

# I knew that this place could make me something



The impact of universal, open access youth services

Adam Farricker, CEO, HideOut Youth Zone



HideOut Youth Zone is a new youth work charity based in Central East Manchester, providing children and young people aged 8-19 (up to 25 for those with additional needs) with somewhere to go, something to do and someone to talk to.



23 March 2020, the day I had been waiting nearly four years for! Little did I know when I woke up that morning what was on the cards for us all.

It was the official practical completion date for HideOut's new £6.6m Youth Zone, on Hyde Road in the heart of Gorton, for young people aged 8-19 (up to 25 for those with additional needs). I skipped out of the house that morning, beaming from ear to ear as I knew, by lunch time, I would receive the keys to this amazing new youth centre, that will have a hugely positive impact on the lives of local young people and the wider community, in the place, almost 20 years ago, where I grew up and started my youth work career.



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By 2pm I had received the keys from the contractors. There were still a few defects and snags to rectify but nothing you wouldn't expect with any new build. I spent the next few hours checking out every room, imagining what it would be like in just a few weeks - full of young people, staff and volunteers enjoying themselves and developing personal and social skills. Fast forward to 8pm that night, I arrived home and turned on the evening news to hear the Prime Minister's national lockdown announcement and so began a difficult few months.

2020 was a challenging year for everyone, but let's be honest, it comes as no surprise to any of us that children and young people from disadvantaged backgrounds are disproportionately impacted by the ongoing pandemic. Young people who would have not been identified previously as vulnerable or in need of additional support, are now reaching the threshold for support. Issues relating to employment, childcare, education and mental health have created additional pressures on families and local children are crying out for social interaction. Being able to meet and interact with your peers socially through places such as schools, youth projects and sports clubs, is critical to young people's personal and social development. That is why HideOut Youth Zone, and our youth and community work friends and colleagues across the City exist.

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Gorton and surrounding wards such as Ardwick, Longsight and Levenshulme have some of the highest rates of child poverty in the UK, which leads to other social inequalities that impact on physical and emotional health and wellbeing, education, employment, crime and life chances more generally. Too often young people are labelled and stigmatised because of these inequalities and despite good intentions, increased funding for short-term targeted initiatives, such as work on knife crime, can add to this stigmatisation.

What we don't celebrate enough are young people's strengths; they are intelligent, passionate, articulate, resilient and have huge potential. I want to see an increased understanding and acknowledgement of the longer-term impact of universal, open access youth services, that take a strength-based approach to supporting young people. Open access youth work starts where young people start. It is based on voluntary engagement and aims to build trusted relationships with young people over time, helping them to make informed decisions. For me, this is where we need to see more investment. Reactive or targeted funding is needed and valued and a great example of this recently is GM Fareshare's food poverty campaign which is important and relevant, but for me the last year has strengthened my belief that the impact of this type of funding is short-lived without a long term universal offer at its core.



HideOut Youth Zone officially opened on 26 September 2020. Due to Government restrictions, we couldn't have anywhere near the numbers of young people we had hoped to bring through the doors. However, we still created an amazing atmosphere for those that could. Natalia, one of our junior members, summed things up perfectly and reminded us why our services are so needed when she first heard about the youth zone and the activities that would be available:

**“It was in that moment; I knew that this place could make me something.”**

In the weeks following our official opening, it was amazing to see the number of young people from diverse backgrounds, interests and abilities coming through our doors, engaging in positive activities and receiving the much-needed support we have on offer. We have established a core universal youth work offer that has already allowed us to build emerging relationships with young people and their families. Building on the core offer, we have been able to adapt as Covid-19 guidance has evolved to provide support services for some of our more vulnerable local members and we will continue to do so in the months to come.

I am proud to say I grew up in Gorton and Longsight and even more proud that my career has now brought me back to the place that shaped me as a youth. I know first-hand some of the challenges local young people and their families face, and I know first-hand the power of youth work to bring about positive change in a young person's life. I am determined that HideOut Youth Zone will provide a platform from which the local community can celebrate the positive contribution young people make to our city. I know 2021 is going to be a challenging but exciting year for us as we implement a new approach to supporting young people in a post Covid-19 world. For as long as Government guidance allows, we will be here for young people seven days per week, 52 weeks of the year, not just because young people need our services but because they deserve them. History has shown us time after time, that if there was ever a city made to come through this pandemic stronger, it's Manchester and that's exactly what I expect of our young people.