

# Youth clubs are a cool place to hang out again

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From learning rock-climbing to boxing, new hip high tech clubs are luring kids off the streets

When you walk through the doors of Bolton Lads & Girls Club, the first thing you notice is the unmistakable buzz you only get when teenagers are on their own planet. More than 300 11 to 18-year-olds, some from Bolton's toughest estates, are swarming through the smart new building, but the excitement is comfortably contained.

John, 16, distinctive in beads and dark-blue spiky hair, says: "There's all different types here - chavs, Goths, lesbians - and if you were out in the street, people would get picked on. But here we're all in it together. Where I live is quite rough and I come here to get away from all that. This is one of the only places people can chill out and have fun, otherwise it's hanging around outside shops waiting for someone to buy alcohol." John, who is home-tutored, comes during the day for a brew and to study for his GCSEs. It's thanks to the club - whose unashamedly flash facilities include two climbing walls - that he has become one of Bolton's top junior climbers.

Bolton Lads & Girls is seen as an example of the future of youth clubs, which have at last been recognised as one obvious solution to teenage drinking and trouble-making. After years of underfunding, the Government has promised them an extra £184 million. But this ambitious new vision for youth clubs - a far cry from their shabby church hall image - needs much more than money, says Simon Antrobus, of the National Association of Clubs for Young People. "It's great that the Government is investing in high-quality facilities, but the next part of the jigsaw is how we engage volunteers and community leaders to make things happen and to fund projects over time. It is critical that youth clubs are a valued part of their community."

## Luring kids away from Facebook

A ping-pong table and a place to hang out is no longer enough. The emphasis now is on structured activities, supervised by responsible adults, which develop personal and social skills; a report for the Department for Education and Skills in 2005 even suggested that youth clubs with no organised activities could be damaging. UK Youth, which represents 6,000 youth centres, advocates a ten-point curriculum to develop self-esteem, communication skills and problem-solving. But won't too much structure put teenagers off? It's already hard enough to lure them away from virtual clubs such as Facebook. In Bolton there are still opportunities to do both. Jeremy Glover, the club's chief executive, says: "If kids don't want to engage and would rather sit in a corner, meet their pals and

listen to music, we ought to make space for them to do that. It's all about them making their own decisions. What matters is that teenagers are safe when they're finding their feet in that tricky transition from childhood to adulthood."

### **Kids can dip in and out of activities**

In the main area of the club the music is loud and girls in winter jackets and diamond? dangle their legs from the air hockey table or huddle next to lads with shaved heads and striped hoodies on the sofas, keeping half an eye on a chaotic ball game near by. They're sitting near a huge window looking on to the sports hall where serious volleyball is played all evening; the open plan is a ploy to tempt kids to dip in and out of activities. Eyeing up the talent from the sidelines in immaculate make-up are Georgia, 14, and Megan, 15, who say they've come every day of the week for the past 18 months. Why? "Nothing else to do, and it stops you from hanging out on the streets." What would they do otherwise? "Sat at home on MySpace. But it's boring, the computer."

Meanwhile, in the packed gym, a group of friends recently arrived from Afghanistan try out the bench-press under the guidance of Yusuf, a part-time worker, who asks them more than once to stop play-fighting. A pasty hoodie won't stop punching Yusuf in the arm, but the telling-off is good-natured.

In other parts of the country, youth club provision is patchy: if teenagers are lucky enough to have a club, it probably won't be open for more than one or two nights a week. Bolton is an exception because Glover took matters into his own hands in the mid-1990s and raised £5million - from the Lottery and local fundraising - to build new premises for the club, which had been housed for 100 years in a near-derelict mill.

The club gets some annual funding from the local council and the Government, but it couldn't survive without fundraising. Thanks to its high standing in the local community, a large proportion of its income and board members come from 200 local businesses.

Meanwhile, volunteer numbers have risen from 50 to 250 since the move five years ago. Like most clubs, Bolton is staffed largely by volunteers. But, as life gets busier, many other clubs have found it harder to recruit new people. John Bateman, of UK Youth, says: "There was a time where there were professionals in most communities willing to undertake these roles. Now people think twice because of lack of time, because of the added responsibilities, and the extra time to get trained."

### **More sensible than giving out ASBOs**

Volunteering has changed radically over the past ten years and can be a stepping stone to a new career or further education as well as a chance to give something back. Innovative clubs offer progressive training programmes to attract and retain staff. As a result, Bolton is able to run a mentoring project for more than 100 teenagers, a weekly session for Asian

girls, and it has six minibuses that it can send out to collect kids from local estates - if required, they can respond to reports of trouble from police and residents and scoop up teens from the streets and take them back to the club.

“It’s a much more sensible response than throwing ASBOs around,” says Glover. “So far the adult response to young people on the streets is mostly stick and not much carrot. Obviously, where young people are out of order, they need some discipline, but there’s got to be a lot more carrot in terms of offering them decent places to go, and the chance to be positive, active and healthy. We should be ashamed that while investment in recreational facilities for adults has soared in the past 25 years, the quality of youth clubs has stayed the same. And people wonder why kids vote with their feet.”

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/families/article1757858.ece>