

Letter to the Mayor about youth services in London

Key information

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Contents

[Youth services in London](#)
[Response from the Mayor](#)

Youth services in London

Dear Sadiq,

I am writing to you following on from our discussion yesterday at Mayor's Question Time (Thursday 20 November) where I mentioned I would follow up with you with more information.

You mentioned the work of my predecessor on the London Assembly, Siân Berry, who wrote numerous reports about the difficulties facing the youth sector in London and in particular tracking the decline in funding that the sector experienced. She published reports in 2017¹, ², 2018³, 2019⁴, 2020⁵, and 2021⁶, culminating in her report 'London's Youth Service Cuts 2011-2021: A Blighted Generation'⁷ which found over £36 million has been cut from annual youth service budgets between 2011-12 and 2021-22, a fall of 44 per cent.

Your funding provided through the Young Londoners Fund, and particularly the £25 million of new money in February 2020, following the City Hall Greens budget amendment 2020-21, was greatly appreciated by us and the youth sector.⁸

I have sought to continue this work by championing the youth sector. In 2024, I conducted my own research into the state of youth service budgets in London⁹, and this year I have continued that work by holding a roundtable with several Black leaders of youth organisations in London.

As we talked, there were several recurring themes regarding how they interact with organisations such as MOPAC.

Many of the attendees stressed to me how they felt that they and the youth sector were "holding back the tide" on youth violence.

They told me how they felt that Black-led youth work was distinctive from other kinds of youth work, highlighting how their work extends beyond just interacting with the young person themselves and instead also incorporating working with families and the wider community network of the young person. They said they felt that this approach is a **hallmark of Black-led youth work** but is rarely recognised or valued in the current funding models, despite the fact it is this deep relational work can be very effective at keeping young people safe.

In addition, they also said that they feel that Black youth workers are often brought in by larger mainstream organisations as **community ‘intermediaries’** because their cultural reach and trust are essential for delivery, but their contribution is not meaningfully recognised. This means that the true impact of Black-led practice becomes obscured in reporting and evaluation, and they said the current funding framework can inadvertently reinforce this imbalance.

Several also told me how funding applications ask you to bare your soul and how the **applications process** wants to hear the details of the violence the youth people they support face. They told me how they feel funders are looking for the ‘worst, baddest gangsters’ but that the youth sector is trying to prevent that from happening.

Another recurring theme was that funders want metrics that they can track to know that they are getting value for money when they provide grant funding. While this is partly understandable, the organisations I spoke to told me that they feel that **funders don’t fully understand the problem and so they cannot set the parameters in order to get the best outcome** for young people and London as a whole. Youth sector organisations told me how they know that the deep, long term work they do is valuable and does make a difference in the lives of young people.

Some headline stats from the **survey** we ran in October 2025:

- 80% said they were not confident their ideas were protected and would not be reused without consent
- 50% strongly disagreed that “the feedback they were provided reflected a genuine understanding of their community’s needs”
- 80% said they were not offered any follow-up support or guidance after rejection.

The survey also revealed that:

- Most people felt Black-led organisations were not fairly represented among the Mayor’s funded groups
- Most people did not feel the application process accounts for the capacity challenges faced by grassroots organisations
- Some people found it hard to navigate the Mayor of London website and discover which grants are available and which projects have been funded.

Organisations also said in the meeting I had with them that to rectify the feeling that Black-led organisations were not fairly represented among the Mayor’s funded groups that a possible solution would be to provide proportional allocation of funding to Black-led organisations. They said this was due to the fact they disproportionately serve the communities most affected by violence and that proportional investment is not only fair but necessary for effective prevention.

When asked what changes survey respondents would recommend in order to **make the funding process more equitable** responders said:

- Funders should set aside proportional funding for Black-led organisations

- Make application processes transparent both for winners and losers and much more accessible.
- Greater value needs to be given to grassroots insight and offer real capacity support
- Commit to long-term partnerships and include us in shaping priorities and decision criteria as well.
- More plain, commonly used language and less emphasis on forms and more on discussions and observations
- Giving young people a voice when it comes to choosing who receives funding so projects for them are chosen by them.

In addition to the above, what I heard from the sector time and time again was the need for **longer term funding**. These are organisations who are constantly working within the short-term cycles of funding that is provided to them, always unsure of their stability which will no doubt have knock on effects for the services they provide and the young people they support. Some told me about how they felt that a short burst of funding would appear after high profile incidents, but that this funding and attention would soon disappear leaving them back in the same place once the TV cameras had left. People also spoke about how continually revisiting traumatic incidents within their communities simply to justify funding was a great emotional stress which they felt was not recognised or compensated in the existing funding structures.

Extending funding cycles so these organisations have certainty for much longer periods of time would allow them to focus much more on the deep valuable work that only they can provide, and let them spend less time hunting around for funding opportunities and filling out funding applications. Reducing this administrative burden and providing them with much needed long-term stability will have significant positive effects and returns on investment. If you can explore the possibility of yourself and the government being able to provide real long term funding certainty to these groups, it would go such a long way to improving the quality of the youth sector and the fantastic preventative and life enriching work that they provide.

The other change that is needed is to go beyond what can be measured simply and easily. I fully understand the want and desire to have easily trackable and contrastable metrics that you can feedback to the public and scrutiny bodies like the Assembly to show that Londoner's money is being put to an effective use, but the true value of the kinds of long-term work that the Black-led youth sector provides is hard to quantify. I urge you to both **explore new and innovative ways that the impact of the great work these organisations do can be quantified** and also to look beyond and find ways of valuing work that cannot be quantified as easily.

As we touched on in my discussion with you today, it's great that so many young people have been supported by your Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) in some way, I'm sure each one has benefited, but to make real, deep and lasting change it takes intensive, wider work with the young person their family and community. I am seeking reassurance that you will respond to the concerns from Black-led youth organisations and the need for both long term funding and an appreciation for the kinds of deep long term youth work that can make lasting change.

Given the role you and MOPAC play in both the procurement process and funding decisions surrounding youth organisations in London I ask you to:

- Increase the transparency regarding what youth organisations yourself, MOPAC and the VRU are funding
- Provide actionable feedback to all bidders for funding
- Provide longer term funding to give organisations more certainty
- Increase the funding that you provide to Black-led youth organisations and recognise the unique and high-quality work that they do.

You've done this before, you've responded to the desperate need of the youth sector, I hope you will take on the points I raised constructively and listen to the calls that have come from the Black-led youth sector representatives that I have spoken to. Thank you for taking the time to read this letter.

Yours sincerely,

Zoë Garbett

Green Party Member of the London Assembly

Response from the Mayor

Dear Zoë,

Thank you for your letter regarding youth sector funding following our discussion at Mayor's Question Time in November.

I am committed to making London the greatest city in the world to grow up in. Where every young person has the support and opportunities they need to fulfil their full potential and thrive.

Years of austerity had a devastating impact on youth services, and Siân Berry's work rightly exposed the scale of those cuts – more than 600 youth workers lost, over 130 youth hubs closed, and more than £240 million stripped from young Londoners.

My response has been to rebuild and reinvest – putting youth work and mentoring at the heart of my approach – including establishing the Violence Reduction Unit (VRU) in 2019. In London, working in partnership with others, the VRU is committed to funding, supporting, and championing youth work in all places and spaces in our city. I welcome your support for the work the VRU does.

I know the critical role that youth workers play in a young person's life. It is youth workers we turn to at critical times – when a young person feels lost or has been let down by the system. Like you, I recognise and champion the life-changing impact that youth work has on our communities. I want to thank the thousands of grassroots and community organisations, including our Black-led voluntary and community organisations, working tirelessly to improve the lives of Londoners.

Since 2016, through the VRU and wider City Hall programmes, I am proud to have invested more than £100 million and delivered over 500,000 positive opportunities for young people across every London borough. I am committed to building on that work and investment in youth work by helping young Londoners access a further 250,000 positive opportunities this term.

My record investment of £34 million in mentoring through the New Deal for Young People (NDYP) fulfilled a manifesto pledge to ensure 100,000 young people most in need of support have had access to a mentor.

These opportunities provide safe spaces, trusted relationships, and access to a range of positive activities, including sport, education and employment, mental health and well-being support. I also support the youth work sector by investing in professional development, helping nearly 500 youth workers develop leadership skills, gain more skills and confidence, and be even more effective in supporting young people.

The VRU's approach is informed by young people and frontline youth workers, whose perspectives are directly embedded in decision-making. Together, they play a central role in shaping strategy and guiding service commissioning.

Whilst I am proud of what we have achieved, there is more to do to help young people fulfil their potential.

Increase the transparency regarding what youth organisations yourself, MOPAC and the VRU are funding

The VRU collects data on investment, programmes and interventions for all boroughs and this can be found on its [website](#). The VRU's new interactive dashboard, which will be published shortly, will allow Londoners to see where activities and work are delivered across the capital.

With the aim of making information on grant programmes accessible, the Greater London Authority (GLA) recently launched the [Find a Grant](#) webpage, improving visibility of live grants. We are working to register all GLA-funded organisations on the [360Giving Grants Portal](#).

A list of funded NDYP projects can also be found on the GLA website.

Provide actionable feedback to all bidders for funding

The VRU is making changes to ensure its procurement process is accessible to smaller grassroots youth groups. We are working with the London Research & Policy Partnership to [pilot a new, collaborative approach to commissioning research](#) that better serves both community organisations. The commissioning process involves consulting with frontline experts, simplifying the bidding process for grassroots organisations and including grassroots in the commissioning process for a research delivery partner. All bidders received detailed feedback.

As part of my NDYP, bidders received tailored feedback through bespoke emails and phone calls from the team.

As part of the "Mayor's Go!" London partnership programme, all applicants are provided with feedback on their submissions.

Provide longer-term funding to give organisations more certainty

I recognise the real challenges youth organisations face when funding is short-term or uncertain. When setting up the VRU, it was one of the first things we heard from the sector, and that is why it has moved to two- and three-year funding cycles, giving partners the stability needed to build sustainable, effective support for young

people. This is a valuable opportunity to monitor performance, ensure value for money and consider scaling up if interventions are proving successful.

Through the NDYP, I have invested in more than 150 organisations to deliver high-quality support to disadvantaged young Londoners. A key part of this work is through the Propel partnership, a collaboration with London's leading funding bodies that is supporting selected organisations with up to seven years of long-term funding to drive systemic change. As a result, funders have already contributed an additional £12 million in long-term support to the NDYP mission.

Increase the funding that you provide to Black-led youth organisations and recognise the unique and high-quality work that they do.

The VRU's commissioning approach is evidence-led, fair and equitable, ensuring investment reaches the organisations with the deepest relationships and strongest impact in their communities, rather than favouring certain organisations. Priority need is guided by London's Strategic Needs Assessment of Serious Violence and supported by a growing 'what works' evidence base developed with our delivery partners.

I am also committed to strengthening grassroots capacity, because we know those closest to their communities are often best placed to support young people. Through the MyEnds programme, I invest directly in local neighbourhoods – building skills, embedding youth and community participation in design and delivery, and improving coordinated responses to local challenges. This approach not only empowers communities, but also ensures smaller organisations are better equipped to compete for funding and to deliver the consistent, trusted support young people deserve.

Equitable grant processes were central to the NDYP assessment. An equity advisory panel was convened to prioritise organisations tackling equity concerns, ensuring that funding reached those best placed to address inequalities. To strengthen this approach, applicant lists were shared and assessment criteria refined, helping to confirm that funded organisations were genuinely equity-led.

Go! London is a £22.5 million partnership between City Hall, London Marathon Foundation, Sport England, London Marathon Events and London Sport. The programme supports children and young people through community-based sport and physical activity initiatives, aiming to deliver 70,000 positive opportunities that improve physical and mental wellbeing, social connections and access to education and employment.

To date, £7 million has been awarded to 208 community organisations through Go! London's Foundation fund. A key priority of the fund is supporting equity-led organisations and those that prioritise youth voice in programme design and development. This ensures programmes are inclusive, representative, and shaped by the lived experiences of young people, particularly those from under-represented communities. So far, 85% of funded groups identify as equity-led organisations.

The VRU and London United, who represent the 17 community foundations of all London's professional football clubs, have joined forces to work in partnership to tackle violence. This new partnership uses the power

of football to engage with young people and deliver social impact in communities across the capital.

Alongside leveraging funding from the Premier League and the English Football League, London United foundations have been supported with funding from the VRU to deliver interventions such as youth workers in custody suites, after-school diversionary activities, and the award-winning MyEnds programme.

London is a city built on fairness, opportunity and collaboration, and that is exactly what our Grants Transformation programme is about. Led by the Grants for London team, this work is creating a new service to strengthen grant-making across the GLA group.

Our goal is simple: to make the experience for grantees and delivery partners better from start to finish, while taking a more strategic approach to investment. We want to be an inclusive and forward-thinking grant-maker – one that reflects the diversity and strengths of London’s communities. That means clearer processes, fairer systems and easier ways to navigate funding.

Transparency, openness and equity will sit at the heart of everything we do. These principles will guide how we design a better, more strategic approach to grant-making for the future.

Yours sincerely,

Sir Sadiq Khan
Mayor of London

[Back to table of contents](#)

References

- [1 London’s lost youth services](#), January 2017
- [2 Youth service cuts in London – what next?](#), June 2017
- [3 London’s Lost Youth Services 2018](#), March 2018
- [4 London’s Lost Youth Services 2019](#), March 2019
- [5 London’s Lost Youth Services 2020](#), August 2020
- [6 A lost year for youth work?](#), March 2021
- [7 London’s Youth Service Cuts 2011-2021: A Blighted Generation](#), August 2021
- [8 News from Siân Berry: Mayor agrees to Sian Berry’s call for £25m investment in youth service | London City Hall](#)
- [9 Zoë Garbett AM: “youth services shouldn’t be a postcode lottery” | London City Hall](#)