

“A Space of Our Own”

The role and value of youth organisations in strengthening communities



About London Youth

London Youth is a charity on a mission to improve the lives of young people in London, challenging them to become the best they can be.

We’ve been championing outstanding youth work for over 130 years. Across London, young people need opportunities outside education and the home to have fun with their friends, to be healthy and creative, to make positive change in their communities and to shape the kind of city they want for the future.

Together with our diverse network of over 370 youth organisations, we create opportunities for tens of thousands of young Londoners every year through our sports development, employability, youth social action, arts and outdoor education programmes.

In every borough of London, programmes are run by our members who, every day and most evenings, provide services which are open to all. They provide a safe place where young people can express themselves, receive the support they need and have fun.

With local authority funding greatly reduced and activities for young people being lost as a direct result, it is more important than ever for us to support our network of members, youth workers and the young people they support.

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Foreword

Recently I shared a stage with an impressive young man, Tariq, at a conference on the future of youth services. Tariq is a member of our youth advisory board.

And, as Tariq shared his thoughts on the role that his youth organisation had played in shaping his life, what struck me most was his straight-forward assertion that *“it’s simple to get young people involved in their communities”*.

Tariq went on to explain that *“everyone has their own talent, a skill they enjoy and a niche that they belong to”*. He emphasised the importance of investing in young people’s passions and interests as a way of strengthening communities and supporting young people on positive pathways.

Yet, when we talk about communities, we can get caught up in describing them as if they are entities in themselves. Tariq’s comments reminded me that communities are made up of individuals, that connections are forged through shared interests and activities, and that we need to invest in individuals in order to strengthen communities. We also need to invest in the organisations – the people – supporting young people.

At London Youth, we represent a diverse network of over 370 youth organisations, who collectively support thousands of young people across our capital city. That’s an amazing resource that we need to value, celebrate and help to thrive.

We undertook this research because we felt that our members have an important role to play in strengthening communities. Many of them have a long history of working within a particular community. All of them play a key role in supporting individuals who make up London’s diverse communities. We wanted to understand for ourselves the different ways in which our members are working with young people to make them feel a part of their community and the roles they play in bringing communities together. We are pleased to be able to share what we have learned with you through this report.

A young person we spoke to told us how important it was that young people in his area have “a space of our own” and that this gave them a sense of belonging in their community. That conversation inspired the title of this report.

We aspire to London being a place where every young person feels connected to their community. A place where they feel both safe and valued. This is all the more pressing at a time when violence on the streets is on the rise and communities feel increasingly fragmented. For Tariq, his youth organisation is a family and a place of emotional and physical safety. It has shocked me in this research, and other conversations, how often young people talk about their youth project in relation to physical safety.

Youth organisations are a critical part of our community infrastructure and we need to draw on the wealth of knowledge, expertise and strong relationships that they hold in responding to the issues that our communities are currently facing. Yet we also cannot overlook the significant impact which local authority funding cuts have had on their sustainability and the growing demands on them as a result of reduced public spending on statutory services.

Collectively, we can ensure London’s communities thrive. But it will take a partnership between the youth sector, funders and policy makers to ensure this can happen. We have purposefully chosen not to set out recommendations in this report, but instead highlight areas where we think our practice can be improved or changes to strengthen the youth sector and London’s communities.

Rosemary Watt-Wyness
Chief Executive, London Youth



Executive Summary

About the research

We wanted to understand how our members are working in their own communities (meaning the local, geographical area) and the benefits this has, not just for young people, but also for the wider community. As case studies, we used ten youth organisations that are members of London Youth, work in different parts of London and vary in the types of services they offer and the young people that they support. We interviewed a youth professional from each organisation and trained five youth researchers to visit the same organisations to get the views of 22 young people about their local community and their youth organisation.

Findings

Creating connections

The youth organisations aimed to create environments in which the power dynamic between young people and others in the community, such as older volunteers, was more equal than it might be in other situations. This contrasts with ‘social integration’, which focuses on bringing different groups together, regardless of the context of the interaction. It was especially important to provide opportunities for young people to establish new and different relationships for those who may have had negative experiences with others in their community in the past, such as black and minority ethnic young people or young refugees and asylum seekers. Ultimately, organisations achieved this by creating fun, positive environments and an attitude of ‘everybody’s welcome’.

Sense of belonging

The young people spoke of their youth organisations resembling a family, and one which constituted its own community within their wider community. The key factor facilitating a sense of belonging was young people’s ability to have a feeling of ownership over both the physical space of the organisation and the activities they took part in. Youth workers spoke of how this sense of belonging extended outwards to the wider community, as young people felt they had a space to call their own in their local area. However, youth workers raised concerns for the future due to the lack of value placed on community assets and increasingly unaffordable housing across London. It was felt that not only could these factors damage a young person’s sense of belonging, but increasing transience could discourage them from getting involved and making connections in their community in the first place.

Physical safety

A common theme throughout the research was the importance of young people feeling safe within their community. During interviews, young people spoke passionately about knife crime and gang violence in their area, whether this was something that directly affected them or they were aware of from the media. Many young people made explicit references to wanting to reduce violence in their local areas. For them, their youth organisations played a key role in providing a place of safety.

Recognising and celebrating difference

We found that enabling young people to maintain their cultural identities, rather than setting them aside, actually supports them to make new connections. Young people placed a high value on being able to be themselves

and to express their cultural identity, and this can be an essential building block in making connections within the wider community. This can involve activities around the cooking of local dishes, traditional dance workshops or celebrating a national day. It can also involve allowing young people to spend time with people from similar backgrounds, as well as encouraging young people from different backgrounds and cultural groups to mix.

Developing the skills and confidence to get involved in their communities

Young people proudly detailed the skills and attitudes they have developed through attending their youth organisations. These skills included learning to be more open-minded, developing critical thinking or simply building the confidence to be involved in the community. Some of the youth organisations ran focused social action programmes to develop young people’s skills and abilities, providing them with a voice and the opportunity to explore thoughts and ideas on social issues that affect them and their community. Youth workers spoke of the importance of helping young people to see the role they can play in bringing about change, both now and in the future.

Known and trusted within the community

A clear thread throughout the research was that the work of youth organisations is much broader than supporting young people, with the organisations often accessed by the wider community. The youth organisations we spoke to were well-known to and well-connected with individuals, schools, councils and other community groups. They were therefore able to play an important role in signposting and facilitating access to services for people in the area, something which built trust with the wider community. It was also apparent that these youth organisations had a wealth of knowledge on overcoming barriers to community engagement,

particularly for young people. This knowledge is clearly an important resource to draw upon in strengthening London’s communities.

Conclusions

Our research found that youth organisations have an important role in strengthening the communities of London, a role which they perform for and with young Londoners. Youth organisations are able to bring people together and provide space for connections and relationships to form. This relies on having a space where young people feel safe, feel like they belong and feel that they have some ownership and control. Youth organisations allow young people to recognise and celebrate cultural difference and to develop the skills and confidence to get involved in their communities. Through these activities, professionals in youth organisations become known and trusted figures able to provide benefits to members of the community far beyond their official roles.

Our research shows that youth organisations can support individuals to feel that they have a place within a community and can foster connections across a community. If properly supported, these organisations are a valuable social asset that can be used to strengthen communities within London.

On page 24, you can find principles of good practice and the best ways to strengthen or develop your existing practice. Our research highlighted examples of good practice for youth organisations working to help young people feel part of their community and to bring different parts of the community together.

On page 27, you can find our key reflections and conclusions for funders and commissioners, local authorities and the Mayor of London and Greater London Authority.

Introduction

This section introduces why we have undertaken this research and what we wanted to achieve.

Over the last year, there has been significant attention on London’s communities. The Mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, followed up his promise to “tighten the bonds between Londoners from different backgrounds” and “encourage people to build connections with their fellow Londoners”¹ with the publication of his strategy for social integration.² This sits alongside a national focus on integration as the Government consults on its Integrated Communities Green Paper.³

We saw a very powerful example of a community coming together in a time of need, following the tragic Grenfell Tower fire. Yet this also shone a light on how individuals within the same community felt that their concerns and wishes had been ignored. Research that we previously conducted at London Youth brought home to us how acutely aware young people are of the areas where they live becoming gentrified, and their perception that this isn’t for the benefit of existing communities, or for them.⁴ In response to the feeling that communities are coming under strain, there has been increased

interest in the structures that support cohesion. There has been growing awareness of what it would mean for communities to be powerful in the future,⁵ as well as greater recognition of the importance of small to medium-sized charities in responding to local need.⁶

At London Youth, we have a long history of working with our members to support young people to develop and deliver youth-led community projects.⁷ Yet, this is often only one part of a much broader role that youth organisations can play in supporting young people to feel a part of their community and in bringing communities together.

We wanted to understand more about how London Youth’s members are working in their communities and the benefits of this. We undertook this research to develop our own and others’ understanding of the role and value of youth organisations in strengthening communities.

About the research

This report draws on research carried out with ten youth organisations who are all members of London Youth. We sought to reflect a range of different provision within the research. Organisations were drawn from across London and varied in terms of the type of services they offer, and young people they support. Some have a mission focused solely on young people (although as we found out, they often work with parents, carers and other stakeholders in the community); others are much broader in their focus, and are not solely ‘youth organisations’, but work with young people as one of a number of groups of individuals.

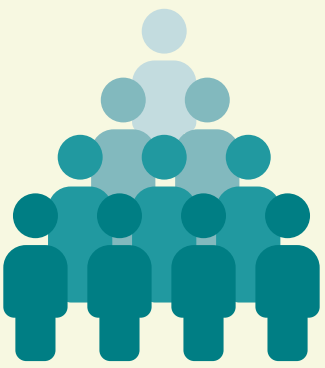
A note on terminology

We have used the term ‘youth organisations’ throughout the report to refer to organisations who work with young people. This includes organisations who have a specific focus on young people, as well as those who work with young people as one of a number of groups of individuals.

We conducted interviews with youth professionals at each of the ten youth organisations. Their roles ranged from frontline practitioners, such as Project Officers and Youth Workers, to Directors and Chief Executives. The aim of these interviews was to provide insight into the different ways that youth organisations work within their communities, and the benefits for young people and the wider community.

Young researchers, trained and supported by London Youth, also visited each organisation to talk to the young people who take part in the activities and services they provide. During these interviews, young people were asked about their local communities, the youth organisation and what helps them feel part of their community.

Overall, we gathered information from:

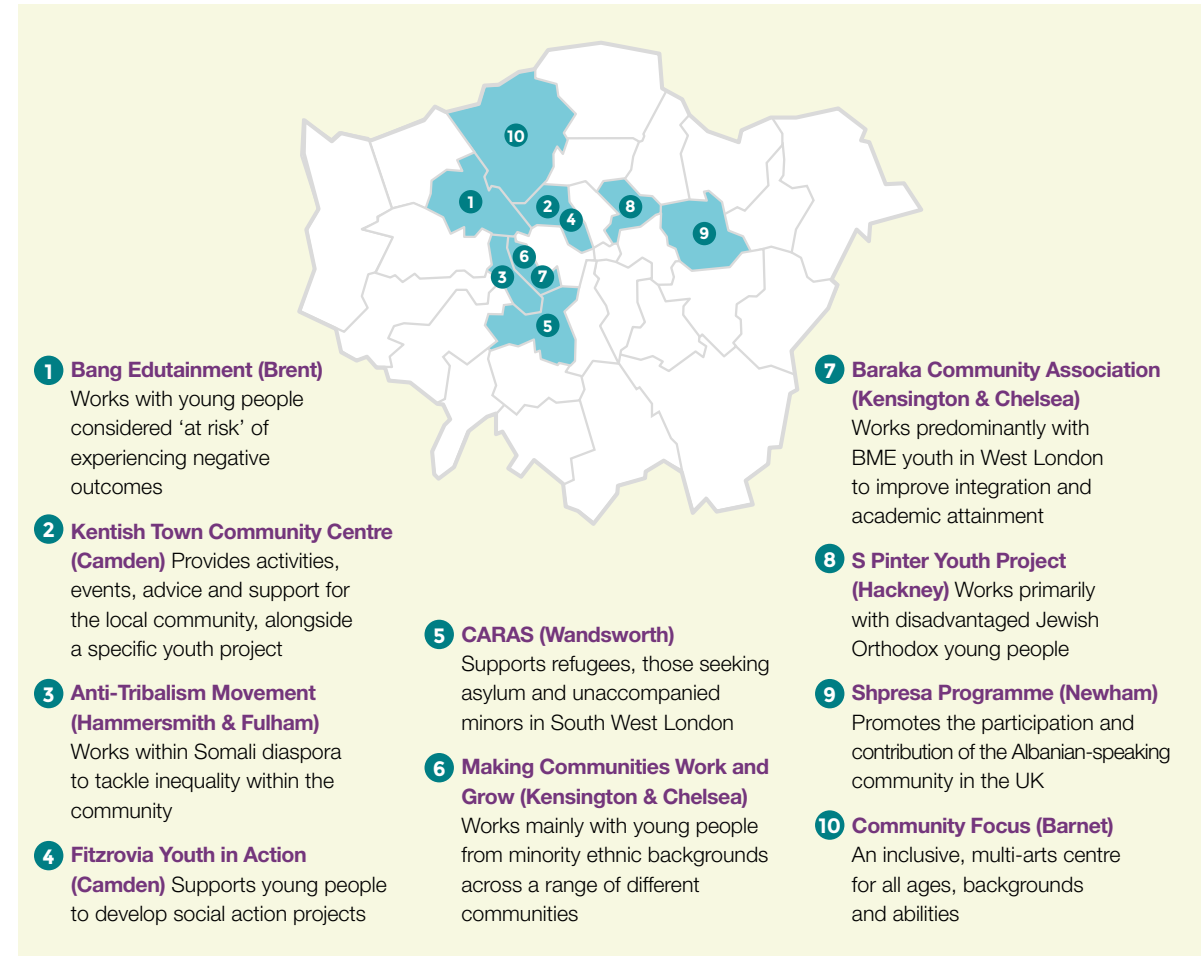


**10 youth professionals
working for 10 different
organisations, located across
8 London boroughs**



**22 young people from
14 boroughs, interviewed
by a team of 5 peer
researchers**

¹ Greater London Authority (2016) *Mayor pledges to make social integration a ‘core’ priority*.
² Greater London Authority (2018) *All of Us: The Mayor’s Strategy for Social Integration*.
³ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2018) *Integrated Communities Strategy green paper*.
⁴ London Youth (2017) *Young People’s Capital of the World? Understanding and responding to young Londoners’ changing needs*.
⁵ Local Trust and IVAR (2018) *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power*.
⁶ Lloyds Bank Foundation (2018) *The value of small: In-depth research into the distinctive contribution, value and experiences of small and medium-sized charities in England and Wales*.
⁷ See <http://londonyouth.org/what-we-do/youth-social-action/> for more information on how London Youth supports young people to become active leaders at their youth organisations and in the community.



Peer researcher

David Kennedy, 18, was one of the peer researchers who conducted the interviews for this report. He interviewed young people in Camden and Hammersmith & Fulham about their experience of their youth organisations and how these organisations strengthened the local community. As a peer researcher, David experienced a real insight into the state of local youth services. David attends Creative Opportunities youth organisation in North London. He is a graduate of our City Leaders and Future Leaders programmes and a member of Dare London, London Youth’s youth advisory board. David has recently completed an internship and plans to study economics and politics at university. David believes passionately in young people and says, “Despite the significant problems young people face, they have the potential to triumph.”



What do we mean by community?

Primarily when we refer to community in this report, we mean the local, geographical area in which each youth organisation is based, and the people who live in that area. This definition was informed by previous research that indicated that young people tended to view their local geographical area as their community.⁸ Having a relatively narrow definition also provided a useful starting point for our peer researchers to begin a conversation with young people about their community, whilst also providing space for them to speak about other communities that they felt a part of.

Whilst we generally use the term ‘community’ to refer to a group of people united geographically, some of the organisations who participated in the research serve a specific community within a geographical area. This includes the Somali diaspora, the Haredi Jewish community and the Albanian community. Where relevant, we refer to cultural communities when discussing specific groups that identify with each other culturally.

⁸ This decision was informed by the research that fed into the following publication: London Youth (2017) *Young People’s Capital of the World? Understanding and responding to young Londoners’ changing needs.*

The Context: Young people and their communities

This section provides an overview of key issues affecting London’s communities, and what is already known, to help situate our research within a wider context. We have chosen to focus specifically on issues relating to community integration, participation and belonging, as well as highlight broader, structural issues that are affecting London’s communities.

We have included additional information on youth violence (see box on page 11) as a particularly prominent current issue, and one that was frequently referred to by young people throughout the project.

The views of young people

The Government’s Community Life Survey paints a mixed picture in relation to London’s communities:⁹

- **83% of young Londoners (16–24-year-olds) feel that their local area is a place where people from different backgrounds get on well together** – this is higher than any other region and compares favourably to the average for young people in England (81%).
- **33% of Londoners feel they can influence decisions in their local area.** Whilst this is higher than any other region in England, which averages 28% but ranges from 21%–30%, a third of the population feeling able to influence decisions certainly does not indicate a strong sense of empowerment. Most worrying is that within this young Londoners were significantly less likely to say that they can influence decisions in the local areas than other age groups, with only 23% of 16–24-year-olds agreeing.
- **London also has the lowest proportion of people who say that they feel they strongly belong to a neighbourhood (56% compared to national average of 61%).** 48% of 16–24-year-olds in London feel they strongly belong to their neighbourhoods, a figure that has steadily increased since 2013.
- However, within the Community Life Survey data there are also some interesting variations in relation to young people that reported taking part in a youth organisation in the last year – although the sample size is too small to be statistically robust so is provided here as an illustration, rather than evidence.
- **48% of 16–24-year-olds in London reported they feel they strongly belong to their neighbourhoods** – however this figure rose to 53% for those that had taken part in a youth organisation.
- Survey respondents were asked “How often do you feel lonely?” Of the 16–24-year-old respondents in London that had taken part in a youth organisation, **6% reported never feeling lonely**, compared to 14% for those that did not attend.
- Survey respondents were asked “Is there anyone who you can really count on to listen to you when you need to talk?” Of the 16–24-year-old respondents in London that had taken part in a youth organisation, **84% responded “yes, more than one person”** compared to 78% of those that did not attend.

⁹ Cabinet Office (2017) *Community Life Survey 2016–17*. NB: figures included here are unweighted averages from the data for consistency with drill-downs

In 2017, we carried out our own survey of over 1,000 young people aged 15–25 across London.¹⁰ Two findings stood out in relation to young people and their communities:

- The majority of young people **(71%) want to make a positive contribution to their community**
- **Only 14% of young people feel connected to their local community.** Interestingly, girls feel this disconnect more acutely, with 31% of girls not feeling a connection with their local community compared to 25% of young males.

The forces destabilising communities

Poverty, unstable housing and reduced investment in social infrastructure are all having a significant impact on communities across the UK.¹¹

These issues are felt particularly acutely within London. London is a city in which 2.3 million people, or 27% of Londoners, live in poverty (after housing costs are taken into account), significantly higher than the average for England.¹² Of those living in poverty, 58% are living in a working family and more live in the private rented sector than any other type of housing. The main factor explaining this disparity in poverty rates is housing costs.

Our previous research has demonstrated that young people were acutely aware of disparities in wealth across their boroughs and the impact of regeneration on the areas in which they live.¹³ Many young Londoners were concerned that the lack of affordable housing and high living costs would have negative impacts on their lives. The most frequently heard concern was of having

to move – out of the local community, or out of London entirely.

These forces represent looming challenges to the physical and social continuity of London’s communities as places change and people move. The social infrastructure, defined as those “activities, organisations and facilities supporting the formation, development and maintenance of social relationships in a community”,¹⁴ which might be expected to ameliorate the effects of these forces, has also suffered. The combination of public sector cuts and market forces has contributed to a reduction in the social infrastructure that can support strong and well-connected communities.

For many of the youth organisations participating in this research, their role in strengthening communities, the opportunities that this presents and the challenges they are facing were often tied up in the broader context of how funding for the youth sector has changed in recent years.

Since 2011, many areas of London have seen significant reductions in local authority funding for youth services. Recent figures published by London Assembly Member Sian Berry show that between 2011/12 and 2017/18, £39 million was cut from local authority youth service budgets across London (around 44% of previous budgets), and 81 youth centres or youth projects were closed.¹⁵

The changing role of local authorities in delivering, funding and commissioning youth provision has meant a greater burden on voluntary organisations in the youth sector. The voluntary youth sector has had to rely on a more diverse range of funding, which has translated to smaller and shorter-term funds being available and a trend towards targeted interventions rather than preventative, universal provision youth work.¹⁶

These challenges have made it harder for youth organisations and community groups to keep the lights on. The core costs of running an organisation, such as employing staff and maintaining facilities, have become increasingly difficult to fund. Yet, without meeting the minimum needs of an organisation, this social infrastructure is not available when those in the community require it most.

Violence and physical safety

Whilst we did not set out to focus specifically on serious youth violence or young people’s feelings of safety in their community, this was a recurring theme throughout the research and one which clearly has an impact on young people’s experiences within their communities.

Throughout 2017 and 2018, there has been an increasing amount of media and public attention on young people as the perpetrators and victims of violence, particularly knife-related deaths. Reliable statistics are difficult to obtain due to definitional issues, but there were 8,151 victims of serious youth violence between January and December 2017. This represents a significant rise on the 6,278 and 6,930 in the same periods for 2015 and 2016 respectively.¹⁷ Knife crime offences (including those committed by adults) have declined since the high point of Q2 2017/18, but are still up 4.6% on the same period last year.

This is a prominent issue for young people and for our members, many of whom have been affected directly or indirectly by serious youth violence. When we asked young people, 50% identified safety and policing as the worst thing about London.¹⁹

The Youth Violence Commission’s recently released Interim Report has made explicit the connection between reforming youth provision and reducing youth violence in the UK.²⁰ The report notes the negative effects of changes to how youth provision is structured, funded and delivered. In particular, they note the increasing inaccessibility of youth provision run from centralised hubs, the move away from universal programmes to targeted ones and the difficulty small local charities face in attracting funding.

Despite the commitment of people and organisations who work to stabilise them, London’s communities are facing countervailing forces from poverty, unstable housing and reduced investment in social infrastructure.



¹⁰ London Youth (2017) *Listening to Young Londoners*. NB: Unpublished data, available on request.

¹¹ Local Trust and IVAR (2018) *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power*.

¹² Trust for London (2017) *London’s Poverty Profile*.

¹³ London Youth (2017) *Young People’s Capital of the World? Understanding and responding to young Londoners’ changing needs*.

¹⁴ Local Trust and IVAR (2018) *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power*.

¹⁵ Sian Berry AM (2018) *London’s Lost Youth Services 2018*. NB: Data on youth centre closures is based on comparable data from 25 councils.

¹⁶ London Youth (2017) *Young People’s Capital of the World? Understanding and responding to young Londoners’ changing needs*.

¹⁷ Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) (2018) *Gang Crime and Serious Youth Violence Dashboard*.

¹⁸ Mayor’s Office for Policing and Crime (MOPAC) (2018) *Quarterly Update Performance Report Q4 2017/18*.

¹⁹ London Youth (2017) *Listening to Young Londoners*. NB: Unpublished data, available on request.

²⁰ Youth Violence Commission (2018) *Interim Report – July 2018*.

Key Findings

This section summarises the findings from the interviews with young people and youth professionals at the ten youth organisations. The findings are presented according to the main themes that emerged.

Creating connections

Much of the recent focus on communities has been seen through the lens of social integration.²¹ Previous work on this topic emphasises the importance of ‘meaningful social mixing’ wherein positive interaction between people from different groups grows trust and decreases prejudice.^{22, 23} Typically, these groups sit across race, age and class lines.

At the most basic level, the youth organisations we interviewed are providing opportunities for young people to meet and positively interact with people that they may not ordinarily get a chance to meet. Organisations provided examples of events that they ran where different members of the local community were invited to participate, or of engaging volunteers from a range of different backgrounds.

However, the examples often went beyond simply bringing different groups together. There was an important element of creating opportunities where the power dynamic was more equal than it might be in other situations, or where individuals were coming together on different terms. One organisation talked about the benefits of young people taking the lead in organising events within the community, and the positive impact that this has on local residents’ perceptions of young people. We also heard from an organisation which works primarily with young people from black and minority ethnic backgrounds and has found that having local volunteers from a range of backgrounds provided opportunities for young people to have direct, positive contact with groups that they normally only encounter in positions of power.

“I think some of the kids might not have much contact with White British people. They tend to be people from the council, social workers, police. It’s always someone you’re not going to be friends with – they’re not going to be your mate or someone you can have a conversation with as equals. A lot of our teachers, a lot of our volunteers [...] are from different walks of life. People they might not meet. Everyone’s equal. It cuts through what might be experienced as a gap. By giving people direct contact, it breeds confidence and they feel part of things more than they otherwise would.”

Youth professional

Providing opportunities for young people to establish new and, critically, different relationships with other members of the community was considered to be crucial for young refugees and asylum seekers, who have often had negative experiences that undermine their ability to feel part of their new community.

“

Having someone you can trust, who is always there for you, who will not judge you, will not question you and will not ask your story again and again... It rebuilds that trust in other people, getting a tiny bit of that positive adult presence in their life.”

Youth professional

In addition to building connections – and in many cases trust – between groups that differ in terms of age or race, we also heard examples from two organisations who were seeking to bring groups together within the same cultural or religious community where there is some form of segregation or discrimination. Both Anti-Tribalism Movement and S Pinter Youth Project actively seek to bring together groups of young people from different parts of their respective communities, regardless of the ‘tribes’ or ‘sects’ that they and their families may be affiliated with. Anti-Tribalism Movement is working in this way within the Somali community, and S Pinter within the Haredi Jewish community. These organisations work hard to foster an inclusive environment that removes existing barriers or discrimination within and between these communities.

Across all the examples we saw of youth organisations fostering connections between different groups within a community, a common thread was the importance of providing a safe and inclusive space for this to happen. Organisations described working hard to create

a fun, positive environment where everybody gets the chance to experience success, regardless of ability. This was underpinned by an attitude of ‘everybody’s welcome’, an approach that is then role-modelled through their interactions with others.

Sense of belonging

For many of the young people interviewed by our peer researchers, the youth organisation they attend provides them with a community within their wider community. They frequently used the term ‘family’ to describe the relationships between themselves, their peers and the youth workers and volunteers who support them. This is also picked up on through the Community Life Survey, with more young people who attend a youth organisation feeling they strongly belong to their neighbourhoods than those who do not.²⁴ It is clear that for young people, a sense of belonging is an important outcome in and of itself and one which can act as a key stepping stone in the development of other skills and capabilities.

A contributing factor to young people feeling a sense of community and belonging within their youth organisations comes from their ability to have a sense of ownership both over the physical space and the activities they take part in. This took a number of different forms: from dedicated approaches to involving young people in decision making, even up to board level, to simply allowing young people to participate in activities on their own terms. There were also examples of organisations working in the wider

²¹ Greater London Authority (2018) *All of Us: The Mayor’s Strategy for Social Integration*.

²² Social Integration Commission (2015) *Kingdom United? Thirteen steps to tackle social integration*.

²³ Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government (2018) *Integrated Communities Strategy green paper*.

²⁴ Cabinet Office (2017) *Community Life Survey 2016–17*. NB: Figures included here are unweighted averages from the data for consistency with drill-downs.



community to protect and carve out spaces for young people, sometimes against the backdrop of hostility from local residents:

“That is part of it, making them feel that this is your area too. You’re not outsiders coming in, you’re part of this community... I think the same thing applies everywhere where there’s open space, where young people hang out... Where young people are choosing to hang out, it belongs to them and they need to be made to feel that.”

Youth professional

This feeling of ownership is likely to be all the more important at a time when there are fewer facilities available to young people. This applies not only to the closure of youth spaces but also to the lack of open, and green, spaces in London where young people feel that they can spend time safely. Young people and youth workers also spoke of the ‘judgement’ that some young people feel they receive from the public when they spend time in open places. This creates an environment where young people feel they have no space to call their own in their community and can lead to animosity between members of the community.

Youth workers identified how a sense of belonging within the youth organisation can then extend out towards a sense of belonging in the wider community, when young people feel that they have their own space within the local area. However, youth workers were also increasingly concerned about the lack of value being placed on community assets and the message that this sends to young people and the rest of the community.

“In terms of the local community, it would be very important for people to see that things don’t get closed down and things are valued and that there’s more value given to community assets and things that benefit everyone... I’ve lived in that estate for a few years and that estate was typical. It was run down, just being run into the ground and left to rot. You couldn’t get anything changed, anything done... [They’re saying] ‘This is not valuable, you’re not valuable and we’re going to let this rot and sell it off’. That’s been going on for the last few years around here... Everything is just a battle to keep it, but the value of community-built assets has just reduced and reduced. And then there’s the gentrification, which is a very visible thing. They’re putting a Pret a Manger opposite the station now. That building used to be a Citizen’s Advice and social services.”

Youth professional

Finally, youth workers also spoke about how difficult it is for young people to stay in the same area that they grew up in, due to the lack of affordable housing. They gave examples of families that access their services who were living in overcrowded and poorly-maintained housing, facing eviction or at risk of being rehoused outside of their borough or even outside of London. This made them concerned that families would increasingly be leaving the community, possibly leaving only a handful of

young people in the most expensive areas. As also identified by young people in our previous report, young people were not insulated from the pressures of the housing market, with older respondents worried about the cost and availability of housing in the communities they would like to call home. Not only does this damage the sense of belonging a young person may develop for their community, but it also discourages them from getting involved and making connections within their local area in the first place if their living situation becomes increasingly transient.

Physical safety

A recurring theme throughout the research was the importance of young people feeling safe within their community. During the interviews, a significant number of young people referred to knife crime and gang violence in their area, either that was directly affecting them or that they were aware of from the media. They also spoke about their desire to feel safe and the role that their youth organisation played in providing them with a place of safety.

“There is a lot of crime around my area, there are bad things so you really want to just go off to some place where you can relax and be yourself, and get away from the bad things.”

Young person

At the end of each interview, young people were asked what they would change about their local community if they had a magic wand. One young person responded “stop knife crime” – a sentiment that was shared by a number of interviewees who all made explicit reference to wanting to reduce violence in their local areas.

During the interviews, young people were asked what they would change about their community if they had a magic wand. Their answers are summarised below.

More peace, less violence and more people going to university instead of jail.

Improve gang violence. Get more groups like this open in the area.

Stop knife crime.

The amount of gang and knife crime. Have young people's voices heard more – young people's opinions matter very much and yet they lack a say.

Make it more comfortable, more open-minded, and for people to be more passionate about their own aspirations.

Young people's behaviour and how they come across. Help them solve what they have wrong.

Opportunities for people to talk to each other and get to know each other.

Less violence.

Gangs. Innocent people losing lives or people going to jail.

Advertise where to get support so young people with mental health or disability issues will know where to look for help.

Better communication between various communities in the area.

Police to be more welcoming, more friendly.

Make it more safe so that people feel safe to walk outside in the dark and don't have fears of getting stabbed.

Change people's attitudes towards people of colour. Tackle discrimination.

The way people act.

More shops and restaurants. More things to do. More youth groups.

Give people without jobs, jobs. Help homeless people.

Make it cleaner.

Recognising and celebrating difference

Recent policy has considered how social integration might best be supported. It is clear from our research that enabling young people to maintain their cultural identities actually supports them to make new connections. Helping young people to maintain and develop a sense of cultural identity, combined with recognising and celebrating difference, is an important feature of how the organisations we spoke to are supporting young people to feel part of their communities. It was clear that young people place a high value on being able to express their cultural identity and be themselves. One young person from a migrant community said they liked having the opportunity to meet other people “who are like you” and referred to the lack of opportunities for doing so, for example at school. CARAS, one of the organisations we spoke to, gives young people who are refugees and asylum seekers the opportunity to preserve their cultural identity whilst also building new connections. They balance periods of time when young people are free to speak whatever language they wish with communal activities such as group meals that aim to both improve the young people’s English and encourage them to spend time with young people that may be from a different country or background to them.

However, they also recognised the power of building connections with people from similar backgrounds.

“Last week a boy from Kurdistan met another boy from Kurdistan. When he arrived he felt so alone, and then when he met him, the boy just transformed. To have someone speak your own language is so important to feeling connected.

Youth professional

Other organisations spoke about how they help communities come together through celebrating the differences within them by arranging programmes or sessions around the cooking of local dishes, traditional dance workshops or celebrating a national day.

“Shpresa is a two-way street. It’s for the hosting community to get to know us and for the Albanian community to know the society where we live and become active.

Youth professional



Developing the skills and confidence to get involved in their communities

Young people spoke passionately about the skills and confidence that they develop through participating in activities at their youth organisation. Some of these skills and behaviours are directly linked to supporting young people to be better placed to get involved in community activities, such as learning to become more ‘open-minded’ and recognising different people’s viewpoints. There was also an element of more general skill development, for example, building young people’s confidence, which provides an important platform for young people to then get involved in other aspects of community life.

The more focused work done by the youth organisations to develop young people’s skills in this area typically involved some form of social action. For example, young people coming together to plan and run a large community event in their local area, or develop a specific project to raise awareness of a particular issue in their local community such as poor mental health or homelessness. This provided young people with a voice in their community, as well as the opportunity to explore their thoughts and develop new ideas on social issues.

“It’s a great opportunity to raise awareness about something I feel passionate about.

Young person

“This programme changed me because I think since I’ve done the programme I’ve built a lot of confidence and have come out of my shell.

Young person

There were also clear examples of how the organisations we spoke to were helping young people to see themselves as part of the solution to issues within their community and begin to understand what role they could play in bringing about change, both now and in the future. For example, through developing young people’s critical reflection, providing opportunities for them to get involved in campaigns, or through mentoring or volunteering both inside the organisation and in the wider community.

| Case study

Developing community leaders: Anti-Tribalism Movement

The Anti-Tribalism Movement is an organisation based in West London that is dedicated to ending tribe or clan-based discrimination and segregation in Somali communities in London. A key focus of their work is on creating strong leaders in communities and part of the way they do this is through their programme for young people called Lead and Be Led.

Lead and Be Led has three main components. The first involves three workshops with a lecturer from SOAS, University of London. These workshops cover topics such as critical thinking and decision making, as well as supporting young people to understand the best ways to process conflicting information and gain insight into how decisions that affect them are made.

Young people then spend seven weeks with another trainer who supports them with leadership skills, CV writing, interview techniques and project management skills. The young people then go on to put those skills into practice by running a social action project either in their school or their community. Projects run by young people this year are on themes such as getting people passionate about science and mental health awareness.

For Faiza, the Project Officer on Lead and Be Led, part of the success of the programme hinges on two key aspects. The young people receive a qualification from SOAS for successful completion of the programme. This can then contribute to CVs and college or university applications. Secondly, the trainers are from a similar Muslim background to the young people. This means the training is relevant to the young people, using references and context that they understand and can apply to their own lives. With the help of these mechanisms, Lead and Be Led ultimately aims to “empower [young people] to understand how they can make a change in their lives and hopefully in their community”.

“It makes me more open-minded. I can understand other people and where they are coming from. Before my opinion mattered more than everyone else but now I can see how things can be different.

Young person

This aspect of the programme supports young people to positively challenge ideas and situations they may face. This can include supporting young people to explain to their parents the importance of being involved in a volunteering opportunity or being on a programme such as Lead and Be Led, something parents have often been concerned about if it meant travelling to unfamiliar parts of London at hours when it may be dark.

Known and trusted within the community

It was clear through the research that the work of youth organisations was much wider than just supporting young people, and that the organisations were often open to and accessed by the wider community. The types of relationships they described within their community suggested that they are both well-known and well-networked with

other organisations and individuals in their local area. This included relationships with schools, councils and other community groups. Because of these connections, they are often playing an important role in signposting individuals to services within the community, as well as facilitating access, for example through giving people the confidence to access the services they need. Being able to provide this practical help and support appears to help build trust, which enables wider work with families and young people.

| Case study

Responding to tragedy: Grenfell Tower

The tragic fire in the Grenfell Tower in 2017 has had a huge and lasting impact on the area around Ladbroke Grove and North Kensington. Three of the organisations who participated in this research were involved in providing support to those affected by the fire.

One of the youth professionals interviewed reflected on the importance of being known and established within the community at this critical time:

“We’re already up and running, well-connected and know who needs what, where to go, know all the local authority places and so we could signpost people to where they needed to go. We’re something that’s established... we’ve got an office, we’ve got a base, we’ve got people dotted around the borough that we can call very quickly in an emergency, which has proved to be quite useful.

Youth professional

This example demonstrates how youth organisations can form a key part of a community’s infrastructure. It was only by being embedded and known in their local area, and seen as an organisation that people can ‘work with’, that these organisations were able to support the relief effort.

| Case study

Promoting the participation and contribution of the Albanian community: Shpresa Programme

Shpresa Programme is a user-led organisation that promotes the participation and contribution of the Albanian-speaking community in the UK as well as enabling their users to play a positive and active role in their ‘host’ community.

The organisations we spoke to as part of the research prided themselves on being responsive to the needs of their local community and working with the community, rather than trying to ‘solve’ the communities’ ‘problems’.

“We’re not doing things to people, we’re doing things with people.”
Youth professional

It was also apparent that there was a wealth of knowledge around overcoming barriers to community engagement, particularly around engaging young people in community activities. Whilst these often involved small adaptations, or doing the simple things well (for example, ensuring there is a ‘hook’ for young people to get involved), these are important resources to draw upon in strengthening London’s communities.



From the late 1990s, Shpresa has advocated for and supported Albanian people in London to access services and opportunities available to them. For example, through providing access to English classes, training on how to travel around London, information on rights and responsibilities, and information on employment or volunteering opportunities or ways to develop their skills and build their experience. This is based on listening to the needs of the Albanian community in their local area, as well as the needs of the ‘host’ community.

Shpresa aims to provide a ‘family base’ for those in the Albanian community and to support both adults and young people, as well as playing a vital role in facilitating communication between the Albanian community and mainstream providers.

“My parents came here as young people with no passport and [Shpresa Programme] were the people who helped them grow sixteen or seventeen years ago.”
Young person

For young people, this support works in two ways. Shpresa runs a comprehensive youth programme that supports young people to embrace their heritage and feel a part of London as a whole. It does this through a variety of activities such as dance, cooking, sports sessions, leadership courses, volunteering opportunities, employability workshops and supporting young people to develop their own campaigns or participate in campaigns for issues as diverse as creating an Albanian GCSE qualification and supporting the Living Wage. By participating in this broad range of activities young people feel “less isolated” as “Shpresa is like a family”. For many young people the chance to help others and improve their confidence through volunteering or campaigning is instrumental for feeling like they are engaged in London as a wider community, whilst the chance to celebrate their culture is also highly valued.

“They always do a party for Albanian Independence Day. As well as enjoying yourself, it helps you learn more about your culture as well.”
Young person

The second way Shpresa supports young people is through creating a closer link between Albanian families and the schools their children attend. Initially schools were approaching Shpresa with issues of racism and struggling to engage Albanian children in their education, primarily due to language barriers. Shpresa were able to negotiate free use of school premises for their community engagement work in return for training the school on refugee and migrant issues, and supporting and engaging parents regarding their child’s education. By having several bases in schools across East London, Shpresa became more visible and accessible to Albanian people across London, and schools became much better at engaging Albanian families. This model has run for a number of years and has led to parents becoming school governors with Shpresa’s support, as well as a pilot of the model across other communities such as Somali and Turkish groups in London.

Good Practice

Through the research, we identified a number of elements of good practice in how youth organisations are working with young people to help them feel a part of their community and to bring different parts of the community together. The principles underlying this good practice are outlined below, together with examples from the youth organisations participating in the research.

Principle 1: Bring people together on equal terms

Many of the organisations we spoke to provide opportunities for young people to interact with other people they may not ordinarily get the chance to meet. This is most effective in situations where power dynamics are as equal as possible, and young people feel they are in a team with or ‘on the same level’ as the people they are engaging with.

Practice example: CARAS, an organisation which supports refugees, individuals seeking asylum and unaccompanied minors in South West London, uses local volunteers from a range of different backgrounds to work with the young people they support, and together they carry out activities such as gardening and DIY projects. The teamwork required in these activities allows the young people and volunteers to build relationships based on trust and a common goal.

Principle 2: Celebrate young people’s cultural identity

Recent research from the Local Trust has highlighted the importance of identity in creating strong communities.²⁵ We saw examples of youth organisations supporting young people to develop, maintain and celebrate their sense of cultural identity, as well as creating opportunities for them to share this with others. Having a strong sense of identity, and connections with individuals you identify with, are important for giving people the confidence to get involved in the wider community.²⁶

Practice example: Shpresa Programme, which promotes the participation and contribution of the Albanian-speaking community in the UK, provides young people with the opportunity to participate in traditional Albanian dancing, alongside modern street dancing. By offering both forms of dance, young people are able to engage with their Albanian heritage, as well as explore how this links with British culture through mixing the two art forms.



Principle 3: Give young people ownership

Our research has shown that youth organisations can provide young people with a sense of belonging within their communities. A contributing factor is young people having a sense of ownership over both the physical space and the activities they take part in. A number of different approaches can be used to facilitate this, ranging from formal governance roles for young people within an organisation to providing open, unstructured sessions where young people choose how to spend their time.

Practice example: At Fitzrovia Youth in Action, the staff team has an explicit open-door policy for the football pitch and playground they manage. This allows young people in Camden to feel that they have their own space in an area where spaces that are accessible to them are extremely limited. They also provide opportunities for young people to take a lead on community events, and in supporting each other, for example, through peer mentoring.

Principle 4: Build the foundations for community involvement

For young people to get involved in their communities, they need to feel confident and able to do so. The organisations we spoke to were providing a lot of support, often over a sustained period of time, to enable young people to grow in confidence, develop new skills and identify the issues they felt passionate about, before moving on to some form of community involvement. Progressive routes that allow the time and provide the necessary support for young people to develop these foundational skills are likely to be most effective.

Practice example: Anti-Tribalism Movement works within Somali diaspora to tackle inequality within the community. They have a structured programme aimed at supporting young people to become more active in their community. This begins with sessions focusing critical thinking to ensure young people are able to engage with different ideas, as well as understand the sources of power in their community and city, before moving on to applying their skills within a social action project.

²⁵ Local Trust and IVAR (2018) *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power*.

²⁶ Ibid.

Extending existing practice

In addition to the good practice highlighted above, there were also some areas where we are interested to see how practice could be strengthened or developed further.

- **Being purposeful in how we bring people together** – We were struck by the importance of power dynamics and pre-existing prejudices when bringing different parts of the community together. Is there more that youth organisations could do to actively consider and take steps to address potential barriers to different groups within a community coming together in a meaningful way?
- **Ownership of spaces within a community** – Youth organisations can provide young people with a physical space within a community. However, there are other places that young people choose to go in their free time, such as parks and shopping centres. How can we ensure that young people feel that they belong in these spaces? How could youth organisations work with local residents, community groups and business owners to ensure that this sense of belonging extends to more areas?
- **Support for transitions** – Whilst youth organisations are providing young people with a space where they feel they belong within their communities, we were left with a question around what happens beyond the life of their involvement with the youth organisation to help maintain that sense of community. Do we need to think about transitions from youth organisations in the same way that we might consider key transition points in education or within other types of services? What might a successful transition look like and what role could youth organisations and others play?

Practice reflections

For youth professionals:

- To what extent are these practices built into your work?
- Is there anything that you could develop further?

For practitioners working in other sectors:

- What opportunities are there to learn from and collaborate with youth organisations?
- What good practice could you share?

For funders and commissioners:

- How do your funding/commissioning practices support youth professionals to build these practices into their work?
- What could be learned from the youth sector that could be applied elsewhere in designing services for communities?

Reflections and Conclusions

The distinctive value of youth organisations

Our research demonstrates that youth organisations have an important role in strengthening the communities of London, a role which they perform for and with young Londoners. Youth organisations are able to bring people together and provide space for connections and relationships to form. This relies on having a space where young people feel safe, feel like they belong and feel that they have some ownership and control. They allow young people to recognise and celebrate cultural difference and to develop the skills and confidence to get involved in their communities. Through all of this, professionals in youth organisations become known and trusted figures who provide benefits to members of the community far beyond their official roles.

Many of the themes we identified through our research mirror those found in research into the value of small, local charities,²⁷ as well as recent research on what makes communities powerful.²⁸ The youth organisations who participated in this project are person-centred, and their strength is built on relationships and embedded within their communities. They promote inclusion and belonging. They have strong local networks and work with a wide range of individuals. They recognise the importance of identity, and foster connection and a sense of belonging.

At their best, youth organisations help build strong communities when they are able to bring people of different ages and backgrounds together on terms that let them see each other as equals engaged in a common goal. They allow room for young people to celebrate their cultural identities, exploring the differences and sharing the commonalities. They give young people a steady place in their lives, where their decisions matter and their views are valued. They show young people how to move out of those spaces and to become positively involved in their communities.

So what is it that makes youth organisations distinct? Firstly, they provide young people with their own space within a community. Young people repeatedly told us about the importance of feeling safe and that they belong. Spaces where young people experience physical and emotional safety, and can connect with others in their local communities.

Youth organisations also have an important role to play in making young people feel valued, both as a member of the organisation and as a member of the wider community. They place a strong emphasis on what young people can contribute to their communities, such as volunteering or social action, over what they might need or want from their communities. We are a strong advocate of the value of youth social action and have seen excellent examples of this through the research. However, young people also have to want to contribute. This is inevitably less likely to be the case if they feel excluded or marginalised within their communities.

²⁷ Lloyds Bank Foundation (2018) *The value of small: In-depth research into the distinctive contribution, value and experiences of small and medium-sized charities in England and Wales.*

²⁸ Local Trust and IVAR (2018) *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power.*

Supporting youth organisations

Our research has shown that youth organisations can both support individuals to feel that they have a place within a community as well as foster connections across a community. These organisations are a valuable resource that can be used to strengthen communities within London. In order to make the most of the valuable social assets that youth organisations represent, we believe it is important to focus on the two issues of providing funding to enable relationships to develop and protecting good-quality physical spaces for young people.

Funding relationships

The relationships that youth organisations hold within their communities and with young people take time to develop. They are built up over many years and may come about through an ability to respond, in the moment, to a request for support. There is a danger that when we think about communities, especially the diverse communities that make up London, we focus on bringing different groups together, losing sight

of existing relationships and what is needed to sustain these. These relationships, and the trust and knowledge that support them, are social assets that take decades to grow, but can be lost in a heartbeat.

Youth organisations identified funding as the main barrier to working effectively within their communities. Whilst the amount of funding an organisation receives is clearly an important factor, we also need to consider the type of funding that’s available. Project or programme-based funding has its place in supporting youth organisations to work effectively within their communities, for example, when there is a discrete, time-limited piece of work to be done. However, there is a need to look beyond this if we want to truly capitalise on the knowledge, expertise and relationships held within youth organisations for the benefit of local communities and ensure their survival. Core funding and unrestricted grants undoubtedly provide stability for organisations, as well as the flexibility to be able to respond to community need. In fact, recent research has shown that the added benefit is such that smaller voluntary organisations would be willing to accept a smaller grant for the added flexibility that unrestricted grants provide.²⁹



²⁹ IVAR (2013) *Thinking about... Core Funding*.



Funding spaces

Honest conversations are needed around the true cost of operating high-quality spaces and how realistically these costs are being met through programmatic funding. Without appropriate and regular investment in existing spaces, the quality of provision provided will inevitably decline, as will their ability to offer universal provision. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that justifies further cuts to facilities or makes it necessary for organisations with limited resources to close facilities requiring significant upgrades. Community spaces that provide places of physical safety for young people should be actively identified, mapped and protected. This requires a youth-centric assessment of the offer in local areas that considers the use of other spaces where young people choose to go and where they feel safe and have a sense of ownership. Funders and commissioners may have to think holistically about the provision in a certain area and the available facilities. Intelligent use of space may need to be considered, including the shared use of facilities by youth organisations and community or other organisations, as long as young people’s influence and connection with the youth organisation is maintained.

We believe that we need to focus on protecting physical spaces for young people. Research has shown time and time again the importance of spaces where people can come together within a community.³⁰ Yet, 81 youth centres or projects closed in London between 2011 and 2018.³¹ Young people are also telling us of the need to feel safe within their communities. This basic need has to be met if we are to develop strong, healthy, resilient communities.

In order to make the most of the valuable social assets that youth organisations represent, we believe it is important to focus on two key issues:

- **Funding that enables relationships and networks to be developed and sustained**
- **Protecting good-quality physical spaces for young people**

Youth organisations are a powerful asset in the social infrastructure of London. However, if we want youth organisations to strengthen our communities now and in the future, then we must ensure that they too are strong.

³⁰ Local Trust and IVAR (2018) *The Future for Communities: Perspectives on power*.

³¹ Sian Berry AM (2018) *London’s Lost Youth Services 2018*. NB: Data on youth centre closures is based on comparable data from 25 councils.

Reflections for those supporting youth organisations

For funders and commissioners:

- How do your funding practices affect an organisation's ability to develop and maintain relationships within a community? For example, through impact on staff retention or consistency of provision.
- How do you ensure that activities such as outreach, signposting and partnership building that are essential for effective community working are sufficiently resourced?
- What role could you play in protecting community assets, such as spaces for young people?
- How could you better understand the true cost of operating high-quality spaces and ensure that total costs are recovered? How could you provide capital resources to operate and maintain facilities that are available to youth organisations in your area?

For local authorities

- How are you working with youth organisations and other community organisations within the borough to ensure young people have access to safe spaces in their local area?
- What spaces already exist? What's needed to sustain these?
- How can you ensure consistency of provision?

For the Mayor of London and Greater London Authority (GLA)

- What role could you play in setting out a pan-London vision for spaces for young people? What support could you provide to local authorities, youth organisations and others to enable this?
- Where do youth spaces sit within the Night Time Economy, Culture, Sports, and Social Integration strategies? How do these strategies ensure that there are sufficient high-quality, safe spaces for young people within their local community across London?
- What role do you have in mapping youth spaces and promoting them to young people, the local community and service providers?

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