Programme%20of%20%C2%A31.839bn>

<sup>7</sup> An intergenerational audit for the UK. Resolution Foundation, Oct 2020 <https://www.resolutionfoundation.org/app/uploads/2020/10/Intergenerational-audit-2020.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Running on Reserves: The impact of COVID-19 on London's youth sector. London Youth, Jun 2020 <https://londonyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Full-Results-Running-on-Reserves-Final-web.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> 24 full or partial council responses have been received at publication. Comparable data on closures is available from 17 of these councils, and proposed 2021-22 budget data from 15 councils. Start of lockdown period set at 23 March 2020, the start of the first national lockdown.

<sup>10</sup> Newham council meeting with Sian Berry AM, Mayor of Newham and Newham's youth team

