

Why London's teens need more third spaces

Kayla's mum encouraged her to go out to a local youth club. "I was at home, mostly just in my bedroom, on my phone." Today, the 17-year-old is sitting on a fold-up chair in a slightly chaotic office in Mary's youth club in Islington, north London, speaks with quiet confidence about overcoming her initial shyness. "I've talked to more people, made more friends."

Next to her is 18-year-old Mikala. Naturally gregarious, she started coming to the youth club because she craved a welcoming and safe venue to socialise after school. There seemed to be few alternatives, as many local shops and fast-food restaurants restrict the number of children allowed. [...]

After all, many youth clubs shut due to austerity cuts in council budgets. One report estimated that between 2010 and 2023, 1,243 youth centres closed, leaving just 581. The Institute for Fiscal Studies, a think-tank, found closures led to increased crime and declines in exam results.

Sometimes it feels like young people are either demonised for staying in — or going out. Connie Muttock, the head of policy at think-tank Centre for Young Lives, says: "We talk about the time children spend on their phones, but we don't talk about alternatives."

The debate over teens' social media dependency has intensified. Countries including the UK are considering following Australia by banning social media for under-16s. Last month, a court in New Mexico fined Meta and Google for harming a young woman's mental health. Generation Isolation, a report by OnSide, a youth charity, found that almost half of young people spend most of their free time in their bedrooms, and nearly a fifth are mainly alone. [...]

It is clear that Mary's is also a place for Mikala and Kayla to learn life skills, including camping and a financial workshop that advised them to stay away from crypto. Local musician, Little Simz, has credited the Islington youth club with helping her career. "I can't imagine what my life might have been if I didn't have that," she told Elle magazine. "Creativity is a way of life. When it's tended to and nourished, you learn how to figure things out, how to make and create things, and that really helps you in your future."

Recently, Sadiq Khan, the mayor of London, pledged £30mn to ensuring each borough in the capital has a late-night youth club. The Labour government has pledged £500mn over 10 years to tackle education, unemployment and loneliness, including opening youth clubs.

Jamie Masraff, OnSide's chief executive, is heartened by the "significant step... although it doesn't come close to filling the gap. It was better than we've seen." Emma Warren, author of *Up the Youth Club*, worries about funding long term.

In Queen's Park, north-west London, advertising veteran Paul Billingsley co-founded a "social space for teenagers" with a games room and café because he could see that young hires were "really struggling with the basics of sitting across the table from someone, being resilient and reconciling differences of opinion".

At Mary's, 18-year-old Nevan says the joy of such places is that they operate outside school "where there's high expectations". It is also a place where they can support peers who are dealing with "friendship drama", says Mikala. "Sometimes you may be alone and that's okay, but how you handle it is also i