

Transforming opportunities for the most vulnerable young people

How Young Futures Hubs can keep vulnerable teenagers safe and support them to succeed

The logo for the Centre for Young Lives, featuring the text 'CENTRE FOR YOUNG LIVES' in white, stacked vertically inside a red circle.

**CENTRE
FOR
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LIVES**

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About the Centre for Young Lives

The Centre for Young Lives, founded by Baroness Anne Longfield CBE in early 2024, is an independent think tank and delivery unit working to improve the lives of children, young people, and families across the UK - with a particular focus on those facing the greatest challenges. Our team combines decades of experience in Westminster, Whitehall and beyond with a relentless commitment and drive to breaking down the barriers that hold back some children, and to ensuring that every child and young person can thrive. We use high quality research and evidence to advocate and campaign for innovative solutions and new models that improve the lives of children, young people and their families.

Building on the work of the Commission on Young Lives

The Young Futures approach and Hub model is based on a central recommendation of the Centre's previous incarnation – the Commission on Young Lives. The Commission's flagship recommendation was a 'Sure Start for Teenagers', a network of intervention and support hubs that reduce the risks vulnerable young people face and encourages and supports them to thrive. The proposal was subsequently adopted by Labour in its manifesto and called 'Young Futures'. Led by Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, the Commission launched in September 2021 to put forward a national plan to transform the outcomes of the most marginalised teenagers. The Commission worked with commissioners, young people and other experts who had lived experience of exclusion, gangs, and serious violence, to provide practical and affordable ideas that local communities – if backed by government, councils, the police, and social services – could put in place. The final report, [*Hidden in Plain Sight*](#), was launched in November 2022.

Foreword by Baroness Anne Longfield CBE, Executive Chair of the Centre for Young Lives

In September 2021, after my term as Children's Commissioner for England, I launched the Commission on Young Lives – a year-long inquiry into how to better protect vulnerable teenagers from harm and to support them to succeed.

I was frustrated and angry as repeated serious case reviews into young people who had died before ever reaching adulthood revealed the same stories of failure - the adverse childhood experiences at home or outside it, unmet needs, systems that had failed to identify risky behaviour or circumstances, and which had not offered support. We had seen the dismantling of services that offered early family support, the development of an education system that was not inclusive of need, children's services struggling with a tick-box culture with high thresholds, and mental health services that were unable to meet demand or intervene before problems became crisis.

The result of these failures was clear to see in the thousands of teenagers in gangs or on the edge of them. The children groomed for crime or sexual exploitation. The violence in broad daylight involving teenagers with knives or guns. Homes where the young people involved in the drugs trade are the main breadwinner. Communities where organised criminals seek out and groom very vulnerable children who have fallen through gaps in the care, health, or education systems.

It also comes at high cost to the public purse. The police are spending huge amounts of time and resources stepping in to cover for other struggling services. Schools are having to do so much more beyond simply teaching. NHS staff working in trauma units treating teenagers arriving with knife or gunshot wounds. Social workers working with children who are taken into care for their own protection but who can be then placed in dangerous accommodation miles from home.

Meanwhile, those who wish to exploit young people find it easy. They are often well-coordinated, well-organised, well-funded.

The Commission on Young Lives drew up a national plan to put up a much stronger ring of protection around these vulnerable children, to transform their outcomes and boost their life chances. It was solutions-focused, and put forward proposals that were realistic, deliverable and affordable. At the heart of its recommendations was a call to identify and stick with vulnerable children by building long-term, trusted, culturally sensitive, sustainable, and impactful relationships with them and their families. Our main recommendation was for a new Sure Start Plus Programme, a "Sure Start for Teenagers" network of intervention and support hubs that reduce the risks vulnerable young people face and encourages them to thrive.

Our vision was for hubs run by charities, public bodies, business, and philanthropy organisations, initially in the areas of greatest need. Somewhere that is open in

the evenings and weekends. Where young people feel safe, and where they can also experience new opportunities through enrichment activities, skills and training, mental health support, mentoring, and youth work. A place knitted into a local community, a local asset where young people trust those around them, where long-term relationships are built.

We worked on the Young Futures plan with Labour before the last election, winning a commitment for an incoming Labour government to roll out hubs in its first years in office. The Government has kept to that promise.

Now it is time to deliver. I believe Young Futures Hubs are an exciting opportunity to turn the tables on those who exploit children and young people, to tackle the ingrained vulnerabilities facing those teenagers most at risk of involvement with gangs or serious violence, and to help vulnerable children to thrive and succeed.

Let's be much more ambitious about the potential for developing a new way of joining up services to support children, rebuilding community trust in statutory services, and building new relationships that can plug the gaps through which too many children can fall. The rewards for doing so will be in transformed life chances and a reduction in the enormous social and economic costs of broken systems. It's an investment in young futures that will benefit us all.



Baroness Anne Longfield, September 2025

Executive summary

Introduction

This report comes at a critical point for the Young Futures programme, with the first Prevention Partnership Panels and eight early adopters being developed this year and a further 42 Hubs being created before the end of this parliament. We draw on the findings and recommendations of the Commission on Young Lives – the precursor to the Centre for Young Lives and the source of the ‘Sure Start for Teenagers’ recommendation which is now the Young Futures programme – as well as our ongoing engagement with community groups, young people and families, local authorities, Violence Reduction Units, and Government, to set out a new framework for Young Futures. This framework brings together the core principles that should guide Young Futures, to ensure that it is a sustainable model that reaches and engages the most vulnerable young people, keeping them safe from violence, crime, and exploitation and supporting them to thrive.

A mounting youth crisis

Young people in England are facing a mounting crisis. Over a decade of austerity, the disruption caused by the global pandemic, and the pervasive influence of social media have fundamentally reshaped the experiences of children and adolescents today. Attendance at school has declined sharply, mental ill health is at a record high, and rising levels of radicalisation, peer-on-peer violence, and criminal exploitation threaten to create long-lasting social harm. Vulnerable young people - particularly those who are care-experienced, living in poverty, or from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds - face disproportionate disadvantage. Despite the levels of need, too often the services they encounter are fragmented, underfunded - if they exist at all.

As a country, we have been too slow to respond to the needs of our vulnerable teenagers and many face violence, harm and diminished life chances as a result.

The Government's ambitions for Young Futures

The Government has committed to begin to address these challenges through its missions to open up opportunities for young people and create safer streets, and its missions to make this generation of children the healthiest generation, and to deliver economic growth. All of these will hinge on our ability to tackle these serious social problems head on and support our young people to thrive.

Central to delivering the Safer Streets mission – and with close ties to the opportunity, growth, and health missions – is the Young Futures programme, which seeks to intervene early to prevent and mitigate risks for young people who are most vulnerable to exploitation, violence, crime, and poor mental health.

Young Futures consists of two main elements: Young Futures Hubs and Prevention Partnership Panels. Young Futures Hubs, initially launching in eight early-adopter sites with a £2 million investment to provide co-located and co-ordinated, integrated services for young people aged 10–18 in areas of high needs, such as areas with high rates of poverty, knife crime, and antisocial behaviour. These hubs build on all the principles of excellent youth centres to embed

targeted support, such as mentoring, counselling, mental health support and family and employment support, alongside inspiring and engaging open-access programmes, enabling young people to build strong and trusted relationships that can guide and support them.

Prevention Partnership Panels, led by the Home Office, complement the hubs by proactively identifying and referring vulnerable young people to appropriate interventions through clear referral pathways.

Together, hubs and panels aim to break cycles of violence and poor mental health while expanding opportunities for education, employment, and personal development to help young people thrive.

Young Futures represents a strategic, mission-driven response to systemic failures by preventing young people from falling through the gaps, and creates pathways to safety, stability, and opportunity. By operating in areas of highest need and reaching out to the most vulnerable in a “no wrong door” approach to support, Young Futures has the potential to transform the lives of young people, strengthen families, and reduce long-term social and economic costs associated with violence, exploitation, and unmet need.

A new proposed framework of delivery for successful Young Futures Hubs

The core principles of our framework should ensure that the programme has the flexibility to respond to local need and bring together existing support services, while also establishing a recognised and national brand for the hubs so that they are recognised as safe, supportive spaces, which also provide appealing and open-access activities.

These are the foundations of the building blocks that we believe are essential to provide transformative support that truly changes lives.

Key principle	This means in practice	What this requires from local areas and government
<p>Single front door with integrated local system</p>	<p>Young Futures Hubs are visible, trusted, and embedded in communities, offering consistent support and opportunities through a coordinated local system.</p> <p>Operating as a central hub, hub and spoke or through co-ordinated youth provision, the Young Futures Hub will provide a dynamic offer of activities and opportunities, linked to a strong network of specialist services.</p>	<p>The Government should establish a cross-departmental Young Futures Plan, aligning multiple departments and policies to maximise the impact of Young Futures Hubs.</p> <p>It should provide centrally mandated services, publish joint guidance, and create a nationwide brand with public awareness campaigns.</p> <p>Long-term investment and innovative funding, supported by a common outcomes framework and clear</p>

		accountability, should strengthen and embed the Hubs in communities.
Voices of young people and families are heard	Hubs co-produce services with young people and families, responding to their needs rather than imposing services.	Commission and issue guidance to local authorities on effective ways to embed co-production into service design, supported by the sharing of best practice and practice guides.
Embedded in communities and reaching those most in need	<p>Hubs actively reach underserved communities, understanding and responding to local needs, including girls and minoritised groups.</p> <p>The door is open to all young people, while data collection and early identification enables workers to reach out and engage with the most vulnerable young people to provide ongoing support and opportunities through the Hub.</p>	<p>Provide guidance to local authorities and support where necessary to strengthen standardised data collection and effective monitoring of take-up, engagement and outcomes of service delivery.</p> <p>Direct resources first to communities facing the greatest challenges, including high levels of deprivation and knife-related incidents.</p>
High-quality services	Hubs provide the highest quality inspirational, meaningful, impactful, and inclusive programmes of activities and support that provide positive places to go, engage young people, build skills and support belonging, opening up opportunities and supporting positive mental health and wellbeing so transforming life chances.	The Government should develop a workforce and leadership programme for Young Futures Hubs. It should also support high-quality, evidence-based service delivery for local authorities through a national database of programmes.

Recommendations

Young Futures is an ambitious and transformative programme which, if successful, has the potential to bring together national and local policy for young people and establish dynamic anchor institutions and networks across our communities. The following recommendations are designed to guide and enable central government and local government to make this a reality.

Setting sights high for Young Futures hubs and backing them financially

Hubs need to be open to young people who need them, with inspiring activity programmes during the week and at weekends, that draw them in and away from unsafe environments; well-trained and skilled youth professionals who can establish trusted relationships; and ambitious leaders who can drive forward systems change across the local area. For this to be possible, we recommend each Hub is backed by **£1 million per year**, jointly funded to cover staff and administrative costs, as well as rent and activities.

Establishing a single front door with an integrated local system of opportunities and support

- Government should establish a **cross-departmental Young Futures Plan**, bringing together the Department for Work & Pensions, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport, and the Department for Education. This Plan should establish a shared ambition for the Young Futures programme and join up existing and future policies and funds to maximise the role of Young Futures Hubs as a key means of delivering a range of ambitions, including new neighbourhood health models, the Education White Paper, Best Start, Child Poverty Strategy, Growth Plan, and the Youth Strategy.
- Departments which are co-signatories to the Young Futures Plan should also publish a **comprehensive, joint guidance document** for Young Futures Hubs. Government should design and deliver a centrally mandated 'core offer' of services to be delivered through the Hubs, including separate, specialist support for girls and young women, and an offer of inspirational programmes of open-access activities and opportunities which is available throughout the week.
- Government should establish a **nationwide Young Futures Hubs brand** with coordinated public awareness campaigns, so that all young people and their families recognise Hubs as safe spaces they can attend to participate in great activity programmes, build relationships with peers and trusted adults, and access support.
- Government strengthens integration and joined-up working across Departments through a cross-departmental **common outcomes framework for young people**.
- The Treasury **scales up investment** into joined-up support for young people and families over the next decade to strengthen and extend provision and embed Young Futures Hubs into communities for the long-term.
- The Treasury and Department for Culture, Media & Sport should consider innovative means to raise investment for Young Futures Hubs, including **National Social Outcomes Partnerships pilots**.

Ensuring the voices of young people and families are heard

- The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should commission and issue guidance to local authorities on effective ways to **embed co-production with young people into service design**, supported by the sharing of best practice and practice guides. This should include involving Young People in local design teams as Hubs are established. The views and voices of young women and girls should be present throughout every aspect of service design and delivery.

Embedding Young Futures in communities and reaching those most in need

Currently, the young people who need support the most are falling through the gaps, either because of a lack of support, or the support is inaccessible.

- The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should provide guidance to local authorities and support where necessary to strengthen standardised data collection and **effective monitoring of take-up, engagement, and outcomes** of service delivery, in order to ensure that Young Futures is reaching and supporting the most vulnerable young people.
- To maximise impact, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport should direct resources first to **communities facing the greatest challenges**, including high levels of deprivation and knife-related incidents. These areas are likely to benefit most from early intervention, helping to prevent young people from being drawn into violent behaviour while supporting community cohesion. Prioritisation should be informed by local data on crime, socioeconomic indicators, and existing service provision.

Providing high-quality services

- The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should develop a **workforce and leadership programme** for Young Futures Hubs, which is gender- and trauma- informed, and supports staff to be culturally aware.
- The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should support the **delivery of evidence-based services** with a focus on high quality implementation through a national database of evidence-based programmes to support local authorities. The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should ensure that service delivery is gender- and trauma- informed, recognising the unique experiences of young people exposed to trauma and girls and young women facing challenges such as exclusion and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Background

Young people are facing a growing crisis. More than a decade of austerity, the disruption of the global pandemic, and the rising ubiquity of phones and social media have all combined to existentially shift the experiences of young people today. School attendance has dropped, and a growing minority do not attend at all. Mental health need has never been higher and rising radicalisation and peer on peer violence have ramifications which could ripple across generations.

These pressures are very real for all young people, but all the evidence shows that the impact is greatest on the most vulnerable and marginalised young people.

To tackle these problems, the Government has made breaking down barriers to opportunity for young people and creating safer streets two of its core missions. To deliver these ambitions, it has promised a renewed focus on widening opportunities for children and young people, pledged a new Youth Strategy, and put greater emphasis on inclusive education, mental health support, tackling child poverty, and reducing youth violence. A central pillar of realising the Safer Streets mission – but also closely linked to increasing opportunity - is the Young Futures programme, which aims to intervene early to prevent and support vulnerable young people most at risk of being drawn into serious violence, gangs, or exploitation, as well as young people at risk of mental health problems.

Young Futures builds directly on the central recommendation of Baroness Anne Longfield's Commission on Young Lives – the precursor to the Centre for Young Lives – which called for a “Sure Start for Teenagers” model of early intervention and support to stop vulnerable young people from falling through the gaps in education and social services. This model recognised the crucial importance of early help for young people who are struggling, a more inclusive education system, mental health support for young people, family support, and a care system that supports those on the edge of care and puts more emphasis on prevention and kinship care.

The Government is now developing the first Young Futures Hubs, announcing in July 2025 that fifty hubs will be established in this Parliament, with eight early adopter Young Futures Hubs launching by the end of 2025 – backed with an initial £2 million trench of investment for the development phase and targeted at areas of greatest need.

Young Futures offers the potential of a new, ambitious, and exciting innovation that provides integrated, joined up support, as well as developing more effective ways of working with young people, families, and local communities. The vision is of Young Future Hub at the heart of the community, with inspiring activity programmes, open throughout the week and at weekends and where trusted adults are there to help and support to children and their families – backed up by wider joined up support.

The Young Futures programme is formed of two parts:

- 1. Prevention Partnership Panels:** led by the Home Office, the panels are a new multi-agency mechanism in Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) areas to identify,

assess, and refer into effective support. Panels will proactively identify and refer vulnerable teenagers – who may currently be falling through the net – to a range of different support services and interventions much earlier, including Young Futures Hubs, through clear referral pathways. These interventions could include mentoring, sports programmes, mental health support, arts and cultural programmes, and therapy or family support.

“We will create local prevention partnerships that will identify young people who could be drawn into violence and intervene” [2024 Labour Party Manifesto]

- 2. Young Futures Hubs:** reaching across Government but led by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS). The Government intends for the eight early adopters to open during the financial year 2025-26. A further 42 hubs will then open before the end of this Parliament.

The Commission on Young Lives’ proposal for Sure Start for Teenagers hubs envisaged them as centres that “lead and co-ordinate health and wellbeing support, early intervention, education psychologists, mental health support, SEND support and support for families through trauma informed and responsive practice - but with a focus on teenagers”.

Young Futures Hubs have three primary aims: to reduce crime, improve mental health, and increase the development of opportunities, such as careers, among the target cohort of 10-18 year-olds.

“new hubs will bring together vital community-focused services under one roof to help teenagers who face being dragged into violence and at risk of mental health challenges” [Prime Minister’s Office]

Crucially, Young Futures is about opening up great opportunities for all young people in an area, building relationships and offering targeted, more specialist support where needed. They will also provide accessible mental health and wellbeing support in the hub as well as improved access to additional support where necessary, including Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) or specialist interventions.

Detached youth work, targeted outreach, and digital support will all enable the most vulnerable young people to be reached - vital to those young people who are marginalised or feeling excluded.

Policy landscape

Vulnerable young people left behind in policy making

In November 2022, the Commission on Young Lives published its final report highlighting the paucity of support for vulnerable teenagers and the urgent need to develop new national and local plans to protect young people from violence and crime and support them to thrive.

The same month, the National Audit Office (NAO) published its assessment of the Government's support for vulnerable adolescents. It found that "there is no overall strategic approach, so government does not know whether there are gaps or overlaps in the support for vulnerable adolescents".¹

The absence of priority and any purposeful or strategic approach to support for vulnerable young people over the last decade, has resulted in a piecemeal approach in a long list of disjointed, uncoordinated, and underfunded responses to real-life tragedies taking place in communities across the country. Every day, vulnerable young people are in danger of violence and exploitation, their life chances diminished because of their background. What's more, the scale and the causes of the problem are no secret: we know that young people who are Black, Brown, and minority ethnic are at a higher risk, as are young people growing up in poverty. All of this is preventable.

Beyond a lack of strategic approach, the NAO identified several factors inhibiting the Government from providing effective support for vulnerable teenagers. It found that the problems begin with a lack of understanding within Government of the scale and nature of the problem. It also found little evidence of departments working together to understand whether their respective programmes "make sense as a whole", therefore leading to gaps and overlaps. Often, Government was found to be failing to coordinate objectives, accountability, and governance, to the extent that departmental goals were sometimes actively undermining others, leading to a waste of resources and a loss of positive outcomes.

Throughout the Commission on Young Lives' inquiry, we found systems and statutory services that didn't have the trust of young people, were over-stretched, simply unable to meet the needs of many vulnerable children, and unable to stop them falling through the gaps and into danger. We heard from young people who were able to identify the moment where their life changed for the worse, where they knew they needed support but it wasn't there. It was clear to us that not just more support needed but the right kind of support – understanding and supporting young people's needs.

Young people told us that what they needed was help that came to them, that understood their lives and that was able to offer help that was able to bend and stick with them.

¹ National Audit Office (2022) Support for vulnerable adolescents. Available at: <https://www.nao.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/Support-for-vulnerable-adolescents.pdf>

Putting young people at the heart of a mission-led Government

The Government's Plan for Change is built around five missions to improve lives and deliver "a decade of national renewal".² Responsibility for driving forward the missions falls with the five cross-departmental Mission Boards, chaired by the relevant Secretaries of State, with a view to breaking down some of the very departmental silos which have inhibited a cross-government, strategic approach to supporting vulnerable young people.

Support for vulnerable young people is inextricably tied to the successful realisation of four of the missions:

- The Opportunity Mission holds the potential to break down the barriers that underpin many of the vulnerabilities at-risk adolescents are facing.
- Tackling youth violence and knife crime is central to the Safer Streets Mission. Almost one in five knife crime offences resulting in a caution or conviction are related to children, with Black children significantly overrepresented in the data, making up 14% of offences despite being 6% of the general population.³
- Through the Health Mission, the Prime Minister has pledged to create the "healthiest generation of children ever," recognising the long-term personal and economic cost of childhood ill health.
- Supporting young people to succeed is crucial for the long-term economic outlook and the growth mission of our country. Supporting young people to succeed in education and work is crucial to opening up opportunities and lowering the UK's rate of NEET young people. Matching that of the Netherlands – the lowest in the OECD – would be worth £69 billion to the economy, with approximately 500,000 more young people earning or learning.⁴

Young Futures in the policy context

It is the Safer Streets mission which Young Futures ultimately is accountable, to aiming to reduce serious harm and increase public confidence in policing and the criminal justice system. The Government has also set an ambition to halve knife crime and Violence Against Women and Girls (VAWG) within a decade.

“Labour will intervene earlier to stop young people being drawn into crime, creating a new Young Futures programme with a network of hubs reaching every community”
[2024 Labour Party Manifesto]

The success of these mission hinges in part on the ability of the Young Futures programme to deliver transformative change in the lives of young people at risk of crime.

² Prime Minister's Office. Plan for Change. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/missions>

³ Youth Justice Board (2025) Knife Crime: Key Evidence and Insights. Available at: https://yjresourcehub.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Knife_Crime_Evidence_Insights_Feb25-1.pdf

⁴ Youth Futures Foundation. Young people not earning or learning remains stubbornly high into early 2025. Available at: <https://youthfuturesfoundation.org/news/neet-levels-remain-high/>

The eight early adopter hubs were announced following the King's Youth Opportunity Summit in July 2025, where the Prime Minister, actor and leading campaigner Indris Elba and members of the Coalition to Tackle Knife Crime underscored the role of hubs in keeping young people safe.⁵ The Government stated that hubs will be targeted at areas with high levels of knife crime and antisocial behaviour.⁶

Similarly, Prevention Partnership Panels are being rolled out to identify, assess, and refer children and young people at risk of being involved in violence to appropriate interventions and support.⁷ The panels are coordinated by the Home Office and are a key pillar in the Government's plans to deliver its ambition to halve knife crime and combat youth violence.

The Young Futures programme builds on the work of Violence Reduction Units (VRUs), which were established to tackle serious youth violence. These VRUs operate in 20 police force areas, targeted specifically at preventing serious violence through a whole-systems approach.

Case study: MyEnds

The 'MyEnds' programme has been developed by the London VRU to tackle violence on a hyper-local level through local groups of community leaders, organisations, and statutory agencies.

The programme is an example of setting intended outcomes for an intervention, in this case reducing violence in local areas affected by high and sustained levels of violence, alongside several principles for delivery: programmes should be local and community-led, appropriate to local need, and targeted towards the most at-risk young people. While these principles are well-evidenced in delivering positive change, they are not prescriptive and instead empower the voluntary and community sector (VCS) to develop tailored approaches that meet the needs of their communities. For example, the Ecosystem Coldharbour Consortium in Lambeth holds "community truths" events to explore community members' views on solutions to violence in the area, with a programme of activities established following these consultations.⁸

By empowering local organisations who are best placed to understand the needs of a certain area, MyEnds funded programmes may look different across London, as they seek to fill different gaps in support and tackle different challenges.⁹

⁵ Prime Minister's Office, 10 Downing Street. Young Futures Hubs to launch offering vulnerable young people lifeline. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/young-futures-hubs-to-launch-offering-vulnerable-young-people-lifeline>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ London Violence Reduction Unit (2025) London Heads of Community Safety: VRU Update. Available at: <https://www.liia.london/wp-content/uploads/2025/06/VRU-LHoCS-Newsletter-June-2025.pdf#:~:text=In%20May%202025%2C%20the%20Home%20Office%20tasked%20VRUs,them%20with%20positive%20outcomes%20and%20brighter%20young%20futures.>

⁸ CordisBright (2024) MyEnds evaluation. Thematic report 2: Strengthening community networks. Available at: <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/londons-violence-reduction-unit-vru/our-research/vru-evidence-hub/myends-impact-evaluation-main-report>

⁹ CordisBright (2023) MyEnds impact evaluation: Main report. Available at: <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/londons-violence-reduction-unit-vru/our-research/vru-evidence-hub/myends-impact-evaluation-main-report>

While each consortium is unique and draws on the experience of the established VCS organisations in each local area, many of the positive outcomes are shared across London: the three most common outcomes of interventions across 2023/24 were improved mental wellbeing, increased engagement with activities and support services, and improved understanding of issues related to harm and exploitation.¹⁰

Breaking down the barriers to opportunity

The Opportunity Mission aims to break the link between a child's background and their future successes, from the early years and the first 1,001 days to ensuring a child can thrive at school and beyond.

This mission cannot be realised without a clear focus on the most vulnerable young people, many of whom face the greatest barriers to opportunity. Children who experience persistent disadvantage leave school almost two years behind their peers.¹¹ A child has an 80% chance of passing Maths and English at GCSE if they neither live in poverty nor require the support of a social worker. That figure falls to 65% where a child lives in poverty or needs a social worker, and to 13% where a child experiencing disadvantage also has Special Educational Needs.¹² Children eligible for Free School Meals are more than 3.5 times more likely to be severely absent than their peers and 5.5 times more likely to be permanently excluded from school.^{13,14} In the criminal justice system, 90% of young offenders sentenced to custody had a previous record of being persistently absent, with 59% reporting they had regularly missed school.¹⁵

There are a number of welcome interventions from Government to improve the outcomes for young people which are relevant to Young Futures and have the potential to enhance its effectiveness:

- **Youth Strategy:** The Government is imminently set to publish a new 10 year national youth strategy. The strategy is so far backed by £185 million to improve coordination of youth services and £26 million capital funding for youth club regeneration.¹⁶

¹⁰ CordisBright (2024) Thematic Report 4: Intervention development and delivery. Available at: <https://www.london.gov.uk/programmes-strategies/communities-and-social-justice/londons-violence-reduction-unit-vru/our-research/vru-evidence-hub/myends-impact-evaluation-main-report>

¹¹ EPI (2024), Annual Report 2024: Disadvantage. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024-disadvantage-2/#:~:text=Disadvantaged%20pupils%20have%2C%20on%20average,from%204.8%20months%20in%202022>. Note: Persistent disadvantage is defined as being eligible for Free School meals for at least 80% of their time in school.

¹² N8 Research Partnership (2024). An evidence-based plan for addressing poverty with and through education settings. Available at: https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Poverty_Report_2.pdf

¹³ Department for Education (2025) Pupil absence in schools in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2024-25-autumn-term>

¹⁴ Department for Education (2025) Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24>

¹⁵ Ministry of Justice & Department for Education (2016) Understanding the educational background of young offenders. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81513740f0b62302696a70/understanding-educational-background-of-young-offenders-full-report.pdf>

¹⁶ Department for Culture, Media & Sport. [New National Youth Strategy to break down barriers to opportunity for young people](#). Accessed: 01.05.25

- **Local Youth Transformation Pilot:** The Local Youth Transformation Pilot is an £8 million investment running through 2025/26, designed to help 12 'Pathfinder' local authorities rebuild a high-quality youth offer and re-establish strong local leadership of services for young people.
- **Inclusive education:** The Government has committed to establishing a new era of inclusion in mainstream education, including through Ofsted inspections. Mental Health Teams in schools are rolling out to an increased number and the Centre for Young Lives has argued strongly for a bold plan for inclusion which will be vital to ensuring vulnerable young people have the support they need to stay in school and thrive. Details on its plans for reform of the SEND system are due in a Schools *White Paper* in the Autumn.
- **Child Poverty Strategy:** Tackling the root causes of vulnerability is essential to improving outcomes for young people. The Child Poverty Taskforce will publish its Child Poverty Strategy in Autumn 2025, which looks at both reducing the rate of and impacts of child poverty. The Strategy will also include more details on the recently announced Better Futures Fund, a £500 million programme with the impact economy intended to support up to 200,000 vulnerable children, young people, and their families over the next ten years.
- **Best Start in Life:** Vital for early intervention in the early years but also to delivering joined up support for older children and their families, the plan provides £500 million to create a network of up to 1,000 Best Start Family Hubs for 0-19 year olds across every local authority in England by 2028.

Boosting health, including mental health and wellbeing

The ambition to improve mental health and wellbeing is a core aspect of Young Futures so the positive engagement of health nationally and locally will be essential.

In 2024, the Prime Minister – then in opposition – set out his commitment to create the healthiest generation of young people ever through the Child Health Action Plan.

In July 2025, the Government published *Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan for England*, its roadmap to realise the NHS mission and transform the health service through three major shifts: from hospital to community; analogue to digital; and sickness to prevention.¹⁷ The plan commits to establishing a neighbourhood health service, which will bring co-created patient-centred care to people's doorsteps.

The ten-year plan recognises Young Futures Hubs as a vehicle to provide additional support for children and young people's mental health outside of schools and colleges, "to ensure there is no 'wrong front door' for people seeking

¹⁷ UK Government (2025) *Fit for the Future: 10 Year Health Plan for England*. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/6888a0b1a1f859994409147/fit-for-the-future-10-year-health-plan-for-england.pdf>

help” and enabling a shift towards earlier intervention for young people, reducing pressure on more specialist services in the long term.¹⁸

Breaking down barriers to employment and training

The Young Futures programme brings the potential to break down barriers to training and employment for young people and reignite economic activity in this young generation. Economic inactivity has risen among young people in the context of high inequality, poor health, and a precarious employment environment. Nearly one million young people are now not in employment, education or training (NEET).¹⁹

The Department for Work & Pensions (DWP) leads a small number of interventions to support young people into employment, but a transformative approach is yet to be delivered:

- The DWP has introduced measures to tackle economic inactivity, through the Youth Guarantee, which sets out “a vision to ensure all young people aged 18 to 21 are learning or earning.” Eight Youth Guarantee Trailblazers have also been established and extended for another year, which are developing ways to identify, engage and sustain contact with young people most at risk of falling out of education, employment or training. DWP has partnered with several prominent organisations, such as the Premier League, to leverage their popularity and influence among young people to better reach and engage them in opportunities and support. This approach should be more common across Government, in programmes such as Young Futures.
- Young people can also access support through 100 DWP Youth Employment Hubs, which currently support more than 14,000 young people.²⁰ Each hub offers up to six months of tailored support from a Youth Hub Work Coach, alongside other professionals based on-site.

Investing to save

More broadly, the exploitation and violence experienced by some young people comes at great personal and economic cost. Nearly £17 billion is spent annually on the damaging problems that affect children and young people such as domestic violence and abuse, child neglect and maltreatment, mental health problems, youth crime and exclusion from education and the labour market.²¹

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Office for National Statistics. Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), UK: February 2025. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peoplenotinwork/unemployment/bulletins/youngpeoplenotineducationemploymentortrainingneet/february2025>

²⁰ Demos (2024) Launch Pads: The Future of Youth Employment Hubs. Available at: <https://demos.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/UNDER-EMBARGO-Demos-Youth-Employment-Hubs-final-version.pdf>

²¹ Early Intervention Foundation (2016) The cost of late intervention: EIF analysis 2016. Available at: <https://www.eif.org.uk/report/the-cost-of-late-intervention-eif-analysis-2016>

In 2020, the Youth Violence Commission estimated that over the preceding 11 years, the economic and social cost of serious youth violence across England and Wales was at least £6bn, but more likely in the region of £11bn.²²

²² The Youth Violence Commission (2020) Youth Violence Commission Final Report. Available at: https://www.yvcommission.com/_files/ugd/ad2256_a0f38547a4134e0cb923905486bcc186.pdf

Vulnerable people falling through the gaps

The Commission on Young Lives highlighted the epidemic of county lines, criminal exploitation, and serious violence across Britain. This is a national crisis which put thousands of the most vulnerable young people in England at risk of harm, exploitation and lost life chances. In the worst cases some young people are losing their lives or facing many years in prison. Too many young people are being allowed to fall through the gaps because of failures or lack of investment in our education, family support, children's mental health, care, or youth justice systems.

What makes these young people particularly vulnerable to harm or exploitation is not a mystery. Throughout the Commission on Young Lives' evidence sessions, we heard about the numerous and overlapping risk factors and adverse experiences that put some young people at risk, including: experiencing childhood trauma; high levels of school absence or a permanent exclusion; growing up in poverty; unmet Special Educational Needs; and care-experience. These children are also disproportionately likely to be growing up in poverty and be from minority ethnic backgrounds.²³

VRUs which bring together police, health, education, local government, and community groups to coordinate efforts and share data to reduce violence in the long term, have also identified similar risk factors relating specifically to involvement in serious violence, including education, adverse childhood experiences, deprivation, unemployment, mental health, and involvement in crime and gangs.²⁴

Similarly, a study published by the West Midlands Combined Authority into the journey of 80 children who were known to Youth Offending Teams found a number of common vulnerabilities among the cohort, including having experienced or been a victim of abuse, being raised by a single parent, having interacted with the social care system, and having a mental health disorder.²⁵

Shaken by the pandemic, children and young people are increasingly experiencing these risks while at the same time early help and other services are reeling from over a decade of cuts. As a result, the gaps in support for vulnerable young people are growing, leaving them at risk of falling into violence, gangs, and exploitation.

Childhood harm, abuse, and neglect

Trauma comes from deeply distressing or threatening experiences that overwhelm an individual's ability to cope, leaving lasting effects on physical,

²³ Commission on Young Lives (2022) Hidden in Plain Sight: A national plan of action to support vulnerable teenagers to succeed and to protect them from adversity, exploitation, and harm. Available at: <https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/COYL-FINAL-REPORT-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>

²⁴ Home Office (2025) Violence Reduction Units year ending March 2024 evaluation report. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/violence-reduction-units-year-ending-march-2024-evaluation-report/violence-reduction-units-year-ending-march-2024-evaluation-report>

²⁵ West Midlands Combined Authority (2021) Punishing Abuse: Children in the West Midlands Criminal Justice System. Available at: <https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/4678/punishing-abuse.pdf>

emotional, and social well-being. As a consequence of experiencing trauma, young people become more likely to experience other factors that make them vulnerable. They may experience dissociation or other dysfunctional behaviour to reduce trauma-linked emotional distress, which may manifest itself in attention difficulties, school absence, substance abuse, and offending.²⁶

It can result from single or repeated events - such as abuse, neglect, violence, accidents, disasters, or loss - and refers not only to the event itself but the long-lasting effects.²⁷

These effects include impacting a person's development throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood. It can hinder their emotional growth, socialisation, self-esteem, confidence, and capacity to build meaningful relationships with others.

As of March 2024, there were 399,460 children in need in England; a legally defined group of children "assessed as needing help and protection as a result of risks to their development or health".²⁸

However, many children and young people who are experiencing harm, abuse or neglect are not on the radar of children's services or other agencies. Action for Children estimates that as many as one in ten children in the UK have experienced neglect, which is the persistent failure to provide for a child's fundamental needs and is one of the most widespread forms of child abuse.²⁹

Such a large discrepancy between the number of children in need and the number of children experiencing neglect alone demonstrates the difficulties in identifying and supporting these children and young people. The NSPCC found that the child protection system focuses on thresholds and recording specific incidents, whereas the nature of neglect often presents as a "patchwork of concerning lower-level reports built up over time to form a picture of cumulative harm."³⁰

Other measures also highlight the gap between the scale of need and the number of children identified as needing support. For example, one in 13 children and young people in the UK are estimated to suffer from PTSD at some point during childhood.³¹

²⁶ Beyond Youth Custody (2014) Young Offenders and Trauma: Experience and Impact. Available at: <https://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/wp-content/uploads/BYC-Trauma-experience-and-impact-practitioners-guide.pdf>

²⁷ Beyond Youth Custody (2014) Young Offenders and Trauma: Experience and Impact. Available at: <https://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/wp-content/uploads/BYC-Trauma-experience-and-impact-practitioners-guide.pdf>

²⁸ Department for Education. Children in need. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-in-need/2024>

²⁹ Action for Children. Neglect and abuse. Available at: <https://www.actionforchildren.org.uk/our-work-and-impact/children-and-families/neglect-and-abuse/>

³⁰ NSPCC (2024) Too little, too late: The multi-agency response to identifying and tackling neglect. Available at: <https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/media/cfanzypa/too-little-late-multi-agency-response-neglect.pdf>

³¹ Ptsduk. Post Traumatic Stress Disorder stats and figures. Available at: <https://www.ptsduk.org/ptsd-stats/>

Children in need have lower attainment on average than their peers. At Key Stage 2, the percentage of children meeting expected levels in reading, writing and maths is roughly half that of the overall pupil population.³²

They are also more likely to be missing education altogether, with 44% of children in need and over half (57.2%) of those with Child Protection Plans (CPPs) persistently absent from school, in comparison to 20.3% of the pupil population.³³

A similar gap exists among children who are severely absent, with the rate at 11% among children in need and 15.6% among children with CPPs are severely absent, compared to 2.5% among the overall pupil population. Children in need are also more likely to be suspended, affecting 14.1% of children in need and 16% of children with CPPs, and 3.7% of all pupils.³⁴

The evidence linking childhood trauma and young people at risk of violence and crime is overwhelming. Nine in ten violent young offenders have experienced abuse and/or loss in their lives,³⁵ while the West Midlands Combined Authority study of 80 children who were known to Youth Offending Teams found 89% of the cohort were suspected or confirmed to have been abused.³⁶

A separate study of young adults who received custodial sentences found that 41.7% were children in need and 17.6% had been children looked after.³⁷

Tackling the causes of vulnerability – poverty and marginalisation

The Youth Endowment Fund's recent evidence review about poverty, youth crime, and violence found that poverty is a risk factor for both youth crime and violence, although different experiences of poverty have an effect on the strength of this link. For example, it found boys living in families experiencing financial problems are more at risk of engaging in youth crime and violence than girls.³⁸

Child poverty has been on an upward trend year on year since 2010, rising particularly sharply through the recent cost of living crisis. In the year to April 2024, 4.5 million children in the UK were living in relative poverty, representing almost a third of all children. This is 900,000 more children than in 2011/12.³⁹

³² Department for Education (2025) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2024>

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Beyond Youth Custody (2014) Young Offenders and Trauma: Experience and Impact. Available at: <https://www.beyondyouthcustody.net/wp-content/uploads/BYC-Trauma-experience-and-impact-practitioners-guide.pdf>

³⁶ West Midlands Combined Authority (2021) Punishing Abuse: Children in the West Midlands Criminal Justice System. Available at: <https://www.wmca.org.uk/media/4678/punishing-abuse.pdf>

³⁷ Office for National Statistics (2022) The education and social care background of young people who interact with the criminal justice system: May 2022. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/theeducationandsocialcarebackgroundofyoungpeoplewhointeractwiththecriminaljusticesystem/may2022#data-sources-and-quality>

³⁸ Youth Endowment Fund (2025) Evidence Review on Poverty and Youth Crime and Violence. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/08/YEF-Poverty-Evidence-Review-Technical-Report-August-2025.pdf>

³⁹ HM Government (2025) Households below average income: for financial years ending 1995 to 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/households-below-average-income-for-financial-years-ending-1995-to-2024>. Measure is relative poverty after housing costs.

Poverty restricts a young person's life chances, leading to poorer outcomes in health and education, as well as putting them at heightened risk of involvement in violence and crime. In 2023, the disadvantage attainment gap at the end of secondary school was 19.2 months, up from 18.8 months in 2022 and 1.1 months larger than prior to the pandemic. The gap in 2023 was at its largest since 2011.⁴⁰ Young people in deprived areas are also more likely to not receive or be waiting for the mental health support they need (39%) compared to the most affluent areas (28%).⁴¹

Children and young people missing education

Schools and colleges have a key role in safeguarding young people – a role that has taken on even greater importance given the decline in other areas of support, such as youth clubs. Schools provide a chance to have regular contact with young people and build relationships, making it possible for staff to understand their personal circumstances and therefore identify any signs that a young person may be struggling. Schools are then able to connect young people with other statutory services where necessary.

For many young people, the protective factor of school and education is felt: 82% of respondents to the Youth Endowment Fund's *Child, Violence and Vulnerability Survey 2024* said they feel safe at school, the highest rate for any space other than inside the home.⁴²

When young people are missing education because of absence, suspension, or exclusion, a large gap in support therefore opens, increasing the likelihood that they do not get the help they may desperately need and in some cases become prey to those who wish to exploit them. Ensuring young people are able to stay in school and are supported to thrive in their education is therefore vital.

Case study: London's Inclusion Charter⁴³

London VRU has developed London's Inclusion Charter, which seeks to tackle the causes of exclusion, including suspensions, managed moves, and absenteeism, recognising that children and young people are safer in school. Almost 4,000 children were consulted during the development of the Charter; they identified having friends they can trust, being treated with respect, and feeling able to be themselves as key factors in feeling a sense of belonging at school. They also said teachers being respectful and trusting that they will stop any bullying are central to feeling safe at school.⁴⁴ These findings informed the development of the Charter's four key principles:

⁴⁰ Educational Policy Institute (2024) Annual Report 2024. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2024/>

⁴¹ Barnardos (2023) New figures reveal the impact of poor mental health provision on those most in need. Available at: <https://www.barnardos.org.uk/news/new-figures-reveal-impact-poor-mental-health-provision-those-most-need>

⁴² Savanta & Youth Endowment Fund (2024) YEF's Child, Violence and Vulnerability Survey 2024. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/>

⁴³ London VRU. London's Inclusion Charter. Available at: <https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-02/London%27s%20Inclusion%20Charter%204.pdf>

⁴⁴ London VRU & University of Bath (2024) Inclusion, Belonging, and Safety in London Schools. Available at: https://www.london.gov.uk/sites/default/files/2024-12/UoB%20Belonging%2C%20identity%20and%20safety%20in%20London%20schools%20v4%2009.24_0.pdf

- **Embedding Equity and Diversity** - integrating approaches to ensure students from all backgrounds feel welcome and valued in school.
- **Students as Active Citizens** - collaborating to create a sense of shared responsibility and accountability for the whole school community.
- **Being Adaptable and Reflective** - creating a supportive culture where educators are empowered and enabled to innovate, experiment and refine their practices to meet the diverse needs of all.
- **Beyond Academic Achievement** - enabling young people to achieve by giving them opportunities to flourish.

All education settings in London are invited to sign up to the Charter, and the delivery of the four principles is backed by a £1.4 million investment to provide a universal offer of UNICEF UK's Rights Respecting Schools Award programme free to all state-funded schools and education settings in London.

The rate of severe absence – when children miss more than 50% of their education – has increased by 137% since the Autumn term before the pandemic, rising every year to 2.04% in Autumn term 2024/25.⁴⁵ Children and young people who are eligible for free school meals are more than 3.5 times more likely to be severely absent, at a rate of 3.57% compared to 0.97% for those who are not eligible.⁴⁶

Between 2018/19 and 2023/24, suspensions have increased by 118% from 438,000 to 955,000. In the last year alone, they have increased by 21%. As with absence, the rate of suspensions and exclusions is higher among pupils eligible for FSM: the suspension rate for pupils eligible for FSM was more than four times that of pupils who were not eligible, with rates of 27.55 and 5.99 respectively. Permanent exclusion rates were also higher for FSM-eligible pupils, with a rate of 0.33 compared to 0.06 for pupils who were not eligible.⁴⁷

The Commission on Young Lives heard how, in some cases, children who need extra help or who are vulnerable – such as those with SEN, with mental health problems, with serious difficulties at home, growing up in poverty, or from Black and minority ethnic backgrounds – are sometimes viewed as a problem that can be pushed on to someone else to deal with or largely ignored by placing them outside the mainstream. We found evidence of different ways of doing so, including exclusion, off-rolling, or moving children into Alternative Provision (AP).

Since we published our final report, the number of children in AP has risen from 2,785 in 2020/21 to 16,643 pupils in AP in 2024/25.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Department for Education (2025) Pupil absence in schools in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/8e6bd536-3c46-4edb-7615-08ddef71f8cf>

⁴⁶ Department for Education (2025) Pupil absence in schools in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/permalink/e6836b27-a8f1-4345-7617-08ddef71f8cf>

⁴⁷ Department for Education (2025) Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24>

⁴⁸ Department for Education. Schools, pupils and their characteristics. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/school-pupils-and-their-characteristics/2024-25>

As the 2022 SEND Green Paper stated, children in AP “are also often vulnerable, including to criminal exploitation”.⁴⁹ These challenges often coincide with SEN, with around 80% of children and young people in state place-funded AP having some need, primarily Social Emotional Mental Health (SEMH) needs. Just 55% of pupils from state place-funded AP sustained an education, training, or employment destination after key stage 4 in 2019/20, compared with 89% and 94% from state-funded special and mainstream schools respectively.⁵⁰

There is a well-established link between young people out of school or who are missing entirely from education, and the youth justice system. Analysis published by the Ministry of Justice and the Department for Education found that 90% of young offenders sentenced to custody had a previous record of being persistently absent, with 59% reporting they had regularly missed school.⁵¹

A separate study of young people who came into contact with the criminal justice system found that over half (52.5%) of young people in the study who went on to receive a custodial sentence later in their lives had been persistently absent from school, missing a fifth of sessions or more in a single school year. Persistent absenteeism declined to 35.8% among those with non-custodial sentences or cautions, contrasting sharply with 10.9% among those with no criminal convictions.⁵²

Mental health

One in five (20.3%) of children and young people aged 8-16 had a probable mental health condition in 2023.⁵³ The number of children on waiting lists for support for their mental health – and the length of time children have to wait to be seen – has increased dramatically in recent years. In June 2024, 80% of the 500,000 people who had been waiting for over a year for community services were children and young people.⁵⁴

The Commission on Young Lives heard the unequal experiences that many face in both experiencing mental health problems and accessing the necessary support in a timely and equal manner. For example, individuals from racialised communities have been and continue to be disproportionately impacted by adverse experiences and negative outcomes within mental health care when

⁴⁹ HM Government (2022) SEND Review: Right support, right place, right time. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/1063620/SEN_D_review_right_support_right_place_right_time_accessible.pdf

⁵⁰ Ibid.

⁵¹ Ministry of Justice & Department for Education (2016) Understanding the educational background of young offenders. Available at: <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/5a81513740f0b62302696a70/understanding-educational-background-of-young-offenders-full-report.pdf>

⁵² Office for National Statistics. The education and social care background of young people who interact with the criminal justice system: May 2022. Available at:

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/theeducationandsocialcarebackgroundofyoungpeoplewhointeractwiththecriminaljusticesystem/may2022#absence-and-exclusions>

⁵³ NHS England (2023) One in five children and young people had a probable mental health disorder in 2023. Available at: <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023/>

⁵⁴ Lord Darzi (2024) Independent Investigation of the National Health Service in England. <https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/66f42ae630536cb92748271f/Lord-Darzi-Independent-Investigation-of-the-National-Health-Service-in-England-Updated-25-September.pdf>

compared to other ethnic groups.⁵⁵ Care-experienced children are also particularly vulnerable, with half of all children in care meeting the criteria for a possible mental health disorder, compared to one in ten children outside of the care system.⁵⁶ We also heard how children and young people with SEND and their families are at greater risk of experiencing poor mental health.⁵⁷

Children and their parents and families who have experienced school exclusion told the Commission about the damaging impact that exclusions have on them, often being out of school for extended periods, feeling isolated and away from peers and once again feeling uncared for. Children can be punished for behaviour that is linked to their mental health, and responses to their behaviours, which can often include the use of isolation rooms and exclusion, rather than therapeutic interventions, which can further harm young people's mental health.

The use of 'zero-tolerance' policies have been shown to be particularly counterproductive to bettering young people's mental health; these include but are not limited to: exclusion, suspension, isolation rooms and detention.⁵⁸

Children and young people with unmet mental health needs are more likely to have poor academic outcomes, poor health, and more likely to abuse drugs, self-harm, or attempt suicide. These challenges can persist into adulthood, with half of mental health conditions in adulthood starting by the age of 14.⁵⁹

There is also a strong link between poor mental health and vulnerability to violence and crime: children who do end up in custody are three times more likely to have mental health disorders than those who do not.⁶⁰

Children in care

As of March 2024, there are 83,630 looked-after children in England,⁶¹ too many of whom face significant instability and risk. Too often, they are moved far from their home communities, separated from family, friends, and trusted support networks, and placed into environments that can heighten their vulnerability rather than provide safety.

Teenagers in care are often sent far from their home area and sometimes to neighbourhoods that have high levels of crime. In 2024, 14,590 placements – 17%

⁵⁵ Race Equality Foundation (2019) Racial disparities in mental health: Literature and evidence review. Available at: <https://raceequalityfoundation.org.uk/health-and-care/racial-disparities-in-mental-health-event-25th-march-2019/>

⁵⁶ Department for Education. Improved mental health support for children in care. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/improved-mental-health-support-for-children-in-care>

⁵⁷ Commission on Young Lives (2022) Hidden in Plain Sight: A national plan of action to support vulnerable teenagers to succeed and to protect them from adversity, exploitation, and harm. Available at: <https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/COYL-FINAL-REPORT-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ Child of the North, N8 Partnership and Centre for Young Lives (2024) A country that works for all children and young people: Improving mental health and wellbeing with and through education settings. Available at: https://www.n8research.org.uk/media/CoTN_Mental-health_Report_3.pdf

⁶⁰ Commission on Young Lives (2022) Hidden in Plain Sight: A national plan of action to support vulnerable teenagers to succeed and to protect them from adversity, exploitation, and harm. Available at: <https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/COYL-FINAL-REPORT-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>

⁶¹ Department for Education. Children looked after in England including adoption: 2023 to 2024. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/statistics/children-looked-after-in-england-including-adoption-2023-to-2024>

of all looked after children – were over 20 miles outside of the responsible local authority.⁶² This means that many teenagers in crisis are moved away from their home area and away from their family, their friends and school, stripping them of their support networks and people they trust and rely on, leaving them feeling confused and out of place.

Teenagers in care are often moved frequently. In 2024, 17,490 children – more than one in five looked after children – had two placements, and 10% had three or more.⁶³

As a result, teenagers with the highest needs are most likely to be moved often as the placement breaks down or to take a child with less complex needs; again, preventing children from forming relationships and disrupting their education.

Children who have been in their most recent care placement for less than 12 months are more likely to be persistently and severely absent than children who have been care for longer. 42.2% and 12.6% of children in care less than 12 months were persistently and severely absent respectively, compared with 20.8% and 5.7% for those in care for longer, which is closer to the pupil population (20.3% are persistently absent and 2.5% are severely absent).⁶⁴

Some teenagers in care are placed in provision that is not regulated leaving them without care, sometimes in dangerous accommodation or at risk of organised crime. It is staggering that the state as a parent continues to house vulnerable teenagers under 18 in accommodation that is often unsuitable and sometimes dangerous.

We even heard of criminal gangs being tipped off from within local authorities when vulnerable children are moved into unregulated accommodation, because of the opportunity this can bring for cuckooing or other exploitation.

Once a young person reaches the age of 18, placements are no longer required to provide care, so many young people experience a cliff edge of support where they are expected to become independent overnight.⁶⁵ Of all the young people in care, 40% leave on their 18th birthday, but more than a third of care leavers feel they left care too soon. In comparison, half of young people have moved out of their parent's home by age 24.⁶⁶

This can have a profound impact on care leavers' future life chances. Almost four in ten care leavers are not in education, employment or training (NEET),⁶⁷ only 15% go on to higher education - compared to 47% for young people who

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Department for Education (2025) Outcomes for children in need, including children looked after by local authorities in England. <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/outcomes-for-children-in-need-including-children-looked-after-by-local-authorities-in-england/2024>

⁶⁵ Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry, written evidence. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/>

⁶⁶ Office for National Statistics. National Statistical. Available at: <https://blog.ons.gov.uk/2024/04/12/our-changing-population-is-there-for-all-to-see/>

⁶⁷ Become (2024) Education Select Committee Inquiry, written evidence. Available at: <https://committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/127723/html/>

have not experienced care – and one in three become homeless within two years of leaving care.⁶⁸

Special Educational Needs

Children with special educational needs (SEN) generally have poorer outcomes, including those with less severe needs. The Commission on Young Lives heard extensive evidence that some children with SEN have been managed out of mainstream education, formally or informally, because schools have failed to understand or support their behavioural and educational needs. This exposes them to greater risk by removing what should be a key protective factor in their lives.

Children with any SEN are more than three times as likely to have been a victim of violence than their peers without SEN.⁶⁹ They are more than twice as likely to have gone missing and more than five times as likely to have been part of a gang.⁷⁰

More than three-quarters (80%) of people who went on to receive a custodial sentence had been identified with SEN at some point during their schooling. People who went on to receive custodial sentences were almost five times more likely to have had a SEN statement than people with no criminal convictions.⁷¹

Children are identified as having SEN if they have a learning difficulty or disability that requires special educational provision beyond the provision provided to most children of the same age. There are over 1.7 million pupils in England with SEN, which has increased by 34% since 2018/19, when there were just over 1.3 million children with SEN.⁷²

Supporting vulnerable young people and their families

Many youth workers told us how important it was to work with young people and their families to keep them safe.

The Commission on Young Lives' second thematic report, *A New Partnership with Families: Supporting families to keep teenagers safe from gangs, exploitation, and abuse*, explored how a greater focus on strengthening families could help prevent children falling into crisis, and how many families can play a greater role in supporting children through crisis.

We heard how many families feel ignored by a system of judgements being 'done to' families with the majority of interventions being at the point of crisis. Many of

⁶⁸ Become (n.d.) Why the care system has to change. Available at: <https://becomecharity.org.uk/about-us/about-the-care-system/>.

⁶⁹ Savanta & Youth Endowment Fund (2024) YEF's Child, Violence and Vulnerability Survey 2024. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/>

⁷⁰ Ibid.

⁷¹ Office for National Statistics (2022) The education and social care background of young people who interact with the criminal justice system: May 2022. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/educationandchildcare/articles/theeducationandsocialcarebackgroundofyoungpeoplewhointeractwiththecriminaljusticesystem/may2022#data-sources-and-quality>

⁷² Centre for Young Lives analysis of Department for Education (2025) Pupils in all schools, by type of SEN provision. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/data-tables/special-educational-needs-in-england/2024-25?subjectId=27403e26-aca1-4ef2-3b3f-08dd97c89364>

the parents and young people we spoke to during our evidence sessions identified the need for more targeted help when children started school, particularly when they had special educational needs and/or were at risk of dropping out of school or being excluded.

Parents told us how shocked they were when they found a burner phone, or unexplained amounts of money, or knives in their children's bedrooms. We heard how their children suddenly start behaving very differently, spending a lot of time with an unknown group of friends, or long and unpredictable periods of time away from home. Worryingly, we heard how sometimes parents call the police and social services desperate for help, only to be told that this does not exist or to be given ineffective responses or contradictory advice.

Some local authorities have prioritised work with families of older children, including providing additional safeguarding for families as a whole as an alternative to taking young people into care.

Closing the gaps and creating a platform of support and opportunity for vulnerable young people.

It is these vulnerable young people Young Futures must be designed to reach, inspire and support.

They are young people with high levels of often complex needs which are being missed entirely or for which there isn't the right support in place to help. This ranges from being excluded from school and 'dumped' into poor AP where there are already vulnerable young people involved in criminal exploitation; it could mean not receiving the support or treatment for speech, language and communication challenges and/or mental health conditions, or neurodivergent needs, which were leading to problems at school or at home; or it could mean failing to receive the support they needed for their special educational needs and falling out of the school system.

A failure to identify needs and provide consistent support early is a sadly familiar experience for many young people in, or on the edge of the criminal justice system.

Reaching vulnerable young people

Young Futures Hubs outreach teams will need to be proactive, ambitious and tenacious in finding and reaching vulnerable and at risk young people, and engaging them meaningfully in the programmes and support on offer through hubs. Young people consistently told the Commission on Young Lives that they lack safe, welcoming spaces in their lives, leaving them with very few places where they feel supported and able to simply ‘be’.

Expenditure on youth services in England has collapsed by £1.2bn since 2010/11, a 73% decline.⁷³ As a result, 1,243 council-run youth centres closed between 2010 and 2023, leaving just 581 in operation in March 2023.⁷⁴

This deprives young people of safe spaces and opportunities to build trusting relationships with youth workers, meaning a crucial chance to support and intervene in young people’s lives is being lost. While all young people can benefit from this provision, it is some of the most at risk young people who are missing it the most, with young people in deprived areas the least likely to have access to clubs and activities in general and are most likely to agree there are not enough groups and clubs in their local area. They are also the most likely to cite the cost and difficulty of reaching an activity as a reason for not participating, highlighting the need for more local provision within walking distance.⁷⁵

Young Futures Hubs are designed to ensure that the young people most at risk of harm, exploitation, or disengagement from education and community life can access support in ways that are safe, inclusive, and practical. To achieve this, hubs must go beyond being open-access spaces and proactively reach out to those who face the highest barriers to engagement and provide ongoing and targeted support in a welcoming and non-stigmatised environment.

Active outreach to the most vulnerable young people

For Young Futures to support the most vulnerable young people, it will not only need to create a safe and welcoming environment with trusted adults and appealing activities within the Hubs, but also actively reach out to the most marginalised and at-risk groups. This requires meeting them where they are, whether that be when they are on the brink of crisis or after a serious incident.

Working with Accident & Emergency Departments

When young people fall through the gaps and are at risk of exploitation and crime, tragically some end up victims of serious violence. Placing youth workers in hospital settings, particularly within Emergency Departments, allows trained

⁷³ YMCA (2025) Beyond the Brink? The state of funding for youth services. Available at: <https://ymca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/youth-services-report-A5-2025WEB-compressed.pdf>

⁷⁴ UNISON. Closure of more than a thousand youth centres could have lasting impact on society. Available at: <https://www.unison.org.uk/news/2024/06/closure-of-more-than-a-thousand-youth-centres-could-have-lasting-impact-on-society/>

⁷⁵ SQW & UK Youth (2025) Barriers and Enablers to Participation in Youth Activities and Research. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/688b2d741affbf4bedb7b12e/Barriers_and_Enablers_Final_Report_accessible.pdf

professionals to engage young people at critical moments, offering support and guidance when they are most vulnerable.

For example, Oasis UK supports young people aged 10-25 living in Greater Manchester through its Navigator project, funded by the Greater Manchester VRU. The scheme places 'Navigators' within Emergency Departments across the region, where they are then able to offer support to young people with injuries from violent incidents. Young people can also be referred into the programme if they are at risk of involvement in violent crime, with over 1,000 referrals as of March 2024 and 77.5% of young people accepting support.⁷⁶

Similarly, the charity Redthread has developed the Youth Violence Intervention Programme, which places youth workers in Emergency Departments to support young victims of violence. This type of trauma-informed youth work is able to reach young people when they are in crisis and therefore in a "reachable moment" when they are more open to receiving support.⁷⁷

Referring young people involved in knife crime

While Young Futures needs to provide early support to vulnerable young people before they get drawn into vicious cycles of crime and exploitation, it will also be able to help young people who have already fallen through the gaps and come into contact with the criminal justice system. Through Prevention Partnership Panels and collaboration with local VRUs and police, Young Futures Hubs should provide safe spaces to provide tailored support that not only addresses immediate concerns, such as involvement with weapons or anti-social behaviour, but also provides a wider focus on personal development, wellbeing, and future aspirations

YOLO programme

Northumbria VRU partners with two of the region's football club charities - the Newcastle United Foundation and the Foundation of Light – to support young people age 10-16 who are identified as being at risk of or having carried a knife or weapon. When there is evidence of this, young people are referred by Northumbria Police or youth justice services to the football club charities, who then deliver a one-to-one mentoring service for 20 weeks. Young people can also be referred by educational settings via the police, and a new referral pathway as recently opened up through the Young Futures Prevention Partnership Panel in Gateshead.

We spoke to representatives of the Newcastle United Foundation, who described how sessions include knife crime awareness but also broader educational workshops about social media, drug and alcohol awareness, anti-social behaviour, goal setting, and health relationships. They are also supported to engage in activities such as sport, music, art, or social action projects.

⁷⁶ Greater Manchester Violence Reduction Unit. Navigator Project. Available at: <https://gmvru.co.uk/initiative/navigator-project/>

⁷⁷ Redthread (2025) Redthread: Transformative Youth Work in Hospitals and Health Settings. Available at: <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/65fc47ef8626067373c6342a/t/687a0ccb5b691124ef71883a/1752829132862/Redthread+Booklet+2.pdf>

Young people are supported where they feel comfortable; for most, that is in educational settings, with the Newcastle United Foundation having strong relationships with many of the Pupil Referral Units in the region. For young people who have completely fallen out of education, mentoring takes place in other safe spaces such as one of the charity's hubs. Where financial barriers exist, the Foundation covers the cost of the young person travelling to the support.

The Newcastle United Foundation's hub offers private spaces where young people feel safe, as well as a games room and rooftop pitch which young people can use, making them more comfortable and likely to open up to staff.

Towards the end of the 20 weeks, mentors discuss an exit strategy with each individual, tailoring it to their needs. This may include supporting them back into education or referring them to employment support.

Prevention Partnership Panels

Young people already in the criminal justice system or on the edge of offending will be identified and supported through co-ordinating mechanisms in the community.

Prevention Partnership Panels will bring together local authorities, schools, police, health services, and voluntary organisations, panels to identify those young people already in the criminal justice system in some way or those at very high at risk of exploitation, involvement in violence, or disengagement from education. Using agreed risk indicators and local intelligence, they can prioritise those most in need and coordinate early, tailored interventions.

These panels should be guided by a shared commitment to safeguarding, inclusion, and long-term wellbeing, and should include:

- a) **Children's services** - including early help and social care professionals, who can provide oversight on safeguarding concerns and coordinate family or statutory support where needed
- b) **The police** - particularly youth engagement or neighbourhood officers, who can share intelligence on risk areas or emerging concerns, and contribute to diversion strategies
- c) **Health services** - including mental health practitioners, school nurses, and substance misuse services who can advise on health-related risks and help ensure young people receive timely medical or therapeutic support
- d) **Relevant youth and voluntary organisations in the area** - such as local youth workers, charities, or community organisations with trusted relationships with young people
- e) **Secondary schools** - pastoral leads, safeguarding officers, or behaviour support staff from local schools to contribute to identifying vulnerable students and helping develop education-based prevention strategies

While these panels are key to identifying the most vulnerable young people, it is Young Futures Hubs that will provide the ongoing preventative and targeted support for those young people on the edge of crime and experiencing violence.

Delivering the transformation needed: the core components of Young Futures Hubs

The potential for Young Futures Hubs is to provide a single front door to opportunities and support under a new nationally recognised brand embedded in communities.

Behind this, a locally integrated system will bring partners together to deliver coordinated, long-term help, ensuring that every young person – especially the most vulnerable – can access consistent support wherever they enter the network.

To encourage young people to open this door, Young Futures Hubs need to appeal to those vulnerable young people who are most at risk of harm or exploitation, and to those families who are often reluctant to engage with statutory services or who are unable to access early help and support. Identifying and then sticking with vulnerable children is central. Trained youth workers would facilitate activities, build trusting relationships with young people and their families, and be able to identify young people who need extra support. The role of the third sector is crucial to this work - sharing their good practice and experience and encouraging and helping statutory services to build greater trust in communities.

The time and effort involved in building these long-term, trusted, culturally sensitive, sustainable, and impactful relationships with vulnerable children, their families and marginalised communities is not something that happens overnight. Investing in long term relationships is one of the foundations of diverting young people away from the criminal justice system and keeping them safe from exploitation or violence.

The Commission on Young Lives vision of a new ‘Sure Start for Teenagers’, was of a universal hub placed initially in the areas of greatest need, a mechanism for bringing services together and providing bespoke services for families and children who need it. It looks way beyond rundown community spaces with a couple of ping pong tables, and raises its sights about what is possible, necessary, and enticing to marginalised groups of young people. There are many organisations already delivering inspirational work of this kind, and we need to listen and learn from their successes and build upon them across the country.

What should impactful Young Futures Hubs look like?

Key principle	This means in practice	What this requires from local areas and government
A single front door with an integrated local system of opportunities and support	The single front door is consistent with each partner involved in the Hub and all the workforce is able to identify young people’s needs and have	Establish a cross-departmental Young Futures Plan, bringing together the Department for Work & Pensions, the Department of Health and

	<p>a clear understanding of the purpose of the Hub and support and opportunities on offer.</p> <p>Each partner understands how to raise awareness of the Hub and refer young people.</p> <p>The Young Futures Hub leader co-ordinates, brokers and grows the partnership to maximise the impact for young people.</p> <p>Local strategic partners should include schools and school attendance teams (identification of need, support to reduce suspensions and exclusions, support to reduce absenteeism and education achievement, use of buildings), children’s services (support with early help, family support and specialist support), health (mental health hubs, physical health), youth services (youth workers, youth opportunities, centres) job centres (support to employment), targeted services to reduce violence, child criminal exploitation (CCE), and child sexual abuse (CSA), Best Start 0 – 19 Hubs (integrated support – 0-19), VRUs, job centres, and the police and youth offending teams.</p> <p>New Young Futures Hubs Local Plans should set out how the delivery of</p>	<p>Social Care, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport, and the Department for Education.</p> <p>As part of an ambitious plan, Government should join-up existing and future policies to maximise the role of Young Futures Hubs as a key means of delivering a range of ambitions, including new neighbourhood health models, the Education White Paper, Best Start, Child Poverty Strategy, Growth Plan and the Youth Strategy.</p> <p>Publish a comprehensive, joint guidance document for Young Futures Hubs. Government should design and deliver a centrally mandated ‘core offer’ of services to be delivered through the Hubs.</p> <p>Develop a new and meaningful nationwide Young Futures Hubs brand with coordinated public awareness campaigns.</p> <p>Stronger integration and joined up working across Government departments. A cross-departmental common outcomes framework for young people should be established through Young Futures, with clear accountability across Government.</p> <p>The Treasury should scale up investment into joined-up support for young people and families over the next decade to strengthen and</p>
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	<p>integrated local systems will be designed and delivered through Hubs. This should include strong partnerships with local community groups and other local partners with a clearly defined role for the voluntary sector.</p>	<p>extend provision and embed Young Futures Hubs into communities for the long-term.</p> <p>The Treasury and DCMS should consider innovative means to raise investment for Young Futures Hubs, including National Social Outcomes Partnerships pilots.</p>
<p>Where the voices of young people and families are heard</p>	<p>Young Future Hubs 'get alongside' young people and families rather than 'do to', providing opportunities and support when and how it is needed, and embedding co-production into service design and delivery from the very start.</p>	<p>Commission and issue guidance to local authorities on effective ways to embed co-production into service design, supported by the sharing of best practice and practice guides.</p>
<p>Embedded into communities and reach those most in need</p>	<p>Local authorities should establish delivery plans for proactive outreach of services into communities.</p> <p>This should draw on existing community assets such as schools, youth centres, school attendance teams, mental health teams in schools, community spaces and community networks, and factor in the role of the voluntary, community and social enterprise (VCSE) sector in reaching underserved communities.</p> <p>Hubs understand the needs of girls and have active outreach and</p>	<p>Provide guidance to local authorities and support where necessary to strengthen standardised data collection and effective monitoring of take-up, engagement and outcomes of service delivery.</p> <p>Direct resources first to communities facing the greatest challenges, including high levels of deprivation and knife-related incidents.</p>

	<p>delivery programmes in response.</p> <p>Young Futures Hubs are culturally competent and are meaningfully engaged and delivering with Black and minoritised communities.</p>	
High-quality services	<p>Provision that is open throughout the week and weekends to provide frequent and consistent open access opportunities to ensure the 'dosage' is adequate to transform young people's outcomes.</p> <p>High quality, inspirational activities that are appealing and engaging for young people.</p> <p>High quality workforce to build positive, inspirational and trusted relationships.</p> <p>Skilled staff to identify and respond to need with additional support.</p> <p>Seamless specialist support from integrated partners.</p> <p>Culturally competent opportunities and support.</p>	<p>Develop a workforce and leadership programme for Young Futures Hubs.</p> <p>Support the delivery of evidence-based services with a focus on high quality implementation through the YEF database of evidence-based programmes.</p> <p>The Government should support the delivery of evidence-based services with a focus on high quality implementation through a national database of evidence-based programmes to support local authorities.</p> <p>Design and deliver a centrally mandated 'core offer' of service to be delivered through Young Futures Hubs, set out in cross-departmental guidance.</p>

Young Futures Hubs can become a network that endures and becomes part of the fabric of a local community, lasting for decades, adapting as society changes. It would be somewhere that offers not only help for young people and their families – be that through parenting classes or mental health support - but is knitted into the education system and is a place that also provides routes into new skills. It should be a local asset where young people trust those around them, where long-term relationships are built, that is inclusive, nurturing, culturally

sensitive and representative, and relentlessly positive about encouraging success and high aspiration.

At this formative stage of development, we must set sights high to achieve truly transformative change for the most vulnerable young people. Young people's life chances depend on it, as do all our futures.

Services and support in and around Young Futures Hubs

Young Futures Hubs are designed to be open-access community spaces, making them vibrant and de-stigmatised places offering a range of fun and engaging activities like sport and creative arts which are appealing to young people.

Open-access positive activities and opportunities: such as volunteering, social action, music, art, and sport, as well as just a safe space to meet friends and relax.

Case study: Premier League Kicks

The Premier League Charitable Fund uses Premier League funds and those from partners - including the Professional Footballers' Association - to support football club charities to deliver six community and school-based programmes, one of which is Premier League Kicks.

Premier League Kicks targets vulnerable young people to support them to achieve their potential and develop life skills with free access to weekly sessions in communities with high levels of need, including football, multi-sports, mentoring, and educational workshops. The appeal of the Premier League, a professional football club, and the opportunity to play football attracted over 100,000 young people to community sites across England and Wales in 2024/25, where they were then able to develop relationships with staff from football club charities and access support.

Sessions are targeted at young people in deprived areas, with 60% of the 1,278 Premier League Kicks venues across England and Wales were in the top 30% most deprived communities, based on the Indices of Multiple Deprivation.

Premier League Kicks uses football as a hook to attract young people, with support then provided alongside. We visited an all-girls session delivered by Arsenal in the Community, where a mental health support worker from a partner charity speaks to participants when they are taking a break from playing. Some football club charities are also participating in the targeted police partnerships pilot, which sees them co-design with the police tailored support to young people at risk of involvement in crime and violence.

As was the case with Sure Start, these activities can act as a 'hook' to engage and build relationships with young people, moving on to provide highly targeted support alongside. This will need to include:

- 1. Mental health support:** drop-in mental health support and a dedicated CAMHS presence offers clinical support for young people with moderate mental health needs. Having CAMHS on-site allows for faster referrals, joint

working with youth workers, and a less intimidating environment than hospital settings.

Case study: The Nest

Located in Southwark, The Nest is a youth-focused service dedicated to providing early intervention and preventative support for emotional and mental wellbeing. Aimed at children and young people experiencing low-level mental health challenges such as stress, anxiety, or general worries, The Nest offers immediate access to help, without the need for a professional referral.

The service is built around the principles of accessibility, empowerment, and holistic development. It provides a range of non-clinical interventions including youth work, person-centred counselling, psychological wellbeing practices, and traditional talking therapies. Support is delivered through various formats such as one-to-one sessions, group work, online resources, and peer mentoring.

A key component of The Nest's approach is its regular drop-in sessions, available to young people and their families. These sessions offer immediate support and act as a gateway for identifying those who may benefit from more sustained, personalised interventions.

The Nest is firmly integrated into Southwark's broader support network for young people. It works in close partnership with Family Early Help services, schools, NHS Child and Young People's Mental Health Services (CYPMHS), GPs, Social Services, and Goldsmiths University. Additionally, through collaboration with the London Violence Reduction Unit and the Family Early Help team, The Nest is supporting the development of a parent and carer champion network. This initiative enables parents to deliver peer-to-peer support, backed by funding from the London Violence Reduction Unit.

Notably, two-thirds of referrals to The Nest come from young people from Black, Brown, and minority ethnic backgrounds - reflecting the diversity of Southwark. The service plays a vital role in promoting equity of access to mental health support. It helps to reduce stigma while serving as a model for other services seeking to broaden their reach and inclusivity.

Importantly, most referrals are self-initiated by young people themselves. Outcomes show a clear impact: 73% of those who access The Nest report feeling happier, and 78% experience improved wellbeing.

- 2. Mentoring and support in school:** mentoring and support in schools allows young people to receive support in a familiar environment

Case study: Oasis Hub Waterloo

Oasis Hub Waterloo is a community hub in central London, attached to Oasis Academy South Bank. It offers a range of services and support for children,

families, and the wider community, addressing social challenges such as poverty, isolation, and youth vulnerability.

For many children, school is the most stable and consistent part of their lives, so by embedding the hub within the school environment, Oasis reduces barriers to support, ensuring that young people and their families can access both practical and emotional help in a place they already know and trust. This trust begins with staff who pupils see every day and are therefore well placed to spot early signs of problems, enabling timely interventions before problems escalate.

These interventions can involve encouraging young people to attend open-access youth projects and activities or referring them to targeted support such as one-to-one mentoring. The targeted school mentoring programme, typically lasting 8–12 weeks, is designed to help young people explore the motivations, beliefs, and skills needed to drive change, and guides them through collaborative action planning to achieve these changes for themselves.⁷⁸ Referrals can be because of concerns about their wellbeing but may also be due to their school attendance, behaviour, or attainment.

Other targeted support includes the “Farming, Family & Therapy” programme at Oasis Farm Waterloo, which targets disadvantaged young people to help them fulfil their potential in school and in life. After participating in gardening, food growing, and animal care, 61% of young people reported an improvement in mental wellbeing and 58% felt their self-esteem had been boosted. The intervention has also been successful in reducing the risk of exclusion and improving academic attainment.⁷⁹

As well as referrals from the Academy, Oasis actively reach out through the Oasis Youth Support Service, which places Youth Workers in Accident & Emergency departments. Hospital staff can then refer young people admitted to hospital because of involvement in violence to receive one-to-one support to help steer them away from further involvement in violence and crime.⁸⁰

3. Wider health support:

- a) **A colocated GP:** A visiting or part-time GP provides accessible, youth-friendly primary healthcare for physical health concerns, early diagnosis, and referrals. This reduces barriers to accessing care, especially for young people who may be disengaged from traditional services.
- b) **Sexual health support:** drop-in sexual health services to support young people to make informed decisions about their health and relationships in a safe, non-judgemental space.
- c) **Drugs and alcohol support:** Substance misuse practitioners can offer harm reduction, recovery support, and education tailored to

⁷⁸ Oasis Community Learning. Children and Youth Work. Available at: Targeted school mentoring programmes, typically lasting 8–12 weeks, are designed to help young people explore the motivations, beliefs, and skills needed to drive change, while guiding them through collaborative action planning to achieve these changes for themselves

⁷⁹ Oasis Farm Waterloo. About us. Available at: <https://oasisfarmwaterloo.org/about-us/>

⁸⁰ Oasis Hub Waterloo. Oasis Youth Support. Available at: OASIS YOUTH SUPPORT A&E: Violence intervention and prevention

young people. Being based in the hub makes it easier to engage those who are reluctant to access traditional services or who may not yet recognise a need for help.

Case Study: Health Spot, Tower Hamlets

Health Spot is a youth-focused, integrated health service based at the Spotlight Youth Centre in Tower Hamlets, London. Central to the initiative is a GP clinic embedded within a familiar, youth-friendly environment, ensuring that healthcare is accessible, non-intimidating, and responsive to young people's needs. The service supports 11–19-year-olds, as well as young adults up to 25 with special educational needs or care experience, and is now being replicated across other boroughs in North East London.

The on-site GP clinic provides comprehensive, holistic care in close collaboration with youth workers. Services include routine health appointments, mental health and emotional wellbeing support, sexual health and substance misuse services, speech and language therapy, social prescribing, and health education workshops. GPs also link young people to the centre's broader activities - including boxing, music, mentoring, and employability programmes - ensuring a seamless integration between health support and personal development opportunities.

Feedback from young people has been overwhelmingly positive, with all users reporting they would recommend Health Spot to a friend. Analysis of 800 consultations demonstrates that the service effectively reaches a representative cross-section of the borough's youth. Over two-thirds of attendees presented with mental health or emotional wellbeing challenges, more than half of whom were not accessing any other support. Additionally, 65% had involvement with children's social care, and 19% were not in education, employment, or training (NEET), underscoring Health Spot's success in engaging some of the community's most vulnerable young people.

- 4. Employment and further education support:** careers advisors or job coaches can help young people explore pathways into education, training, apprenticeships, or employment, and help equip them with the skills they need.

Case Study: Onside Youth Zone – Wigan

In August 2025, we visited the Wigan Youth Zone: a purpose-built youth facility in Wigan town centre which opened in June 2013 and is part of the OnSide network of Youth Zones. The centre is open seven days a week to all young people aged 8-19, with young people up to 25 with additional needs also able to access. Facilities such as music and dance studios, a kitchen, sports pitches, gym, climbing wall, and a boxing ring have helped to attract thousands of young people, who are then able to develop relationships with youth workers.

Alongside the activities, targeted support is provided, such as the specialist employability support. The Youth Zone's satellite hub in Leigh delivers a 'Pathway 2 Employment' programme, funded by the Department for Work and

Pensions. The DWP refer young people aged 18-25 who are NEET to the programme, who then receive specialist one-to-one support and group sessions to support them into work placements, apprenticeships, and higher education. In the last 12 months, the Leigh hub received almost 260 referrals to their service, with 89 young people now in employment; 50 in education or training; and 29 in volunteer/work placements. Young people are also equipped with the life skills and confidence to transition into the world of work: 88% of young members increased or maintained their life skills, 81% increased or maintained their self-confidence, and 89% increased or maintained their aspirations.⁸¹

Wigan Youth Zone is also participating in a randomised controlled trial of the Summer Jobs Programme, funded by the Youth Endowment Fund and delivered by UK Youth. The programme in Wigan has identified 50 young people at risk of violence, enrolling 30 onto the programme and supporting 15 into a week of pre-employment training, followed by a five-week paid summer job, and the other 15 part of the randomised control trial offered 1 to 1 employability support, with an ambition to reduce crime and violence. While the project is in this trial phase, it is based on the successful Summer Youth Employment Programme operating in the United States, and the initial feasibility study found participants could be successfully recruited and retained and that they attended the pre-preparation training and placements themselves with a “good level of fidelity”.⁸²

5. Family support: It is important to understand the contexts in which young people are growing up, and what makes them and their families more vulnerable. Many young people are affected by the precarious balance a lot of families face in relation to employment and income, housing, and health. Last year, over 160,000 children in need assessments identified concerns that a parent was a victim of domestic abuse. More than 70,000 assessments identified parental drug use, and more than 72,000 identified parental alcohol misuse.⁸³ Too many of the families we spoke to during the Commission on Young Lives had little time for statutory agencies: dismissive of their ability to offer real meaningful help and suspicious of their motives, worried about feeling judged and about the power to take their children away.

The default position must not be to ignore, marginalise, or blame parents and families, who are often crucial in protecting children. Those who seek to exploit teenagers rely on a steady flow of vulnerable young people to sustain their activities, and they recognise that engaged parents and families significantly hinder their ability to access and groom children. Strengthening families to address these challenges directly, and to provide

⁸¹ OnSide. Network Impact Report 2023-24. Available at: https://www.onsideyouthzones.org/content/uploads/2024/11/4871_OnSide_-Impact_Report_23-24-1.pdf

⁸² Youth Endowment Fund. Summer Jobs. Available at: Summer Youth Employment Programmes

⁸³ Department for Education (2024) Children in Need. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/children-in-need/2024>

protection and support - particularly for the most vulnerable – is central to keeping at-risk young people safe.

Case Study: ShiftUK

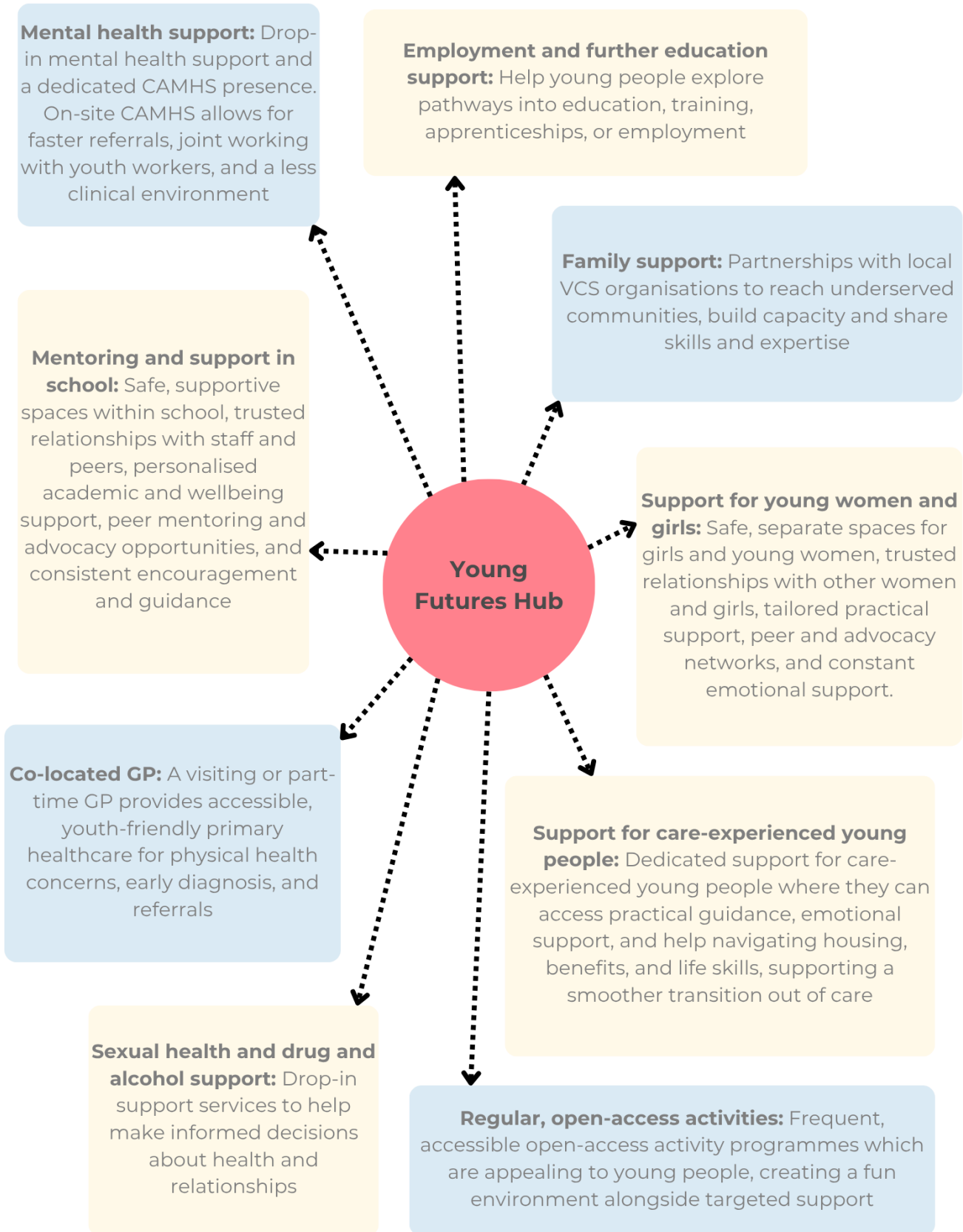
The Commission on Young Lives visited ShiftUK in Greenwich, which was working closely with 20 young people at risk of becoming involved in the criminal justice system and their families. Shift 'Guides' are selected because of their ability – rather than their professional title – to work empathetically with young people. The team includes social workers, residential care home workers, youth workers, and those with lived experience. The Guide works closely with the young person and their family for around 18 months, helping to build relationships and skills, to navigate local services and support teenagers to build confidence, attend and progress in school and develop relationships.

The emphasis is on hope and aspiration; doing whatever it takes to help families progress and support themselves. Relationship-building is at the core of their model. This means 'going with the flow' with the family, being flexible and informal. As a result, families are more relaxed and accepting of support.

By offering trusted relationships with adults and safe places to go at weekends and weekday evenings, the hubs have the potential to reduce vulnerability to grooming, gang involvement, and criminal exploitation by providing engaging diversions, supporting families and children to prevent vulnerable teenagers from falling through gaps in the education, care or mental health support systems. This holistic model builds protective factors around young people, promoting wellbeing, school attendance, engagement in learning and skills, and offering new pathways into training or career choices. This reduces the opportunities for those who exploit and harm children to insert themselves into the lives of vulnerable children and offers real prospects and opportunities to boost learning and employment readiness.

A Young Futures Hub can also offer advice and support to families and be a contact point for parents concerned their children are at risk of exploitation but unsure where to turn to.

While these principles should be the blueprint for all hubs, no Young Futures Hub will look exactly the same. While a consistent, core offer needs to be set out, there should also be flexibility for local design teams – including young people – to tailor the services within a hub to meet local need.



A tailored approach for vulnerable groups

It is important that Young Futures takes a tailored approaches for specific groups. For instance, girls and young women may need safe, gender-specific activities to overcome confidence or mental health barriers, while care-experienced young people benefit from dedicated guidance on housing, benefits, and independent living. Similarly, it will be vital that culturally aware support must be available to young people from racialised communities and those with SEND.

Supporting care-experienced young people

“Children in care are powerless, are often invisible and they face some of the greatest inequalities that exist in England today” [The Independent Review of Children’s Social Care, 2022]

The Commission on Young Lives’ first thematic report, *Out of Harm’s Way: A New Care System to Protect Vulnerable Children at Risk of Exploitation and Crime*, highlighted the need to support the increasing number of vulnerable teenagers entering care or on the edge of care, setting out proposals to reduce the number at risk of exploitation, violence, and criminalisation.

The report explored how the current social children’s social care system is not always serving vulnerable teenagers well - often not adequately identifying children and young people at risk, and is confused and uncoordinated in its response to identified risk. When a teenager is taken into care the system is often ill-prepared and makes inappropriate decisions about the care they need. It is a terrible irony that a system that is supposed to be protecting children from harm, is in fact putting some vulnerable children in harm’s way, increasing their risk of them becoming the victims of criminal or sexual exploitation.

It is clear to us that some vulnerable and exploited teenagers are coming into care and then being placed in harm’s way by using inappropriate accommodation designed for supporting young people towards independence as a quick fix driven by a lack of suitable placements. Many are moved around the country, missing out on education, unable to form trusted relationships and not getting the therapeutic treatment they need to recover. This dysfunctional system is making it easier for those who want to exploit young people to succeed.

Young Futures will need to pay particular attention to young people in care – especially those in in unregistered provision or supported accommodation. This will mean providing dedicated support for care-experienced young people where they can access practical guidance, emotional support, and help navigating housing, benefits, and life skills, supporting a smoother transition out of care. This can form a part of Staying Close support local authorities will be required to provide for care leavers, “which gives support to help find and keep suitable accommodation, and to access services relating to health and wellbeing, relationships, education, training and employment”.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ Department for Education (2025) Children’s Wellbeing and School’s Bill: Policy Summary Notes. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/67dd2b17a18f580c277f7887/CWS_Bill_Policy_Summary_notes_as_amended_in_the_House_of_Commons.pdf

Supporting girls and young women

A large focus of the growing challenges facing young people and consequences of a lack of support for young people falls on boys, who are disproportionately impacted by violence and knife crime. While girls' involvement is indeed smaller, it can still be minimised or ignored due to stereotypes or data gaps, leaving them with little tailored or appropriate support.⁸⁵

Girls and young women are also disproportionately impacted by other challenges facing young people. For example, low wellbeing and poor mental health among girls and young women is higher and has been rising at a faster rate in recent years, and girls are at a higher risk of sexual violence and relationship abuse.⁸⁶

Despite these unique challenges faced by girls and young women, current support is inadequate and often inaccessible to them. Girls are less likely than boys to attend a youth club or participate in positive activities,⁸⁷ and are more likely than boys to say that they don't participate in youth provision because of their mental health, a lack of confidence, concerns about not fitting in, not having anyone to go with, having other commitments, and a lack of awareness of activities in their area.⁸⁸

Many organisations working with girls and young women who have been criminally or sexually exploited gave evidence to the Commission on Young Lives. We heard about the ongoing struggle to encourage girls to disclose what is happening to them when they are being abused or exploited, combined with a lack of understanding from some statutory services about how to spot problems that are occurring, or how to help young women. One organisation working with girls who have been exploited talked about how many victims have disclosed what is happening to social workers or the police, but they have not been taken seriously, and services had not followed up. There is sometimes a perception that exploitation is overlooked because a girl doesn't fit into society's idea of what a victim should be.

Many Black, Brown and minority ethnic girls, both in and out of the care system, are seen as harder to engage, more aggressive, are subjected to racialised judgements, and over-sexualised. The adultification of Black Brown and minority ethnic girls across the justice system (as well as education and care systems) is a deep-rooted problem that needs tackling head on.

⁸⁵ Local Government Association (2024) Girls involved in youth violence: Key findings and recommendations. Available at: <https://www.local.gov.uk/publications/girls-involved-youth-violence-key-findings-and-recommendations>

⁸⁶ NHS England (2023) One in five children and young people had a probable mental health disorder in 2023. <https://www.england.nhs.uk/2023/11/one-in-five-children-and-young-people-had-a-probable-mental-disorder-in-2023/>

⁸⁷ Savanta & Youth Endowment Fund (2024) YEF's Child, Violence and Vulnerability Survey 2024. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/>

⁸⁸ SQW & UK Youth (2025) Barriers and Enablers to Participation in Youth Activities and Research. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/688b2d741affbf4bedb7b12e/Barriers_and_Enablers_Final_Report_accessible.pdf

We also heard about how the culture in some local authorities is too closely grounded in dealing with exploitation as a crime and disorder issue, rather than a welfare, trauma-informed approach. If young women are dealing with services for the first time at a time of crisis involving the criminal justice system or police, then opportunities have usually already been missed for intervention. We were told how some vulnerable girls are not using services because there is no assertive outreach, particularly from people who look like them and who they trust. Where interventions are successful, youth workers and outreach workers are providing services that are not judgmental, that don't assume 'something is wrong with you', and that feel safe.

London Youth's *Good for Girls* programme demonstrates what this can look like. The initiative offers holistic early intervention and mental health support to girls from Black, Asian, and minority ethnic backgrounds, delivered in trusted grassroots community spaces. Evaluation shows its transformative impact: 84% of participants reported feeling comfortable talking about their mental health, and nearly half experienced a significant improvement in wellbeing. Crucially, the benefits extended beyond individual outcomes, strengthening the capacity of youth organisations and workers to deliver gender-aware, mental health support over the long term. This shows that when girls' needs are prioritised, meaningful and lasting change is possible.⁸⁹

A framework for supporting girls and young women through Young Futures has been developed by the charity Advance, alongside the London VRU. This framework promotes a holistic, long-term, and empowering approach to support, rooted in positive regard, co-design, contextual safeguarding, cultural awareness, and inclusivity. This is delivered through safe, separate spaces for girls and young women, trusted relationships with other women and girls, tailored practical support, peer and advocacy networks, and constant emotional support.

⁸⁹ London Youth (2023) Good for Girls: Evaluation Summary. Available at: <https://londonyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/Good-for-Girls-evaluation-report-summary-April-2023.pdf>

Areas of priority for the first Young Futures Hubs

Establishing the appropriate geographic coverage for Young Futures Hubs is crucial to ensure accessibility and effectiveness. Young people often face significant barriers in accessing youth services, including the cost of activities or the cost, distance, and difficulty of travel.⁹⁰ When an activity is beyond walking distance, young people often rely on family and friends or public transport, making their participation in an activity dependent on their local areas transport connections or whether they know someone with a car.⁹¹

To maximise impact, Young Futures Hubs will need to serve a radius that is walkable or easily accessible by public transport for the majority of young people in the area. This approach aligns with findings from the Youth Evidence Review published by DCMS, which suggest that providing a more diverse range of activities within walking distance and making public transport more accessible can significantly improve youth participation in services.⁹² This may differ in rural areas, where longer travel distances and limited public transport mean alternative solutions will be needed to ensure young people are not left behind. In these contexts, mobile or outreach youth work, satellite provision in community spaces, and subsidised or flexible transport options could all play a role in making hubs genuinely accessible.

This also mirrors similar place-based, community initiatives such as Sure Start centres, which operated a similar model of open-access hubs with co-located services for families. While they did not have strict catchment areas, they had considerable benefits for their local communities within a “pram-pushing distance” of 2.5 kilometres.⁹³

Hub and spoke model

In a hub and spoke model of support, the hub acts as the central point of support and connection for young people and families. A Young Futures Hub offers activities and some direct support, but equally importantly, it acts as a signpost, helping families identify what other services exist and how to access them, all within a safe and trusted environment. These connected services are the ‘spokes’ of the model.

Wherever the young person or their family enters the network, be it through a central hub or one of the spokes, they are then able to access a whole system of joined-up support – this is the principle of ‘no wrong door’ or a ‘single front door’.

Locating Young Futures Hubs geographically

To achieve the transformation in life chances for the most vulnerable young people, hubs will need to prioritise those areas of greatest need. Primarily, this

⁹⁰ SQW & UK Youth (2025) Barriers and Enablers to Participation in Youth Activities and Research. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/688b2d741affbf4bedb7b12e/Barriers_and_Enablers_Final_Report_accessible.pdf

⁹¹ Ibid.

⁹² National Centre for Social Research (2021) Youth Evidence: Deep dive focus group findings. Available at: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/61aa018b8fa8f5037ffaa246/Youth_Evidence_Review_-_Phase_2_-_Deep_Dive_Report_-_accessible_1_.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

⁹³ Institute for Fiscal Studies (2024) The short- and medium- term effects of Sure Start

should be done by identifying areas of high knife crime. The 20 Police Force Areas with the highest rates of knife crime are set out in Annex A, 15 of which are also the locations of the 20 Violence Reduction Units. Young Futures Hubs and Prevention Partnership Panels in these areas would complement the whole-systems approach of VRUs by providing pathways to connect young people to support. VRUs have also already carried out their own research to understand and strengthen the evidence base around violence patterns and trends, work which should be built upon by Young Futures rather than duplicated.

The wider social and economic factors that shape young people's lives should also be considered in the location of Young Futures Hubs. Child poverty is a particularly important measure because it cuts across health, education, safety, and wellbeing, and is strongly associated with the risks that the hubs are intended to address.

Poverty is an underlying driver of many other challenges in young people's lives. It means them growing up without the basics, with severe consequences for their health, social, and emotional wellbeing and education. Children in poverty are more likely to have poor mental health and are at a higher risk of psychological distress and start school so far behind they will struggle to catch-up: young people age 16-19 from low-income families were 3.3 grades behind their peers on average in 2024.^{94,95}

Children and young people from low-income backgrounds are also more likely to be missing school. Those who are eligible for free school meals are nearly twice as likely to be absent from school than their peers who aren't eligible, and they are more than twice as likely to be persistently absent – 32% in comparison to 14% - and more than three times as likely to be severely absent, at a rate of 3.6% compared to 1%.⁹⁶ Similarly, pupils eligible for free school meals are over 4.5 times more likely to be suspended from school than their peers, and over five times more likely to be permanently excluded.⁹⁷

As we have set out, there is a strong correlation between exclusion from school and entry into the youth justice system: 25% of children in youth custody had been permanently excluded while at school.⁹⁸ Similarly, nearly three-quarters (74%) of young people who have been excluded from school have been a perpetrator of violence.⁹⁹ There is also a clear link between areas of high deprivation and areas where a high proportion of the school population is educated full-time in AP, where there are high rates of young people who have

⁹⁴ Child Poverty Action Group. Effects of poverty. Available at: <https://cpag.org.uk/child-poverty/effects-poverty>

⁹⁵ Education Policy Institute (2025) Annual Report 2025. Available at: <https://epi.org.uk/annual-report-2025/>

⁹⁶ Department for Education (2025) Pupil absence in schools in England: Autumn term 2024/25. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/pupil-absence-in-schools-in-england/2024-25-autumn-term>

⁹⁷ Department for Education (2025) Suspensions and permanent exclusions in England: Academic year 2023/24. Available at: <https://explore-education-statistics.service.gov.uk/find-statistics/suspensions-and-permanent-exclusions-in-england/2023-24>

⁹⁸ Children's Commissioners Office. Press Notice: Children in youth custody 'failed before they arrive', trapping them in a cycle of disadvantage. Available at: <https://www.childrenscommissioner.gov.uk/blog/press-notice-children-in-youth-custody-failed-before-they-arrive-trapping-them-in-a-cycle-of-disadvantage/>

⁹⁹ Savanta & Youth Endowment Fund (2024) YEF's Child, Violence and Vulnerability Survey 2024. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/>

been cautioned or sentenced, and where children are often vulnerable to criminal exploitation”.¹⁰⁰

Analysis by VRUs also reveals the inextricable link between deprivation and serious violence. Their analysis has found most violence to be concentrated in urban areas with high levels of deprivation and poverty, where a lack of opportunities and social exclusion also increase the risk of violence.¹⁰¹

Young people’s own experiences also demonstrate the close link between poverty and violence. 31% of young people eligible for free school meals have been victim of violence, compared to 12% of those who are not eligible.¹⁰²

This demonstrates that areas with the highest rates of children living in poverty are also the places where young people face the greatest barriers to opportunity and are most vulnerable to harm. By identifying those local authorities with the highest levels of child poverty, Young Futures Hubs will be established where the need is greatest and where they can have the most meaningful impact.

Annex B shows the 50 local authorities with the highest rates of children living in low-income families in England and provides an effective starting point to identify areas of the country with the most vulnerable young people. This serves as a proxy for other measures of vulnerability, such as high rates of youth violence and knife crime, which are not broken down by age and local authority. However, within these local authorities with high rates of deprivation, live local crime data should be used to target hubs at areas of high knife crime, in line with the Government’s ambitions to halve knife crime within a decade. Currently, VRUs primarily use police and health (ambulance, A&E and hospital admissions) data to identify violence trends in their local area, with some complementing this with data from sources such as the fire and rescue service, probation and youth justice services, schools, and public health data.¹⁰³

¹⁰⁰ Commission on Young Lives (2022) Hidden in Plain Sight: A national plan of action to support vulnerable teenagers to succeed and to protect them from adversity, exploitation, and harm. Available at: <https://thecommissiononyounglives.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2022/11/COYL-FINAL-REPORT-FINAL-VERSION.pdf>

¹⁰¹ Home Office (2025) Violence Reduction Units year ending March 2024 evaluation report. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/violence-reduction-units-year-ending-march-2024-evaluation-report/violence-reduction-units-year-ending-march-2024-evaluation-report>

¹⁰² Savanta & Youth Endowment Fund (2024) YEF’s Child, Violence and Vulnerability Survey 2024. Available at: <https://youthendowmentfund.org.uk/reports/children-violence-and-vulnerability-2024/>

¹⁰³ Home Office (2025) Violence Reduction Units year ending March 2024 evaluation report. Available at: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/violence-reduction-units-year-ending-march-2024-evaluation-report/violence-reduction-units-year-ending-march-2024-evaluation-report>

Key outcomes and outcome measures

A core aim of Young Futures is to reduce serious violence and antisocial behaviour and support young people to thrive through providing a space to engage in meaningful, alternative activities and develop relationships with trusted adults. As a community hub bringing together a range of local services, the Young Futures programme should also work to improve young people's feelings of safety and engagement in their communities, their mental health, and their future life chances by providing support through and into education, training, or employment.

It is not only important for Young Futures to measure a range of outcomes, such as their impact on knife crime, mental health, and school attendance and exclusions, but that these outcomes are measured specifically among the right cohorts of young people: the most vulnerable young people who need the support the most, such as among young people in AP or who are excluded/at risk of exclusion.

To realise these aims – and the potential of Young Futures Hubs – we recommend developing a cross-departmental common outcomes framework for young people through Young Futures, with clear accountability across Government departments.

- **Young people are and feel physically and emotionally safe: Reduced rates of knife crime**
 - a) Self-reported incidents of carrying weapons (pre/post anonymous surveys)
 - b) Attendance and engagement in diversionary or mentoring sessions
 - c) Police or youth justice service data on knife-related offences involving participants

- **Young people have a choice of things to do and places to go and make positive choices: Reduced incidences of antisocial behaviour**
 - a) Local rates of antisocial behaviour incidents (area-wide youth crime data)
 - b) Self-reported involvement in antisocial behaviour (surveys or interviews)
 - c) Number of behavioural incidents recorded by youth workers or staff

- **Young people feel valued and respected and that they belong to the community: Increased feelings of safety and belonging in community**
 - a) Percentage of participants reporting feeling safe in their local area (survey)
 - b) Participant responses to questions on community connection and belonging
 - c) Qualitative feedback from focus groups

- **Young people have their emotional, social and personal needs met and are supported to build resilience: Lower rates of mental health problems among young people**

- a) Scores from validated mental wellbeing tools (e.g., SDQ)
 - b) Self-reported stress, anxiety, or mood ratings
 - c) Number of participants referred to or accessing mental health support
- **Young people have their emotional, social and personal needs met and are supported to build resilience: Increase confidence and self-esteem among young people**
 - a) Scores from a recognised self-esteem or self-efficacy scale (e.g., Rosenberg or GSE)
 - b) Participant self-assessment on confidence before and after programme
 - c) Observational records or feedback from youth workers and mentors
- **Young people are and feel safe at school and are protected from adversity: improved school attendance and reduced risk of exclusion**
 - a) Pupil unauthorised absence
 - b) Rates of suspension and exclusion
 - c) Participant and staff feedback on engagement and behaviour in learning environments
- **Young people are gaining the knowledge and skills they need for later life: Improved access to education, employment or training (EET)**
 - a) Percentage of participants moving into EET post-programme
 - b) Number of accredited qualifications, certificates, or completed workshops
 - c) Attendance and completion rates for learning or training sessions
- **Young people are happy with their friendships and connections: Increased positive peer relationships and reduce social isolation**
 - a) Participant feedback on friendships and social support (surveys/focus groups)
 - b) Percentage of participants involved in group activities or peer-led sessions
 - c) Changes in social functioning scores (e.g., from SDQ or custom tools)

It is vital that the Young Futures programme is designed and delivered to achieve a broad set of outcomes that collectively aim to improve the safety, wellbeing, and future life chances of young people. By reducing knife crime and antisocial behaviour, fostering a sense of safety and belonging, supporting mental health, building confidence and self-esteem, enhancing access to education, employment, or training, and strengthening positive peer relationships, the programme seeks to create meaningful and lasting change.

The outlined outcome measures provide a framework for tracking progress, ensuring that interventions are evidence-informed and that successes - both quantitative and qualitative - can be systematically captured and used to refine and improve support for young people over time.

Recommendations

Supporting vulnerable young people to thrive requires a bold strategy and joined-up national approach, setting a clear framework and outcomes for Young Futures, underpinned by flexible local delivery which can adapt to meet the needs of young people.

Sufficient funding for Young Futures Hubs

- Hubs need to be open to young who people need them, with inspiring activity programmes during the week and at weekends, that draw them in and away from unsafe environments; well-trained and skilled youth professionals who can establish trusted relationships; and ambitious leaders who can drive forward systems change across the local area. For this to be possible, we recommend each Hub is backed by **£1 million per year**, jointly funded to cover staff and administrative costs, as well as rent and activities.

Establishing a single front door with an integrated local system of opportunities and support

- Government should establish a **cross-departmental Young Futures Plan**, bringing together the Department for Work & Pensions, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport, and the Department for Education. This Plan should establish a shared ambition for the Young Futures programme and join up existing and future policies and funds to maximise the role of Young Futures Hubs as a key means of delivering a range of ambitions, including new neighbourhood health models, the Education White Paper, Best Start, Child Poverty Strategy, Growth Plan, and the Youth Strategy.
- Departments which are co-signatories to the Young Futures Plan should also publish a **comprehensive, joint guidance document** for Young Futures Hubs. Government should design and deliver a centrally mandated 'core offer' of services to be delivered through the Hubs, including separate, specialist support for girls and young women, and an offer of inspirational programmes of open-access activities and opportunities which is available throughout the week.
- Government should establish a **nationwide Young Futures Hubs brand** with coordinated public awareness campaigns, so that all young people and their families recognise Hubs as safe spaces they can attend to participate in great activity programmes, build relationships with peers and trusted adults, and access support.
- Government strengthens integration and joined-up working across departments through a cross-departmental **common outcomes framework for young people**.
- The Treasury **scales up investment** into joined-up support for young people and families over the next decade to strengthen and extend provision and embed Young Futures Hubs into communities for the long-term.

- The Treasury and Department for Culture, Media & Sport should consider innovative means to raise investment for Young Futures Hubs, including **National Social Outcomes Partnerships pilots**.

Ensuring the voices of young people and families are heard

- The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should commission and issue guidance to local authorities on effective ways to **embed co-production with young people into service design**, supported by the sharing of best practice and practice guides. This should include involving Young People in local design teams as Hubs are established. The views and voices of young women and girls should be present throughout every aspect of service design and delivery.

Embedding Young Futures in communities and reaching those most in need

- Currently, the young people who need support the most are falling through the gaps, either because of a lack of support, or inaccessible support.
- The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should provide guidance to local authorities and support where necessary to strengthen standardised data collection and **effective monitoring of take-up, engagement, and outcomes** of service delivery, in order to ensure that Young Futures is reaching and supporting the most vulnerable young people.
- To maximise impact, the Department for Culture, Media & Sport should direct resources first to **communities facing the greatest challenges**, including high levels of deprivation and knife-related incidents. These areas are likely to benefit most from early intervention, helping to prevent young people from being drawn into violent behaviour while supporting community cohesion. Prioritisation should be informed by local data on crime, socioeconomic indicators, and existing service provision.

Providing high-quality services

- The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should develop a **workforce and leadership programme** for Young Futures Hubs, which is gender- and trauma- informed, and supports staff to be culturally aware.
- The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should support the **delivery of evidence-based services** with a focus on high quality implementation through a national database of evidence-based programmes to support local authorities. The Department for Culture, Media & Sport should ensure that service delivery is gender- and trauma- informed, recognising the unique experiences of young people exposed to trauma and girls and young women facing challenges such as exclusion and involvement in the criminal justice system.

Annex A: Police Force Areas with the highest rates of knife or sharp instrument offences

Police Force Area – England and Wales	Offences involving a knife or sharp instrument rate per 100,000, March 2024 - March 2025¹⁰⁴
Metropolitan Police	182
Cleveland	150
West Midlands	150
Greater Manchester	115
South Yorkshire	101
West Yorkshire	97
Avon and Somerset	87
Humberside	84
Bedfordshire	81
Merseyside	80
Essex	79
Northumbria	71
Lancashire	71
Northamptonshire	69
Nottinghamshire	68
Staffordshire	66
Leicestershire	66
Cambridgeshire	66
Gwent	65
Hertfordshire	63

¹⁰⁴ Office for National Statistics. Crime in England and Wales: Police Force Area data tables, March 25 table P7. Available at: <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/crimeandjustice/datasets/policeforceareadatatables>

Annex B: Local authorities with the highest rates of children living in relative low-income families

Local Authorities in England	Percentage of children living in relative low-income families FYE 2024
Pendle	44.6%
Bradford	44.2%
Oldham	42.9%
Birmingham	41.7%
Blackburn with Darwen	41.6%
Manchester	40.7%
Middlesbrough	40.4%
Hyndburn	40.2%
Burnley	40.0%
Stoke-on-Trent	39.7%
Leicester	39.5%
Nottingham	38.8%
Kingston upon Hull, City of	38.2%
Sandwell	37.7%
Bolton	37.5%
Rochdale	36.7%
Walsall	36.0%
Wolverhampton	35.7%
Blackpool	35.6%
North East Lincolnshire	34.5%
Luton	34.1%
Doncaster	34.0%
Kirklees	33.7%
Liverpool	33.0%
Peterborough	32.1%
Derby	31.9%
Great Yarmouth	31.7%
Boston	31.3%
Sheffield	31.2%
Preston	30.8%
Hartlepool	30.6%
Barnsley	30.6%
Norwich	30.6%
Newcastle upon Tyne	30.5%
Tameside	30.5%

Calderdale	30.5%
Salford	30.3%
City of London	30.3%
Rotherham	30.0%
Redcar and Cleveland	29.8%
South Tyneside	29.8%
Dudley	29.7%
North Lincolnshire	29.6%
Lincoln	29.5%
Tower Hamlets	29.4%
Ipswich	29.3%
Sunderland	29.1%
Bury	28.9%
County Durham	28.8%
Leeds	28.8%

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