youthfocus NW

A situational review of Northwest Local Authorities and their application of the Statutory Guidance 507b

February 2025



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Youth Focus North West (YFNW) is an organisation with strong youth work roots. We work in partnership with young people and organisations to have a voice where it counts.

Our youth voice work gives young people the opportunities to make a difference individually, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. We nurture youth work practice, create networks, broker partnerships and provide opportunities for young people and organisations to work together.

YFNW has over 30 year's experience of working in partnership with the youth sector. We have strong relationships with each Local Authority Youth Service in the region and the wider Voluntary, Community and Faith Sector. Youth Focus NW (YFNW) also acts as the Regional Youth Work Unit in the Northwest.

Contents

Scope of the report - Page 4

Data and insights gathered from the surveys - Page 5

- Youth Offer Budgets
- Workforce
- Challenges and barriers in developing and delivering the Youth Offer

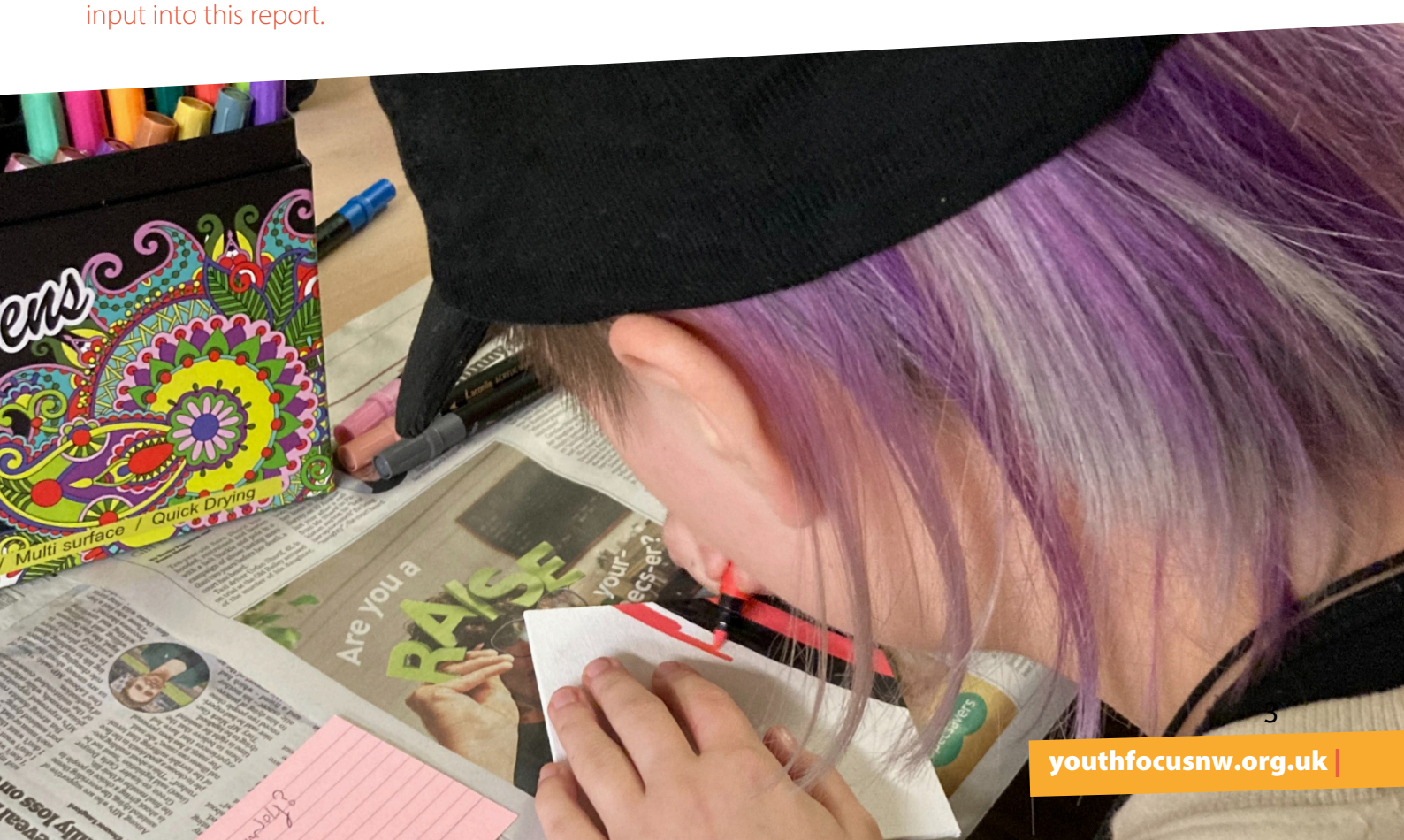
Insights gathered from the interviews - Page 7

- Responses to Statutory Guidance
- Positioning of the Youth Service
- Resources to carry out the guidance
- Impact of the guidance
- Senior Leadership
- Age range
- Working in partnership
- Workforce
- Publicising the youth offer
- Regional Support
- Funding

Conclusions- Page 23

Appendix- Page 24

Thanks extend to the Local Authority Strategic Leads who have generously given their time, insights and input into this report.



Scope of the report

YFNW undertook a review to understand the application of the Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities on Services and Activities to Improve Young People's Well-being, Section 507B of the Education Act 1996.

This report synthesises the data and insights from Local Authorities (LA) across the region.

The information in this report was gathered from a structured survey and one to one semi structured interviews. Details of the interview questions can be found in Appendix A.

All Local Authorities in the region were invited to take part in the report, twenty one Local Authorities contributed.

Whilst YFNW has conducted this report across the Northwest region, the data gathered cannot be directly compared LA to LA.

There is a number of variables at play, including geographic spread, youth population, staffing, budgets, capacity and senior buy in which have impacted how the Statutory Guidance has been received and enacted.

This report endeavours to highlight these in broad themes raised by participants rather than compare borough to borough.



Blackburn with Darwen	Manchester	Liverpool
Blackpool	Oldham	Warrington
Bolton	Rochdale	Wirral
Bury	Salford	Wigan
Cheshire East	Sefton	Westmorland & Furness
Cheshire West & Chester	St Helens	
Halton	Stockport	
Knowsley	Tameside	
Lancashire	Trafford	

Fig 1. Local Authorities in the Youth Focus North West (YFNW) region.



Data and insights gathered from surveys

Youth Offer Budgets

Local Authorities (LAs) were asked to outline their Youth Offer budget; of those that provided the information, two LAs have a Youth Offer budget under £250k, five LAs have a Youth Offer budget £300-500k, seven with a budget of £600-950k, and five £1.2m-1.9k.

It's important to note that some LAs have presented the figures in differing ways to include staffing and resources, assets, others their commissioning budget, so the figures are not directly comparable from LA to LA. Also of note is that the geographic size of each local authority and the population data of young people, this varies greatly.

Many local authorities are also working through cost savings and potential cuts to services in the new financial year; many LAs may experience changes in their Youth Offer budget in the new financial year.

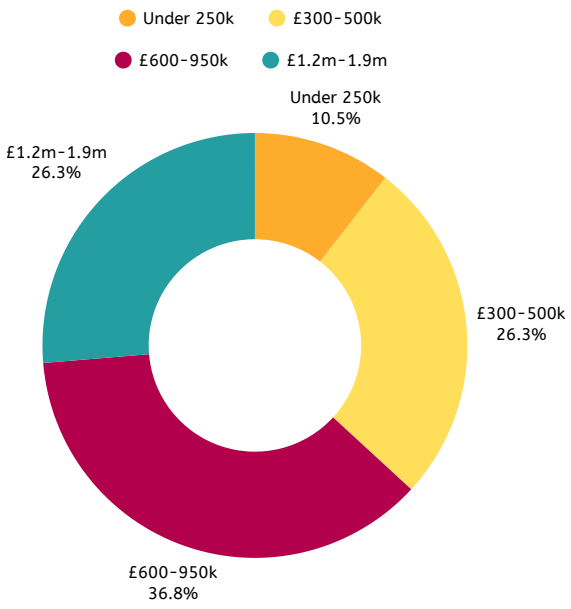


Fig.2 Total Youth Offer Budget by size

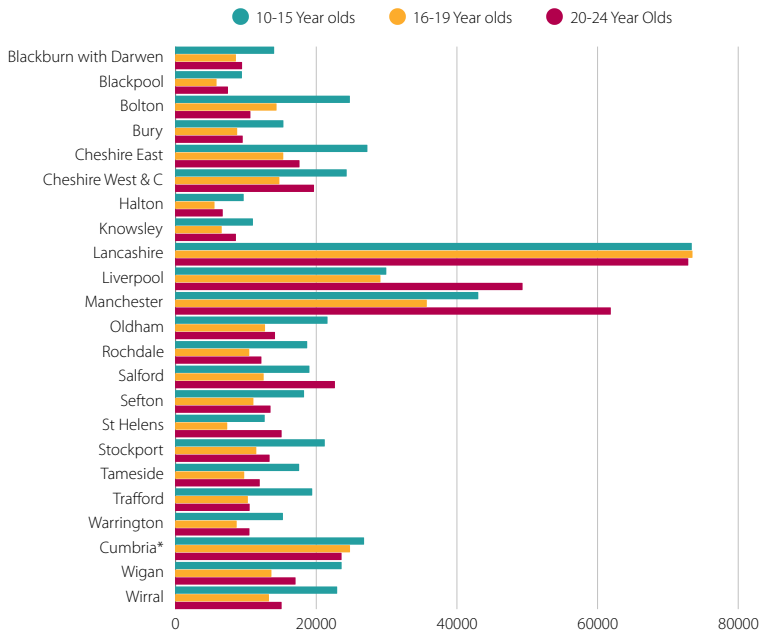


Fig.3 Total Youth Population by Local Authority
Source: 2021 Census profile

Workforce

Through the survey, local authorities provided insights into their workforce through the survey and indicated levels of qualifications and staffing.

Each local authority has a mixed staff team of qualified and unqualified Youth Workers ranging from full time to sessional and volunteers. Pay, alongside terms and conditions for Youth Workers is administered using both the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) and the National Joint Council frameworks (NJC). These frameworks are referred to as the Pink and Green books.

Traditionally, JNC is used to connect qualification status with the roles and responsibilities associated with Youth Work posts. However not all LAs use the JNC scales, terms and conditions, with the majority opting for NJC.

Fifteen LAs have professionally qualified JNC Youth Workers; eight LAs have locally JNC qualified part time youth workers. Seven LAs with Level 2 & 3 trained youth workers. Three LAs with apprentices and four with sessional youth workers, three LAs with part time unqualified youth workers, and one LA with volunteers.

Level 2 and 3 qualifications in Youth Work is a certification that meets the National Occupational Standards for youth work and is recognised by the Joint Negotiating Committee (JNC) and the Joint Education and Training Standards (JETS) of England and Wales. The professional qualification is a Level 6 Bachelor's degree or the new Level 6 Youth Worker Apprenticeship.

For local authorities that fully commission out their youth offer there was limited or no data to ascertain the levels of qualification and workforce development in the VCFSE sector, this theme also featured within the semi-structured interviews and will be highlighted later in this report.

Challenges and Barriers in developing and delivering the Youth Offer

The survey also asked LAs to offer any insights or the barriers they face in developing and delivering their Youth Offer.

Funding featured highly on their concerns, particularly around long term secured funding and the amount allocated to Youth Services. Some LAs have identified that priorities of social care and education are taking precedence over other services.

Workforce development and recruitment featured highly in the challenges faced by local authorities, defined in two areas; the difficulty in recruiting qualified staff, the throughput and development of staff, eg. The lack of training, HEIs and limitations around apprenticeship routes means the pipeline of staff coming through the qualification route is reduced, conversely the pool of experience and qualified staff is reduced. Additionally the absence of youth work being promoted and seen as a long term profession and career pathway also has an impact.

Further to this colleagues highlighted the increasing complexity of young people's needs increasing and youth services filling gaps where a more specialist approach would be more appropriate. These themes were again reflected in the semi structured interviews.



Insights gathered from interviews

Local Authority strategic leads were invited to take part in one to one, semi structured interviews. Twenty of the twenty-three local authorities participated in the interviews. The conversations and insights have been synthesised into common themes, many of which reflect the themes raised in the survey, each will be expanded in turn.

Responses to Statutory Guidance

There is widespread consensus that the new guidance is both welcomed and beneficial. Colleagues have highlighted the increased clarity, and improvement on previous iterations of the guidance. With the explanation of what the youth work role is, this acknowledgment reinforces the vital role youth work plays in addressing the needs of young people.

> ***"So I think the new guidance is good, and that it is a little bit more explicit about, you know, the professional youth work that we see and we think is important"***
>
> ***"It's really been needed, obviously, to put youth work back on the page"***
>
> ***"It's a bit clearer now. It's got a few more definitions in it. It mentions youth work, which is good. It mentions youth services which is good. you know, the professional youth work that we see and we think is important"***

There was recognition that the guidance has provided legitimacy and credibility for Youth Service Strategic Leads to provide a strong foundation to build on, enabling them to gain leverage for dialogue and action with Directors and Chief Executives of Local Authorities.

The guidance has also granted Youth Service Strategic Leads legitimacy to help grow and strengthen the youth service and wider youth offer in Local Authorities. This is particularly valuable when Local Authorities are under extreme financial pressures and increasing service demands.

"A lot of things of value in the new guidance. I think it, it makes it a lot clearer to local authorities that they can't just ignore it"

"It presented in a really easy way for people to understand who weren't necessarily youth workers, and are responsible for delivering youth work. So in terms of it having the gravitas there's much more senior level understanding that we do have statutory guidance around what we should be doing.

" I don't think I'd have got that voice and audience if it didn't say in the strategy, this is the responsibility of the director of Children's Services and the lead member"

However, there were also comprehensive and detailed discussions concerning the actual strength and enforceability of the guidance, as well as the extent to which it holds any practical accountability. This was notable in the reflections of colleagues on the duty not being part of Ofsted or any other form of inspection framework.

"This is not something they're going to get inspected about."

"You can talk about the statutory guidance until you're blue in the face, but it's not putting us on par with other statutory duties. There was an opportunity to make youth work more prominent, but that hasn't happened."

They also reflected on the guidance's lack of accountability, remarking on the insufficient clout, and lack of teeth.

""I think if it would have come with a little bit of force behind it, we'd be having a completely different conversation.

"It's still inherently weak with the reasonable term in it, which means that it's still a nice to do, rather than a sort of must do, really".

The language of the statutory guidance and duty was a familiar feature of the discussions with almost all interviewees remarking on the need for more robust language, there was consensus that the language used is vague and open to interpretation. Some colleagues felt the language was fluffy and vague.

During discussions it was clear that the language of, "sufficiency " "reasonable" "practicable" isn't robust enough to ensure accountability and protection of a meaningful Youth Offer.

"If I was really lucky, I might get a 10 minute audience with the Director of Children's Services, whose assistant is going to Google search youth activity and say, it's not a problem".

Colleagues would welcome more concrete language that clarifies what local authorities "must do" and is less "open to interpretation" to meet the needs of young people. Whilst colleagues also acknowledged that this would be difficult without appropriate funding and resources.

"What the guidance can do when we've got a very wobbly duty, I think until the duty changes, we're not going to see much more"

"But the other side of guidance is it's vague. So as much as it's a better version of it, it's still quite vague"

"Doesn't help anybody whatsoever, because no one has any quantifiable words within that phrase. So what's reasonable to me could be completely different to what's reasonable to the chief exec You know?"

"So the guidance does a good job. But the duty is very woolly"

"The whole the way it's written, our statutory duty, just, even though we've got the guidance now, which is a lot clearer, the actual statement still leaves a lot of gaps or can be interpreted into a lot of different ways"

Colleagues noted that without defined timelines or deadlines, the urgency to implement the guidance is often overtaken by other service demands. Whilst there is passion and commitment to fulfil the statutory guidance, there is also recognition that service priorities on a daily basis are high, and therefore completing the necessary tasks to fulfil the guidance can drift.

"Because it hasn't got a deadline on it as such, which I think would have been helpful, it's meant it's down to me and the amount of time I've got to do it, and my managers really to implement it and follow that process through"

it's not a top priority, which, if it had said, do it by the 31st of March 2025, then we'd have probably had a bit more impetus, really. So I think a deadline would have been helpful

"I think deadlines probably key one, you know, give me, give me a reason to do it quicker."

Where the Youth Service sits in the Local Authority

The impact on local authority youth services was often dependent on the department they sit within, with some experiencing moves into new areas such as Children's Social Care, Communities, and other departmental shifts. For some this has been positive, for others it has added to the ongoing struggle to champion the need for a well funded Youth Offer and distinct Youth Service.

"Youth Services have been kind of pushed and pulled and probably positive in one way that they're trying to keep keep alive, yeah, but then it's probably taken a bit of a hit in terms of where it goes."

"Our Youth Work team is small we're part of a wider service including Youth Justice and Safeguarding. It's good having this to put pressure on LAs but i think its the least of their worries depending on priorities."

"What it will help us to do is where we've got limited resources. It will give us the opportunity to say, this is where we need. This is what we need to concentrate our resources on."

This was further reflected in some colleagues' concerns about how delivery of statutory and regulatory services such as Children's Social Care and Education is often prioritised over protecting budgets of Youth Services.

"Its great that they've got the guidance behind that statement, when people are making decisions, they'll go straight to what the actual statutory duty is and won't necessarily have the guidance to support them with any you know, decisions they're making. And that's why I've gone through a process of going into cabinet and presenting reports, just so I can keep the youth work on the agenda with our with our children's cabinet"

"Yes, it's statutory guidance and it's to be implemented, but we've also got children social care and the statutory implementation of delivery of services."

"We've got big cuts coming our way as well. So it's about making sure we're putting ourselves in the best position for kind of supporting young people, and, you know, early enough to prevent them having, needing more support, which involves social care. Unfortunately, even though we've got this statutory duty, it doesn't hold much weight when you compare our statutory duty compared to social care statutory duty or education."

Resources to carry out the Statutory Guidance

Passion and commitment from colleagues shone through the conversations about wanting to do the Needs Assessment well and thoroughly in order that the youth offer is the best it can be for young people, within the financial constraints available. Colleagues wanted to ensure that a quality and meaningful process was undertaken and there were some frustrations with not being able to access the resources or capacity to do this.

"If we're going to do it in, we're going to do it properly"

Three of the nineteen local authorities had either previously commissioned a third party needs assessment or were planning to do so, one local authority had been able to reallocate some staffing time to take on a part-time role to lead the needs assessment.



"It's great having statutory guidance without any resources around it. So we've had to find the resource to do this work within our existing offer"

"It's allowed me to commission a needs assessment, which has helped so massively, because otherwise I would have struggled to get that through."

For others this was being absorbed into existing Head of Youth Service responsibilities or the wider youth work teams, which added additional pressures on time and resources.



"I mean, it needs a full time officer working on it. Yeah, there's, there's no question in my mind that you can't do anything of the scale that we're talking about in terms of a needs assessment and do it well unless you've got seconded in a person with the right skills and experience to do to do that."

"We're cobbling it together, there's a risk won't do justice. And the other risk is it's going to take us five years, because it's going to take too long"

"I guess if we were asking for anything from central government in terms of the guidance, it would be enough money to to do a great job on this."

Impact of the Statutory Guidance

None of the LAs felt that meeting the guidance would be a problem, these views ranged from LAs believing they already meet the requirements, to those who remarked that due to the vagueness of the duty you could easily make a case that it is fulfilled.



"There's a knock on effect in terms of the wording and what the "musts" and the "should's" are within that, but there's also the knock on effect of, actually, you need good people, good qualified people, to be able to implement this to a good quality standard"

That being said the overarching view was that the guidance wouldn't create huge changes to services, but the value in understanding any additional data about where services need to be for young people and looking at how to use the existing budgets to meet these would be welcome.

"Guidance won't change the amount of money that we've got to spend"

"There's nothing overtly new"

"It's us driving it, and I'd like to drive it, because I think it's important"

There were reflections on carrying out a needs assessment, with some LAs seeing this as a good way to change services (if needed) within their financial envelope to have more impact and meet need, for others conversely they didn't want to create expectations that they were unable to meet.

"I think to make some of the improvements that you want to make are to evolve the service like we might want to meet some of those in relation to a needs assessment, it might come with resources, identifying that resource, whether it's external, internal or even for the third sector."

"Very brief discussion about it afterwards was that they didn't want to place any further changes on what we do locally, without the additional resources to do anything about it, thus creating an expectation that we were going to significantly change the youth offer involvement, which I don't think we are currently."

Senior Leadership

All Heads of Youth Work Services in Local Authorities are aware and familiar with the Statutory Guidance, it is a mixed picture in terms of senior leadership, elected members, directors and Chief Executives of Local Authorities, having awareness of the guidance.

"It's not that people aren't bothered about youth provision and things like that. I think it's that link between youth provision and statutory guidance. I think that just doesn't seem to it doesn't perk people's ears up. I don't think, sadly"

What is notable for a large majority of LAs was a lack of any professionally qualified and experienced youth workers beyond those who hold Head of Youth Service roles. Those who oversee services from a director and senior level do not have a youth work background and thus had limited experience and understanding of the importance and uniqueness of professional youth work. For some Heads of Youth Services this has been part of their role to champion and advocate upwards for the importance of their services and professional youth work as a response to need.

> ***"It's been up to the likes of myself and similar, kind of championing youth work all the time, to our senior leads. And it's been, it's been a learning process, but we're a place now where you know they get it. They get what youth workers and how valuable youth work can be meeting the, you know, the outcomes of the wider council priorities."***
>
> ***"I'm as high as it gets, and I'm not a senior manager. I am a manager, but I'm not a senior manager, so I'm constantly trying to have those conversations with people above me who don't understand what the statutory duty is and the complexities of that."***
>
> ***"Long gone are the days where your senior leadership team will actually be youth workers. They're not now. They're like they've come from other areas, so don't have a don't have the understanding of what youth work is."***

For some LAs there has been proactive engagement from the highest level of the authority prompting a desire to understand the implications of the duty and guidance.

> ***"Considering I've been here as a youth worker for 27 years, it's the first time the Chief Executive emailed me to say, what does this mean for us? What's the impact for us in terms of how we implement this?"***

In some areas the guidance has enabled deeper conversations with senior leaders and elected officials resulting in more engagement and buy-in from Senior leaders.

> ***"It gives us the opportunity to say, you know, to talk about the cuts and the effects and the positives of doing this, and aligning what money we can put into it to preventative, you know, preventative work so so that that without guidance, I wouldn't have been able to go to a SLT with anything other than business as usual."***

For around half of the local authorities there has been less interest or urgency from Senior Leaders.

"With regards to the actual guidance, no, to be fair, it's not something that we, we are asked about or even challenged on"

"I'm getting no pressure from, you know, like, directors or anybody about where's our response to this or anything."

"Director, Deputy Director, assistant directors they reviewed it at one of their weekly meetings a while ago. I'm not entirely sure they were, I was going to say particularly interested, but I don't think I mean it like that."

For a small number of LAs the turnover of staff at senior/director level has impacted on their building of momentum and understanding for the protection of Youth Services.

"They're struggling to recruit directors and why their directors move. You know, when you think about all the risks that they manage, yes, you know, we're the teeniest, tiniest little fish, but our youth services, the teeniest, tiniest little fish in the pond."

"I think we've been a little bit unfortunate in terms of we've had quite a bit of staff change, kind of a senior level, so we haven't really had a like a sponsor, an improvement where we're wanting which is coming, that whoever that, that person is, you know, really takes the reins and champions it because it's, it's not for me, really, as a commissioner manager, to champion it, because I'm more on the contractual side of it. They need to be kind of champion it as, this is our, you know, this is our children's provision."

Age

Throughout conversations with all LAs, the notion of the age on the statutory guidance is not congruent with the service delivery in each LA. All remarked on the need to ensure that the offer is for 11-19 (up to 25 with additional needs). For some local authorities their age range is lower as they have combined play and youth services so would be working with under 11s.

Many colleagues highlighted the importance of support for young people as they transition from primary to secondary school ages, this being a pivotal moment in their developmental stage. They also highlighted the nuanced approach needed for junior provision which engages young people at a younger age and leads them to progress into youth services as they mature providing a key safety net for their personal, social, emotional development.

Colleagues noted that there are many young people dealing with more complex issues earlier in their lives than perhaps they have seen in previous years.

When unpacking what may have impacted on this need for services to be available at younger touchpoints, there were reflections on the impact of Covid and the legacy of the engagement of young people in the Holiday Activity Fund (HAF).

For Covid some older young people missed out on the opportunity to access youth services and therefore when Covid restrictions ceased they were less likely to engage in services due to the gap and the lack of relationship building, thus prompting some services to build relationships with younger young people to enable growth and progression through services.

> ***"I think there's been two effects of particularly COVID, is that we lost the generation of young people. When I say generation in three years worth of there was, there was a group that who would, who would have worked with youth workers through use so and all the Youth Network was saying the same thing."***
>
> ***"Post covid were seeing an increase in issues of unmet need and emotional regulation."***

HAF has created engagement and an audience with younger young people who are looking for activities to engage in.

> ***"11 is the right age. As you go transitioning from primary to maybe not 11, it's more like year seven upwards, to be honest, because that's the main transition point in in a young person's life"***

The complexity of the issues young people are facing and dealing with has been mentioned in interviews and in the survey, whilst there was limited opportunity to delve deeper into due to the scope of this particular report.

> ***"We did it purely because there were more young people, younger wanting to access provision that was on. we're starting to identify this, and talking to kind of peers in other other areas, is the issues that were affecting, like 14-15, year olds are now starting to affect sort of, you know, 11-12, year olds. So it's interesting that our focus potentially needs to in terms of, you know that kind of issue based work needs to be starting at an earlier age."***

Some services remarked on the close working relationship with edge of care and early help teams, with some Youth Services located within these departments and taking on case work. Other services are bridging gaps. Others are proactively taking a youth work approach to working with young people who may present at Youth Justice, or with Emotional Health and Wellbeing difficulties.

Working in partnership

Nine LAs do not commission out any services, 4 commission out 90% + of their service with the remainder commissioning smaller lots of work out to the VCFSE sector.

Many LAs have local youth partnerships in place, however as there is no unified definition of what Local Youth Partnerships (LYP) should look like, there are variations in approaches. Some LAs have multiple partnerships within their geographic boundaries, whilst others have one. Across the Northwest there are LYPs at differing stages of development, some fledgling, others well established with networks and agreements in place.

The partnership approach to fulfilling the statutory guidance is a mixed picture across the NW with some youth partnerships being active players in responding to the Statutory Guidance. Others are participating but are looking to the LA to be the lead and steer the process.

> ***"I've been able to relaunch the youth partnership board under the guise of 507b again, but then also bringing everyone together to make sure we are offering that cross party, cross deliver area, piece of work and the need assessment is from the bigger board. "***

In understanding the breadth and scope of what to include as part of both the needs assessment process and the wider Youth Offer some LAs have raised concern about what should be included and excluded.

> ***"It's not just youth work in its truest theoretical sense, and that's fine. It's youth activity as well. But is that youth activity that it's all only from volunteer, community and charity sector, or the private sector since that do we include, you know, dance groups and were people paying a subscription? Does that include, then every sports club that people pay subs to?"***
>
> ***"And then there's lots of little small organisations and maybe handful of bigger ones. And then there's some peripheral ones, like arts based ones and leisure ones. And you know, whether they're part of it or not. And so it means getting that full picture across this sort of city council area is quite a challenge."***

Also some LAs recognise that the networks with different providers of youth and leisure activity in their areas is not as developed.

> ***The bit that I worry about is the faith groups, the uniform services and leisure. We haven't got buy in from faith and uniform services, because we just don't engage with them at the moment.***

For others there is a concerted effort to engage with faith and other grassroots groups but recognition that there is also some way to go in developing quality and consistency of youth work practice. Alongside this there is an impasse about officially placing something as part of the youth offer, and a number of questions raised, regarding the assurance that provision is safe and reputable. Furthermore some LAs were concerned about the implications of having good quality provision that meets safeguarding requirements.

> ***"Because at the moment, we can't, we can't guarantee what the quality of the quality of the work is."***

This position ranges across LAs. One area has a youth partnership, but the LA provides no funding investment and consequently has little sway to insist on any formal quality assurance checks.

In other areas where a commissioned model is used there is greater confidence about the quality and delivery of services and more controls due to the LA providing the commission and funds.

> ***"My youth partnership board, I'm almost meeting the duty just with that one Board. I've got all the players around the table. We know what each is doing. We're sharing training opportunities, we're sharing funding opportunities, we're sharing commissioning opportunities."***
>
> ***"We tend to get more engagement from your bigger kind of VCF, you know, so, like, Barnardo's and kind of long established third sector organisations. Whereas I think that there's a lot of value in getting your small youth club that runs in a church on a Friday night, getting them involved, but it's just that it's always time and capacity with things like that."***

One LA benefits from a quality mark provided by a third sector infrastructure organisation which ensures VCFSE organisations have relevant policies and processes in place around work with children and young people.

For some LAs their VCFSE infrastructure has shrunk dramatically over the last ten years, so there is limited capacity to deliver support

Workforce

A consistent theme and concern throughout all discussions was around the workforce. This discussion was nuanced with a number of issues impacting on staffing, retention, recruitment, youth work as a long term profession and the ongoing development of staff.

A significant feature for all local authorities was the lack of available data about external service providers and their levels of qualifications and experience in Youth Work.

"But I don't know how many qualified youth workers exist . I can tell you how many exist in our youth service, but there will be others that are working in other parts of the offer"

"We don't know if, what the status of people who deliver in the youth work. We don't know if they've trained youth workers"

There were reflections on the potential loss of professional sector memory and knowledge, with a proportion of Heads of Youth Services approaching the latter parts of their career, and others noticing the potential gaps in knowledge and understanding of professional youth work.

"I do think the number of people in positions like mine of a certain age, and I'm only mid 40s, we were around 15 years ago when it actually meant something, and there was money behind it all. It was all 20 years ago now where it was, but again, as unless something happens soon, we will start disappearing."

"We went from a service of 83 to 10. So we've lost a substantial load of qualified staff. And then the 10 that you've got left, you know, there's four of us that are in our 60s out of that 10."

"Will it be understood for the most recent university graduates to come through and grab that piece of legislation at the right internal level. So you're going to have a gap about 15 years where it's going to be no one who really knows or understands what that duty means, or how to deliver it in a smart way and actually that youth and community setting piece of work."

"How many qualified staff have you've got in this city? Not that many. How many people can afford to go to university and get qualified as a youth worker when they still haven't got a full time job to come out to? "

Reflections on the professionalisation of youth work being misunderstood or lost was a concern for many colleagues.

"There's a there's a bigger issue, isn't there around the professionalisation of youth work and how people view the view the role, because you wouldn't have a social worker that was not qualified in a social work role, and you wouldn't have a teacher doing teaching in a in you know, it just wouldn't happen, would it?"

"I think people do forget it is a profession, Youth Work is a really, it's a really difficult thing to do, and you are, in some cases, you are invited into young people's lives who are at their most vulnerable."

"There's a risk in terms of they may not be fully trained or fully skilled in what they need to be doing, the quality of what you deliver may be different, and also they may not stay if they don't see it as a career. So then you've got a perpetual issue, haven't you, of trying to ensure that you've got a flow of workforce"

Colleagues highlighted the lack of public perception of Youth Work as a viable career path was identified as a barrier to the flow and retention of staff.



"I think it's the difference between youth work being a career and youth work being a job. So if you offer part time sessional workers, that's what they'll always be, and then the turnover of staff is naturally always ongoing, not because the sector is not a good place to work but, people have bills to pay. So unless you can invest in, you know, full time equivalents or people turning youth work into a career becomes really difficult to manage and retain a workforce that might take years to train up, for example, because obviously we want most people that are qualified and have the right skills in the sector."

A number of LAs had benefited from supporting apprenticeships in youth work in order to grow and develop their own workforce. Whilst others have highlighted ongoing challenges with the hours of apprenticeships and them not being viable options to upskill the sector. Often the nature of youth work roles and contracts don't provide enough hours to be eligible for the apprenticeship, this is particularly prevalent in the VCSFE sector. The requirement for a large amount of paid hours for apprenticeships have inhibit many organisations ability to host.



"You've still got to have somebody on 30 hours with one employer, which I think's an absolute travesty, because, like most of your part time staff, they might work in a school and then have an evening they do youth work, or they might work in Tesco's or something, and even do youth work. But you can't count all them hours. You can only count for one employer. And I'm like, That's madness. How many voluntary sector organisations have 30 hour posts? Not many. Generally, you're lucky if an organisation has got one full time worker"

"So, for example, public health gave us money for five trainee youth workers, and because they were quite young, we decided to focus them on year five and six in primary and year seven in high school, because it meant they weren't working with your people similar ages to them, and that works, work really well, but it's now left a gap. Those schools are now going to, well, who's going to work with my year Nine's now."

Local Authorities remarked on the positive experience of having access to the Youth Work Bursary in the NW. Since YFNW embarked on delivery of the scheme over the last five years there has been some reinvestment in local authority based training. With at least four local authorities providing their own Level 2 and 3 training opportunities to help grow the workforce and increase the development of the wider VCFSE sector in their areas.



"Where you guys have been really great is that development of our staff you know, that access to training far staff has been amazing."

"Workforce we do well, we have own level 2-3 courses, and train communities e.g Jewish orthodox to become youth workers to serve their own communities"

Promoting the Youth Offer

The promotion and dissemination of the Youth Offer took many forms across the LAs. It is clear that there are some LAs with the digital resources in place to share information on websites that are regularly updated. For many others this was a struggle, due to the resource needed to build a suitable repository or a challenge to maintain current information. Some good examples included maps and youth led apps.

> ***"We have a digital map for our youth offer, youth offer currently includes sports, youth activity, uniformed groups."***
>
> ***"We have our own website, for young people that was kind of run by young people as well. So we have young reporters, and they're people who kind of go out and, do you know, interviews with people or just talk, or if they want to write about something they can. I'd say word of mouth is is probably the biggest on our relationship with the website."***
>
> ***"So one of the people that were previously we started to sort of this Google digital map where people just put flags on where, where they where they're used to, where their youth offer is and what it is, but it's, it's one of those things in it, it needs constantly updating."***

For some LAs there is a virtual presence on existing corporate websites, but this has to fit with the design and flow of the authorities web page design, and isn't always a prominent section on their webpage.

> ***"Someone, would find out about the youth offer. One is that council website, which is very much Council, all in our branding colours, it's very hard to navigate. Then there's our local offer website. And then there's the youth service social media."***

Most Local Authorities utilised social media to post about opportunities, using different platforms to engage with different audiences.

> ***"So we post regular we engage with young people as much as we can on socials, and then the other obvious places are like schools and, you know, the old school posters and leaflets and things like that. But essentially, word of mouth is the way forward, and social media, it's direct."***

Traditional methods of schools engagement, engagement via youth workers and word of mouth were still cited as the most effective ways of communicating the youth offer.

We've got really good relationship and participation with the schools."

"When we talk to young people, they often say that the best way that they can get information is for people to go into school and tell them about it, which is interesting. But young people don't say social media and things like that. But so, so yeah, kind of young people who are already kind of accessing provision and then kind of sharing the information with their with their peers is probably the main way. "

Progress on addressing Statutory Guidance

There is a mixed picture of progress across the Northwest. Whilst there is consensus on the value in having Statutory Guidance, there isn't a concern in meeting the requirements. Local Authorities are progressing at differing speeds, with a small number driving their responses to meeting the guidance, some in a state of pause whilst changes at SLT take place and others who haven't got the resources or buy-in to make progress. What is common amongst all is that they are able to meet the guidance.

" So can we meet it? Yes, absolutely. You can meet it quite easily, as long as you've got a clear justification around your decision making, then you've met the guidance."

"I think we're in quite a good position anyway, because we've got a relatively decent sized youth service that sits within the local authority, and we work with, you know, kind of partners and things. I think the basis of what we, you know, what we need to be doing, in terms of meeting the statutory guidance is there anyway. "

"I think we will, we will meet it without necessarily going through the process, really, because we did a big needs assessment for the youth zone funding application."

"So we wanted to almost be in a position to be able to listen and deliver whatever came back from the needs assessment as best as we could. I know it's not perfect, but if you can do that, and it just makes more sense to be able to react to what comes back from it"

"I think I could go out with the current youth service spec, and it would be fine, and it would deliver. But we're really going to be focusing on that consultation period now with young people, children, young people and parent carers to say what's what's missing within this and what's working well, what's not so, yeah, I think from from my observation of the guidance. I don't think there's anything there that jumps out and poses a threat or a worry or a challenge."

"We're meeting the guidance because we've built strong connections with the third sector. But if it was solely down to the local authority, we wouldn't be able to meet it."

Importance of Regional Support

Many local authorities appreciated the support of YFNW and Regional Youth Work Unit in their area, and benefited from the resources and advice available to them. This was also highlighted in the way that LAs can learn from each other when responding to the Statutory Guidance but can also seek support and advice from a regional perspective and have their views amplified from locally, to regional and national platforms.

"I like the fact that they've asked you as a regional unit to do this. That is so that is so important, isn't it, so that the link local to regional to national, that wouldn't have happened, would it? I think that's so important because, because we are all different. I feel really lucky to be part of the North West."

"The only thing I would say is that having youth focus North West is a huge help. for me, it's very supportive. It's a great way to link up with other, youth managers"

"W***here you guys have been really great is that development. We've, you know, that access to training for staff has been amazing, but also the meeting with other strategic leads."***

Funding

A key topic in discussions with Local Authorities was the ongoing financial constraints, cited as a major concern and issue for most services, reducing budgets, looming cuts in the new financial year and the concerns about maintaining the presence of a good quality professional youth service.

"I don't own any youth clubs. We rent space for everything that we do. We don't own any."

"***If the guidance went further, local authorities would have to invest in full open-access youth provision. But because it doesn't, it becomes wishy-washy in terms of requesting investment."***

"***Some of the centres are becoming increasingly harder to keep and maintain, because there's not a lot of capital money. And over the last few years, we've had to kind of offload the asset to other groups, but we've, we've maintained the presence. So we've become a user group, but the council won't be paying all the bills."***

"***The obvious challenge is that it's coming alongside further cuts to services. So, whereas I can say, right, you know, like this month, I know that in 12 months time, I will have significantly less budget. So what I can say, we're able to fulfil now in 12 months time would be, would be different. So I think, I think that's the kind of challenge."***

"***So I've taken it to the senior leadership team in children's, and I can say, right, this is what we've got to do. And they are now talking as if youth services are a statutory function of the local authority, which I've got to say they weren't before. How much we spend on it is, is the bit that isn't written in stone."***



Conclusions

The findings from the responses to the statutory guidance highlight the multifaceted challenges and opportunities facing the sector. On the whole the new iteration of the guidance is welcomed, with little concern about meeting the requirements outlined within it.

Recurring themes across the responses included the need for robust and actionable guidance that strengthens the position of professional youth work within wider statutory frameworks. This entwined with accountable measures bestowed on local authorities, which includes the call for strengthening the language within the guidance.

Senior leadership also featured prominently, with respondents pointing to the necessity of committed and informed leaders to advocate for youth work at all levels. This buy-in also impacts on how the guidance is viewed and acted upon within the LA. The availability of resources to implement the guidance emerged as a significant concern.

The importance of investment in the workforce, including professional development, recruitment, and retention strategies, to ensure that youth workers are equipped to meet the diverse needs of young people was emphasised throughout.

The age range that the guidance covers was stressed as incongruent with practice across LAs, with all stating that the youth offer should incorporate 11-25 year olds rather than 13-19 year olds.
Relationship building and direct dialogue with young people featured heavily in the promotion of the Youth Offer, whilst digital tools are one way of communicating, traditional techniques are often cited as being most effective.

What is undeniable is the vigour and passion of those who contributed to this report, as well as their unwavering commitment to professional youth work despite operating under exceptionally challenging circumstances.

It is crucial to recognise and value the wealth of knowledge and expertise within the youth work sector in the Northwest, ensuring that it is preserved and supported. Prioritising adequate long term secure funding, strong leadership, and workforce development will be essential to unlocking the full potential of the statutory guidance and fostering a thriving future for youth services.

In conclusion, while the statutory guidance has been welcomed by Heads of Youth Services across the region, there is a range of challenges to overcome in consistently applying the guidance and ensuring a robust Youth Offer is available for all young people across the Northwest.



Appendix

Survey Questions

What services are currently delivered by your LA Youth Offer?
What is the size of the LA Youth Offer budget?
How many qualified youth workers/volunteers are part of your service?
Do you know how many young people access your services and provision?
Is any of your Youth Offer commissioned out?
What's working well in your current youth offer?
Are there any challenges facing you in developing and delivering your youth offer?



Appendix

Interview Questions

What are your thoughts on the updated statutory guidance for Youth Work? Do you understand what has changed with the update? Do you understand the guidance in general? Do you feel your LA is able to meet the requirements set out in the guidance?
How does the statutory guidance impact your service/youth offer ? How will your service enact/respond to implementing the updated guidance Can you see any challenges/benefits to the changes?
Are there any challenges in implementing/meeting the new statutory guidance? Have you been able to make the necessary changes Has there been any additional positive or negative impacts as a result of the guidance To what extent do you feel you are meeting the statutory guidance? Do you feel that you are more or less able to meet the statutory requirements since the update?
Are there any areas of implementing the guidance that you need support with? Where are you at on your journey with it Have you used any of the existing guidance/toolkits
What age group does your youth offer cover?

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