



SAFE SPACE

A REPORT EXAMINING YOUNG
PEOPLE'S EXPERIENCES
OF YOUTH SERVICES

MARCH 2020



YMCA was established in 1844, and is the largest and oldest youth charity in the world, helping more than 65 million people in 120 countries. Here in England and Wales, 116 YMCAs work to transform 740 different communities, impacting the lives of nearly 630,000 people every year.

We believe that the right start in life is crucial for a person's long-term development. It is for this reason YMCA works with people from birth through to adulthood – supporting individuals and families to flourish.

To this end, each year YMCA supports 33,560 young people through our youth work and services.

FOREWORD

In January 2020 YMCA England & Wales published research which showed the extent to which youth services had been cut since 2010. The 70% decline in youth services speaks for itself but we must investigate the impact of how this is affecting our young people.¹

The voices of young people are too often missed from the conversation, that's why research like this is so important. YMCA believes that young people should all have the opportunity to belong, contribute and thrive and strong youth services are fundamental in that.

There is no point in delivering and commissioning youth services that young people don't want. It is vital that we listen and allow them to direct what is on offer for them at a local level.

We need to place value on the services that we create for young people in the importance of reducing youth crime, loneliness and mental health difficulties but we also need to make sure young people have fun and enjoy being young. For this to be delivered, funding at both a local and national level must also follow suit to ensure we deliver this in a sustainable way.

While young people are forced to bear the brunt of drastic cuts, they are expected to do so quietly and without consequence.

The findings of this report vocalise the needs of young people – in their own words – and in order to support them now and in the future, they must be listened to and acted on.



Denise Hatton
Chief Executive,
YMCA England & Wales

¹ Out of Service, YMCA England and Wales, January 2020

KEY FINDINGS

In summary, the key findings of this report are:

- 1.** Youth services provide a valuable and consistent touchpoint throughout young people's lives.
- 2.** Young people tell us they feel unsafe on the streets, fear gangs and knife crime. They are stressed and worried by school and societal pressures. Young people want youth services to play a role in building confidence, supporting mental health and allowing them to make friends in safe spaces.
- 3.** Half of young people don't have access to a youth service or know what is available in their area and they are seeing a decline in services at a time they want to see more.
- 4.** Youth services need to have fun and friends at the heart of them but they must provide a vital role in keeping young people off the streets and building self-esteem.
- 5.** A key aim of youth services is and should continue to be providing positive role models and trusted adults for young people.
- 6.** Young people want and need to be at the heart of decision making.

METHODOLOGY

The aim of this research is to establish what young people's needs and experiences are of youth services.

This research was undertaken by YMCA with the fieldwork conducted by specialist youth research agency, YouthSight. The sample consisted of 998 young people aged between 11 and 16 from across England and Wales. The sample was representative by age and gender, and weighted to ensure representation across the regions.

For the purposes of this research, 'youth services' broadly encapsulates two types of service: 'open-access' (or 'universal') services, including a range of leisure, cultural, sporting and enrichment activities often based around youth centres; and more targeted provision for vulnerable young people, including teenage pregnancy advice, youth justice teams, and drug and alcohol misuse services.

INTRODUCTION

The path for young people today as they transition into adulthood is by no means a clear one as they try and struggle to navigate an ever-changing world.

Youth services were traditionally there for young people during this time. They provided them with a safe space in which they could be themselves, a place where they could speak to a mentor and a place for them to build friendships. But successive years of cuts to funding have devastated these services.

Previous research by YMCA revealed that almost a billion pounds had been cut from local authority spending on youth services in real terms since 2010.² As a result, more than 4,500 youth work jobs have been cut and 760 youth centres have closed.³

As local authorities struggle to manage funding pressures it is youth services, and the young people they support, who so often miss out.

While young people are forced to bear the brunt of the cuts, they are expected to do so quietly and without consequence. However, rising levels of mental health difficulties, incidences of knife crime and social isolation illustrate that many young people are increasingly struggling.

Increased public and political awareness of the consequences of the cuts have now forced the issue on to the agenda, but young people are still being excluded from the conversations about funding needs and provision in their area. Indeed, less than one in 10 young people (8%) said they had been asked which services should be available in their local area.

Given that the country is starting to wake up to the crisis, the purpose of this research is to give these young people a voice. To investigate their experiences of youth services and what they think their communities need to help support young people today and into the future to help reverse the negative trends.

² YMCA England and Wales, *Out of Service*, January 2020

³ Unison, *Youth services at breaking point*, April 2019

USAGE OF **YOUTH SERVICES**

Youth services provide a valuable and consistent touchpoint throughout young people's lives.

Youth services play a pivotal role in many young people's lives. Indeed, more than seven in 10 young people (71%) have accessed a youth service at some point in their life.

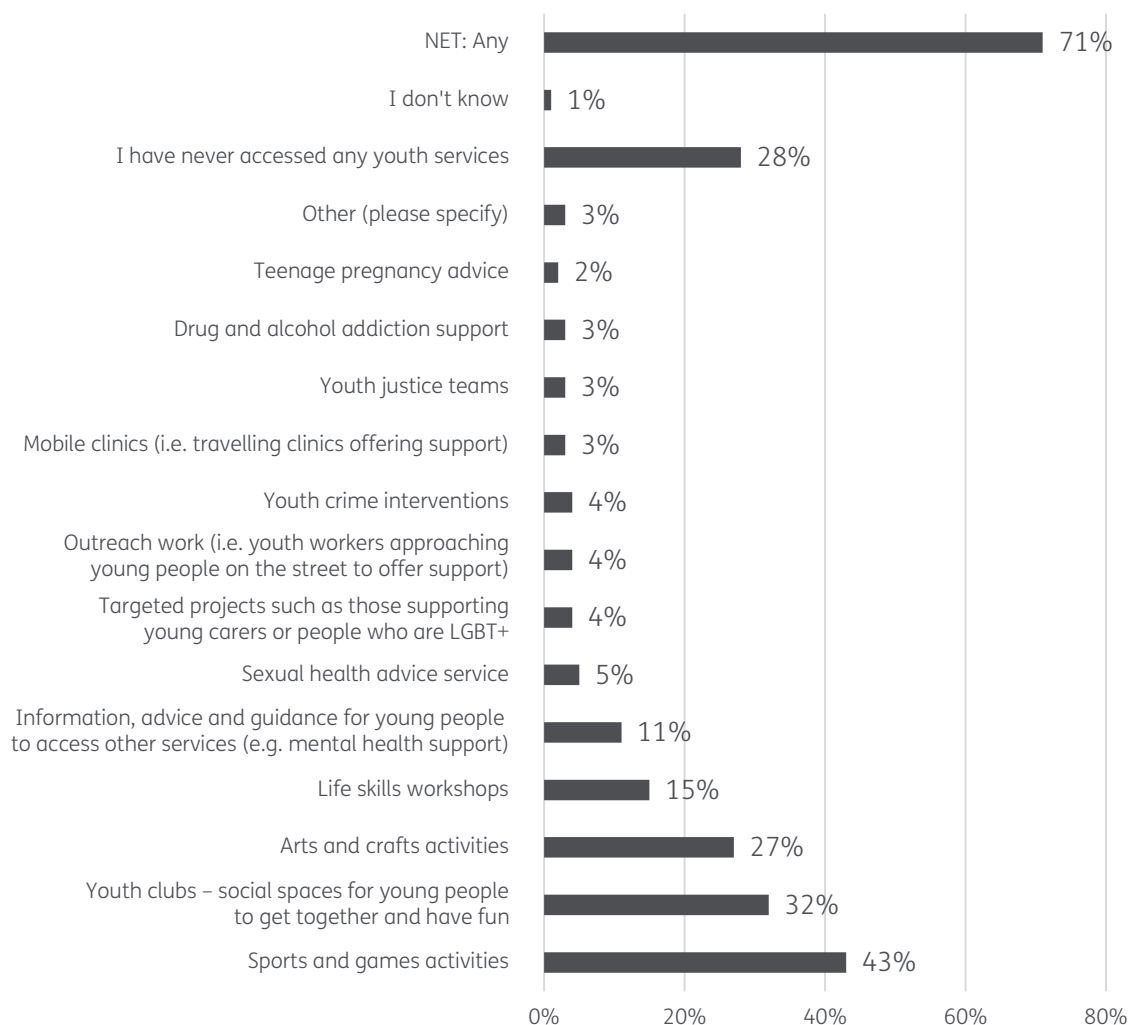
The term 'youth services' is a broad one that encapsulates a number of different services offered to young people. The most commonly accessed youth service was sports and games activities, which more than two-fifths of young people (43%) had attended. Youth clubs (32%) and arts and crafts activity sessions (27%) followed this.

Less commonly attended were more formal and sometimes targeted education and support-based services. Life skills workshops had been attended by 15% of young people and 11% of young people had sought information, advice and guidance to access other services (such as mental health support) via a youth service.

"I would be doing absolutely nothing if it wasn't for my youth club."

SAM, 16

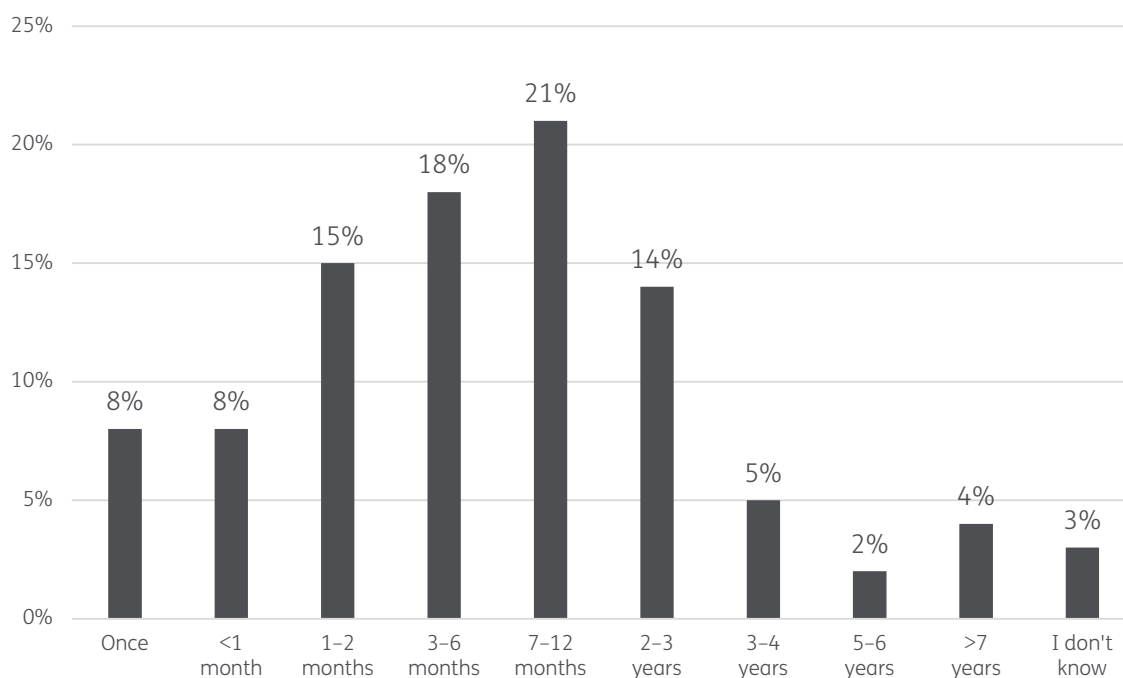
WHICH OF THE FOLLOWING YOUTH SERVICES HAVE YOU EVER BEEN TO?



Of those who had accessed a youth service, more than two-fifths (44%) were currently accessing them, and just less than two-fifths (39%) had accessed them in the past.

The young people who accessed youth services tended to do so on multiple occasions over a sustained period of time, with just 8% reporting to have accessed them on only one occasion. More than two-fifths (42%) had accessed them for up to and including six months and nearly half of young people (47%) had accessed youth services for more than six months.

HOW LONG HAVE YOU SPENT ACCESSING YOUTH SERVICES?



While not all young people access youth services, the time spent there by those who do show how much of a pivotal role they play in their lives. Far from being a one-time visit, many young people come to rely on the youth services present in their communities as a constant in their lives, accessing them time and time again.

“[They] keep us from getting in to trouble, it gives us better options. If the YMCA weren’t there we would probably be getting up to things we shouldn’t be and being silly. We don’t want to get into trouble really we just get bored there is nothing for us to do if [our service wasn’t around].”

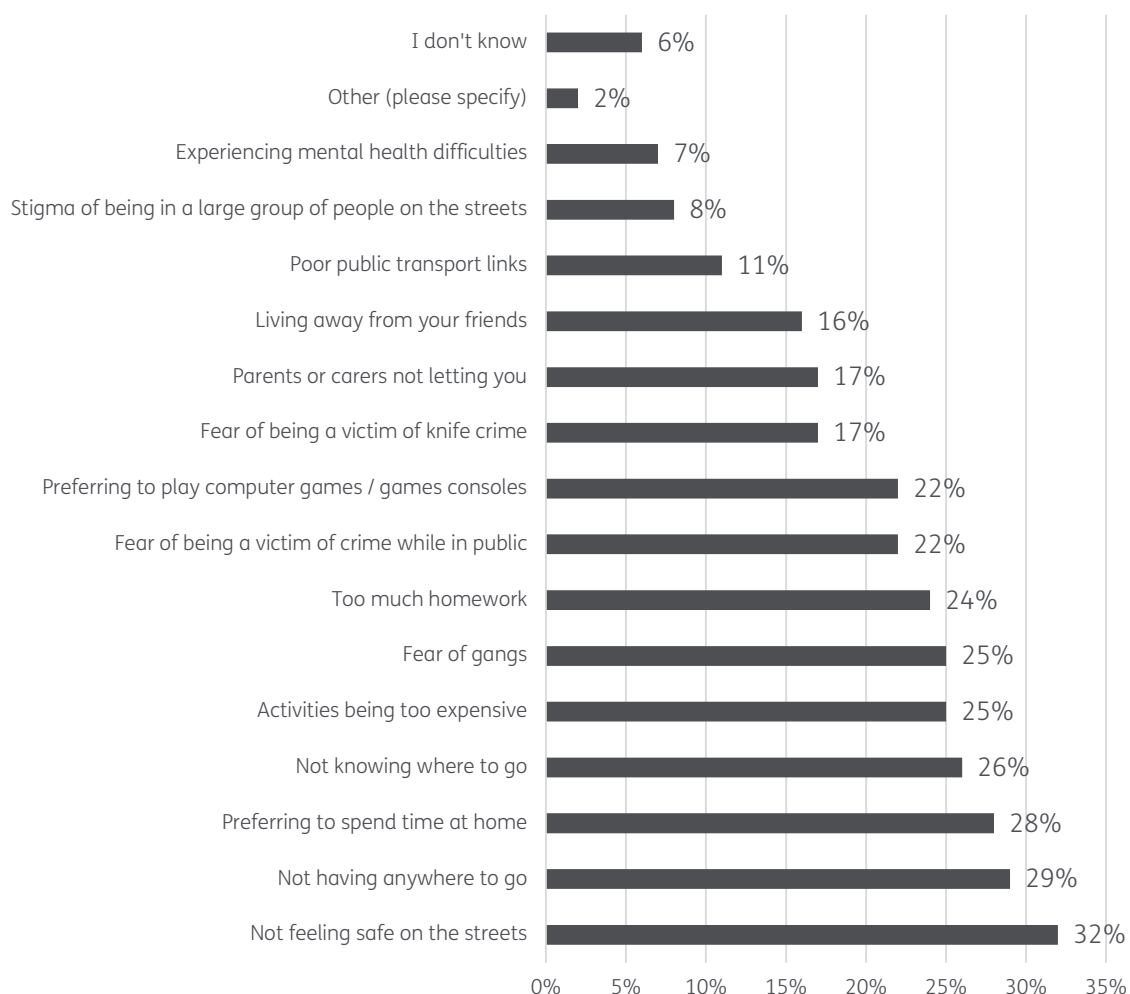
JACK, 14

NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE

Young people tell us they feel unsafe on the streets, fear gangs and knife crime. They are stressed and worried by school and societal pressures. Young people want youth services to play a role in building confidence, supporting mental health and allowing them to make friends in safe spaces.

When we asked young people what stops them spending time with friends outside of school, most notably nearly a third (32%) stated not feeling safe on the streets, this was closely followed by 29% of respondents who said they did not have anywhere to go and one in four (25%) responded fear of gangs. This is reinforced by 83% of young people stating their parents or carers worry about their safety while they were not at home or school.

WHAT STOPS YOU SPENDING TIME WITH FRIENDS?



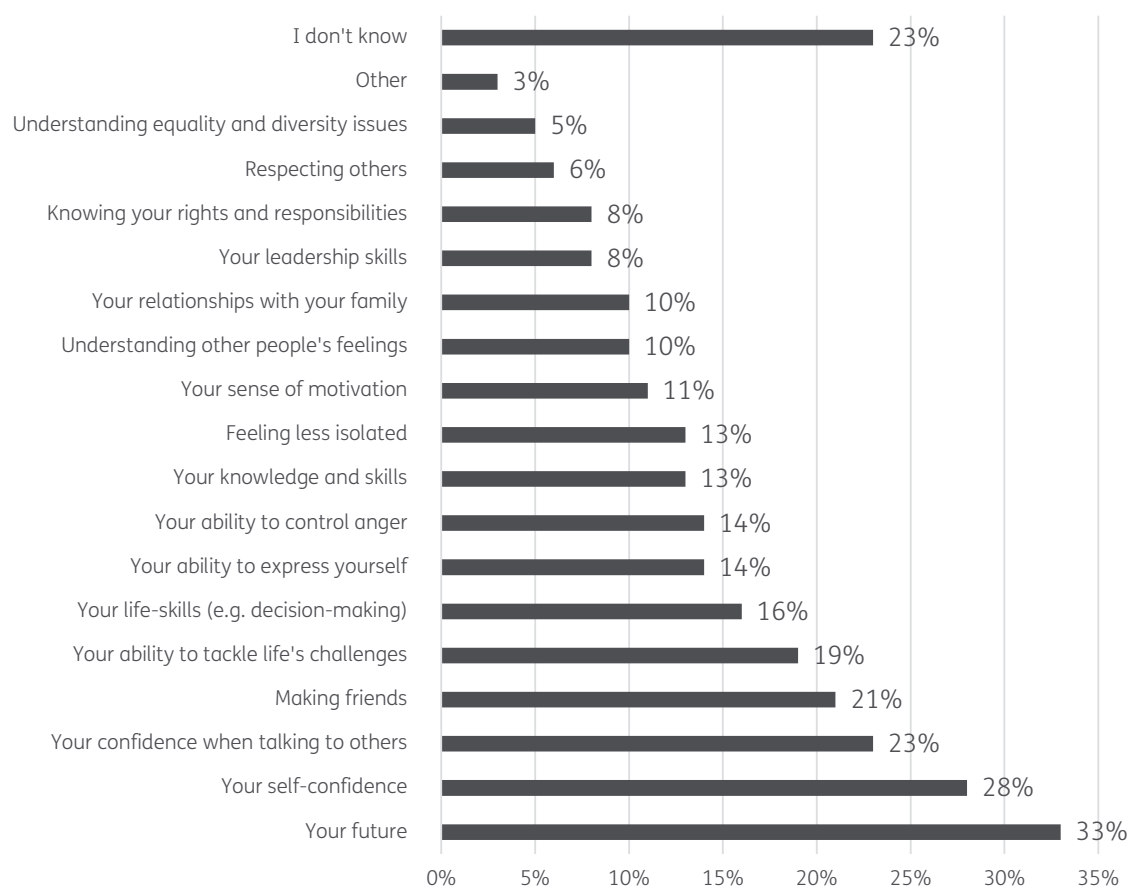
Despite the benefits that accessing youth services brings to young people, it is clear concerns and a need for support still exist.

The most common worry reported by young people was about their future, which was a concern for a third of them (33%). This concern was more prominent among 14 to 16-year-olds, with more than two-fifths citing a concern about their future (43%) compared to just less than a quarter (24%) of those aged 11 to 13-year-olds. This differential is likely due to the increased agency those in the older cohort have over their lives as they move towards the GCSE years and picking their options.

Young people also reported worrying about confidence levels. Indeed, 28% were concerned about their self-confidence and 23% were concerned about their confidence when talking with others. Again, the age differential existed in self-confidence with those in the older cohort being more likely to report being concerned about their self-confidence (31%) compared to their younger counterparts (25%). In contrast, concerns about an individual's confidence in talking to others remained consistent among all ages.

Making friends was identified as a concern for more than a fifth of young people (21%). This was followed by their ability to tackle life's challenges (19%) and their life-skills (16%). This is particularly poignant as 37% of the young people we spoke to said they had felt lonely.

ARE YOU CONCERNED ABOUT ANY OF THE FOLLOWING THINGS?



Given that some of these concerns can be quite damaging almost a third (29%) of young people told us they do not have an adult outside of their family who they trust to talk to about their problems.

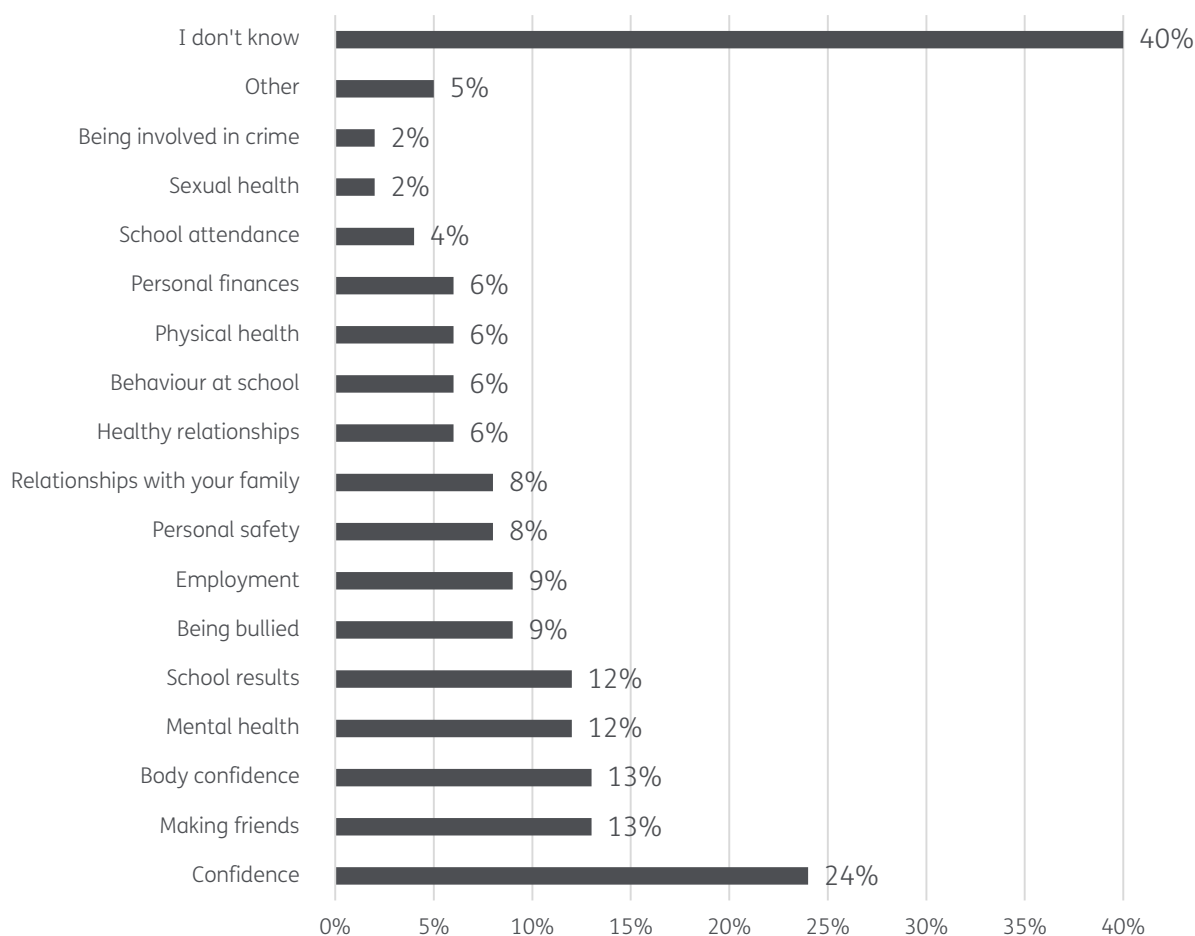
As well as recognising their own individual worries, many young people also actively recognised their need for external support in a number of areas of their life.

As such, nearly a quarter of young people (24%) said they needed support with their confidence.

Other areas of support needed by young people included making friends (13%), body confidence (13%), mental health (12%) and school results (12%). This shows a high level of need from young people who want support building confidence and resilience which is a core aspect of youth service provision.



DO YOU NEED SUPPORT IN ANY OF THE FOLLOWING AREAS? BREAKDOWN BY 'CURRENTLY ACCESS YOUTH SERVICES'



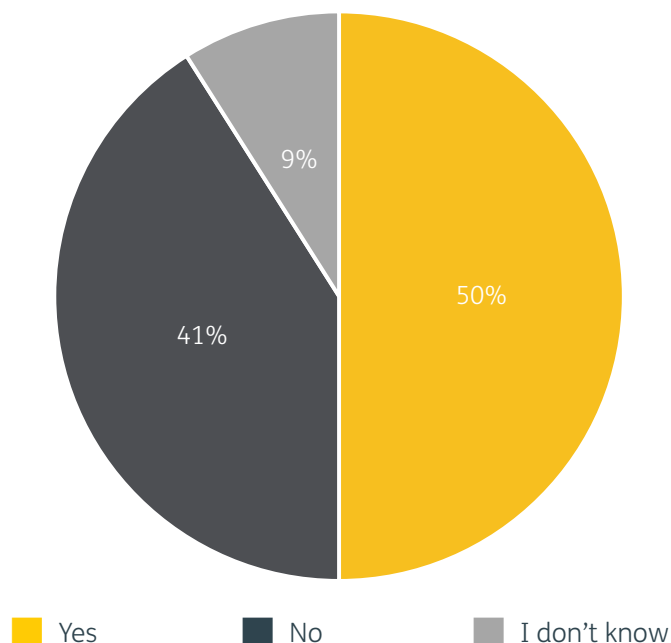
Traditionally youth services play a big role in ensuring young people have safe spaces, a trusted adult to speak to and opportunities that help them develop. Given half of young people don't have or know where their youth service is locally shows why the need level is high in these areas from this cohort of young people.

PROVISION AND AVAILABILITY OF **YOUTH SERVICES**

Half of young people don't have access to a youth service or know what is available in their area and they are seeing a decline in services at a time they want to see more.

Youth services can only benefit young people if they are accessible and young people know how and where to access them. However, only half of young people reported knowing where their local youth service is (50%).

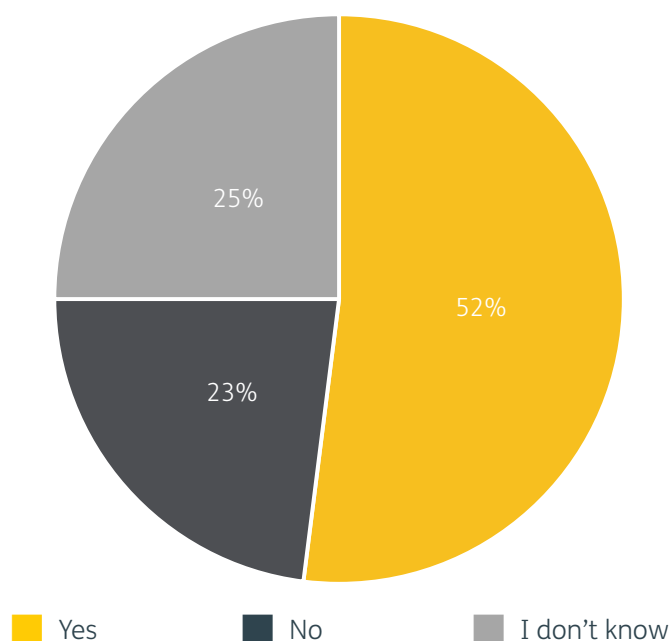
DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR LOCAL YOUTH SERVICES ARE?



Not all youth services are suitable or intended for all, and so are likely to be less known about. However, even those which take a more universal approach are either not known about or are not present for young people to access.

As such, only just over half of young people (52%) said they have a youth club in their area they could access. Nearly a quarter of young people (23%) said they definitely did not have a youth club in their area they could access and a quarter (25%) said they did not know if they did or 'not' illustrating a barrier to attendance.

DO YOU HAVE A YOUTH CLUB IN YOUR AREA THAT YOU COULD ACCESS?



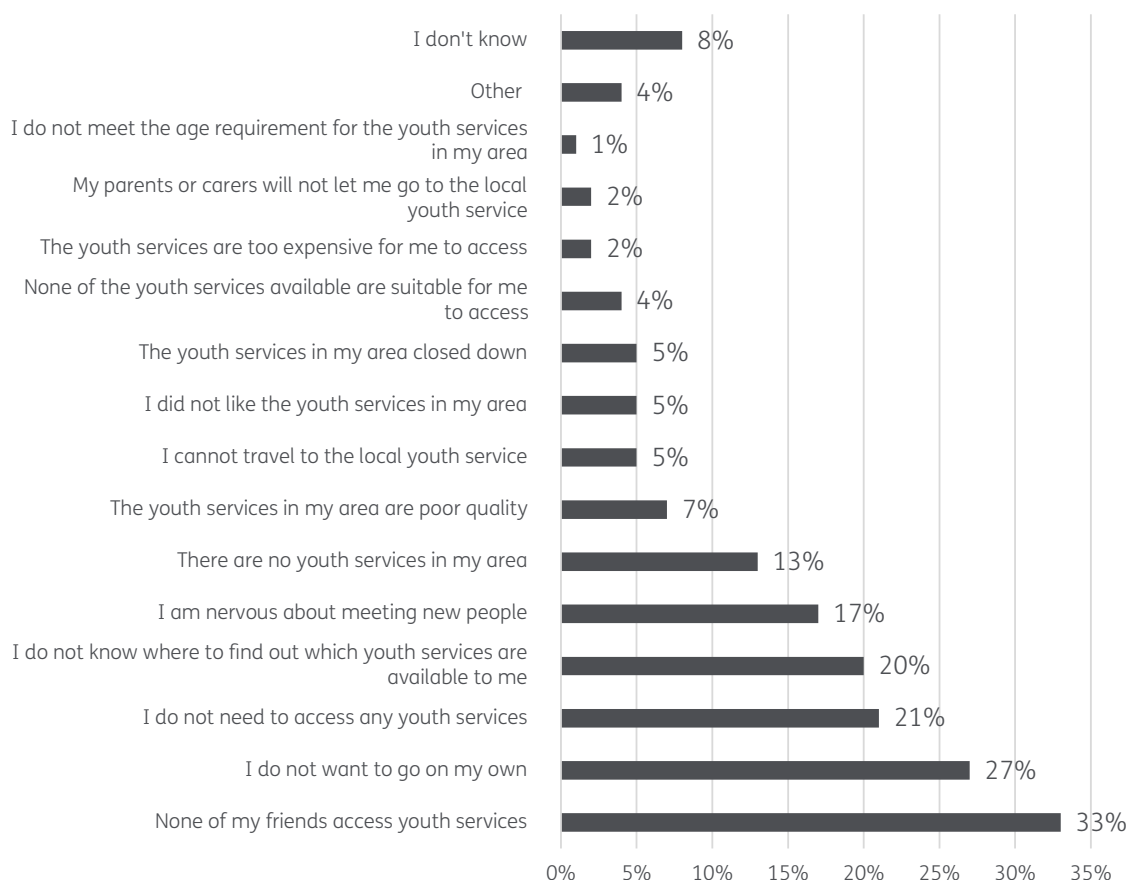
Young people's reasons for not accessing youth services varied greatly, but often it was simply because they did not know where to go. As such, of those young people who were not currently accessing youth services, a fifth (20%) said the reason was they did not know where to find out which youth services were present in their local area.

However, the most named reason for young people not currently accessing youth services was because none of their friends did (33%), followed by people not wanting to go on their own (27%). Similarly, nearly a fifth (17%) of young people said they do not currently access youth services because they are nervous about meeting new people illustrating the importance of peer networks. This is likely a result of worries about confidence levels and ability to make friends.

"Youth clubs are important to me because they have helped me build my confidence and make new friends."

AMY, 15

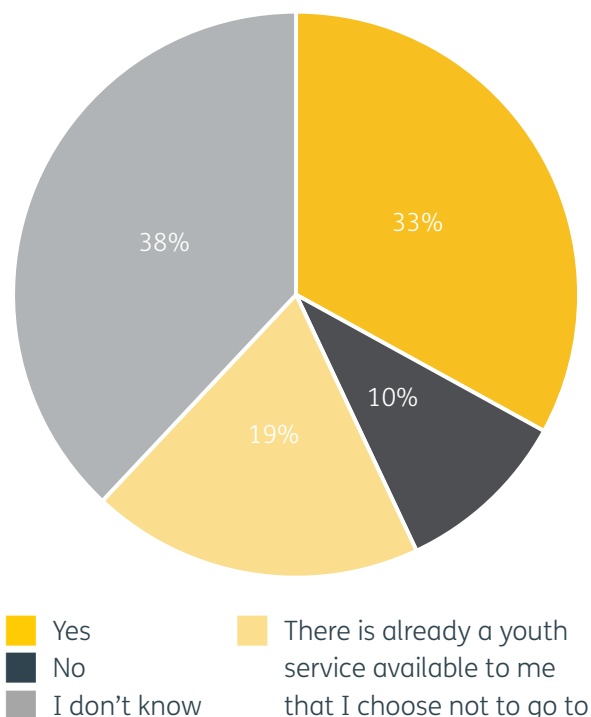
WHY DO YOU NOT CURRENTLY ACCESS ANY YOUTH SERVICES?



Of those who were not currently accessing youth services, a third of young people (33%) said they would if one was available to them indicating that availability is key for many. Those young people not currently accessing a youth service but who had previously were more likely to say they would access one again if it were available to them (42%) compared to their counterparts who had never accessed one (25%).

However, in contrast nearly a fifth (19%) of young people not currently accessing a youth service said there was one available to them but they still chose not to access it.

WOULD YOU ACCESS A YOUTH SERVICE IF ONE WAS AVAILABLE TO YOU?



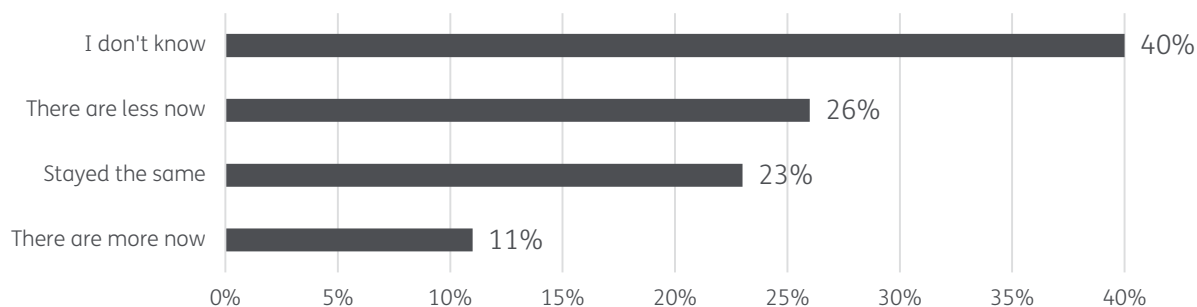
Young people are recognising the funding strains youth services are under and the consequences it is having on provision. As such, more than a quarter of young people reported that there are fewer services available for young people now than three years ago (26%). A similar proportion (23%) said that youth provision in their area had stayed the same in the last three years and only one in ten young people (11%) said that there are more youth services than there were three years ago.

However, young people's perceptions of service provision inevitably differed depending on their experiences with youth services. Of those young people who had previously accessed youth services but who did not currently, nearly a third (32%) said the number of services for young people had reduced over the last three years. This is compared to more than a quarter (26%) of those who were currently accessing youth services and one-fifth (20%) who had never accessed them.

“They help you meet new people and learn new things.”

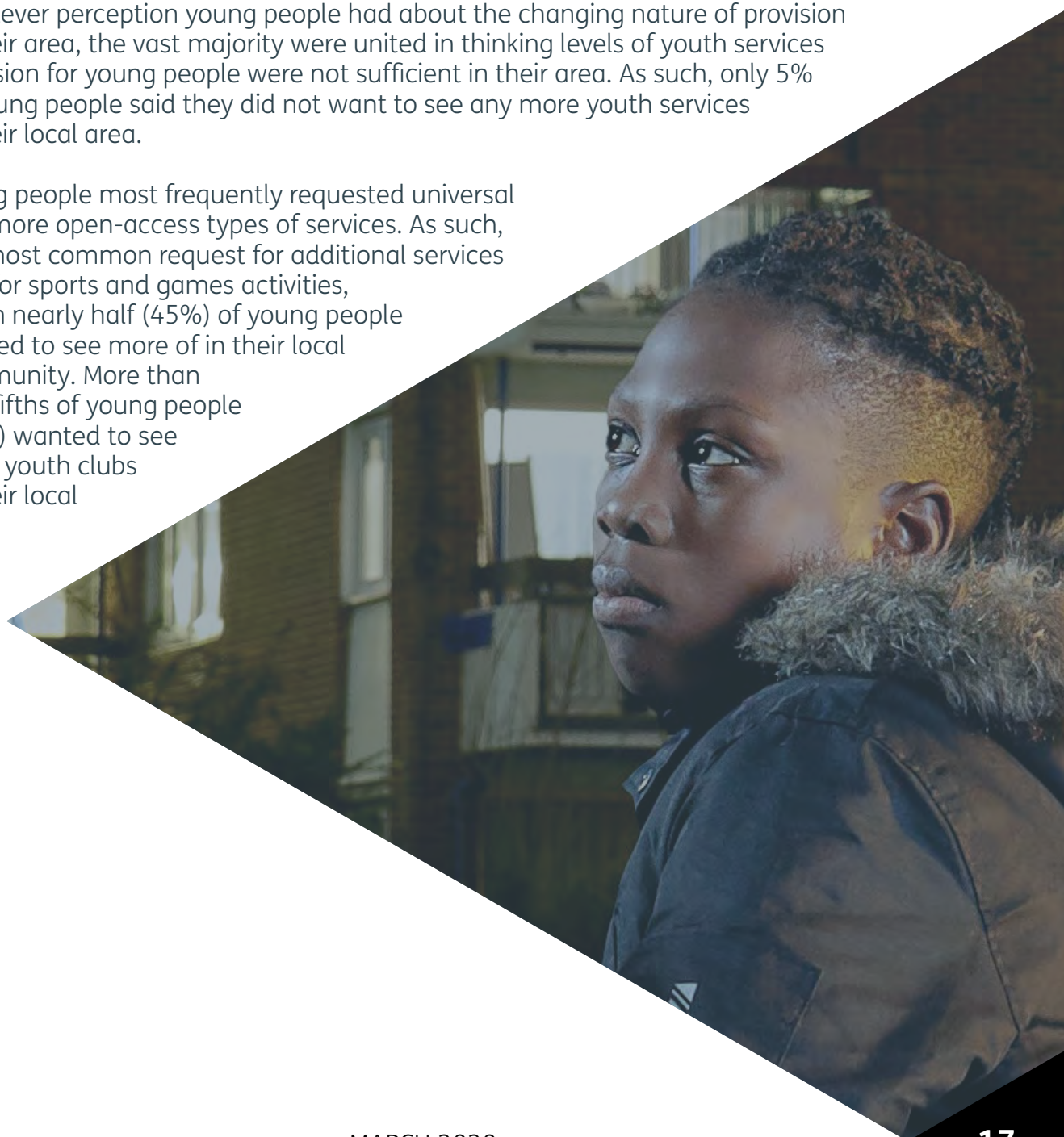
EMMA, 15

**ARE THERE MORE OR LESS SERVICES AVAILABLE
FOR YOUNG PEOPLE NOW THAN THREE YEARS AGO?**
BREAKDOWN BY 'CURRENTLY ACCESS YOUTH SERVICES'

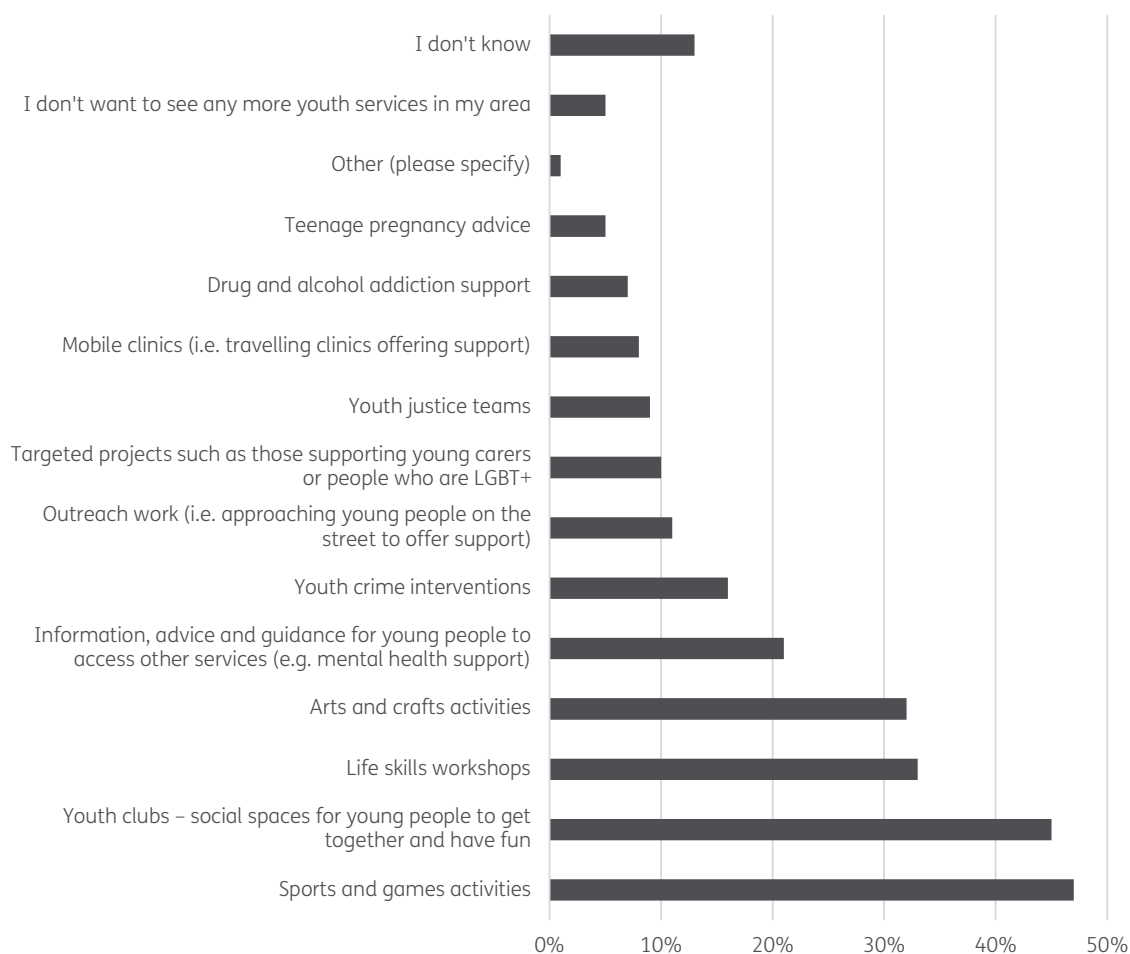


Whatever perception young people had about the changing nature of provision in their area, the vast majority were united in thinking levels of youth services provision for young people were not sufficient in their area. As such, only 5% of young people said they did not want to see any more youth services in their local area.

Young people most frequently requested universal and more open-access types of services. As such, the most common request for additional services was for sports and games activities, which nearly half (45%) of young people wanted to see more of in their local community. More than two-fifths of young people (45%) wanted to see more youth clubs in their local area.



WHICH, IF ANY, OF THE FOLLOWING WOULD YOU LIKE TO SEE MORE OF IN YOUR LOCAL AREA?



The differing desires and requests illustrate that young people are not a homogenous group and their requirements will differ greatly depending on their backgrounds and their circumstances. They also illustrate the importance of providing both universal and targeted services which work in unison to meet the full spectrum of young people's needs.

“They are how I escape and keep me happy.”

LOUIS, 14



WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE WANT

Youth services need to have fun and friends at the heart of them but they must provide a vital role in keeping young people off the streets and building self-esteem. A key aim of youth services is and should continue to be providing positive role models and trusted adults for young people.

Given the broad range of services under the term 'youth services' it is clear that the possible outcomes are almost endless.

Despite this, young people felt the main thing youth services should be trying to achieve was to provide an opportunity for young people to have fun (57%) and allow them to make friends (57%).

However, the ability of youth services to help a young person develop was also recognised with more than half of young people (56%) stating that youth services should be trying to allow young people to develop new skills and allow young people to develop their confidence and self-esteem (55%). In addition, more than half of young people (55%) thought that youth services should be trying to keep young people off the streets.

Allowing young people to be part of their local community was recognised as a valuable aim for youth services by 47% of young people. However, of those who had experience of youth services, either currently or in the past, 49% said that youth services should be trying to allow young people to be part of their local community, compared to 41% of those who had never accessed such services.

A similar pattern can be found among those who thought youth services should be trying to support young people in a more intensive manner.

“There is nothing to do in the area and the club is fun.”

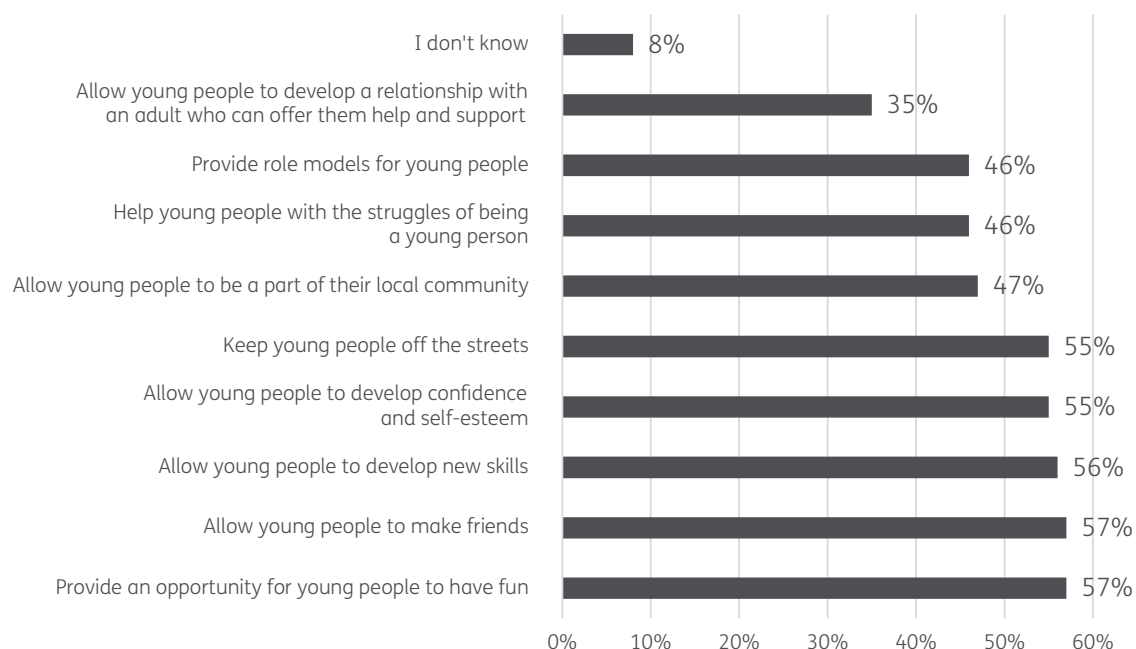
MIKE, 15

Accordingly, of those who had experience of accessing youth services, half (50%) said that their aim should be to help young people with the struggles of being a young person, compared to 41% of those who had never accessed them.

Again, nearly half (49%) of young people who had experience of accessing youth services thought that they should seek to provide role models for young people compared to two fifths of young people who had never accessed them (40%).

Allow young people to develop a relationship with an adult who can offer them help and support was recognised as a key aim for youth services by 38% of young people who had experience of accessing youth services. This is in contrast to 27% of those who had never accessed such services.

WHAT SHOULD YOUTH SERVICES BE TRYING TO ACHIEVE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE? BREAKDOWN BY 'ACCESSED YOUTH SERVICES'



The differential between the intended aims of youth services could be a result of greater awareness of the potential benefits they can bring by those who have experience of them.

Importantly, whatever the service or its stated aim, young people want to have a say about which services are available to them.

ENGAGING YOUNG PEOPLE IN DECISION MAKING PROCESSES

Young people want and need to be at the heart of decision making.

More than four-fifths of young people (84%) thought that young people should help decide which youth services are available in their local area. Again, this was higher for those with experience of accessing youth services (87%) compared to those without (81%) likely because they are more likely to engage with them and have a deepened knowledge about what's available.

While engaging young people is important in itself, the success of such attempts will likely differ depending on the approach taken.

Of those who thought young people should be involved in deciding which youth services are available in their local area, nearly two-thirds (64%) thought this should be done by young people telling decision makers about which services are needed. Similarly, nearly two-thirds of these young people (64%) thought this should be achieved by young people giving feedback on specific plans to decision makers.

As such, the preferred method of youth participation was in a consultative role while the services are being planned.

“We trust the youth workers and my parents trust them too. We get to cook and drink hot chocolate and play games.”

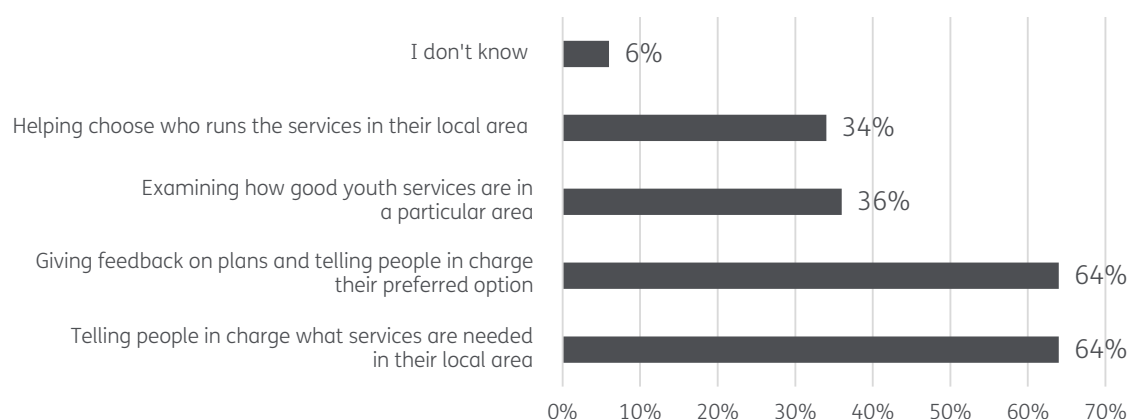
JADE, 13

More than a third of young people who believed they should be involved in deciding which services are available in their local area (36%) said young people should have a role in examining how good youth services are in a particular area. In addition, 34% of these young people said young people should have a role in helping choose which provider runs services in their local area. This illustrated a desire by many young people to have a role in the programme delivery and evaluation, which is a more intensive form of involvement.

Those with experience of accessing youth services, either currently or previously, were more likely to say young people should be more actively involved in determining which services are in their local area and how they should be run.

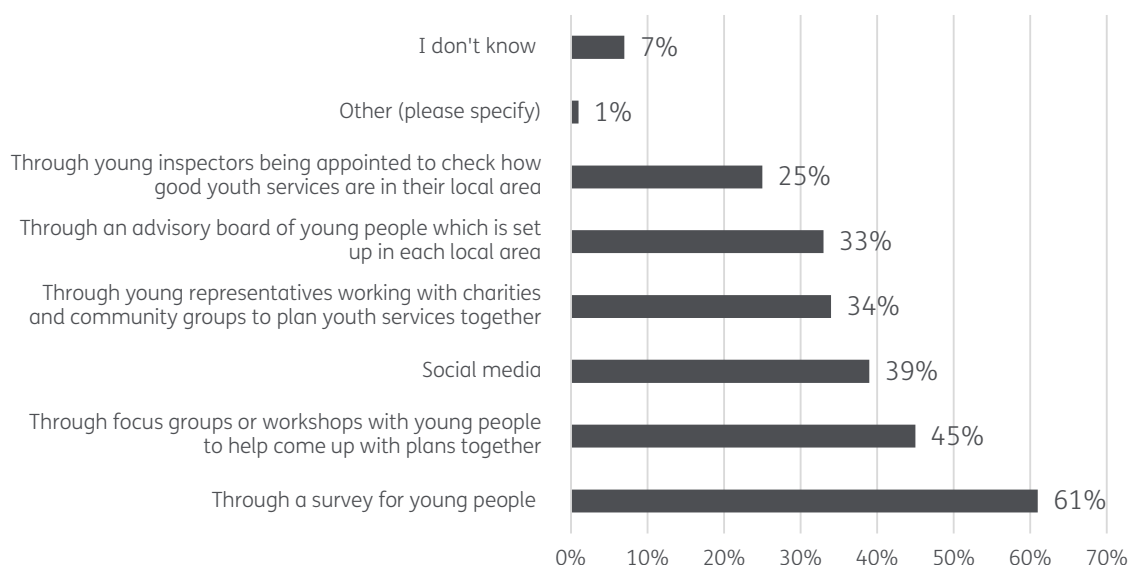
Accordingly, 39% of young people who had accessed services thought they should be examining how good youth services are in a particular area, compared to 29% of those who are not. Similarly, of those who had accessed youth services 38% said young people should help to choose who runs the services in their local area compared to 24% of those who had not.

HOW SHOULD YOUNG PEOPLE HELP DECIDE WHICH SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE IN THEIR LOCAL AREA? BREAK DOWN BY 'ACCESSED YOUTH SERVICES'



The preferred method of engagement for young people was via survey, which more than three-fifths (61%) of those who thought young people should be involved in deciding which services are available in their local area chose. This was followed by focus groups and workshops with young people (45%) and social media (39%).

HOW SHOULD YOUNG PEOPLE HELP DECIDE WHICH SERVICES ARE AVAILABLE IN THEIR LOCAL AREAS?



More than a third of those (34%) who thought young people should be involved in decision-making processes favoured an approach of young representatives working with charities and community groups to plan youth services together. Similarly, one third of this group (33%) favoured the creation of an advisory board of young people being set up in each local area.

The least popular method of youth participation was the appointment of youth inspectors to check how good youth services are in the local area, which was selected by only a quarter of those who felt that young people should have a role in decision-making processes (25%).

Young people's preferred method of engagement shows the majority of young people preferred less formal methods of engagement that involve mass participation by young people, over a structured programme that could only facilitate a limited number.

“They get me out the house and being social.”

CRAIG, 12



CONCLUSIONS

Young people are too often left to sit on the sidelines as the adults around them make decisions that will fundamentally affect their lives without consulting them. The cuts to youth services are a prime example of this. Where young people and their needs have been cast aside as local authorities prioritise other areas of spending when being forced to manage their increasingly pressured budgets.

However, speaking to young people shows the value that accessing youth services bring to them, both in their current everyday lives but also in their future outcomes. It also reveals the level of need still present in young people and the numbers who are struggling without support.

This need and lack of support is having a very real consequence on young people today as they struggle to manage increasing mental health difficulties, violent crime and loneliness. This is why youth services which provide a safe space, a trusted adult and opportunities to enjoy being young are so important.

The country is waking up to the problem but awareness alone is not enough. Young people must once again be prioritised in funding decisions if the negative trends we see so often are to be reversed.

As a result, YMCA is calling on the UK Government to meet the following three tests in England:

- ▶ reinstate and ring-fence youth services funding to 2010/11 real terms levels
- ▶ provide universal youth services for all young people and targeted support for those who need it
- ▶ create a national youth services strategy

In addition, YMCA is calling on the Welsh Government to:

- ▶ reinstate and ring-fence youth services funding to 2010/11 real terms levels
- ▶ include minimum standards for universal and targeted youth services in statutory guidance
- ▶ develop a real partnership approach driven by the Welsh Assembly that puts third sector organisations at the heart of youth service provision
- ▶ develop a longer term 10-year vision for youth services in Wales

REFERENCES

- ▶ YMCA England and Wales, Out of Service, January 2020
- ▶ Unison, Youth services at breaking point, April 2019

CONTACT DETAILS

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this research, please contact the
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Names of young people used in this report have been changed.





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YMCA enables people to develop their full potential in mind, body and spirit. Inspired by, and faithful to, our Christian values, we create supportive, inclusive and energising communities, where young people can truly belong, contribute and thrive.

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