

‘Running on Reserves’

The impact of COVID-19 on London's youth sector.

Executive summary
June 2020

| About London Youth

London Youth is the largest membership body for youth work in London. We are a youth charity on a mission to improve the lives of young people in London, challenging them to become the best they can.

We directly develop the confidence, resilience and relationship skills of over 27,000 children and young people each year through our arts and culture, employability, outdoor education, sports, and youth social action programmes. In every borough of London, through programmes run every day and most evenings and services open to all, our members reach tens of thousands more.

To keep our diverse network of over 550 community youth organisations in London strong, we provide funded opportunities, training and professional development, specialist member networks on issues affecting young people, Quality Mark accreditation, a policy and influencing voice, and research that evidences the needs of the young people and the youth sector.

London Youth is here to support our members and the London youth sector during COVID-19. We will continue to adapt and find new ways to back the amazing work that youth organisations are doing to challenge and support young people in this difficult period. Find out more here: <https://londonyouth.org/news-and-updates/covid-19/>.

Foreword from our Chief Executive



London Youth has been around for 133 years and during that time has served and supported its members through an array of challenges. The COVID-19 pandemic, when taken together with the decade of painful austerity that preceded it and the unprecedented recession that will likely follow it, may prove to be one of the largest challenges that London's youth sector has ever faced.

Like most other charities, we've had to make significant changes to how we operate. I'm very proud, for example, that in the months since lockdown began we've been able to replace our entire face-to-face training calendar and provide virtual training to 499 youth professionals, which is double the number we trained in the previous quarter. Listening to our members has been vital; through our usual channels, through this survey and the one that preceded it, and through regular forums that allow youth professionals from different organisations to share and solve problems together. Listening has allowed us to shift our support for our members towards managing change and meeting these new challenges.

We're moving into a new phase of the response to COVID-19, which will bring whole new ways of operating for many community youth organisations. I am determined that London Youth will continue to listen, and that we will do everything we can to serve our members as they do their work, which is needed now more than ever.

We haven't forgotten about the systemic issues that affected the lives of young Londoners long before this current crisis. We can't let issues like serious violence, youth unemployment, racial injustice, and cold spots in youth provision around London slip down the priority list.

These challenges are daunting, but I am comforted and inspired by the dedication and determination of London's youth professionals to improve the lives of young people in any way that they can, no matter the challenges. Our sector's real resilience lies in its people.

Rosemary Watt-Wyness

Chief Executive

Recommendations

- 1) Community youth organisations need funding certainty over the next 6-12 months:**

We support the response by funders in London, which has rapidly and effectively distributed emergency funding for services to support young people and local communities. We have concerns about the financial sustainability of our members over the next 6-12 months, which aligns with IVAR's warning of a 'funding cliff edge' for charities as they reach the end of emergency funding.¹ We recommend that funders publish their mid-term funding plans to give charities some certainty.
- 2) Community youth organisations need unrestricted funds:**

We encourage funders to increase the number of unrestricted grants they make during this period, allowing community youth organisations the flexibility to cover core running costs and to adapt services to changing public health needs over the next year, as we move between COVID-19 alert levels.
- 3) Prioritise young people's mental health:**

The mental health of young people must be a priority in the response to the pandemic. Both young people's mental health and their access to specialist services were major concerns for youth organisations before this crisis and have only been exacerbated by it. Young people must be supported in the return to 'normal', particularly with the return of formal education, and to find help and appropriate socially distanced services.
- 4) Guidance for changing circumstances:**

There is an extremely clear case for Government guidance, both for young people and for the youth sector. As we move into different phases of the pandemic response, it is vital that youth organisations know what services they are able to deliver and how they can do so safely. Many community youth organisations, with limited resources and expertise in this area, will be significantly adapting their physical spaces and their operations in the coming months. We are concerned about the burden of doing so without specific guidance to call upon.

¹ IVAR (2020) [A Funding Cliff Edge? Briefing 4 on the challenges faced by VCSE leaders during the COVID-19 crisis](#)

| Key findings

The immediate response to the crisis by funders in London has been rapid and effective.

66% have received emergency funding

34% have received unrestricted funding

However, there are ongoing and significant financial impacts on youth organisations. A significant number of community youth organisations are facing a difficult financial future.

31% could struggle to operate within 6 months

27% have struggled with running costs

Young people have struggled during lockdown, with mental health and safety at home a particular cause for concern. Many of the most vulnerable have struggled to access support during lockdown, due to the 'digital divide' and difficulty accessing statutory services.

47% said less than half of their young people had everything they needed to engage, particularly computers, appropriate spaces, and sufficient data or Wi-Fi

73% said that mental health of their young people has been affected

54% are concerned their young people aren't in a safe environment during lockdown

There has been a large decrease in the number of youth workers and types of support available to young people, and challenges keeping young people engaged with virtual provision. Re-establishing services and rebuilding relationships will be a challenge for the sector for some time.

47% have furloughed staff

78% are regularly engaging with fewer young people than they were before lockdown

2% have made redundancies

There are significant challenges expected in the loosening of lockdown. Youth professionals expressed concern about the transition back to 'normal' and the return to formal education, access to services affected by the pandemic, and difficulty in reengaging with youth services.

There is particular concern about young people's physical health and mental health, their employment and financial situations, and young people experiencing serious violence as lockdown eases.

There are serious concerns about inequality and the disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 on communities. Young people from black, Asian, and minority ethnic backgrounds were disadvantaged in the labour market before this crisis, which has disproportionately affected their communities, and are likely to suffer the worst effects of the recession that follows it.

There is dissatisfaction with the guidance that has been available to the youth sector, both for young people and for youth organisations.

54% weren't confident about their young people being able to access and engage with Government guidance



Our concern is that whilst we are able to make [mental health] referrals, there is a complete lack of specialist services available to our young people.

We have seen an increased need for support for the young people we are supporting along with their family members around mental health.

Mental health, drugs and violent crime, education - then impacting employment. This is an emergency for young people, it will have a massive impact on their futures, we need to act now to support them in the best way we can.

We are trying hard to keep in touch with our young people - but it is difficult.

We have 3 months of reserves, which took us 8 years to build up.

We have fixed costs that are not currently funded.

The biggest challenges for young people to face are access to services and support, some of which will no longer exist after the lockdown period. With so many people being made redundant some of our young people fear that they will never gain employment with the increased competition in the labour market.

They don't really want to engage online because that is what they have been doing with their school. They are bored and agitated and want to be outside in the good weather. Many are frustrated as they don't have access to laptops/tablets to amuse themselves with.

Social Isolation is a major issue for young trans people that we work with in normal times... because of the lockdown, some of our young people are now more isolated than ever and some in unsafe homes, so their mental health is really suffering.



Employment, access to services and support, mental health - the lockdown has caused havoc with so many services and has amplified stresses that were already present pre-lockdown, so when many young people needing support post-lockdown we can envision that being a struggle.

Our organisation is fortunate in having the support of funders which have been very flexible and understanding of the effects of the crisis. This is helping in this emergency phase... We are concerned about the picture this time next year.

We're seeing high levels of anxiety and increased level of safeguarding issues related to emotional wellbeing.

We are based in the epicentre of Covid-19. All members have family or neighbours who have died. Most working parents are bus drivers, nurses or frontline staff.

Young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to be hardest hit, setting them further apart from peers. Ideally government will step in and create opportunities for young people to engage in something positive and build their skills rather than seeing large numbers of young people unemployed.

Haven't been satisfied with Government COVID-19 guidance. In order to resume our service, we need reliable information and recommendations on adequate personal protective equipment (except for social distance and hand washing), which will minimize the spread of the virus.

Not satisfied [with Government guidance], there hasn't been a clear direction and other sectors that make money for the economy have been prioritised.

| Key findings from our first survey

Between 26th March and 23rd April 2020, we surveyed 290 youth workers from 149 youth organisations in our network on the impact of COVID-19 on their youth organisation, how they were adapting, and what support they needed in the first weeks of lockdown.

33% were facing significant and immediate financial pressure

26% listed funding and income as their most immediate concern

5% were delivering face-to-face essential services to young people

63% were moving to some form of digital provision

You can read the full results of the survey by visiting our website:

<https://londonyouth.org/covid-19-financial-impact-on-our-members/>.

Get In touch

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