

Good spaces for young people

'Behind the Unclaimed Assets Bill is our determination that money in dormant bank accounts will be used to improve our country's youth and community facilities.'

Gordon Brown, July 2007.

The context

The **Unclaimed Assets Bill**, which will be introduced in the 2007–08 parliamentary session, will allow money in dormant bank accounts (where customers have not initiated activity for 15 years) to be reinvested in communities, particularly youth facilities.¹ It is not yet known how much money will be available, since efforts are being made to reunite accounts with their owners, but it is clear that the scheme will provide a major investment in 'places to go' for young people. According to a Treasury select committee report, there is currently between £400 and £500 million in dormant accounts. More money will also come on-stream in future years as accounts become dormant.² *Aiming high for young people*, the government's ten-year strategy for young people's leisure-time opportunities, activities and support services, describes this as a 'once-in-a-generation' opportunity which, by 2018, will lead to new and improved youth facilities in every constituency.³ This investment will be kick-started with an additional £60 million to improve youth facilities over the next three years.

The government has suggested that a notional £100 million from dormant accounts could be split between:

- newly built youth centres (30 per cent);
- refurbishment of existing youth centres (40 per cent); and
- smaller scale flexible amenities such as mobile youth centres or skate parks (30 per cent).

This would result in 10 new youth centres, 110 refurbishment projects and 350 smaller amenities – a total of 470 'places to go'. If, as the government has suggested, applicants for unclaimed assets money should be required to secure matched funding, the number of places could rise to 700.

In parallel with this injection of funding, the government is supporting pilot projects encouraging local authorities to **transfer public assets to community ownership**, and has set up a £30 million Community Assets Fund to support community groups in owning and running buildings. According to *Aiming high*, this fund could be used to 'develop more spaces for young people, sending a signal about their place in local communities'.

These new initiatives follow on from the **Youth Capital and Youth Opportunity Funds**, which were set up to give young people – particularly disadvantaged young

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What does 'good space' look like?

people – the opportunity to make decisions about activities and facilities in their neighbourhood. A total of £115 million was allocated to these funds over two years (2006-08); during the first year, over 650,000 young people have been involved as grant givers, grant applicants or project users.

A review of the first year of the funds concludes that they had been successfully implemented by local authorities and their partners. A separate interim evaluation report highlighted their success in putting funding decisions into young people's hands, giving them a real chance to make an impact on other young people and their communities.⁴ This success has been recognised in the ten-year strategy, which announced the extension of the Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Funds until at least 2011, with an additional £25 million for projects in the most disadvantaged communities. *Aiming high* also set out plans for giving young people greater influence over resources, through devolving decisions on 5 per cent of spending on youth activities by 2010, and increasing this to 25 per cent by 2018, and it encourages local authorities and their partners to develop integrated capital strategies to make the most of existing assets.

Investment in youth provision is a key public priority. When surveyed, adults and young people alike consistently point to the need for more facilities for young people. A MORI survey carried out in 2005, for instance, found that adults identified 'activities for teenagers' as a priority for improvements in their local area.⁵ Similarly, the Make Space Youth Review (an independent one year study established to consider the lives of young people in the UK) found that young people wanted 'safe places to go with transport to get them home safely, better facilities that have more impressive buildings and furnishings and a place to meet that can act as a base for a wide range of contemporary activities.'⁶ The nature and quality of these facilities is critical, as they carry clear meanings about how young people are perceived. Outdated and rundown facilities do little to promote young people's sense of themselves as valued members of their communities, and hardly encourage them to treat their environment with respect.

Attention also needs to be paid to the location of youth provision. Well designed provision can bring young people back into the heart of the community, and give them a sense of belonging. Locating youth centres on high streets or giving them a high profile in regeneration initiatives offers a powerful message about young people's right to valued space, as well as encouraging other members of the community to view youth provision as an integral part of the local neighbourhood.

Other factors also affect young people's attitude to provision. The move towards extended schools is likely to encourage more youth centres in or alongside schools. While there may be advantages to this, particularly in drawing on other sources of funding, school-based provision is unlikely to attract young people not doing well at school. It may also deter young people attending different schools, particularly if issues of territoriality or faith are involved.

Youth spaces take many forms, from new state of the art youth centres offering access to a wide range of activities and support to localised neighbourhood provision. They also include street-based and mobile provision, offering youth work opportunities to young people who are unable or unwilling to attend youth centres.

Buildings or facilities, though critical, do not by themselves promote positive activity and improved outcomes for young people; it is the relationship between young person and youth worker that does this. There is a balance to be struck between providing spaces which young people feel belong to them, and providing adult support and challenge to promote young people's personal and social development. Recent research on young people who attended youth clubs offering 'unstructured' activities in the 1980s has highlighted their success in attracting the most disadvantaged young people. However, it concludes that once drawn

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in, young people 'at risk' need skilful adult facilitation, support and challenge to improve their life chances.⁷

Salford Foyer

Salford Youth Service supported a 12-week radio project at Salford Foyer, which provides housing for young people aged 16 to 25 who are estranged from their families. The young people taking part in this wanted to continue the project, and other young people wanted to get involved. They formed a residents' group and decided to apply for a YCF grant. They were supported by Foyer project workers and staff from Salford youth service and its planning and development department.

They were awarded over £50,000 for a media centre/recording studio for all young people in supported housing in Salford, and for other young people throughout the borough. They also received funding to train the Foyer residents' group to become technicians and hope to have the course accredited via Salford College.

Residents of the Foyer now socialise with other local young people. Formerly they would not have mixed. The young people's group from the Foyer have learnt a great deal about project management, the funding process, and have increased their technical skills as a result of applying to YCF.

Provision in local areas should be determined by local need, as identified by young people and their communities. Make Space found that young people wanted contemporary places designed for them in the community – 'somewhere that was visibly theirs and known'. Other recent research has highlighted the importance of young people feeling ownership of their space. This found that as well as 'places to go', young people saw youth projects as 'places to be', offering safe associational and recreational spaces, often in contrast to other aspects of their lives.⁸

In determining what type of provision meets local needs, it is important to recognise that young people are not a homogenous group and will have a range of different needs and interests. It is therefore not realistic to expect the needs of all young people to be met by a single place. Different groups of young people may want safe spaces of their own – for instance, young women, young lesbian, gay or bisexual young people, or those of specific faiths. It is, however, also important that local areas have provision which allows young people to meet others from different backgrounds, to explore and negotiate similarities and differences.

E13 Mix Youth Centre, London Borough of Newham

Young people who attended a popular club night run by Racial Equality Newham and Connexions wanted their own youth centre and obtained funding for this from various sources. At the same time, the local strategic partnership commissioned Newmartin Community Youth Trust to develop local youth provision.

The young people wanted a space for performance arts, as well as a venue which would bring together young people from different faiths and ethnic backgrounds. With the support of a project manager, they worked for three years alongside the architects and builders and were involved in every stage of the progress. The new centre opened in March 2007. In addition to a performance arts space, it provides a chill-out room, computer facilities and a garden, and also offers space for other local groups.

It is also important to ensure that the development of provision takes a long-term view to meeting young people's needs. Facilities such as skate parks or shelters may only appeal to a minority of young people, or may fall out of fashion in the future. While there are examples of well thought out and popular provision of this kind, too many initiatives suffer from lack of thought, for instance being sited in

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the wrong location, no provision being made for maintenance, or simply being done on the cheap.

Aiming high suggests that the greater emphasis on 'place' for young people should include making more use of neighbourhood facilities. However, such shared space may result in tensions between young people and other users, and constraints on the use of shared space may limit the work that can be done. If the space is used by younger children, for instance, it may not be possible to put up displays on issues such as sexual health or drugs, while requirements to keep the noise level down may prevent music projects taking place. However, where shared space incorporates distinctive areas for young people which respond to their identified needs, this can increase their access to other facilities and improve relationships between generations. The Reading Agency's Bookbars initiative, for instance, has resolved tensions between young people and other library users by creating spaces run by and for young people. It is vital, therefore, that those planning community facilities consider how these can be made more welcoming and appropriate to young people.

The Phoenix Centre, London Borough of Sutton

The Phoenix Centre is an award-winning multi-purpose centre on the Roundshaw housing estate in Sutton. In 2001 public consultation on the estate's facilities showed that residents wanted a wide range of services under one roof. The new centre, part of a wider regeneration initiative, includes YouthZone, a service for 11 to 21-year-olds including a chill out area and range of activities using the sports hall, dance studio and state of the art IT centre. YouthFM also broadcasts from the building and is open to anyone aged 13 to 21 to learn media skills.

The new centre has led to greatly increased use of youth facilities, improved public health and wellbeing, efficiency savings by co-locating services, a sense of neighbourhood and community, and young people's use of more general facilities.

Harrow Central Mosque

The mosque serves a diverse and settled Muslim community, and is committed to the involvement of young people. It is currently being redeveloped to 'design in inclusion', through the separation of sacred and social spaces. The mosque is on five levels, with the congregational space on the top two floors, and a focus on young people on the lower levels. This allows the mosque to engage young people on their own terms, rather expecting them to behave in ways appropriate to places of worship.

Young people are involved in the redevelopment of the mosque. They have worked with committee members to design services and activity, consulting other young people, and are visiting places of worship from different faiths to inform their ideas. They have also been involved in fundraising, giving them a stake in the success of the redevelopment. The key principle for involving young people is to ensure that young people and committee members build understanding and arguments together, rather than polarising different needs.

While the proposals for transferring unwanted assets to community ownership may offer a welcome boost to local community groups, it will be important to consider why these building assets are currently not used. Are they fit for purpose – or can they be made so given appropriate resources, or do external factors mean that young people are unlikely to use them, even if refurbished? This could be due to a number of factors, including lack of (affordable) public transport, premises being located in areas that young people or their parents see as unsafe, and territorialism among different groups of young people.

Young people also have a right to access shared public space. While young

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Involving young people

people congregating in public space such as shopping centres or parks is often viewed as a problem, young people themselves see it as an important part of their social lives. Recent research by the Joseph Rowntree Foundation concluded that 'these public places provided neutral ground away from home and direct adult surveillance, so for many younger people they were essential for self-expression and development of social skills.'⁹ CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) also highlights the importance of public space in helping young people understand and explore the world around them and learn to manage risk.¹⁰

Aiming high recognises that involving young people in designing, developing and evaluating provision is vital. Discussing young people and public spaces, the organisation CABE argues that involving and listening to young people from an early stage, in places and at times of their own choosing, is central to a successful project. While this may add to the initial costs of a project, it concludes that 'there is increasing evidence that creating a high-quality, locally 'owned' design is likely to reduce the lifetime costs associated with public space, because of reduced vandalism and the increased care and respect of its users.'¹¹

Braunstone New Deal for Communities

Streetvibe Youth Inclusion Project is a key partner in delivering a youth strategy for Braunstone New Deal for Communities regeneration programme in Leicester. Consultation with children and young people, undertaken by trained young residents, highlighted the need to put young people at the heart of regeneration. Streetvibe offers an integrated programme for young people aged 13 to 25, particularly those most at risk of social exclusion. This has three elements: a mobile youth bus carrying out outreach work with a programme developed in consultation with young people; detached youth work focusing on building relationships with young people and offering them support and advice; and a youth affairs strand to engage young people in regeneration activity. This includes a youth panel, youth forums and consultations, giving young people a voice on services and developments in Braunstone and beyond. A young person's steering group helps run the project to ensure it meets young people's needs.

Initiatives such as YouthBank and the Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Funds have demonstrated young people's ability to make responsible decisions about provision. The report on the first year of the youth funds identified the rigorous approaches used by grant givers and their commitment to ensuring that projects would benefit local young people. It also highlighted the importance of supporting and training young people for decision-making, in areas as varied as financial and planning procedures, disadvantage and equal opportunities, and dealing with disagreement.

Equally, however, local communities need to be involved in decisions about youth provision. This may not always be easy. When new youth provision is being developed, local residents may raise objections because of the location, anticipated noise, litter and so on, or more simply may be apprehensive about the increased presence of young people in their area. However, the experience of the youth funds highlights the value of the community as a whole addressing the need for youth facilities, and the way in which this can improve relationships between young people and adults.

Nettica Internet Café, Coventry

Nettica was one of 15 winning projects in the Actions Speak Louder ... competition for YOF/YCF projects. Levels of anti-social behaviour and petty crime were increasing in the Stoke and Wyken areas of Coventry, and youth workers and police discussed the problems with local young people. A public meeting was organised, at which young people said they wanted somewhere safe to go in the evenings where they could use computers.

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Seven young people aged 16 to 18 formed a steering group to set up a young people's cybercafe, and successfully applied for a YCF grant of £8,000 towards the project.

Nettica opened in January 2007 for two nights a week, with an extension of opening hours planned from September. Around 30 young people attend each session. The steering group makes all decisions, supported by the youth workers and in consultation with project users.

Nettica gives young people access to facilities to develop new skills, and brings together young people from different backgrounds. By May 2007, levels of anti-social behaviour and petty crime had fallen by 23 per cent. Councillors have called for similar projects to be developed in other parts of the city.

It is also important to recognise that involving young people in decision-making may legitimately challenge existing practice. The youth funds have revealed many instances where the willingness of professionals – from finance officers to architects and builders – to adapt their normal approaches in response to young people's ideas was key to the success of projects.

Key policy drivers

In addition to the government's specific commitments to improving youth provision, there are a number of policy drivers that community groups and local authorities can call upon to make the case for better youth provision. Many of these draw on and extend existing powers, but these powers are currently not well known or used.

Strong and Prosperous Communities, the Local Government White Paper, sets out the government's commitment to give communities greater influence over decisions that affect them.¹² It places a duty on local government to consult and involve local people in policy development, and introduces a 'community call for action', through which local people can, through their councillors, hold their local authority to account for its decisions. *Aiming high* suggests that this could be used to influence local services for young people. The White Paper also sets out an enhanced role for local councillors, and *Aiming high* makes it clear that this role includes pressing for better services for young people. *The Governance of Britain* sets out further possibilities for involving citizens in decision-making, including consideration of allowing local communities to apply for budgets to fund projects which will benefit the local community.¹³

There is also a move towards participatory budgeting, through which communities are involved in setting financial priorities for their neighbourhoods.¹⁴ Ten authorities were announced as participatory budgeting pilots in July 2007. While YOF/YCF involved young people in financial decisions about provision for young people, there is scope to involve young people in wider local budgeting decisions.

Planning processes also provide opportunities to press for improved youth provision, particularly when planning permission is being sought for new developments. The white paper, *Planning for a Sustainable Future*, stresses the need for community consultation and engagement in planning, but introduces greater flexibility to allow local authorities to respond to local needs.¹⁵ Section 106 planning contributions – which are used to address the negative impacts of development and provide infrastructure and facilities to help achieve sustainable communities – have also been used to develop new youth provision in a number of areas.

The National Youth Agency's position

The National Youth Agency welcomes the government's commitment to increasing 'places to go' for young people and applauds the proposals for use of unclaimed assets and integrated capital strategies. This will ensure that private and public sectors work together and recognise the role that each other plays. We agree that ambitions set out in *Aiming high* will only be realised if these spaces provide young people with access to a range of stimulating activities at times and in locations that meet their needs. They must be supported by an appropriate revenue budget

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and, critically, an adequately resourced and skilled workforce with the ability to support, nurture and challenge young people, particularly those not reached by other agencies.

However, our ambitions for young people are greater still:

We support the Make Space campaign, whose final report calls for the creation of 2,000 young people's hubs located in the most disadvantaged communities in England. These would offer fun, structured activities, social space and support after school, at weekends and during school holidays for all young people. They would also provide a focus for coordinated support for young people in difficulty, as well as access to wider services for young people.

The NYA recognises that this Government will lever more money into places for young people than any other has done for a number of generations but we are concerned that there is currently too much variability across services for young people.¹⁶ To ensure that all young people have access to good spaces, The National Agency calls for:

- specific standards for what should be offered to the young everywhere which will contribute to the government's drive to push up quality set out in *Aiming high*;
- sustained and sufficient investment in workforce and facilities for young people's out of school activity, based on a benchmark of £1 a day for each 13 to 19-year-old, in order to fully implement the excellent vision for young people which government has now articulated;
- opportunities to test out different approaches to providing places to go and learn from experience, recognising that young people are diverse and to ensure particularly that the most disadvantaged have the access they need;
- full empowerment of young people through their full participation in all stages of the decision-making process, using 'Hear by Right' principles; and
- exploring further the potential for private sector investment and partnership in spaces for young people as part of integrated capital strategies.

The NYA recognises that a range of stakeholders – not just government – have a role in making this happen and we look forward to playing our part in this new era for young people.

References

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