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### **The impact of austerity on children and young people's health and well-being in England and Wales.**

The financial crisis of 2007-8, and the unprecedented austerity measures that we have since witnessed, has impacted disproportionately on children and young people in England and Wales. In 2013, youth unemployment reached an all-time high and approximately 60 per cent of young people were unemployed in some European states. Documenting in 2014, UNISON reported that £259 million had been cut from youth service spending by councils and at least 35,000 hours of outreach work by youth workers had been removed. A year on, the Report of the UK Children's Commissioners UN Committee on the Rights of the Child highlighted the failings of the state, where: 'austerity measures have reduced provision of a range of services that protect and fulfil children's rights, including health and child and adolescent mental health services; education; early years; preventive and early intervention services; and youth services'. In this context, we must consider where we are at now and how austerity measures are impacting upon young people today. UNISON's 2014 report spoke volumes and predicted the damage that would inevitably happen. This was subsequently highlighted two years later. A Future At Risk: Cuts in Youth Services published by UNISON warned that in the year 2016/17, and beyond, there was likely to be at least £26m more cuts in youth service spending, the loss of around 800 more jobs, more than 30 youth centres closed, and 45,000 youth service places for young people removed. The worst was confirmed in December 2017 when Children and Young People Now claimed that 'youth service cuts [were] deeper than predicted' and confirmed that 'spending on youth services by local authorities last year [2016] fell by £42m more than initially predicted, government figures have revealed'.

So, has the health and well-being of children and young people been affected by this?

During 2016 and 2017 the theme of mental health dominated the news with headlines such as 'Crisis in mental health care for young people', 'Teenage mental health crisis: rates of depression have soared in the last 25 years', and 'NHS figures show 'shocking' rise in self-harm among young'. New research by Patalay and Fitzsimons reported on the epidemic of poor mental health amongst our young people and claimed that one in four girls had depression by the time they were 14. It is not surprising also to see headlines reporting that 'one in three children suffer from loneliness'. It is clear that we are witnessing a 'crisis' with regards to the health and well-being of our children and young people in England and Wales. It is without doubt that austerity measures are having serious negative impacts upon young people's health, well-being and social development (See Children's Commissioner 2016; Ayre 2016, McKee et al 2010). Natasha Devon, the first Department for Education Mental Health Champion, declared before her role was terminated in May 2016 that, 'this government and the coalition before them have engineered a social climate where it's really difficult for any young person to enjoy optimal mental health'.

Investing in young people and providing for them so that they can enjoy optimal health is clearly not happening. The loss of services, and the closure of youth centres, have left children and young

people with nowhere to go. They can no longer attend a youth centre and socialise with peers, talk to youth workers and overall have somewhere to relax and feel safe. Providing such a service for our young people, combining educational and recreational elements, highlighted the important role of youth work, and what youth centres did for young people's personal and social development.

After spending a year with young people in two coastal resorts, my own research found that it was imperative to provide a safe place for young people outside of the home. Young people reported they needed safe places to 'hang out' 'socialise' and 'feel safe' with their peers because youth centres were a 'sanctuary' for them. Not only did they offer informal education and extra-curricular activities, youth centres also provided three basic needs, food, safety and shelter. The value in young people having 'somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to' is beyond doubt. As youth workers have feared, if this is taken away then many 'young people [will be] left hanging about on street corners, rather than having youth centres where they can learn new skills and channel their energies into projects'. Investing in young people through youth centres can help to build safer communities for them, and can go towards improving children and young people's health and well-being. As the Berkshire youth survey reported 'youth clubs are key to children's well-being' and children and young people who attend youth clubs will be happier and healthier than those who do not'. The extent of the cuts in youth services has been made devastatingly clear. From the headlines documented earlier, is it any coincidence that the removal of such youth provisions has led to a generation of young people at risk of a range of social harms?