



BACK TO SCHOOL

CAN YOUTH WORK HELP
TURN THE TIDE ON ABSENCE?

FEBRUARY 2026

FOREWORD

One of the most pressing challenges facing education today is school absence. Since the pandemic, rates of absence have risen, with long-term consequences that extend well beyond the classroom. While schools play a central role, absence is rarely driven by a single cause, resulting in increasing calls for coordinated, community-based solutions.

Youth work has an important part to play. Youth workers often build trusted relationships with young people who feel disengaged or overlooked within education, offering consistency, encouragement and practical help at critical moments.



National policy is also placing renewed emphasis on enrichment and access to high-quality extracurricular opportunities as a way of improving outcomes, particularly for the most disadvantaged young people. This creates a strong case for better understanding how youth work complements and strengthens these efforts.

At OnSide, we have long been confident in the positive impact youth centres have on young people's lives. Schools and partners consistently highlight the role our Youth Zones play in supporting members' education. Through attending open access sessions, young people build their confidence, social and emotional skills, wellbeing and determination - all key factors in long-term success, both in education and beyond.

Yet with no data to support this assumption, we wanted to better understand whether Youth Zones play a role in supporting young people to stay connected to their education. This is why we commissioned the Policy Institute at King's College London to evaluate the impact of Youth Zone participation on educational outcomes.

The findings show that regular attendance at a Youth Zone results in meaningful reductions in school absence, particularly among young people who are severely absent and those from disadvantaged backgrounds. The research reinforces what youth workers see every day:

that positive, open access sessions can play a powerful preventative role.

This report looks to bring these findings to life, drawing out the components of a Youth Zone that support these outcomes; and how youth work could contribute to national and local efforts to tackle absenteeism.

I would like to thank the team at King's College London for their rigorous evaluation, and The Burberry Foundation for their generous support, including through the Burberry Inspire programme, which helped make this research possible. Their commitment to evidence, opportunity and long-term impact for young people is deeply valued.

Tackling school absence will require sustained investment, partnership and long-term thinking. We hope these findings help inform future policy and practice and contribute to a shared ambition: ensuring every young person has the opportunity to engage, belong and succeed.



Jamie Masraff
Chief Executive, OnSide

BURBERRY INSPIRE

Using creativity as a tool for social connection and confidence building

Burberry Inspire is the flagship programme of The Burberry Foundation, established in 2008 to support young people worldwide. The programme works with youth-focused organisations to help young people access creative activities which build confidence, strengthen community engagement, and support personal growth, with a particular focus on underserved communities.

OnSide is the lead charity partner for The Burberry Foundation programme in the UK. Alongside Burberry Inspire programme funding, Burberry colleagues contribute time and expertise through mentoring, creative workshops, and skills-based sessions. These activities culminate in the annual Burberry Inspire showcase, where young people present their work, celebrate achievements, and explore the roles creativity can play in future pathways.

The Burberry Foundation is proud to have supported OnSide and King's College London with the funding that enabled this research. The findings offer valuable insight into how Youth Zones support young people's confidence, social engagement and connection to learning - factors linked to improved school attendance and re-engagement with education.

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This research clearly shows the importance of spaces that encourage creativity and positive connection for young people. Youth Zones provide environments where young people feel supported, confident, and able to express themselves. Through Burberry Inspire, we see how creative opportunity strengthens confidence and connection, regardless of background. This report reflects what partners and young people show us every day.”

Lord Chris Holmes MBE, Chair of The Burberry Foundation Trustees



MEET SARAH*,

an 18-year-old member at Legacy,
Croydon Youth Zone

“ Before joining Legacy Youth Zone, school had become a place I dreaded. In Years 10 and 11 my confidence was so low that attending lessons especially music, the subject I once loved, filled me with anxiety. Bullying made me feel ashamed of my voice, and there were days I left class in tears. My attendance and motivation dropped because I no longer felt safe or supported at school.

Legacy changed that. When the team visited my school and told me about the recording studio, radio station and drama sessions, it gave me something positive to look forward to. My first visit made a huge difference. The youth workers were welcoming, the space felt safe, and for the first time in a long time, I felt like myself again.

Working with the Youth Zone's drama teacher and later with the music lead, helped rebuild my confidence. Their support meant I could practise my vocals, prepare for GCSE assessments and feel more capable walking back into school. The one-to-one check-ins with Rose also helped me manage my anxiety so it didn't stop me attending lessons. Legacy didn't just help me rediscover my passion for music, it helped me feel able to show up, engage and keep going at school.

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(*name has been changed)



BACKGROUND: NATIONAL CHALLENGE OF SCHOOL ABSENCE

School attendance has been identified as a significant national challenge, shaped by a complex mix of social, economic and educational factors.

Since the relaxation of restrictions on schools imposed during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, there have been concerns about increased absences. Severe absence rates, where pupils are missing 50% or more of possible school sessions, risk becoming entrenched. As the King's College London (KCL) Evaluation notes from reviewing existing literature, the impact of attendance is felt far beyond the classroom, resulting in lower attainment, reduced lifetime earnings and a greater likelihood of long-term unemployment.¹

Evidence gap and evaluation

Absenteeism is a complex issue that cannot be addressed by schools alone; it requires coordinated action across local partners, families, and a range of supporting agencies. Youth workers can play an important role within wraparound support. Whether helping young people develop a positive relationship with school or working with them to address specific issues hindering attendance such as anxiety

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I had my transition from high school to college last year and a lot happened to me last year. I don't think I would have got through the end of high school without them [Youth Zone].

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**Youth Zone member,
Kings College London focus group**

or loneliness, youth workers are well placed to support efforts to ensure that all children can fully benefit from an education. The national focus on enrichment also highlights expanding access to high-quality extracurricular activities as a powerful way to improve outcomes.²

Yet the effectiveness of youth clubs and youth work in improving educational outcomes remains underexplored in the UK. To address this evidence gap, OnSide commissioned KCL to conduct an evaluation to fully assess the impact of OnSide's Youth Zones on educational outcomes, including levels of absenteeism. The evaluation looked at young people who regularly attended a Youth Zone in the OnSide Network. With an overall sample size of nearly 25,000

young people, the evaluation drew on OnSide's own data from its open access provision, alongside the National Pupil Database held by the Department for Education, to understand participants' outcomes over time, comparing changes before and after members joined, with those of similar young people who did not attend a Youth Zone.

The King's College London Evaluation can be read here - www.onsideyouthzones.org/backtoschool – and the key findings are summarised in this report.

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I think the Youth Zones help just to make sure everyone's, relaxed and calm. Just have a little bit of fun before you go back to school the next day. Or just get everything off your mind because you can literally speak to any staff member in there and they'll listen to you.

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**Youth Zone member, Kings College
London focus group**

KEY FINDINGS

Overall, the evaluation shows a clear, positive impact of Youth Zone attendance on school absence rates. Findings include:



Regular Youth Zone attendance reduced unauthorised absence by 21% in 2024 - nearly 4 fewer missed sessions per pupil on average - compared with the usual level of unauthorised absence in the matched comparator group. The figure for the full study period of 2012-24 is a 17% reduction.



The strongest measurable impact is among severely absent pupils, demonstrating clear potential to support those with the highest levels of school disengagement.



Early engagement is critical - young people who join before age 11yrs, particularly between nine and 11yrs, show the most significant improvements in attendance.



Although the scale of impact varies across sites, the overall effectiveness of Youth Zones in reducing absences has strengthened over time. Between 2022 and 2024, the reduction in absences tripled, demonstrating a growing influence on improving attendance.



Youth Zones also deliver particularly strong benefits for young people living in disadvantaged communities, helping to narrow gaps in levels of unauthorised absenteeism.

YOUTH WORKER VIEWPOINT

We spoke to Nicola Varley, Head of Youth Work at Wigan Youth Zone to gain insight into how youth work supports educational outcomes day-to-day.

What approaches do you find most effective when supporting young people who are struggling with school? How do Youth Zones complement what schools are doing, rather than trying to replicate it?

The biggest difference is that youth work is voluntary. Young people choose to attend the Youth Zone, which means engagement is driven by trust and relationships rather than obligation. While education is part of our offer, it is informal and often subtle, focusing on personal development rather than academic outcomes alone.

Youth Zones complement schools by helping to develop well-rounded, resilient young people with higher aspirations. Our youth work curriculum aligns well with school objectives, and our specialist departments provide additional opportunities that enhance learning rather than replicate it.

We know that increased confidence and aspiration supports educational success. Our annual report showed that 93% of young people said their aspirations had increased through attending the Youth Zone. When young people feel more positive about their future, they are more motivated to engage with education and attend school.

See full Q&A at the end of the report.



Nicola Varley

Head of Youth Work at Wigan Youth Zone



IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

By intervening earlier, youth work can play an important role in helping schools prevent unauthorised absence from escalating, providing timely support and sustained engagement that addresses root causes before disengagement becomes entrenched.

This assessment is supported by the evaluation that found a meaningful effect of Youth Zone attendance on reducing absenteeism. This impact stands out in a field where many targeted absenteeism interventions show limited or no effect.



As the KCL analysis cites, national and international reviews, including by the Education Endowment Foundation³, highlight the scarcity of high-quality evidence on effective interventions to boost attendance. In this context, the evidence that OnSide Youth Zones reduce absenteeism more effectively than some targeted approaches underscores the impact of consistent, high-quality youth work. Although not designed specifically to address unauthorised absence, Youth Zones reduce absenteeism and the effect has strengthened over time.

The impact of even small improvements in attendance on young people's attainment and prospects are proven to be significant. Pupils attending 95–100% of the time in Year 6 are 1.3 times more likely to meet expected standards in reading, writing and maths than those attending 90–95%. The link is even stronger at secondary level: Year 11 pupils with near perfect attendance have almost double the odds of achieving Grade 5 in English and maths GCSEs, while missing just 10 additional days is associated with halving the likelihood of achieving these grades⁴. Against this backdrop, proven interventions such as Youth Zones should be given serious consideration as part of strategies to improve attendance.



The KCL analysis shows that early and frequent engagement is also strongly linked to improved attendance. The transition from primary to secondary is a well-known challenge in education, and the research demonstrated that joining a Youth Zone at a younger age, particularly between nine and 11, delivers the greatest impact. This indicates that both the duration and intensity of participation in a Youth Zone matter, and that early, sustained engagement could help prevent absence from escalating, with young people having more time to build relationships, develop skills and benefit from consistent support within a high-quality youth-led setting.



YOUTH WORKER VIEWPOINTS

Antony Marshall, Head of Youth Work and Caroline Weir, Education Manager at Warrington Youth Zone spoke to us about what the findings mean in practice. The full Q&A can be read at the end of the report.

The research with King's College London found that attending a Youth Zone has a positive impact on unauthorised absence. Why do you think that is?

Antony: For me, a big part of it is the role Youth Zones play in bridging the gap between young people and schools. Teachers see young people for many hours each week, but their time is focused on delivering lessons. Youth workers often have more space to explore relationships, wellbeing and the wider context of a young person's life.

We're able to help young people understand why education is important, not just school itself, but the skills and opportunities education can offer. At the same time, we can gently explore what might not be working for them. Often there are unmet needs that schools don't have

the capacity or visibility to address, such as challenges at home, family stress or emotional wellbeing issues.

When those needs are identified, Youth Zones can act quickly, for example by making referrals into early help or supporting families directly. If a parent is struggling or a young person is carrying worries that affect their attendance, addressing those issues can have a real impact on whether they feel able to attend school regularly.

Caroline: I think it's also about the time we have to take a more holistic approach. Particularly for older young people, confidence can be a big barrier. Some don't feel comfortable approaching teachers or asking for help in a classroom environment. At the Youth Zone, we've run things like informal homework clubs where young people can ask questions without fear of judgement. They can make mistakes, talk things through and build confidence at their own pace. That confidence then carries over into school.

See full Q&A at the end of the report.



Antony Marshall
Head of Youth Work,
Warrington Youth Zone



Caroline Weir
Education Manager,
Warrington Youth Zone

YOUTH ZONES IN PRACTICE:

Supporting educational outcomes

Youth Zones combine engaging activities with high-quality youth work to create trusted spaces where young people can build relationships, develop skills and access support.

Across the OnSide Network, the open access sessions help young people stay connected to education by providing safe, consistent environments that build confidence, social skills and wellbeing, which are all key drivers of regular attendance.

This early, accessible support is open to all young people and helps address challenges that might otherwise lead to disengagement. Where needed, Youth Zones can also provide more tailored, targeted support for young people who are struggling at school.

Examples include:

The Hive, Wirral Youth Zone

Inspiring Futures is a programme aimed at working with secondary school aged pupils who are struggling with their attendance. The programme uses Youth Zone activities and resources to help young people hit personal targets, including social, physical, educational, emotional and vocational aspects of their personal development. The programme is delivered for half of a school term, one day a week and works with small cohorts of six young people. It includes structured team-building and small-group support in the first weeks to build trust and comfort within the group, with school staff reporting improvements in motivation, behaviour and participation.

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One of the biggest advantages for me was seeing the students happier and genuinely excited to attend school and engage more with their peers and teachers too. They were excited to tell me each week what they were doing. ”

**School Attendance Officer,
Birkenhead**



CASE STUDY: TM, MEMBER AT THE HIVE, WIRRAL YOUTH ZONE

TM*, a 13-year-old member at The Hive, took part in the Inspiring Futures programme. Her progress extended beyond the sessions themselves, contributing to improved attendance and happiness at school.

At the start, TM presented as quiet and withdrawn, often using her phone to disengage from group interaction. During the early sessions, she found it difficult to engage fully with group activities and tended to stay on the margins of the cohort. She spoke very little and often avoided eye contact, choosing instead to focus on her phone.

Youth Zone staff recognised this as a sign of low confidence rather than disengagement and responded with patient, low-pressure support, allowing her time to observe, feel safe, and gradually build trust without forcing participation. As the programme progressed, she began to form positive friendships with peers, which proved to be a key factor in her engagement. With encouragement from both staff and peers, she started to put her phone away more often and take part in small group activities.

Through consistent support and positive reinforcement, she gradually became more willing to try new activities. Staff ensured she was given choices and reassurance, allowing her to engage at her own pace. At one stage, she decided to step away for one week. This moment highlighted the challenges some young people face in maintaining engagement when confidence is still developing. Importantly, she chose to return to the programme and on her return, she presented with a noticeably more positive attitude and increased confidence, re-engaging with peers and activities more openly.

Following her return, she showed a marked increase in enthusiasm and enjoyment. Staff observed that she laughed more, initiated conversations and actively encouraged others during activities. Her confidence continued to grow as she experienced success and enjoyment, reinforcing her willingness to participate. By the end of the programme, she was significantly more engaged, communicative, and self-assured compared to her starting point. School staff reported she was attending more regularly and looked happier in the school setting.



(*name has been changed)



Legacy, Croydon Youth Zone

Legacy works in partnership with local schools to support vulnerable students at risk of exclusion or isolation. Through mentoring, skills development and health and wellbeing activities, both in school and at the Youth Zone, young people are supported to build confidence, overcome barriers and connect with opportunities such as volunteering and employment.

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The engagement of the team with our disengaged students has proven to be highly productive and beneficial. The students have gained the support of mentors who are committed to encouraging their development into the best versions of themselves. Having mentors who bridge students to teachers has resulted in positive changes within the students.

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Oasis Shirley Park School, Croydon

BLGC

In addition to its open access offer, the team provides a range of education-related support, from youth work and mentoring to alternative provision and targeted support for young people who are not in education, employment or training (NEET).

The Teams Around the School programme works closely with schools, families and young people to improve emotional health and wellbeing, offering young person-led one-to-one support both in school and at the Youth Zone.

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I was referred from my old school. My behaviour was horrific. I had awful anxiety and uncontrollable anger. In my old school I would smash stuff up and run away whenever I flipped. I had awkward days, but these soon got less and less. I felt safe, included and listened to. I wasn't made to do anything I felt uncomfortable doing. They helped me regain a sense of trust and security. At first my mindset was 'I am not going to even bother doing my GCSE'S, I'll never pass them anyway' but I was encouraged to try, now I'm doing English and Maths. To be honest, I don't think I'd be where I am now without all the support.

”

Secondary school pupil, Bolton

ONSIDE'S RECOMMENDATIONS

The Government has introduced a range of initiatives to support schools in improving attendance. These range from free breakfast clubs, funding mental health support, and new Attendance and Behaviour Hubs to provide support to schools facing the most acute challenges.

With evidence showing increased participation in extra-curricular activities is associated with higher outcomes⁵, there is also a commitment to a core enrichment entitlement including a set of enrichment benchmarks, work that sits alongside the wider National Youth Strategy.

Within this policy landscape, OnSide believes there is an untapped opportunity to strengthen joint working between the Department for Education (DfE) and the Department for Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), fully aligning policy and funding across education, youth services and enrichment. This would better enable local youth work providers to complement schools' existing attendance strategies, providing the informal, trust-based support needed to re-engage a young person with education.

Building on the findings of KCL's evaluation and recognising there is no one-size fits all

approach, OnSide is making the following recommendations for decision makers to better enable youth centres like Youth Zones to support young people's educational outcomes, including attendance.

• **Integrate youth work into national attendance policy and guidance**

The Department for Education should explicitly recognise youth work and community-based provision as part of the wider attendance system. This should include updated statutory guidance and dedicated funding to enable schools and local authorities to broker partnerships with youth providers when developing attendance strategies, including the structured involvement of youth workers at key transition points and, where appropriate, in attendance panels.

• **Promote out of school enrichment opportunities**

Building on the Enrichment Partnership Pilots, schools should be supported to promote access to enrichment and youth work opportunities beyond the school day, including offsite provision such as youth clubs, with a focus on young people living in disadvantaged communities. This should include structured collaboration with local providers and the integration of information about local youth

provision into key school communications and transition related events. Working with youth providers, schools should provide clear assurances to parents regarding the safety of these settings and the evidence that participation in enrichment activities supports pupils' wellbeing and academic engagement.

• **Create dedicated programmes to provide access to youth workers**

Government should introduce funded, multi-year programmes in areas with high absence rates, giving disengaged pupils access to designated youth workers, including through offsite, centre-based provision outside of school hours. Funding would support structured partnership between school staff and youth providers to deliver consistent, tailored interventions for pupils at risk of disengagement or persistent absence, with programmes operating within clear safeguarding and accountability frameworks, with information-sharing protocols agreed locally.

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I have been able to talk to staff here, I talk it all out. It makes me able to cope better in school. ”

Wigan Youth Zone, Female, 11

⁵ Robinson, D. (2024). Access to extra-curricular provision and the association with outcomes. Education Policy Institute.

- **Fund the evidence base on youth work and education outcomes**

DfE and DCMS should co-commission robust quantitative and longitudinal research, using common metrics, to further understand how community youth provision influences attendance and wider education outcomes. This should build on existing initiatives, including the Local Youth Transformation Programme, to identify the conditions for effective partnership between schools, local authorities, youth services and the wider voluntary sector.

- **Long-term sustainable funding and complementary delivery**

Government should provide dedicated joined-up funding to strengthen the role of youth work in supporting schools and to deepen cross-sector understanding between the education and youth sectors. This should include national coordination between DfE and DCMS to ensure that youth workers can provide additional capacity and specialist support to schools, enabling teachers to focus on teaching. Strengthened statutory guidance should underpin this approach, and activity should align with national initiatives such as Young Futures Hubs and enrichment benchmarks.



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I'm more pushed to meet more people, then I have more confidence to push myself in school. I'm more confident to ask questions or to go into situations I'm uncomfortable in. I can concentrate longer.

”

The Hive Youth Zone, Male, 13

YOUTH WORKER Q&A'S

To reflect on the findings from King's College London's evaluation and what they mean in practice, OnSide spoke with youth workers from Youth Zones across the OnSide Network.

The Q&As offer insight into how youth work supports educational outcomes day-to-day, and why spaces like youth clubs can make a meaningful difference to young people's lives beyond the classroom.



1. Nikki, Head of Youth Work, Wigan Youth Zone

Please could you start by telling me your names, job titles and a little more about your roles within the Youth Zone?

I'm Nikki and I've been working with young people at Wigan Youth Zone for 13 years – I'm currently Head of Youth Work.

The research with King's College London found that attending a Youth Zone has a positive impact on absenteeism or unauthorised absence. Why do you think that is?

I think a key factor is the impact Youth Zones have on young people's confidence, resilience and social skills, particularly since the Covid-19 lockdowns. We have seen a noticeable shift in how young people spend their free time, with more time spent online and less time in face-to-face social environments. While the digital world can feel safer for some young people and families, it often limits opportunities to build confidence, resilience and healthy relationships.

Youth Zones offer a safe, supervised environment where young people can build those skills in real life, supported by trusted adults. By spending time in a Youth Zone, young people develop social confidence, learn how to navigate relationships, and become more resilient. These are all skills that help them feel better equipped to cope with the structure, expectations and pressures of school.

Our own data supports this. In our most recent annual report, 81% of young people said their determination had increased, 73% said their resilience had improved, 77% reported higher self-confidence and 76% said their social skills had improved since joining the Youth Zone. When young people feel more confident, resilient and supported, they are far more able to re-engage with school and attend more regularly.

From your experience, what are some of the main barriers young people face when it comes to attending school regularly?

There are many barriers, and they are often complex and interconnected. Some young people struggle with the structure of school, the pressure of academic expectations, or the requirement to sit still for long periods of time. For others, anxiety, low self-esteem and social challenges can make the school environment overwhelming.

We also see practical and personal barriers, such as young people who are young carers, those dealing with challenges at home, poor sleep, financial pressures like transport costs, or family illness. While these circumstances differ, the most common themes we see are low confidence, difficulties with social skills, anxiety and a lack of resilience. These factors can all contribute to disengagement and poor attendance if they are not addressed.

How does the Youth Zone help to address some of those barriers, either directly or indirectly?

At the heart of this is the youth work relationship. Youth work is about meeting young people where they are and offering holistic, individualised support. Unlike school settings, where teachers may not always have the capacity to focus on individual circumstances, youth workers are able to take the time to understand each young person's needs and strengths.

The activities within a Youth Zone act as a vehicle for this support. Young people find activities they enjoy, build friendships, and discover spaces where they feel they belong. Importantly, they often find something they are good at, which builds confidence and self-belief. That sense of achievement can be transformative.

Once trust is established, young people feel able to talk to youth workers about wider issues, whether that is anxiety, problems at home or bullying at school. From there, we can put appropriate support in place, including safeguarding interventions and working closely with families, schools, early help teams and other professionals to ensure young people receive joined-up support.

What characteristics of open, universal sessions best support young people with school-related challenges? Should they focus more on targeted programmes?

Both open sessions and targeted programmes play an important role. Open, universal sessions are particularly valuable for supporting young people's social development. For many teenagers, friendships and peer relationships are a priority, and open sessions provide a safe environment to socialise, build relationships and navigate social dynamics with the support of youth workers.

Through open sessions, youth workers can identify tensions, support young people who may feel excluded, and help them develop emotional and social intelligence. These skills are crucial, as many challenges young people experience in school relate not just to lessons, but to social pressures outside the classroom.

Alongside this, targeted programmes are also essential. Youth Zones follow the National Youth Agency's youth work curriculum, which focuses on outcomes such as leadership, healthy relationships and personal development. These programmes often align closely with school priorities and can support young people to achieve outcomes that complement their education.





We also provide practical educational support, such as access to music studios for GCSE coursework, support with dance or art projects, and mentoring from staff with specialist skills. This kind of support can remove barriers for young people who may not have access to these resources at home.

How do Youth Zones complement what schools are doing, rather than trying to replicate it? What approaches do you find most effective when supporting young people who are struggling with school?

The biggest difference is that youth work is voluntary. Young people choose to attend the Youth Zone, which means engagement is driven by trust and relationships rather than obligation. While education is part of our offer, it is

informal and often subtle, focusing on personal development rather than academic outcomes alone.

Youth Zones complement schools by helping to develop well-rounded, resilient young people with higher aspirations. Our youth work curriculum aligns well with school objectives, and our specialist departments provide additional opportunities that enhance learning rather than replicate it.

We know that increased confidence and aspiration supports educational success. Our annual report showed that 93% of young people said their aspirations had increased through attending the Youth Zone. When young people feel more positive about their future, they are more motivated to engage with education and attend school.

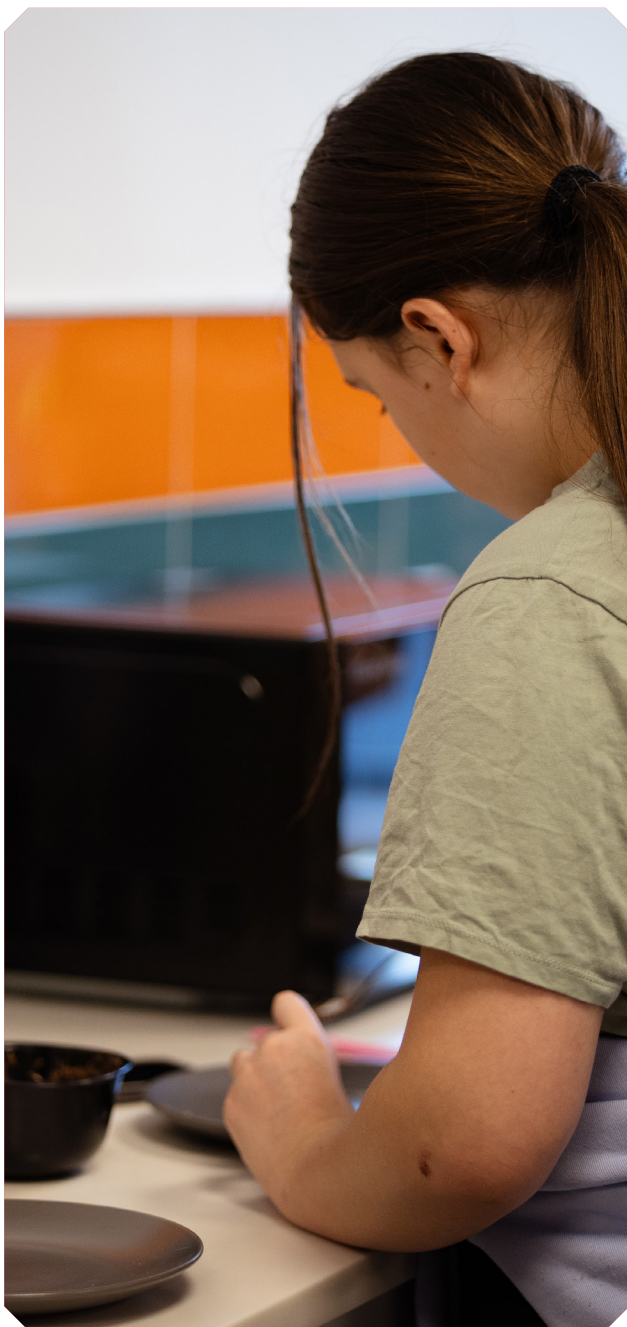
In your opinion, are there opportunities for stronger collaboration between Youth Zones and local schools when it comes to attendance?

Absolutely. Stronger collaboration is key to providing effective, wraparound support for young people. Schools support young people during the school day, but their capacity is limited. Youth Zones are open when schools are not, meaning we can continue that support outside school hours.

Where communication between schools and Youth Zones works well, we see a clear benefit for young people. Safeguarding teams, heads of year and youth work managers sharing information allows for a more joined-up approach. However, these relationships vary between schools, and when communication breaks down, young people can miss out on vital support.

There is a real opportunity to strengthen these partnerships so that support feels seamless for young people. Better communication and understanding of each other's roles would help ensure that young people at risk of poor attendance are supported consistently, both in and out of school.





2. Anthony and Caroline, Head of Youth Work and Education Manager, Warrington Youth Zone

The research with King's College London found that attending a Youth Zone has a positive impact on absenteeism or unauthorised absence. Why do you think that is?

Anthony: For me, a big part of it is the role Youth Zones play in bridging the gap between young people and schools. Teachers see young people for many hours each week, but their time is focused on delivering lessons. Youth workers often have more space to explore relationships, wellbeing and the wider context of a young person's life.

We're able to help young people understand why education is important, not just school itself, but the skills and opportunities education can offer. At the same time, we can gently explore what might not be working for them. Often there are unmet needs that schools don't have the capacity or visibility to address, such as challenges at home, family stress or emotional wellbeing issues.

When those needs are identified, Youth Zones can act quickly, for example by making referrals into early help or supporting families directly. If a parent is struggling or a young person is carrying worries that affect their attendance, addressing those issues can have a real impact on whether they feel able to attend school regularly.

Caroline: I think it's also about the time we have to take a more holistic approach. Particularly for older young people, confidence can be a big barrier. Some don't feel comfortable approaching teachers or asking for help in a classroom environment.

At the Youth Zone, we've run things like informal homework clubs where young people can ask questions without fear of judgement. They can make mistakes, talk things through and build confidence at their own pace. That confidence then carries over into school.

We also have mental health support available, such as our Youth in Mind team, which gives young people space to offload and talk through what's really going on. We're then able to share appropriate information with other professionals and work together to support the young person. It's about piecing things together and making sure no one is working in isolation.

From your experience, what are some of the main barriers young people face when it comes to attending school regularly?

Anthony: One of the biggest barriers is a lack of understanding about the purpose of school and why attendance matters. Alongside that, the social side of school can be incredibly challenging. If young people don't have strong social skills or feel unsure about how to make or maintain friendships, school can feel isolating and overwhelming.

Confidence also plays a role in very practical ways. Things like using public transport, speaking to a bus driver, buying a ticket or walking to school alone can all be barriers if young people haven't developed those skills. These challenges can build up and make attending school feel daunting.

Caroline: We're also seeing a much wider range of needs than ever before. For some young people, the idea of leaving the house or entering a school building is genuinely terrifying. Mental health plays a huge role here, and many young people don't yet have the coping strategies to manage those feelings.

There's also added pressure on families, particularly those experiencing poverty. Parents may already be under stress, and letters or threats of fines linked to attendance can increase anxiety for both parents and young people. That pressure can actually make attendance worse.

A lot of young people tell us they come to Youth Zones because they feel heard. They know we have the time to listen, to unpick what's going on, and to meet them where they're at, rather than expecting them to fit into a system that may not currently be working for them.

What characteristics of open, universal sessions best support young people with school-related challenges? Should they focus more on targeted programmes?

Caroline: Open sessions are really valuable because support can happen naturally. For example, we have staff who young people know they can approach for help with homework or specific subjects. Even if someone is running an activity, they'll stop and help if a young person is struggling.

We've seen young people go from feeling completely overwhelmed to having a real 'lightbulb moment' because someone has taken the time to explain things in a way that works for them. That time and patience can make a huge difference.

Targeted programmes are equally important, as they allow us to focus on specific needs in more depth. They're tailored to the individual and help us unpick what's going on as a whole, rather than just addressing one surface issue.

Antony: Open sessions also do a huge amount for social development. They provide a space where young people can sit, eat, socialise and even do homework if they don't have that environment at home.

Targeted sessions allow us to build life skills that directly support school attendance. For example, we've run sessions focused on using public transport, taking young people on buses

and trains so they feel confident getting to school independently. Sometimes it's not about academic learning, but about making sure young people have the practical skills and confidence they need to get there on time and ready to learn.

How do Youth Zones support young people with friendships and social challenges linked to school?

Antony: This is something we deal with constantly. We regularly mediate friendship issues, whether that's between young people who attend the same school or even those at different schools. Sometimes that mediation happens face to face, sometimes over the phone, but it's about helping young people communicate and resolve conflict.



We also support parents in these situations. Parents sometimes need a safe space to talk, vent or ask questions, and we can help explain school decisions or teacher responses in a more human way. That mediation can de-escalate situations and rebuild trust between families and schools.

Caroline: Some parents we work with are very isolated and don't have other professionals they trust. They come to us because they feel we understand their child and their situation. In those cases, we're often advocating for both the young person and the parent, helping everyone feel heard and supported.

How do Youth Zones complement what schools are doing, rather than trying to replicate it?

Antony: We work closely with schools and are in regular contact with many of them. We share concerns, discuss wellbeing and safeguarding issues, and ask how we can support the work schools are already doing. The aim is always to complement, not duplicate.

Youth workers understand the education system because we've been through it, but not all teachers have experienced youth work or Youth Zones. That can sometimes make it harder for schools to fully understand what we offer. Where schools have had the opportunity to spend time in the Youth Zone, or even work from the building, the impact is clear.

They see how young people benefit from having space to reset, build confidence or burn off energy before returning to lessons.

Caroline: We also reinforce school messages in a more informal, relaxed way. Young people often respond differently in a Youth Zone because the environment feels safer and less pressured. That informal education can be just as powerful.

In your opinion, are there opportunities for stronger collaboration between Youth Zones and local schools when it comes to attendance?

Antony: Definitely. There's scope for deeper partnership working, particularly around integrating Youth Zones more into school life. For example, schools using Youth Zones as part of PSHE delivery or off-site learning, rather than just as a reward or one-off visit.

When teachers spend time in the Youth Zone and actively engage in sessions, rather than standing back, they often have a moment where it clicks. They see the value of youth work and how it complements their role.

Caroline: There's also an opportunity to improve understanding of the impact Youth Zones have. Events like Youth Awards or open evenings allow schools and other professionals to see the difference youth work makes. Even staff who work in the building but aren't involved in sessions are often surprised by the stories and

outcomes. Building those shared experiences is key. When schools truly understand what Youth Zones do, collaboration becomes much easier and more effective for young people



3. Kelly,

Schools and Community Engagement Manager, Legacy, Croydon Youth Zone

Please could you start by telling me a little more about you?

My name is Kelly, and I'm the School and Community Engagement Manager at Legacy Youth Zone. My role is part of a partnership with Reedham Children's Trust, a charity which believes all young people have potential to excel if they have access to education.

I support young people who are at risk of exclusion, school refusal, or low attendance. So, these are young people who are generally disengaged, and we bring them into a space like a Youth Zone, to give them access to different types of opportunities, activities and most importantly for someone to speak to who will really listen.

This programme allows us to work both within schools across Croydon and in the Youth Zone to bridge those two environments. This approach builds trust with young people and helps them overcome the barriers that make education difficult. It's really about meeting them where they are and doing everything we can to provide a supportive environment, which encompasses their life inside and outside of school.

The research with King's College London found that attending a Youth Zone has a positive impact on absenteeism or unauthorised absence. Why do you think that is?

I think what really helps is the fact that the work we do provides wrap-around care. It's not a case of just trying to get a young person back into school, we help the bridge gaps and build a strong support network to surround that young person.

Once a referral has been approved by a teacher, we will not only begin working closely with the school on how best to support that young person, we will also connect with their parent or carer, to help include them in the process of encouraging the young person back into education. This builds strong foundations from the start.

Another key thing that helps reduce absenteeism is that Legacy's programme also supports them inside the school building - through in school mentoring, one to ones, and workshops. Working within the school walls can make a big difference. We work closely with school staff and update them on how the young person is doing, so they know in real time how they're progressing. This collaborative approach means young people start to see that the adults in both the school and Youth Zone work together to support them.



That consistency and cohesion helps rebuild their confidence and trust – especially within teacher-pupil relationships – and makes going back into school and re-engaging with their education feel far less scary.



From your experience, what are some of the main barriers young people face when it comes to attending school regularly?

I think there can be a real lack of trust of the education system. If a young person ultimately doesn't feel understood or supported, it impacts their wellbeing and mental health, it impacts their friendships and interactions with peers. Teacher-pupil relationships can also be strained. This lack of trust can have a huge knock-on

effect and can ultimately lead a young person to isolate themselves from the whole education system.

It's that system itself that can also be a barrier. There is a real focus on attainment (understandably) so there's less resource to offer a different kind of tailored support for some young people, when they really need it. Feeling like they can't connect to the education environment is also a barrier and can lead to young people feeling very isolated.

There are also external factors like instability at home or safeguarding concerns, that make school feel like the last thing they can cope with.

How does the Youth Zone help to address some of those barriers, either directly or indirectly?

We focus on building young people's confidence, nurturing relationships and helping to give them a sense of belonging. We introduce young people to trusted adults who give them time and space to talk things through, and who can teach them how to regulate their emotions.

It's all about taking the time to provide an environment where they feel they can share what they're struggling with. There was one young person we worked with who was suspended for a number of days for repeatedly refusing to go to a specific class. When we spoke to them and unpacked it, it turned out they weren't getting along with another person in the class. They

didn't have the skills to mend the rift and so just avoided the class altogether. So, we ran a conflict resolution session with both of them, and they were able to work through it. Afterwards, not only was the young person happy to attend that class, but they have the tools to cope with any future potential conflicts.

Alongside these sorts of sessions, we also provide academic support, which includes homework help, volunteers for subject-specific support, and one to one guidance. It's a holistic approach that can have a direct positive impact on the young person's relationship with school.



What characteristics of open, universal sessions best support young people with school-related challenges? Should they focus more on targeted programmes?

Universal sessions give young people an opportunity to explore different activities, to challenge themselves and be open to different experiences. They start to feel more capable and more positive within themselves. It gives young people a safe space to be themselves and make new friends and connections. The Youth Zone open sessions also give young people a chance to be part of positive adult relationships. Youth workers are informal; they're here for them and really want the best for them.

I also think the fact that going to Youth Zones and taking part in the activities is voluntary is really important. School is compulsory but Youth Zones aren't, so if a young person decides to come then they're already showing their agency, and they've been brave enough to take that step. They also understand that when they come through the doors, they will be expected to be respectful to others and have positive interactions.

All of these different things help and support young people's development and translates back into their relationship with school.

How do Youth Zones complement what schools are doing, rather than trying to replicate it? What approaches do you find most effective when supporting young people who are struggling with school?

A lot of the young people I work with feel anxious or overwhelmed in school, but they feel safe to take things at their own pace in the Youth Zone. Schools are also safe environment, but there is a real focus on attainment (understandably) so there's less resource to offer a different kind of tailored support for some young people, when they really need it. Youth Zones complement the school's focus on the academic side of things, by offering support the young person more holistically; this has a positive knock-on effect in terms of confidence and agency.

The schools we work with are also aware of what we can offer that they can't. They trust us to handle that different type of support as they know we're experts in this field. And because we work in partnership, we can share insights with schools about how young people are doing in the community, giving them a fuller picture.

The fact that we're also an evening provision means young people have support outside school hours, where they're safe and engaged, which schools really value.

In your opinion, are there opportunities for stronger collaboration between Youth Zones and local schools when it comes to attendance?

Definitely. Some schools work closely with us, but others are still unsure about youth work or have very strict systems that make partnership harder. More openness around data sharing, joint planning, and inviting us in to meet wider staff teams would make a huge difference, too. Schools are under a lot of pressure, and Youth Zones can take some of that weight by supporting with pastoral work, wellbeing, and early intervention - but it does rely on that trust and awareness of what we can offer.





Atria, Spa Road, Bolton BL1 4AG

Tel: 01204 362128

onsideyouthzones.org



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