

Physical Security in Youth Work Settings

Guidance

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Introduction

Youth work takes place in all sorts of settings and often in shared spaces with other users in mind. The primary goal of youth work is to create safe, friendly and inviting environments which are designed to make young people feel at home. One of the primary roles of youth workers, trustees and those responsible for delivering youth sector provision is the safety of those in our charge. While recent incidents have led to increased concern and awareness of what to do in uncertain or threatening situations, it's crucial to remember that such incidents, like those in Southport, are incredibly rare. So rare are these types of incidences that it's almost impossible to fully prepare for them. Nonetheless, young people, parents/carers or guardians, and the public have a heightened sense of concern. This guide is designed to support practitioners in considering the key steps that may help in the event of a threatening event and covers:

1. Legal Framework
2. Understanding the risk of violence or harmful behaviour
3. Developing your risk assessment and plan
4. Preparedness of your venue in an emergency
5. Emergency response

NB: Although this guidance focuses on physical spaces and places, its core principles work well for outdoor and detached youth work delivery.

Legal Framework

Existing legislation and statutory guidance, such as The Children Act (updated 2004), Working Together to Safeguard Children (2018), and the Health and Safety at Work etc. Act (1974) provides the primary requirements for ensuring children and young people remain safe in a youth work setting. This guide provides additional advice on what action could be taken in exceptional circumstances where an unexpected immediate risk of serious harm may present itself. If you are interested in how the above Acts impact your work, please review the free resources provided by the [NYA Safeguarding and Risk Management Hub](#). These resources are comprehensive and can provide further clarity on your legal obligations and best practices.

We all have a duty of care to each other, young people and ourselves. In the event of a serious threatening event involving violence, the preservation of life, including workers' own, is of primary concern. There is no legal duty for workers or volunteers to place themselves in harm's way, though we recognise that often a worker's sense of duty may mean they'll do all they can to protect those in their charge. No one should be a hero.

Any such incidents should necessitate an urgent 999 call for immediate police support.

Understanding the risk of violence or harmful behaviour

Every youth group or project must have a regularly updated risk assessment covering the risk of harm during youth sessions. Some projects may work with higher-risk groups, and it is advisable to review and update these assessments more regularly as factors change. It's impossible to consider all eventualities, but as long as all reasonable steps and risks have been considered, you will have met your duty of care.

Youth work is contextual, and so is uniquely connected to the lives of young people in the context of their peer groups, communities and relationships with other services. Youth workers, therefore, have a responsibility to familiarise themselves with their local context. This gives youth workers a detailed and privileged understanding of the local landscape and risks - workers should create time to consider this knowledge and use it to the best advantage.

NB: The NYA offers free training on providing safe environments and activities [here](#)

Planning for or assessing the risk of violent events is notoriously hard. However, the following steps should be considered:

1. Engage young people who attend your provision. It's good practice to ask young people if they feel safe in their local area and, if not, why. Youth workers build a trusting relationship with young people that allows them to share when they have concerns. Establish clear boundaries in your relationship and make sure young people understand that if they disclose information indicating that they or others might be at risk, you will have to inform the authorities to help keep everyone safe.
2. Whenever possible, connect and collaborate with a network of local stakeholders in your area. The most effective way to understand the local risks is to work with local schools, councillors, and other professionals and agencies that support young people.
3. Talk to your local neighbourhood police teams and ask them what they consider the threat level in your area to be on a scale of 1-10 (10 being the highest). Update the police regularly on your activities and ask them to inform you if they have cause for concern locally that may increase their score. Tools such as [police.uk](https://www.police.uk) may also provide enough information to make your own judgement.
4. It's far from an exact science, but routinely monitoring social media in your area may provide evidence of concerns worthy of consideration.

Local communities are often complex, and many of us can relate to inter-school or local area rivalries. Thankfully, these are often harmless, but it's possible for matters to spill over and your youth provision to be the epicentre. We encourage workers to engage young people in critical conversations about pressures they may feel from different sections of their community to inform their awareness of local needs. An increase in domestic violence or disputes can land at our doors, no matter how unwelcome. There will never be zero risk in relation to your security. Therefore, staff should remain vigilant at all times to safeguard children and young people in their care.

As a result, having a plan and regularly reviewed risk assessment is important.

Developing your risk assessment and plan

Assessing the risk of threatening behaviour or violence in and around a youth centre or in the community involves a comprehensive approach to ensure the safety and well-being of all participants. We should also consider any risks to young people travelling between locations and consider how best to facilitate that.

Here's a concise list of steps a youth worker should consider when assessing the risk of threatening behaviour or violence at a youth centre, along with a brief explanation for each:

1. Identify potential risks

What to do: Conduct a thorough review of your physical spaces and consider how these may help or hinder you in the event of a problem. As suggested above, listen to young people regularly and ask them about what's going on in the area – young people are often attuned to new risks in their area. Observe young people's behaviour for changes, as this may alert you to an increased risk of a problem.

Why: Identifying environmental hazards and behavioural warning signs helps in understanding where and how violence may occur.

2. Identify vulnerable or at-risk groups

What to do: Determine if individuals or specific groups of individuals may give rise to concern. Is there knowledge of violent (actual or threats of), or other harmful behaviours aimed at individuals or specific groups in your area. If you have cause for concern, liaise with key local agencies including police and seek support. Consider what steps you can take to minimise the risk of harm.

Why: Focusing on at-risk young people and staff ensures multi-agency, targeted interventions that can prevent issues or escalation.

3. Evaluate the risk level

What to do: Working as a team, assess the likelihood and potential impact of violent or risky occurrences on your sessions and seek support from other agencies, parents and young people to inform your assessment.

Why: Understanding the severity and probability of risks enables prioritisation of preventive measures.

4. Develop Preventative Measures

What to do: Co-create rules or procedures, behavioural codes of conduct, training needs (ask your Local Authority for support) and consider a [curriculum](#) that promotes safety and positive behaviour.

Why: Proactive measures reduce the chances of incidents by equipping individuals with the skills to handle conflicts.

5. Create a plan

What to do: Establish clear procedures for handling emergencies, including roles and communication strategies. Depending on the age of young people, consider co-designing and communicating your plan with young people.

Why: A well-prepared response plan minimises confusion and ensures timely and effective action during a crisis.

6. Monitor and review

What to do: Regularly observe the environment and review any past incidents or near misses to refine risk assessments. Regularly discuss and update your risk assessments and plans with your team and young people.

Why: Continuous monitoring and analysis help in identifying new risks and improving existing safety protocols.

7. Engage stakeholders

What to do: Involve young people, staff, parents, and community partners in safety discussions and planning. Remember, you are not alone; local partners and stakeholders will be willing to support you. Your local authority has a duty to work with you to safeguard young people appropriately.

Why: Collaboration ensures a comprehensive approach to safety and increases community support for preventive measures.

8. Documentation and Reporting

What to do: Maintain suitably detailed records of all incidents and assessments. Write up your plans and share these with your team. NB: These assessments and plans don't need to be massive; they should be focused and cover the key information the team need. You will also want to be aware of your responsibilities under the General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).

Why: Proper documentation provides valuable information for ongoing risk assessments and accountability and helps in evaluating the effectiveness of safety measures.

Each of these steps is a guide to creating a safe environment at a youth centre, as they collectively help in identifying, preventing, and managing potential threats or violence. By following these steps, youth workers can create a safer environment in youth centres, proactively address potential risks, and respond effectively to any incidents of threatening behaviour or violence.

Certain youth settings' risk assessments may determine that it is prudent to secure doors or venues in high-risk situations or when violence is present or threatened. This may be particularly relevant for targeted work with specific groups that may be at increased risk.

Preparedness of your venue in an emergency

The settings in which youth work takes place vary in size and facilities available to help with security, but here are some ideas of measures that could be considered to help deter and deny unauthorised persons from reaching young people.

Deter - these are features that could make a potential offender decide against committing an offence at your setting:

- If possible, establish a clear boundary between public areas and the youth work setting
- Display signs stating that the venue is private property and that visitors must report to reception
- Staff supervision of entrance doors and gates that open onto public spaces, especially at peak times
- CCTV camera covering main external doors or other potentially vulnerable areas that are not routinely supervised and notices advising of camera footage
- Security lighting of entrances or darker areas where an offender could hide

Deny - these are features that could slow down an offender from reaching young people and potentially committing an offence, at least until police can arrive. Better still there may be measures that prevent unauthorised persons from accessing young people altogether. These measures should be based upon the risk assessment local to your setting and may be dynamic in nature, and either relaxed or reinforced depending on the threat.

- Lock external gates or doors that open onto public spaces such as pavements when it is not possible for staff to supervise entry
- Close external ground floor windows which could be easily climbed through that open onto public spaces such as pavements
- Maintain a staffed reception area that can monitor access from public spaces and allow into inner areas where young people are engaging in activity

Emergency response

By its very nature, youth work provides unlimited opportunities for young people to learn and develop, but also rare scenarios in which a security incident might unfold. Youth workers should seek advice from local police where specific events are assessed as higher risk and follow their advice.

Regular sessions or large-scale gatherings should all be subject to a risk assessment that includes an assessment of the risk of violence. A planning meeting where staff can agree on what action will be taken in the event of a security breach, including a method of communication to alert all staff of the identified threat, is essential.

Fire alarms should not be used in these instances due to confusion it would cause, including an evacuation that could potentially be unsafe.

Depending on the type of incident, the most likely form of action taken is containment (lockdown). In general, where an incident occurs indoors, staff are advised to utilise the physical protection of the building, using locked or barricaded doors, locked windows, and walls for safety, then quietly wait for a Police response.

While in an open outdoor environment, the UK Government's Marauding Terrorist Attack (MTA) methodology of "**RUN. HIDE. TELL.**" should be adopted. In this situation get as far away as possible and seek cover. Calling 999 and getting help is essential.

Summary

The provision of safe and secure youth work involves considering planning for a security incident. While the likelihood of such an incident occurring at your venue or event is extremely low, devising a plan is essential in ensuring staff and volunteers consider and address the risks and enabling everyone involved in youth work to be prepared should such an event occur.

Resources

Police support - <https://www.police.uk/>

School and College Security Guidance - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/school-and-college-security/school-and-college-security>

National Protective Security Authority Guidance - <https://www.npsa.gov.uk/>

Marauding Terrorist Attack (MTA) RUN: HIDE: TELL Guidance - <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/crowded-places-guidance/marauding-terrorist-attack-mta-run-hide-tell>