

# YMCA

Here for young people  
Here for communities  
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# ON THE ROPES

**The impact of local  
authority cuts to  
youth services over  
the past 12 years**

February 2024

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# Everyone should have a fair chance to discover who they are and what they can become.

## About YMCA

YMCA believes in fairness and opportunity. There are essential building blocks for a full and rewarding life: a safe home; acceptance; guidance; friendship; physical and mental health; academic support; employment skills; and access to real opportunities. Many young people have never known these things; other people have lost one or more as they grew up, but we all need them. All of us. At YMCA, we provide these critical foundations for a fresh, strong start for young people and a better quality of life in the community.

YMCA is the oldest charitable provider of youth services in England and Wales. Across the two countries, we provide a safe space for 35,000 young people through our extensive youth services offering. We run 216 youth clubs every week at 78 youth centres, as well as targeted and detached youth work to 7,000 young people on their terms, adapting to their needs and interests.

## About Vestey Holdings

This report is kindly sponsored by Vestey Holdings.

Vestey Holdings is a fourth-generation family business comprising 15 businesses operating predominantly in the food industry. Our core activity remains rooted in providing quality, affordable food globally.

We endeavour to inspire young people to achieve their potential and are committed to raising awareness of the challenges confronting young individuals. It's therefore with immense pride that we are sponsoring YMCA England & Wales' 2024 youth services spending research and report. Through this sponsorship, we aim to ensure governments and institutions receive the necessary facts and insights to make well-informed decisions that will positively impact youth services.

## Summary

- In real-terms, expenditure in England has fallen by 73% since 2010-11, and by 22% in Wales.
- Local authority expenditure on youth services has decreased in real-terms by £1.1bn in England and Wales since 2010-11.
- We estimate an annual real-terms increase of 3% in England to £421.5m in 2022-23, when isolating actual spend on youth services
- Youth services expenditure in Wales totalled £45.5m, broadly unchanged in real-terms from the previous year.
- Local authorities in England spent £47.79 per 5- to 17-year-old in England in 2022-23, while the amount in Wales was double that at £97.04.
- Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the number of local authority-run youth centres fell by 53% in England, from 917 to 427.
- In Wales, there has been a 62% reduction from 233 to 88 over the last 11 years.
- Since 2012-13, there has been a 35% reduction in full-time equivalent (FTE) youth workers employed by local authorities in England, and 36% in Wales.

## Introduction

This is the fifth annual report YMCA has published on local authority expenditure on youth services, and has often charted consistent declines in spending.

Despite these declines slowing in recent years, local authority-run youth services are a fraction of what they used to be.

Today, local authorities are under significant financial pressures. Since 2018, eight councils in England have issued a Section 114 notice, when expenditure will exceed available resources in a financial year, and in turn no further expenditure beyond funding statutory services is permitted. Four of these have been in the last year. One-in-five council leaders surveyed by the Local Government Authority in 2023 think it is very or fairly likely that their Chief Financial Officer will need to issue a Section 114 by the end of the 2024-25 financial year. Moreover, half of surveyed council leaders were not confident they would have enough funding to fulfil their legal duties in 2024-25.<sup>1</sup>

Children's social care is a sizeable pressure on local authorities' finances. As a result, general services for young people can often be compromised to ensure young people most in need can be kept safe and supported. A report from the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee on financial distress in local authorities has stressed that a fundamental review of local authority funding must take place following the next UK General Election, set to take place within the next 12 months.<sup>2</sup>

Since our last report in February 2023, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport has updated guidance for local authorities on statutory duty to provide leisure-time activities for young people, assessing the need for a sufficient local offer for all young people, provision of youth workers and suitable facilities, through collaboration with voluntary organisations, young people and communities.<sup>3</sup> However, guidance alone, without requisite increase in central funding for this provision in the coming years, leaves the extent to which youth services can be strengthened up for debate.

Ultimately, the right sounds are being made in delivering services for young people, but not always in a way that allows all young people to access them.

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<sup>1</sup> Local Government Association, [Section 114 fear for almost 1 in 5 council leaders and chief executives after cashless Autumn Statement](#), 6 December 2023

<sup>2</sup> House of Commons Levelling Up, [Housing and Communities Committee, Financial distress in local authorities, Third Report of Session 2023-24](#), 1 February 2024

<sup>3</sup> Department for Culture, Media and Sport, [Statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people's well-being](#), 27 September 2023

## Methodology

Local authorities have a statutory duty to report expenditure on education and services for children and young people to the Department for Education: this is done through annual Section 251 outturn statements. Line 3.5 of Section 251 guidance covers “Services for young people”, split into universal and targeted services, which are used as the basis of this research.<sup>4</sup>

This report follows YMCA’s previous *Out of Service, DEVALUED* and *Generation Cut* research, which investigated changes in local authority spending since 2010/11.<sup>5</sup>

The analysis was conducted by taking the individual datasets of local authority spending on youth services for each financial year since 2010/11 and then converting these costings into real terms to make them comparable with 2022/23. The financial and cost difference were then analysed at a national level (in this report, England and Wales have not been combined for an overall total, given the distinct spending patterns between the countries), and regional level.

In this report, data was taken from the Office for National Statistics’ estimates of the population for England and Wales from mid-2010 to mid-2022. Local authority population counts of 5- to 17-year-olds were compared against local authority spend on youth services to generate a per-head figure.

### Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme

As explored in our *Generation Cut* report (2023), we learned that a small number of local authorities had included Holiday Activities and Food (HAF) programme grants from the Department for Education under the 3.5 line of “Services for young people” in their Section 251 outturn statements.<sup>6</sup> We re-issued Freedom of Information requests to all local authorities in England to ask where their HAF spending was allocated. For those who had included HAF expenditure under 3.5, either the amount spent as detailed in local authorities’ respective HAF report or the amount of the grant was subtracted from the local authorities’ reported 3.5 gross expenditure as per their Section 251 outturn statement. We had responses from 127 local authorities (83%).

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<sup>4</sup> Department for Education, [LA and school expenditure – Financial year 2022-23](#), 25 January 2024

<sup>5</sup> YMCA, [Out of Service](#), January 2020

<sup>6</sup> YMCA, [Generation Cut](#), 28 February 2023

## Wales

Welsh local authorities provide more in-depth data to the Welsh Government in terms of expenditure and income, and accordingly these figures were analysed to garner what extra expenditure afforded.<sup>7</sup> Powys did not report its data for 2018/19 and so the figure from 2017/18 was used, and then adjusted using an average of the percentage change for all declared local authorities between 2017/18 and 2018/19. This equated to a 2% reduction on the 2017/18 figure.

## Real-terms increases

The spending in this research has been converted into real terms. This conversion takes the latest gross domestic product (GDP) deflators provided by HM Treasury and is used as a measure of general inflation in the domestic economy.<sup>8</sup> This allows a true reflection on how much spending in 2010 would be equivalent to now.

## Youth centres and youth workers

As part of Freedom of Information requests sent to local authorities on HAF, we asked councils to detail how many youth centres they ran, as well as the full-time equivalent number of youth workers employed from the financial years 2016-17 onwards. This was then combined with existing Freedom of Information data compiled by public service union Unison in 2019 in research on youth services cuts.<sup>9</sup> Unison had shared its raw data with YMCA to continue its research.

## Youth services definition

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. Local authorities have a duty to “secure services and activities for young people aged 13 to 19, and those with learning difficulties to age 24, to improve their wellbeing”.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Welsh Government, [Welsh youth service: Expenditure summary by local authority](#), 19 October 2023

<sup>8</sup> HM Treasury, [GDP deflators at market prices, and money GDP December 2023 \(Quarterly National Accounts\)](#), 8 January 2024

<sup>9</sup> Unison, [Youth services at breaking point](#), April 2019

<sup>10</sup> Department for Education, [Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities on Services and Activities to Improve Young People’s Well-being](#), June 2012

## England

### Minimal increases in spending in the last year

As reported in the Department for Education's local authority and school expenditure for the 2022-23 financial year, local authorities increased expenditure on youth services by 3% from 2021-22. This is a slight decline from the 8% annual increase reported between 2020-21 and 2021-22.

This is of course a positive to see local authorities slightly grow their expenditure, rather than the year-on-year cuts that we have seen previously – particularly at a time when a growing number of local authorities are either at the point of declaring bankruptcy, or close to it.

Yet, these small annual increases must be set in the appropriate context of the wider picture of youth services funding over the past 12 years. Taking into account 2022-23 spending levels, the figures still represent a £1.1bn real-terms reduction in local authority expenditure since 2010-11.

### Accounting for HAF

However, YMCA estimates that with all measures held equal, local authority expenditure on youth services in 2022-23 was lower than this reported amount. This is due to the Holiday Activities and Food programme (HAF), a £205m funding from Department for Education (DfE) to support disadvantaged children with access to sporting activities and food during school holidays. The programme was rolled out nationally in 2021 for children on free school meals.

Despite all local authorities receiving this grant, not all report the expenditure in the same way in their account filings to the DfE. Following the release of the local authority expenditure figures for 2021-22, YMCA issued Freedom of Information requests to local authorities with increases of 10% or more in youth services spend. For those who told us they filed their HAF grant under the “Services for young people” line, the amount of HAF grant spent was subtracted from these local authorities' declared expenditure. This was done to hold all local authorities' spend on youth services as equal, as the vast majority of councils had not reported this grant in this way.

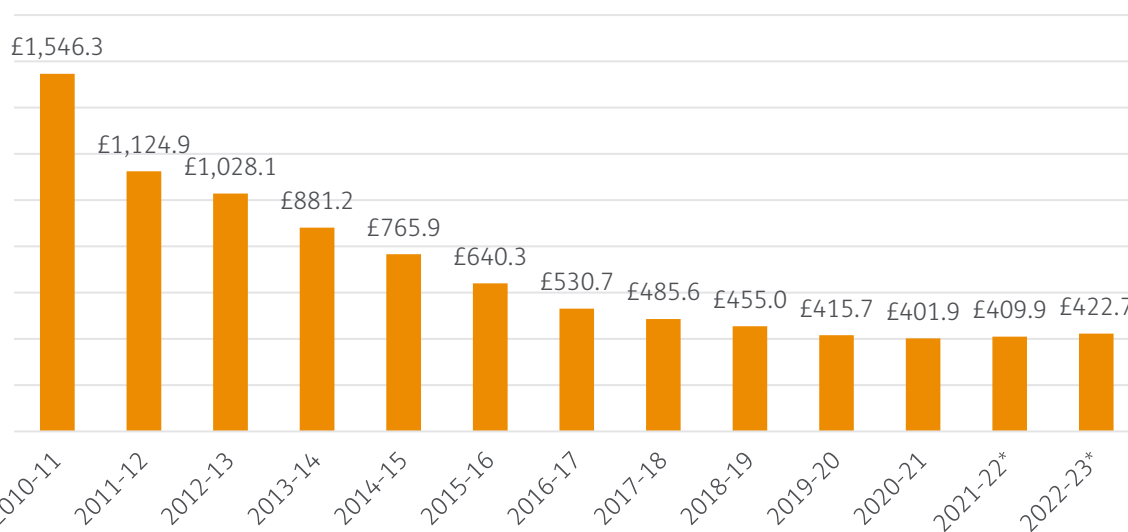
Prior to the Department for Education releasing expenditure figures for 2022-23, we sent FOIs to all local authorities requesting where they reported HAF in their financial outturn (Section 251) reports to the DfE. In Freedom of Information requests sent to local authorities in November 2023, 21% of all responding authorities included their HAF expenditure under “Services for young people”.

Based on the grant allocations for each local authority published by the Department for Education, as well as Holiday Activities and Food annual reports that these councils published on their websites, we subtracted the amount of funding spent on HAF from each local authority’s overall money spent on services for young people. Again, this was to ensure the reported expenditure was consistent across all councils.

## A small increase on a depleted base

Using these calculations, we estimate that local authorities spent £421.5m on youth services in 2022-23: a 3% real-terms increase from the previous year’s spending. Overall, this represents a 73% real-terms fall in local authority spending on youth services since 2010-11.

Total real-term spend by Local Authorities on youth services in England (£m) - 2010-11 to 2022-23



\*adjusted for reported HAF expenditure

Given the depths of reduction in local authority expenditure over the past 12 years, this very slight real-term increase does little to counteract the amount of funding lost.

## Regional variation

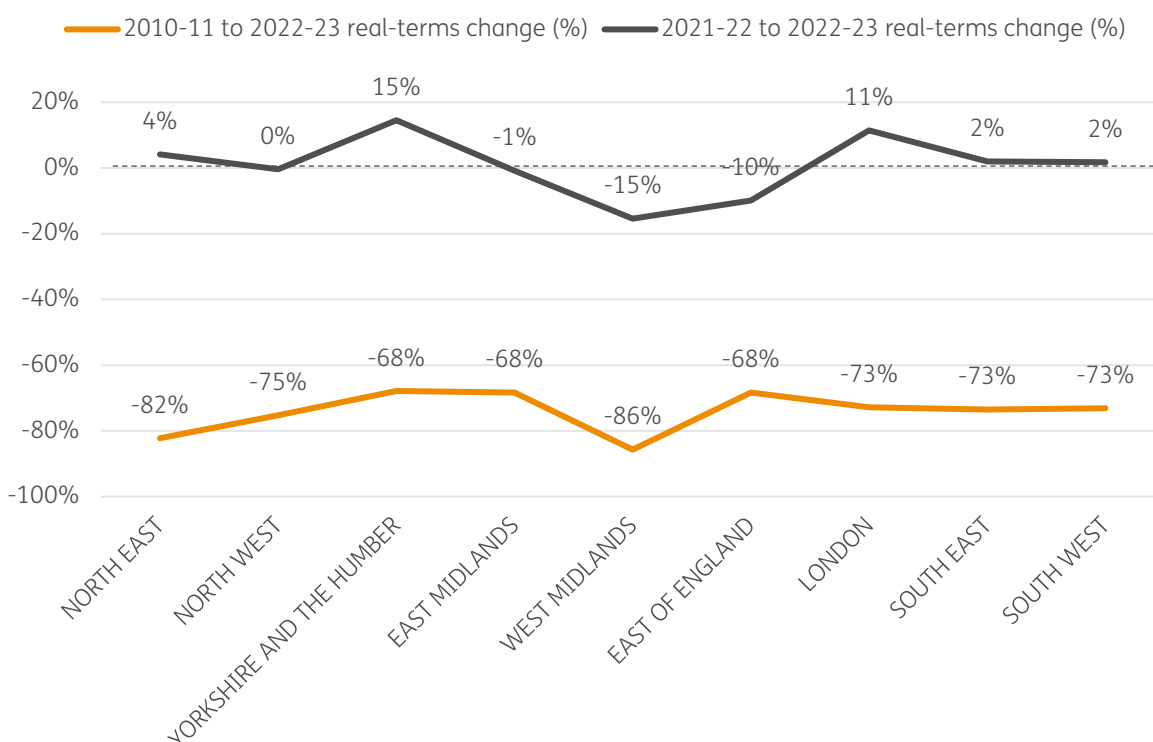
The rate of cuts has been fairly consistent regionally in England, although some have been sharper than others over the last 12 years. In the North East and West



Midlands for example, real-terms cuts over this time have exceeded 80%, while in Yorkshire and the Humber, East Midlands and East of England, cuts have been just over two-thirds (68%).

Annually however, there has been a far more varied picture, with Yorkshire and the Humber and London having double-digit real-terms increases in youth services expenditure. Regionally, further cuts have hit hardest in West Midlands (15%) and East Midlands (10%).

**Change in real-term local authority expenditure in youth services by region in England, 12-year and 1-year**



In September 2023, the Government updated its statutory guidance for local authorities in England on providing leisure-time activities and facilities for young people aged 13 to 19, and those with learning difficulties and disabilities aged 20 to 24.<sup>11</sup> This guidance suggests a needs assessment of young people in a local authority, determining a sufficient local offer, addressing barriers to participation, and coordinating and commissioning the offer.

It will be interesting to note a correlation in expenditure moving forward, although this guidance does not come with any significant additional funding to deliver these services.

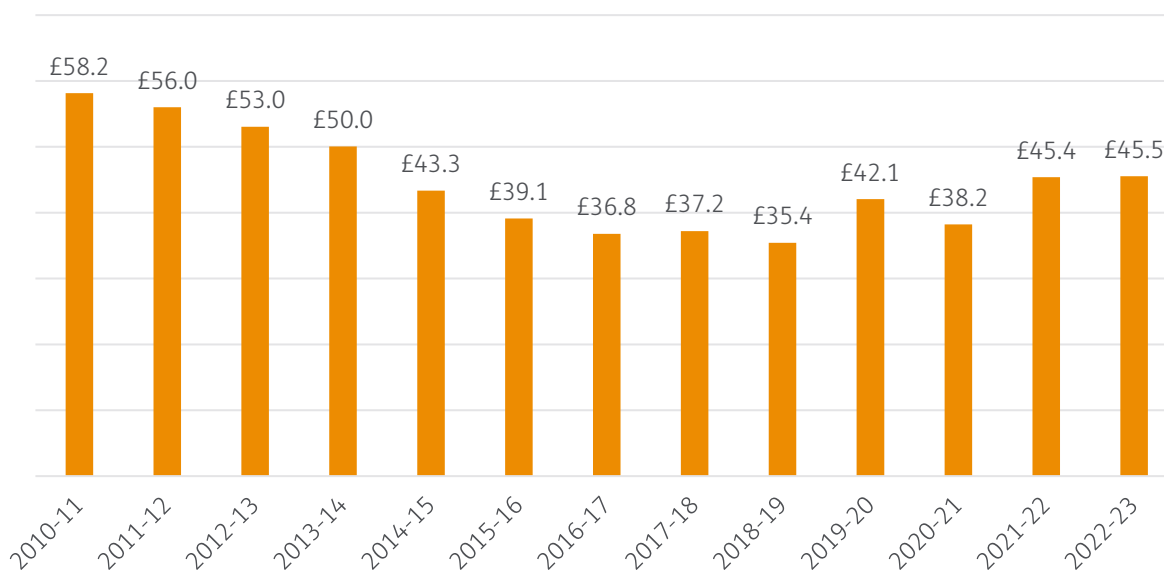
<sup>11</sup> Department for Culture, Media and Sport, [Statutory guidance for local authorities on services to improve young people’s well-being](#), 27 September 2023

## Wales

By comparison, Welsh local authority expenditure on youth services has not had the same level of decline as seen in England. Not only is this devolved spending, but Wales operates a rights-based approach to youth services for all young people. Furthermore, as part of its youth engagement and progression framework to support young people who are at risk of living in poverty throughout their lives, such as risk of homelessness or not being in employment, education or training (NEET), early engagement in those at-risk in youth services is a vital tenet of intervention.<sup>12</sup>

Local authority expenditure on youth services in 2022-23 totalled £45.5m, broadly unchanged in real-terms from the previous year.

**Total real-term spend by Local Authorities on youth services in Wales (£m) 2010-11 to 2022-23**



Aside from 2021-22, where many youth centres were unable to operate because of the Covid-19 pandemic and national lockdowns, local authority expenditure in Wales has on the whole increased in real-terms over the past several years.

<sup>12</sup> Welsh Government, [Youth Engagement and Progression Framework: Overview](#), 22 September 2022

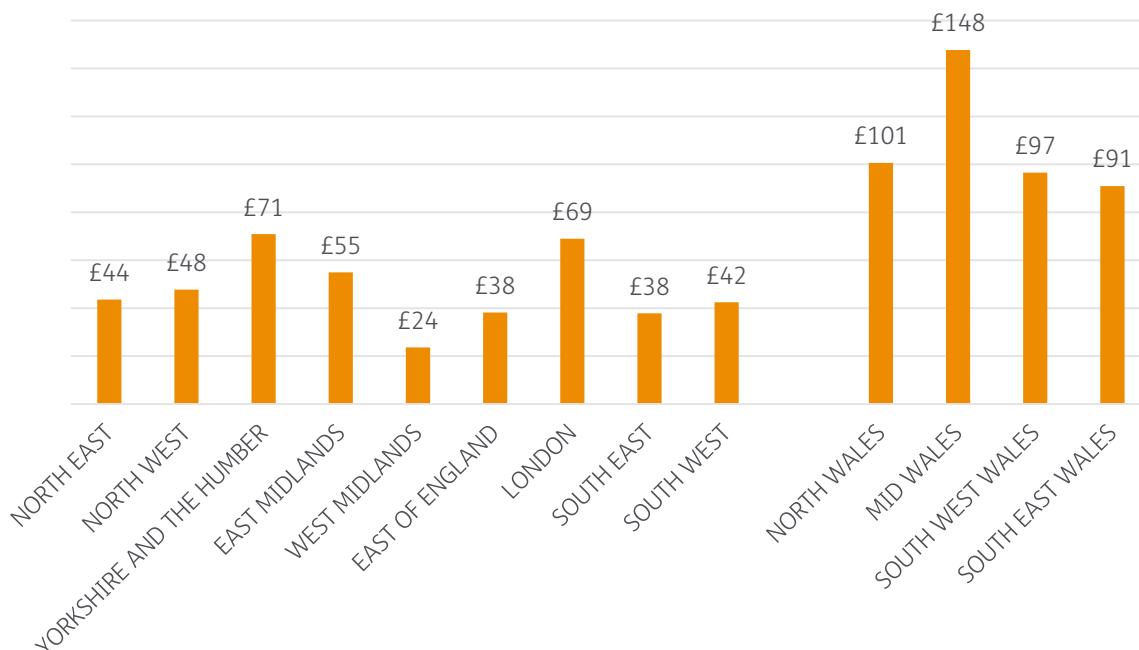
## Spend per head

To contextualise what these different funding levels mean, both nationally and for each local authority, for the last several years we have calculated the value of what local authority expenditure translates to for each child aged 5 to 17.

In 2022-23, spend per head on youth services in England was £47.79 – a 75% real-terms drop since 2010-11. This was a 1% increase year-on-year. Spend per head in Wales remained broadly the same at £97.04 this year, compared to last year’s real-terms figure of £97.38. It also represents a 24% real-terms drop since 2010-11.

Regionally, there is high variation between what is spent per young person. In 2022-23, the lowest spend per young person was in the West Midlands (£23.62), East of England (£38.21) and the South East (£37.86). The average was most pulled upwards by London (£68.96) and Yorkshire and the Humber (£70.89).

Spend per head (£) region in England and Wales, 2022-23

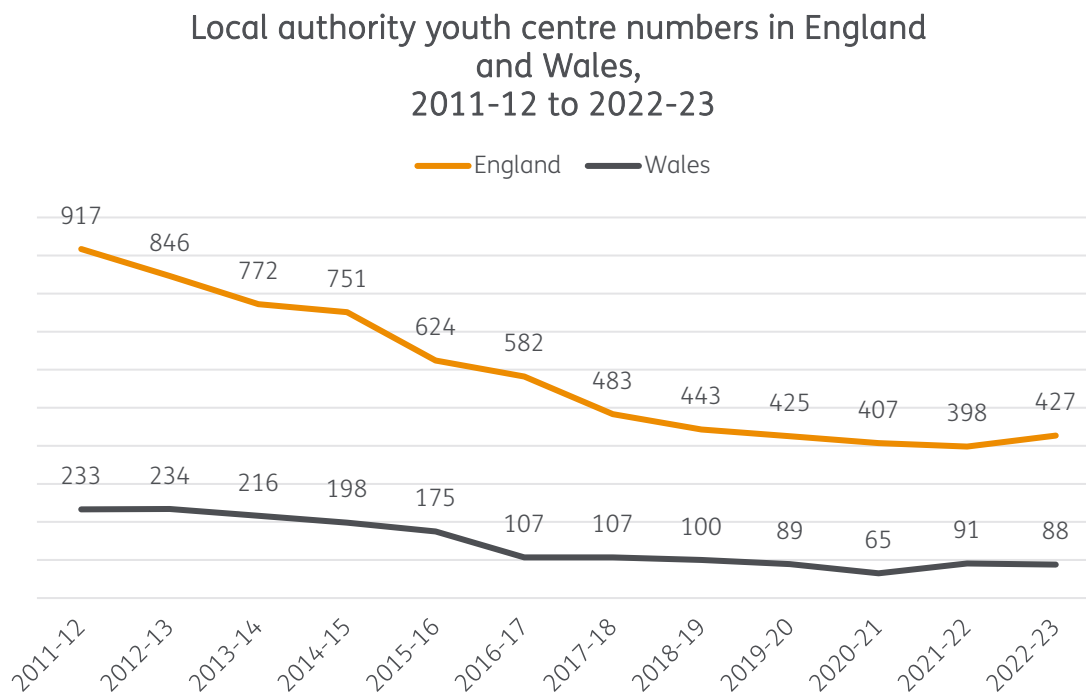


## Youth centre provision

As part of the Freedom of Information (FOI) requests sent to local authorities, we also asked how many council-ran youth centres they operated in the financial years from 2016-17 onwards, and the number of directly-employed youth workers. For Wales, this data is collected centrally and published by the Welsh Government.<sup>13</sup>

This data was then combined with previous FOI data that the public services union Unison had requested on youth centre closures.

Between 2011-12 and 2022-23, the number of local authority-run youth centres fell by 53% in England, from 917 to 427. In Wales, there has been a 62% reduction from 233 to 88 over the same timeframe.



It should be noted that many youth centres are operated by voluntary and charitable organisations, or additionally there are youth services that operate in community centres or halls, rather than dedicated youth centres. Sometimes it is the case that local authority-run youth centres are handed over to these organisations, or that local authorities have commissioned providers to run services. These will not be included in the above counts.

<sup>13</sup> Welsh Government, [Setting types by local authority and location/venue/setting](#), 19 October 2023

As part of our Freedom of Information request to councils in England, we also asked how many youth centres operated by other organisations were run within their local authority area in the financial years from 2016-17 onwards.

Amongst the local authorities who returned the FOI request, half (49%) did not hold this quantifiable data.

We are aware that a significant number of external youth centres in operation, but many local authorities do not have a full overview of the number of buildings run solely for the provision of youth services in their area.

For those that did, we see a gradual increase in non-local authority run youth centres over the last few years. For the local authorities that reported figures of operation of non-LA youth centres, increase in numbers in subsequent years did not typically correlate with declines in LA-operated provision.

While increase in non-LA provision may be the result of direct commissioning or funding, there are many youth services that are operating based on other grant funding or private provision. Unfortunately, the extent of this does not seem to be collected uniformly by local authorities.

As part of the statutory guidance on youth provision, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport suggests that as part of a needs assessment, “local authorities should also determine the current provision in their area, considering services that are run or funded by them as well as services run or funded by others”.<sup>14</sup> Given that data on number of youth centres is not held by a substantial portion of local authorities, it is imperative that this information is collected to understand what is currently delivered and accessible to young people, and to ensure that any future investment meets outstanding need.

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<sup>14</sup> *ibid*, DCMS, 27 September 2023

## Youth workers employed

The Freedom of Information request sent to councils also included the number of directly-employed full-time equivalent (FTE) youth workers to further round out the picture on what youth services expenditure was delivering. This was also information that Unison had previously collected, and so the results were combined. Similarly to youth centre operation, the number of youth workers employed is collected and reported centrally in Wales.<sup>15</sup>

Several local authorities disclosed as part of their FOI responses that similarly to youth centres, they have commissioned providers who employ youth workers themselves, rather than by the council directly. Others re-structured their youth provision into early help services for children and young people with varying degrees of needs, vulnerabilities and risks. This could include employing more youth support workers, rather than youth workers for universal youth services.

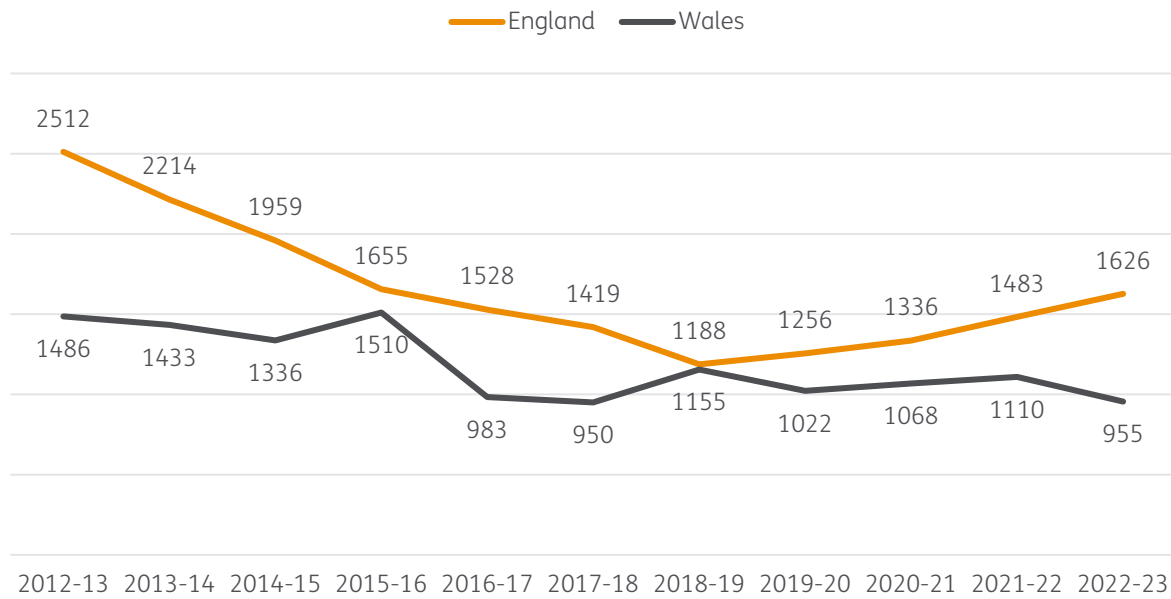
Since 2012-13, there has been a 35% reduction in FTE youth workers employed by local authorities in England. While the number of youth centres has been in steady decline over the last decade, the number of youth workers in England has crept up from the lowest point of 1,187.5 in 2018-19. Nevertheless, this is a loss of 885.6 FTE youth workers employed by councils over the past decade.

In Wales, there has been a more gradual decline since 2015-16, with the number of FTE local authority youth workers just shy of a decade-low at 955.4. This is a 36% reduction since 2012-13, representing 531 FTE youth worker jobs at councils lost.

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<sup>15</sup> Welsh Government, [Total staff by local authority and working hours](#), 19 October 2023

### FTE youth workers employed by local authorities in England and Wales, 2012-13 to 2022-23



As is the case for youth centres, there are many other organisations in the voluntary and third sector that employ youth workers that cannot be accounted for within this data.

## Recommendations

The increase in youth services expenditure in England is a positive step, but such piecemeal annual additional spending does little to counteract how severely funding has been cut since 2010-11.

We welcome the introduction of clearer guidance on the provision of statutory youth services, as introduced by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport in September. But without an increase in funding from central government, local authorities will be stretched to deliver any extra provision without making cuts in other places. Furthermore, as part of their needs assessment of provision in their area, local authorities must ascertain what exists already in terms of externally-run services and youth centres to act as a knowledge base for the best future investment that their communities need.

It is encouraging that the number of youth workers employed on stretched budgets is increasing, but this comes alongside the closure of local authority-run youth centres. In some places there has been a switch towards targeted early intervention models of youth services, to ensure those with the highest need have access to services. When local authorities have such severe budgetary constraints as we have seen in the last several years - with eight declaring effective bankruptcies since 2018 and may more with substantial debts - the universal youth services offering may be the easiest area in a children's services budget to reduce.

This should not be a choice councils have to take, and we implore that all young people should have year-round access to a safe space they can access easily, and with the support of trusted adults who can help them set solid foundations in their development.

Every young person should have access to youth services in their area, all year round. In order to achieve this, the YMCA General Election Manifesto 2024 sets out:

- We need to see long-term revenue funding for universal and open-access youth services, delivering for all young people, all year round.
- We need a cross-departmental strategy for youth services, which takes a long-term strategic vision for the provision of youth services around the country.
- There should be a duty placed on local authorities to ensure that all young people can access youth services in their area, with the support and resourcing from the government to enable it.



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## Get in touch

For any questions or support, please get in touch via email at [policy@ymca.org.uk](mailto:policy@ymca.org.uk) or by calling **020 7186 9500**.



# EVERYONE

**should have a fair chance to discover who they are and what they can become.**



Here for young people  
Here for communities  
Here for you

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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HOUSING

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