

YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES PLAN

EBBSFLEET & SURROUNDING AREAS

Ebbsfleet DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION

YOUTH LEADS.

HOW THIS REPORT WAS BUILT

This plan is grounded in direct engagement with young people and the organisations working alongside them across Ebbsfleet and the surrounding area. Over 300 young people contributed through schools, surveys, and stakeholder conversations, alongside 15 organisations who gave their time, insight, and openness. The methods, contributors, and wider policy context behind this report are set out below

Who Contributed

The following organisations contributed to this research through interviews, stakeholder conversations, and document sharing:

- Dartford Youth Council
- Gravesham Borough Council
- Eastgate Church
- Kent County Council
- Artspoint
- Autism South East
- Ebbsfleet Design Group
- Sports4Change
- Dartford Borough Council
- Northfleet CIO
- Young Mambos CIC
- Cyclopark
- The Salvation Army
- The Grand
- Kent Police
- Kent Family Hubs

How We Gathered This Evidence

A mixed-method approach combining quantitative surveys and qualitative engagement:

- Your Area, Your Say online survey — 34 young people
- In-schools survey — 158 young people across Alkerden Academy, Cherry Orchard, and Northfleet Technology College
- Schools barriers exercise — 72 young people
- Schools provision exercise — 294 responses
- 15 stakeholder conversations across statutory, VCSE, faith, and youth voice sectors
- Document review including the National Youth Strategy, Kent Youth Charter, Gravesham Youth and Community Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022–27, and EDC's Cultural Strategy 2025–30

Policy & Strategy References

This report sits within a wider evidence and policy landscape:

- National Youth Strategy (2025)
- Kent Youth Charter
- Gravesham Youth and Community Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022–27
- EDC Cultural Strategy 2025–30
- EDC Space in the Place Model
- Ebbsfleet Social Value Impact Report 2024/25
- National Youth Agency — National Youth Work Curriculum
- Voice.Opportunity.Power (Grosvenor, TCPA, Sport England, ZCD Architects)
- NLA Think Tank on Engaging Young Londoners (2023)



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This research was carried out independently by Youth Leads UK,
a national youth-led organisation specialising in youth insight, participation, and strategic planning,
on behalf of Ebbsfleet Development Corporation.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ebbsfleet is growing. As one of the most significant new town developments in England, it is already home to one of the youngest and most ethnically diverse populations in the region.

The families with children under 11 who make up a significant share of today's households will have teenagers within three to five years. The decisions made now about youth infrastructure, spaces, and provision will shape the experience of growing up in Ebbsfleet and surrounding areas, for a generation.

This report sets out what young people in Ebbsfleet need, what currently exists, where the gaps are, and what pressures are building. It is based on engagement with over 300 young people across four schools and colleges, a survey and conversations with 15 organisations working across the area - from local authorities and statutory services to voluntary sector providers, faith organisations, and youth voice bodies. It was commissioned by Ebbsfleet Development Corporation and produced by Youth Leads UK between February and August 2026.

WHAT YOUNG PEOPLE TOLD US

We saw that young people in Ebbsfleet and the surrounding areas are engaged and motivated. When asked what would make the area better, they were clear and consistent. They want somewhere to go - a warm, safe, informal social space that asks nothing of them except that they show up.

They want activities that are affordable, or free. They want to feel that the place being built around them has been built with them in mind. And they want to be heard.

They are asking for a place to be with friends, activities that do not cost a family a week's grocery budget to access and someone to talk to who is not a teacher or a parent.

OUR HEADLINE FINDINGS

1. YOUNG PEOPLE WANT SOMEWHERE TO SIMPLY EXIST
2. COST IS THE SINGLE BIGGEST BARRIER TO PARTICIPATION
3. MANY YOUNG PEOPLE IN EBBSFLEET DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW
4. PROVISION HAS SIGNIFICANT GAPS IN AGE, INCLUSION & AWARENESS
5. YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO BE HEARD, NOT JUST SERVED

EDC'S ROLE & OPPORTUNITY

Ebbsfleet Development Corporation is uniquely positioned in this landscape. It cannot restore statutory funding or direct how local authority budgets are spent. EDC holds the convening power to bring partners together, the planning leverage to shape what developer contributions fund, and the community mandate to ensure young people's needs are visible in decisions about how this place grows.

The evidence in this report directly connects youth issues to health and wellbeing, community cohesion, skills and employment, and the reduction of inequality.

Young people want somewhere to simply exist

The single most requested provision across every research method was social space - informal, accessible, and free from obligation. It is a specific and well-evidenced need for what planners call a third space: somewhere between home and school where young people can build friendships, develop confidence, and simply be young. In a 'new' town where many residents are recent arrivals without established networks, the absence of this space can compound isolation in ways that have real consequences for wellbeing and belonging.

Cost is the single biggest barrier to participation

More than half of young people in our school and college workshops and surveys said cost prevents them from taking part in activities. In a barriers ranking exercise, money dominated every other barrier combined. Free and low-cost provision must be the default starting point for any youth offer in Ebbsfleet. The structural imbalance between capital investment in buildings and revenue funding for the programmes that run inside them is a systemic risk that any delivery plan must address.

Many young people in Ebbsfleet don't know what they don't know

When we asked what they do in their spare time, the most common answers were "the Co-op", "the park", and "home" - these are simply the horizon of what feels available. When shown a weekly timetable from a youth club in another area, young people described it as "insanely good". The implication for delivery is significant: demand will not always be expressed before provision exists. Build it visibly, make it obviously for young people, keep it free and low-pressure - and they will come.

Provision has significant gaps in age, inclusion, and awareness

We found that older young people (those aged over 16) feel underserved. Awareness of what exists is low - not because young people are disengaged, but because in a fast-growing, transient community, information does not travel through established networks. We found little in the way of targeted provision for LGBTQIA+ communities, or for religiously diverse communities which has led to some young people feeling unwelcome at existing activities.

Young people want to be heard, not just served

Only one in five young people that we spoke to feel that young people are listened to when decisions are made in their area. Young people have views, ideas, and energy to contribute. Without a sustained, properly resourced mechanism for youth voice, the risk is a place built for young people that does not feel like it belongs to them.

OUR HEADLINE RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **CREATE A DEDICATED YOUTH SOCIAL SPACE IN EBBSFLEET**
2. **ADDRESS THE COST BARRIER THROUGH A YOUTH ACCESS FUND**
3. **BUILD PROVISION THAT OPENS YOUNG PEOPLE'S HORIZONS**
4. **BUILD A CONNECTED AND VISIBLE YOUTH ECOSYSTEM**
5. **ESTABLISH A SUSTAINED AND REPRESENTATIVE YOUTH VOICE MECHANISM**

The intelligence and evidence gathered in this report positions Dartford Borough Council, Gravesham Borough Council, and Kent County Council to engage proactively with any funding landscape.

Areas that can demonstrate a clear picture of local need, an evidence base rooted in young people's own voices, and a costed delivery plan are best placed to make the case for investment as national funding streams open up.

INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

Ebbsfleet is one of the most ambitious new town developments in England. Built on former industrial land in the Thames Estuary, it sits at the intersection of Dartford and Gravesham - two boroughs with distinct identities, established communities, and long histories. With Ebbsfleet's growth comes a question that development corporations do not always ask: what kind of place do young people want this to be?

This report exists to help answer that question. Commissioned by Ebbsfleet Development Corporation, it brings together evidence from young people themselves, from the organisations that work with them, and from the strategic landscape that shapes what is possible. Its purpose is not to tell anyone what to do. It is to put the clearest possible picture of young people's needs, ambitions, and experiences in front of the people who have the power and the opportunity to act on them.

Ebbsfleet's population is growing at a rate of 19% per year. Census data shows that 28.2% of Ebbsfleet's current residents are aged 0–16, higher than Dartford and Gravesham. Only 1.6% of residents are aged 65 or over. This is an exceptionally young community. The families with children under 11 who make up a significant share of today's households will have teenagers in three to five years. Alkerden C of E Academy's admissions trajectory points to a sustained and pronounced increase in secondary-age young people through the late 2020s.

Ebbsfleet is surrounded by the communities of Northfleet and Swanscombe under the local authorities of Gravesham & Dartford. All of these areas have their own relationships, cultures, and ways of doing things. Any conversation about what young people need in this area needs to include those existing communities. The organisations already working with young people across the wider area, from The Grand's 20 years of open-access youth work in Gravesham to the Salvation Army's outreach across both boroughs, are assets to build on.

How this report was produced

Between February and August 2026, Youth Leads UK conducted a programme of research designed to understand current and future youth needs across Ebbsfleet and the surrounding area. That research involved conversations with 15 organisations working with or for young people - spanning local authorities, statutory services, voluntary and community sector providers, faith organisations, and youth voice bodies. It also involved an online survey, visits to three schools and engagement with Dartford Youth Council. In total, the perspectives of over 300 young people and practitioners informed the recommendations in this report.

The research also drew on a number of existing strategies and policy documents, including the government's National Youth Strategy, the Kent Youth Charter, Gravesham Borough Council's Youth and Community Health and Wellbeing Strategy 2022–27, and EDC's Cultural Strategy 2025-2030, which places "places to go and things to do" at the heart of Ebbsfleet's vision for an active, creative community.

The policy moment

This report arrives at a particular moment in the policy landscape for young people. The National Youth Strategy, published in 2025, represents the most significant government investment in youth services in over a decade, with a renewed emphasis on young people's voice, local infrastructure, and preventative provision.

At the same time, the government's Milburn Review sheds light on over 1 million young people not in education, employment or training and the National Youth Strategy signals a significant shift in government investment in young people - moving funding closer to local level, and prioritising places to go, trusted adults, and youth voice as national commitments.



The system picture

Behind our five findings lies a system under significant pressure. Kent County Council's shift from universal to targeted youth provision has removed a generation of commissioned providers from the landscape.

A large number of youth organisations have lost their funding in recent years. The voluntary sector organisations that remain are doing extraordinary work - but on short-term grants, from borrowed venues, with small teams stretched across growing demand. Capital investment is there but buildings without sustained revenue funding for programming, staffing, and subsidised access will not reach the young people who most need them.

The demographic picture makes the urgency clear. Ebbsfleet's population is growing at 19% per year. The under-11s of today are the secondary-age young people of the late 2020s. The provision gap that exists now could become a provision crisis if it is not addressed.

As Ebbsfleet's youngest residents grow up, employability must grow with them - the youth infrastructure built now is the foundation for the skills, confidence, and social capital that determine outcomes a decade from now.

WHO ARE EBBSFLEET'S YOUNG PEOPLE?

Ebbsfleet is one of the youngest, fastest growing, and most ethnically diverse places in the region. The 2021 Census data showed that 28.2% of Ebbsfleet's population was aged 0-16, a significantly higher proportion than Dartford (22.3%) and Gravesham (20.9%). At the other end of the spectrum, just 1.6% of Ebbsfleet residents were aged 65 or over, compared to between 13.8% and 17.2% across the two local boroughs.

Ebbsfleet's ethnic diversity is distinctive. 42.4% of residents identify as non-white - the highest proportion of any comparator area by a significant margin, and nearly double the figure for Swanscombe and Greenhithe. The community reflects a rich mix of African, Caribbean, South Asian, and other backgrounds. This diversity is one of Ebbsfleet's strengths and is visible in the community events EDC supports, from the Bollywood festival to the African cultural networks active on social media.

A COMMUNITY FINDING ITS FEET

Many residents are relatively new to the area, with around 63% having relocated from outside of Dartford and Gravesham in search of space, affordability, and a different kind of life. Community roots, friendship networks, and local knowledge take time to develop. One young person who took part in our survey captured this precisely:

"I moved here in May and my school is in London and I know no-one my age in this area - I have no friends here... I don't even know if there is a youth club here."

That response reflects a feature of new town life - the social infrastructure has to be built from scratch, at the same time as the physical infrastructure. EDC's Resident Satisfaction Survey reinforces this picture. Satisfaction with facilities and community activities, including sports provision, arts and culture, and social spaces remains below desirable levels, even as residents report a genuine sense of community pride and belonging. People like living in Ebbsfleet and they want more from it.

DATA AT-A-GLANCE

28.2% of Ebbsfleet's population is aged 0-16

1.6% of residents are aged 65 or over

42.4% of residents identify as non-white

63% of residents have relocated from outside Dartford and Gravesham

THE PIPELINE EFFECT

EDC's household survey data shows that 24% of surveyed households have children aged 0-11, against just 6% each for 12-15s and 16-24s. Those younger children will become the secondary-age population of the next few years.

Alkerden C of E Academy's admissions trajectory points to a sustained increase in secondary-age young people over the next three to five years, building towards a pronounced bulge before an eventual tapering as the development matures.

This pipeline effect matters enormously for planning. The youth provision gap that exists today will grow significantly.



THE COVID COHORT

The legacy of the pandemic still affects young people today - the young people now aged roughly 14 to 22 experienced their most formative years of social development in conditions of lockdown, disrupted schooling, and enforced isolation. Multiple reports show higher levels of social anxiety, reduced confidence in group settings, and a generation that is in some cases still relearning how to be in a room with people they don't know.

Several practitioners who contributed to this research noted that this cohort needs more than just activities and spaces. They need patient, trusted adults and environments that make low-threshold entry easy. Young Mambos, whose one-to-one careers sessions are consistently fully booked, works with young people up to the age of 30 now, extended from 25 specifically because of the extended impact of those lost years.

This is not a reason for pessimism. Ebbsfleet's young people are engaged, curious, and ready. Organisations that we spoke to including the Ebbsfleet Design Group, Salvation Army and Sports4Change say people sign up and there is good attendance but the barriers are cost and awareness.

THE SURROUNDING AREA

Ebbsfleet's story cannot be told without reference to Northfleet, Swanscombe and Greenhithe, which sit within and alongside the development area and bring a very different set of circumstances.

Where Ebbsfleet's population is predominantly younger, London-origin, and relatively more affluent, Northfleet, for example, carries some of the sharpest indicators of deprivation in the region. Children in income-deprived households stand at 45.3% - three times the South East average. Youth unemployment runs at 13.5%.

Nearly a third of residents have no qualifications, and 44.7% of households have no access to a car, making transport a genuine barrier in ways that are less acute for newer Ebbsfleet residents.

Any youth provision strategy that serves Ebbsfleet must also work for the surrounding areas. This is to ensure that any investment doesn't inadvertently widen any divides.



THE EMPLOYABILITY HORIZON

Nationally, the NEET rate (young people Not in Education, Employment, or Training) remains persistently high, with recent government data showing 1.1 million young people as NEET - the highest level in 12 years . In areas with high deprivation, limited transport connectivity, and an under-developed youth infrastructure, the risk of young people falling into that category is demonstrably higher.

The young people who are under 11 in Ebbsfleet today will be entering the labour market in the mid-2030s. The provision built for them now is the foundation for the confidence, skills, and social capital that determine their outcomes as young adults. The evidence is clear that investment in young people's social and civic development in their early teenage years produces measurable returns in employment, health, and community participation a decade later. As the youth offer in Ebbsfleet develops and matures, an explicit employability strand will become necessary.

The evidence gathered across this research, from over 300 young people in schools, survey respondents, and over 15 stakeholder conversations, tells a coherent and consistent story.

Our five findings over the next few pages overlap and reinforce one another and taken together, they describe both the challenge and the opportunity facing Ebbsfleet as it grows.

YOUNG PEOPLE WANT SOMEWHERE TO SIMPLY EXIST

FINDING 1

Ask young people in Ebbsfleet what they want and the answer comes back with striking consistency: somewhere to go. A place that is warm, safe, indoors when needed and somewhere they can be themselves with their friends without being moved on or made to feel unwelcome.

"Is there anywhere we can just be young? Everywhere we go there are signs telling us we can't do this and we can't do that. Where are the signs telling us what we can do?"

"We need a place that we as teenagers can go while it's raining or really cold outside with our friends."

Across the survey responses, "social spaces" came back as the single most requested type of provision - more than sports, arts and careers support. When young people were asked what they spend their time doing, town centres, shopping areas, cafés and parks came back as answers:

"You just end up hanging around town or going to Co-op."

This is sometimes dismissed as vague or unambitious. What young people are describing is what urban planners call a 'third space' - somewhere that is neither home nor school, that makes no demands and asks nothing in return except that you show up.

The absence of this kind of space has a well-documented effect on young people's wellbeing, social development, and belonging.

In Ebbsfleet, it is compounded by the new town dynamic: many young people have moved here without existing friendship networks, and without a neutral place to build them, isolation can take hold quickly.

The Dartford Youth Council named it directly - a "pub without drinks," a place to socialise and meet new people.

When Year 7 students were asked what they most wanted locally, an arcade came top, followed by a swimming pool and a Starbucks.

A number of young people said they previously used the coffee shops to do their homework but now they are "not allowed".

They also shared that the local Starbucks and McDonalds are actively "against young people" because they have limits on how many young people can enter their premises or how long they can stay there.

Practitioners across the area also recognised this need as they described the demand for safe, free-to-access spaces where young people can socialise with trusted adults, separate from structured, fee-based activities.

One practitioner noted that technology has altered how young people socialise, and many need patient adult facilitation to build the peer connections that previous generations developed more naturally.

This is echoed by the National Youth Strategy priority finding around 'safe spaces' and 'trusted adults'.

COST IS THE SINGLE BIGGEST BARRIER TO PARTICIPATION

FINDING 2

When young people across the schools were asked whether cost stops young people from taking part in activities, more than half said yes. In a barriers ranking exercise, money dominated the top responses, appearing in roughly a third of all first-choice rankings. No other single barrier came close. Young people were direct:

> **"You have to pay for everything. It's not fair on my parents who already can't afford things for themselves."**

Cost is the primary structural reason why young people who want to participate cannot do so. And it does not operate in isolation - it interacts with geography in ways that compound the problem.

Young Mambos observed that transport costs to Bluewater for entry-level jobs are prohibitive for many young people from lower-income families - particularly before the first pay check. If they cannot afford the bus to work, they are unlikely to even try.

The cost barrier falls unevenly. Young people in Northfleet, where 45% of children live in income-deprived households, face it most acutely. But it appears across the survey responses regardless of postcode.

Gravesham Borough Council targets a ceiling of £5 per activity for its programmes and considers anything above that a meaningful deterrent. Cyclopark charges £4.50 for a full family day and considers that a deliberate commitment to affordability.

These are genuine and commendable efforts. They also illustrate how fine the margin is and how provision that is technically affordable can still be inaccessible when it sits alongside transport costs, kit costs, and the accumulated weight of financial pressure on families.

There is also a structural imbalance that we found when speaking to practitioners. Capital investment, buildings, pitches, facilities, appears as more readily available than the revenue funding needed to run programmes inside them. New infrastructure is coming to Ebbsfleet. But a building without sustained funding for staffing, programming, and subsidised access will not reach the young people who most need it. Free and low-cost provision must be the default starting point for any youth offer.



MANY YOUNG PEOPLE DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY DON'T KNOW

FINDING 3

Ask young people in Ebbsfleet what they do in their spare time and the answers come back quickly and without much variation: the Co-op, the park, town, home.

37% of the young people we spoke to during our schools workshops were 'unsure' if they would try something new.



The answers above came not because these are young people's favourite places, but because for many young people here, these are simply the landscape of available options.

There is no gap between what they want and what exists, because the imagination of what might exist has never had anything to feed on.

This became one of the most striking observations in the entire research process. When young people were asked what they wished existed locally, many struggled to answer because the question asked them to picture something they had no frame of reference for.

The clearest illustration came when young people were shown a weekly timetable from a youth club. The reaction was close to disbelief. The range of activities, the consistency of provision, the simple fact of a place that existed for them and around their schedule. Young people described it as "insanely good."

A survey asking young people what they want will understate demand if young people have no basis for knowing what to ask for. The 37% of young people in the schools survey who were "unsure" whether they would try something new if it existed locally are unanchored. Remove the unfamiliarity and many of them become enthusiastic.

The Salvation Army's summer pop-ups, which drew up to sixty young people per session with no pre-registration and no prior relationship, are the proof: when something appears that is obviously for young people, obviously free, and obviously low-pressure, they come.

PROVISION HAS GAPS IN AGE, INCLUSION AND AWARENESS

FINDING 4

There is a lot of strong youth provision across Ebbsfleet's surrounding areas, yet that provision has significant gaps in who it reaches, in what age groups it serves, and in whether young people even know it exists.

"There are places to go, but not really for us."

"Things are there, but you don't really hear about them."

"There's stuff for little kids and stuff for adults, but nothing really for teenagers."

"You don't want to go somewhere if you feel like you won't belong."

The age gap is the most consistently reported. We found that there is a lot of focus on young people in primary school. For example Family Hubs serve 0 to 11 year olds and often only have targeted provision. We visited one family hub which operates out of what used to be a youth club.

The Dartford Youth Council was direct: the scrapping of the universal youth offer was a political decision, and a youth centre open seven days a week simply does not exist. Young people aged 16 to 25 are even more underserved.

Crucially, the appetite is there. Some 45% of young people in the schools survey said they would try something new locally, with a further 37% open to the idea if the right offer existed.

Of the young people we spoke to, 20% knew activities existed locally but did not use them, and 60% more were unaware of anything at all. Only 20% were actively using provision.

The inclusion gap takes several forms. Race and background were named as barriers in the schools ranking exercise. Gender is a further dimension - the current local offer is dominated by sport and physical activity, which tends to engage young men and boys more than young women and girls.

Safety perceptions diverge sharply at secondary age along gender lines - young women are more likely to experience open and outdoor spaces as unsafe or unwelcoming. The arts, creative, social and wellbeing activities that tend to engage young women more effectively are precisely those most at risk from funding cuts. Any youth offer that does not actively consider whether its design works equally well for young people of all genders will replicate these imbalances by default.

Finally, we found gaps in targeted activities for LGBTQIA+ and neurodiverse communities with only a handful of organisations serving these groups.



YOUNG PEOPLE WANT TO BE HEARD, NOT JUST SERVED

FINDING 5

Only one in five young people we spoke to feel that they are listened to when decisions are made in their area

Young people in Ebbsfleet have views, ideas, and a genuine investment in the place they are growing up in. What they lack is a meaningful route to express that and have it taken seriously.

The Dartford Youth Council asked for more political education, more opportunities for all, and more equitable access to civic life. The Ebbsfleet Design Group, which had twenty young people sign up and return from the previous cohort, demonstrates what happens when young people are given creative agency and treated as contributors rather than consultees.

The National Youth Agency is clear that meaningful co-production: young people involved in designing and shaping the services that affect them, improves outcomes, increases engagement, and produces provision that actually works.

The Kent Youth Charter commits to letting young people lead and make decisions. EDC's Cultural Strategy speaks of co-created programming and active participation. The infrastructure for youth voice is supported at every level of policy. What is missing locally is a sustained, properly resourced mechanism for it to happen.

As Ebbsfleet continues to grow, the absence of meaningful youth voice creates conditions where young people feel marginalised in a place being built, nominally, for everyone. Parks with "no ball games" signs. McDonald's that limits how many young people can enter at once. Public spaces that signal, in small but cumulative ways, that young people are a problem to be managed.

Kent Police themselves noted that they would welcome more opportunities to engage with young people rather than simply police them. The aspiration for Ebbsfleet is a community where young people feel they belong.



“No one really asks us what we want”

GAPS, FUTURE PRESSURES & THE CASE FOR ACTION

A dedicated space for teenagers in Ebbsfleet itself

The most consistently identified gap across every source of evidence in this research is the absence of a dedicated, accessible, neutral space for young people aged 13 to 19 within Ebbsfleet. It was named by young people, by practitioners, by local authority representatives, and by Kent Police. It is the gap from which almost all other gaps flow.

Eastgate Church currently provides a space in Ebbsfleet with a youth-facing function. It is a Christian evangelical setting, and is not designed as a universal, open-access youth space. The Space in the Place model notes that Springhead Park's community infrastructure needs are met "in most part" by Eastgate. There is a lot of weight being placed on a single, faith-affiliated venue in an area whose population is among the most religiously and ethnically diverse in the region.

What is needed is what young people described - a warm, affordable, welcoming space where they can show up without a referral, a membership, or a reason. A neighbourhood house or community hub, in EDC's own Space in the Place typology, could serve this function if designed with young people from the outset and programmed with their needs in mind rather than fitted around other uses.

The 16-25 gap

If the 13–19 provision gap is significant, the gap for young people aged 16 to 25 is acute. This is the group that falls outside Family Hubs, outside most youth club models, outside school-based provision, and increasingly outside the scope of targeted services unless they present a specific identified need. They are not children, so children's services do not serve them. They are not yet established adults, so mainstream community provision rarely speaks to them either.

Our research with practitioners at Dartford Borough Council identified 16 to 25 as the most underserved age group. Gravesham Borough Council's practitioners agreed and noted that options drop sharply after Year 11. Young Mambos draws heavily from this cohort and has extended its age ceiling to 30 in recognition of the Covid generation's extended need for support. The skills, confidence, and connections built between 16 and 25 have a disproportionate effect on long-term outcomes.

GAPS, FUTURE PRESSURES & THE CASE FOR ACTION

ACCESS TO WATER BASED ACTIVITIES

Access to water-based activities came up consistently across the schools engagement as one of the most wanted provisions, and the ask was specific: something local, not too far of a journey away. At present, young people in Ebbsfleet travel out of the area for swimming, which adds cost and inconvenience to an activity that is both popular and, for younger children in particular, a genuine safety need. Learning to swim is a life skill, and one that remains unequally distributed along lines of income and geography.

The framing here is deliberately broader than a swimming pool. What young people are asking for is accessible, affordable water-based activity - whether that is lane swimming, recreational sessions, water safety education, or open water awareness. Cygnet Leisure Centre in Northfleet and Hangloose Adventure facilities were cited as “too expensive”.

COORDINATION & NAVIGATION INFRASTRUCTURE

One of the most actionable gaps in the current system is also one of the least glamorous: there is no single, visible entry point for young people to find out what is available to them. Information is spread across provider websites, social media accounts, word of mouth, and school noticeboards.

There is no shared infrastructure connecting what providers offer to what young people can find. A coordinated local platform, whether a digital directory, a youth information service, or a trusted navigator role, could address this and would improve the reach and utilisation of provision that already exists.

Schools represent an underused asset in this picture. Across the area they are in daily contact with the majority of the youth population, hold physical facilities, and are trusted by young people and families. Strengthening links between schools and external providers, and exploring extended use of school facilities beyond the school day, could significantly improve both reach and coordination at relatively low cost.



NEURODIVERGENT PROVISION

Neurodivergent diagnoses are rising sharply, and the provision system has not kept pace. Those from Autism South East were unambiguous that current services do not meet the needs of neurodivergent young people, mainstream provision is not designed for them, and the transition at 18-plus leaves a significant cohort of young adults with no specialist social provision at all. The evidence from Autism South East points to a model that works well when resources allow: interest-led activities, small groups, peer networks, autism-specific social events, and forest school sessions but they require intentional design, trained staff, and sustained funding.

FUNDING & THE VOLUNTARY SECTOR

Most organisations interviewed for this research are operating in the space that statutory provision used to occupy - and almost all of them are doing so on short-term, insecure funding.

The voluntary sector organisations working with young people across this area are remarkable. The Grand has survived 20 years and the loss of its own building. The Salvation Army is launching a mobile community space. Young Mambos runs fully booked sessions from borrowed rooms.

This is the context in which EDC's convening role becomes genuinely significant. EDC could facilitate a more coordinated approach to how existing resources, including developer contributions, are directed towards sustaining the voluntary sector organisations that are doing the work.

The National Youth Strategy's commitment to moving funding from national to local, and its specific focus on places to go, trusted adults, and youth voice, creates an opportunity for this area. Dartford & Gravesham Borough Councils, and Kent County Council, working with Ebbsfleet Development Corporation and the VCSE sector, are well placed to make a compelling case for investment.

SOCIAL DIVISION & COMMUNITY COHESION

Several stakeholders raised the risk of a deepening divide between Ebbsfleet's newer population and the existing communities. Kent Police noted that some areas sometimes have a negative reputation that shapes parental decisions about where children are allowed to go. The Grand referenced community social media groups amplifying incidents involving young people and hardening perceptions. The Salvation Army named a "them and us" culture between different parts of the area explicitly.

This will become more entrenched if youth provision is developed in ways that serve the new town's population without reaching into existing communities, or that are priced and located in ways that exclude lower-income young people.



DIGITAL CULTURE & CHANGING DEMANDS

The nature of what young people want from provision is also changing. This is about a generation for whom digital and physical socialising are complementary, and whose sense of what is worth showing up for has shifted accordingly. The desire for gaming and arcade environments, which came out strongly during school research, is worth taking seriously. Young people are not asking for digital experiences instead of physical ones. They are asking for physical spaces that reflect the culture they actually inhabit. A youth space that acknowledged gaming, creative digital production, or social media as valid activities would find a ready audience among young people.

YOUTH OPPORTUNITIES & DELIVERY PLAN

RECOMMENDATIONS

Our five findings over the next couple of pages point to five areas where action in Ebbsfleet and the surrounding areas could make a lasting difference to young people's lives. These are not five separate problems requiring five separate solutions. They are interconnected - a young person who has somewhere to go is more likely to access support; a young person who feels heard is more likely to engage with provision; a young person who can afford to participate is more likely to develop the confidence and connections that carry them forward.

Our recommendations are organised around five priority areas, each rooted directly in what young people and practitioners told us. For each priority, we set out what the opportunity is, what delivery could look like, and what EDC and partners might consider doing - and when.

This plan is intended to be useful beyond EDC alone. Dartford Borough Council, Gravesham Borough Council, and Kent County Council each have a role in shaping youth provision across this area, and each stands to benefit from the intelligence gathered in this research.

As the National Youth Strategy is implemented and new funding streams open up, the evidence in this report could support all three authorities in making the case for investment, aligning their existing strategies with emerging national priorities, and demonstrating that this area has both the need and the plan to act on it.

UNDERSTANDING SECTION 106

Section 106 (S106) of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 gives local planning authorities the power to require developers to contribute towards the infrastructure that new development creates demand for. These contributions are one of the primary mechanisms through which new community provision, including youth services, can be funded in a place like Ebbsfleet.

In the Ebbsfleet context, approximately £500,000 is currently available or in prospect for youth-related provision. S106 funds in the Ebbsfleet area are held by Kent County Council, Dartford and Gravesham Borough Councils and EDC has a role in ensuring these funds are spent on relevant, local youth and community provision.

PRINCIPLES USED THROUGHOUT THE RECOMMENDATIONS

Young people co-design what gets built.

Free and low-cost is the starting point.

EDC's most valuable contribution is often coordination and convening rather than direct delivery - creating the conditions in which others can do their best work.

CREATE A DEDICATED YOUTH SOCIAL SPACE IN EBBSFLEET

PRIORITY 1

The single most consistent finding across every research method was the absence of a warm, neutral, accessible space where young people aged 13 to 19 can simply exist: indoors, free or low-cost, without obligation. A young person who has somewhere to go is safer, more connected, and more reachable by trusted adults than one who does not.

WHAT DELIVERY COULD LOOK LIKE

Two spaces already open in Ebbsfleet could carry some of this immediately. Weldon Heart and Weldon Wellbeing Pavilion are live now, with the multiple activity zones, kitchen facilities, and hall space that a youth offer needs. The fastest, lowest-cost route to giving young people somewhere to go could be to secure dedicated youth time and programming within venues that already exist.

Alongside this, the Northfleet Pathway Project (land adjacent to Northfleet train station) site is expected to provide a near-term, purpose-built youth space. A successful delivery partner is progressing Stage 1 feasibility work, with proposals identifying the site's Coach House as the principal community space, alongside container-based workspace and amenity provision. The site's emerging specification already anticipates a youth programme for ages 8 to 18, built around afterschool and weekend sessions and shaped in partnership with local artists, tenants, colleges, and training providers.

A Youth-Friendly Spaces Fund, which could be held and distributed by either the Ebbsfleet Garden City Trust, or an anchor institution like them, could enable existing venues across the area, including Weldon Heart, Weldon Wellbeing Pavilion, and the Northfleet Pathway Project site, to make targeted improvements: better lighting, rearranged activity rooms and gaming equipment, based on a framework of what youth-friendly actually means. The framework should not be written by adults in advance. It should be the first substantive piece of work commissioned from the Ebbsfleet Youth Forum described under Recommendation 5.

EDC & PARTNER CONSIDERATIONS

1. Secure dedicated youth sessions and programming at Weldon Heart and Weldon Wellbeing Pavilion, as the fastest available route to a youth social space
2. Support the Northfleet Pathway Project meanwhile use feasibility process through to a confirmed business plan, with youth social space secured as a core use of the Coach House
3. Establish a Youth-Friendly Spaces Fund of £25,000, held by a trusted anchor institution, to be distributed to venues once the Youth Forum has co-produced a youth-friendly spaces framework
4. Apply the square meterage framework in the appendix as a standard reference in any future facility brief or S106 funding negotiation involving community or leisure provision



ADDRESS THE COST BARRIER THROUGH A YOUTH ACCESS FUND

PRIORITY 2

Cost is the single biggest structural barrier to participation, named by more than half of young people surveyed. Free and low-cost provision is the default expectation, not a premium feature. Capital investment without revenue funding for subsidised access will not reach the young people who most need it.

"You have to pay for everything. It's not fair on my parents who already can't afford things for themselves."

WHAT DELIVERY COULD LOOK LIKE

The most targeted and deliverable option is a Youth Access Fund, administered by an anchor institution such as the Ebbsfleet Garden City Trust and distributed to VCSE organisations delivering for young people across the area. VCSE organisations, rather than individual young people, apply to the Trust for funding, which they use to remove cost barriers for the young people they work with. This keeps the mechanism light-touch and rooted in existing trusted relationships.

The fund covers three things: transport, so young people can get to provision without the cost of a bus journey determining whether they go; food, whether a snack or a light meal, which removes another barrier; and kit, so that young people are not excluded from specific activities by the cost of equipment they do not own.

The unit cost across these three components is approximately £10 per young person per activity. A pilot fund of £25,000 in Year 1 would subsidise approximately 2,500 activity places. The evidence from Year 1 such as how many young people were reached, what activities they accessed, what barriers were removed, could become the basis for scaling the fund in Years 2 and 3.



EDC & PARTNER CONSIDERATIONS

1. Establish a Youth Access Fund of £25,000 in Year 1, held by an anchor institution such as the Ebbsfleet Garden City Trust and distributed to VCSE organisations, covering transport, food, and kit as the three eligible uses
2. Set a unit cost target of approximately £10 per young person per activity as the working measure of the fund's reach and impact
3. Make community access pricing, including transport support and food provision, a standard requirement in any future facility brief or S106 negotiation relating to youth or leisure provision
4. Explore a business sponsorship model with local employers in Years 2 and 3, framed around social value and linked to the employability strand for 16 to 25 year olds

WHAT WORKS ELSEWHERE

OnSide Youth Zones

The OnSide Youth Zones network has over 15 youth clubs nationwide and largely operates on a £5 one-off membership and 50p per session entry model - a nominal contribution that keeps the space valued and the cost accessible. The subsidy behind that 50p comes from a mixed funding model combining local authority investment, business sponsorship, and charitable income. The result is a full programme of activities, sports, arts, digital, enterprise, wellbeing available to any young person, regardless of income, for less than the cost of a bus fare.

Manchester Rising Star Talent Fund

The MRSTF supports young people across the city whose family or personal circumstances mean they face financial barriers that are out of their control. They fund vital equipment, training and resources to enable young people to take their next steps to success in work, qualifications or entrepreneurship, via grants of up to £5,000. Around £80,000 per year is granted to young people. Examples include those interested in photography being awarded a grant to purchase a camera, support to participate in the Duke of Edinburgh programme, and the equipment for a disabled young person to participate fully in water activities.

BUILD PROVISION THAT OPENS YOUNG PEOPLE'S HORIZONS

PRIORITY 3

Many young people in Ebbsfleet have never experienced quality youth provision because they have never encountered it. Their sense of what is possible is shaped entirely by what they can see around them.

> **"Let us know about the youth clubs because I moved here in May and my school is in London and I know no one my age in this area - I have no friends here... I don't even know if there is a youth club here."**

PHASE 1: THE TASTER PROGRAMME

The most important design principle is low threshold, high visibility. Provision that appears in a place young people already pass through, at times they are already around will draw them in. The Salvation Army's summer pop-ups, drawing up to 60 young people per session through word of mouth alone, are the proof of this model locally.

A structured and open-access taster programme could launch fastest at Weldon Wellbeing Pavilion or Weldon Heart. A second taster venue could be Cyclopark. The programme would be a rolling offer of activities across a fortnight, free to attend, with no commitment required. The activities themselves should include what came through strongly in the research: retro gaming and amusement arcade provision such as pac-man and racing machines.

A pool table costs around £2,000, an air hockey table costs around £2,500 and a gaming setup runs to £2,000. Equipping one venue to a standard that excites young people costs in the region of £6,500-7,500.

Alongside the equipment, the programme could see VCSE delivery partners bringing their existing activities such as sports, arts, cooking, music into the space for defined sessions. Hiring in additional activity equipment, such as arcade machines, at £500-1,000 per day, adds variety and spectacle. The total cost of a half-term taster programme, covering delivery staff, equipment hire, outreach, and young people's expenses, sits in the range of £30,000-50,000.

BUILD PROVISION THAT OPENS YOUNG PEOPLE'S HORIZONS

PRIORITY 3

PHASE 2: A PERMANENT & CONSISTENT WEEKLY OFFER

The taster programme is an entry point. What young people responded to when shown a Youth Zone timetable was the combination of consistency, variety, and accessibility. The same time, the same place, every week, with something different happening each session. That predictability and reliability builds the habit and trust that turns a first visit into a regular one.
The timetable below illustrates what this could look like in practice.

The actual timetable should be designed by young people through the taster programme and the Youth Forum based on what they engage with, return to, and tell their friends about.

Day	Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3
Monday	Football / basketball	Homework support	Open social
Tuesday	Music	Cooking	Girls' group
Wednesday	Gaming / esports	Art & design	Mentoring
Thursday	Open social	Dance	Film Club
Friday	Employability	DJ & Music	Sports
Saturday	Enterprise	Sports	Creative arts

DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE & OUTREACH

A significant proportion of young people find out about activities through their phones: Instagram and TikTok in particular. Provision that is not findable digitally is, for many young people, invisible. Any new youth offer should launch with a dedicated social media presence, and active promotion through school communication platforms.

EDC & PARTNER CONSIDERATIONS

1. Commission a half-term open-access taster programme at Weldon Wellbeing Pavilion or Weldon Heart, in partnership with two or three VCSE organisations, with gaming and activity equipment as a centrepiece
2. Extend the taster offer a second site
3. Use the taster programme as a co-design mechanism: what young people engage with, return to, and tell their friends about directly informs the permanent programme offer
4. Invest in a starter equipment pack for at least two venues in Year 1 (approximately £13,000–15,000 for both), building the permanent physical offer alongside the programme
5. Build digital presence and schools outreach into strategies

BUILD A CONNECTED & VISIBLE YOUTH ECOSYSTEM

PRIORITY 4

Provision is not the primary problem - connection is. Young people do not know what exists. Providers operate in silos. There is no shared entry point and no coordination infrastructure. 80% of young people we spoke to were unaware of any local provision. Only one in five were actively engaged.

Young people aged 16 to 25 are the most acutely underserved group outside Family Hubs, most youth club models, and increasingly outside the scope of targeted services unless they present a specific identified need. Neurodivergent young people, young women, and young people from communities not well represented in existing provision all face additional barriers.

The facilitation commission
The most structurally important investment in this plan is a commission to a specialist youth organisation to hold the coordination and capacity-building role across the system. This organisation could be commissioned by EDC and would be responsible for the following, across the first twelve months:

- Convening and facilitating a new Youth Providers Network - a quarterly forum bringing together the VCSE organisations delivering for young people to map provision, share referral pathways, avoid duplication, and build relationships
- Building and maintaining a simple digital directory of youth activities across the area, searchable by age, location, cost, and interest
- Establishing and maintaining active links between youth providers and school communication channels
- Supporting the early establishment and operation of the Ebbsfleet Youth Forum described under Recommendation 5

The commission should sit with an organisation that has specialist youth expertise, existing relationships across the VCSE sector, and the credibility to hold a neutral convening function.

Addressing the age gap: 16 to 25 and employability
A dedicated strand within this work should explicitly address 16 to 25 year olds, combining a social offer, open access evening and weekend provision and an employability dimension: CVs, mock interviews, employer encounters, and work experience brokering.

Large local employers, for example Bluewater retail and hospitality businesses, construction and development firms active on the Ebbsfleet site, logistics employers in the Thames Gateway corridor have a direct interest in the pipeline of local young talent and a social value case for contributing to this strand. By Year 2, employer contributions could be meeting at least a third of the cost of the 16 to 25 offer.

Addressing the inclusion gaps
This work should also hold explicit responsibility for the inclusion gaps the research identified. Neurodivergent young people need a dedicated strand within the programme, with appropriate staffing and environmental adjustments. Young women, who are underserved by a current offer dominated by sport and physical activity, need provision that explicitly centres their interests and takes their safety perceptions seriously.

EDC & PARTNER CONSIDERATIONS

1. Commission a specialist youth organisation to hold the facilitation, coordination, and capacity-building role across the system for an initial twelve-month period
2. Establish a Youth Providers Network
3. Include 16 to 25 employability provision in the commission brief, with a target of employer co-funding meeting at least a third of costs by Year 2

ESTABLISH A SUSTAINED & REPRESENTATIVE YOUTH VOICE MECHANISM

PRIORITY 5

Only one in five young people we spoke to feel that they are listened to when decisions are made in their area. National research points to almost nine in ten young people having never been asked their opinion about the future of their neighbourhood, even though more than eight in ten would like to have their say. This would be the first sustained, properly resourced mechanism through which young people's voices shape the decisions that affect them in Ebbsfleet.

THE EBBSFLEET YOUTH FORUM

We recommend establishing a properly resourced Ebbsfleet Youth Forum - a body of young people aged 13 to 25, with a focus on underrepresented voices: older teenagers, young people from Northfleet and other surrounding areas, as well as young people from underprivileged communities and backgrounds. The Forum would meet monthly, hold a mandate to influence decisions about youth provision and community development, and be supported by the specialist organisation commissioned under Recommendation 4.

Paying young people for their time
Young people's participation should be paid, consistent with the practice both the Elevate Board and Mayfair Youth Forum are built on. A core group of fifteen young people, paid at £15 per hour for four hours per month, costs £10,800 per year. Monthly session costs (venue, materials, refreshments) add approximately £1,200 per year.

What the Forum could do
The Forum's first substantive piece of work should be to develop the definition of what a 'youth-friendly space' looks like in Ebbsfleet - a set of principles and standards, co-authored by young people, that can be applied to every new building brief, every commissioned programme, and every S106 negotiation involving youth provision. Following the Mayfair precedent, this could take the form of a short, published manifesto that acts as a live reference point. Beyond this founding piece of work, the Forum could also feed into reviews of what gets delivered under this plan.

WHAT WORKS ELSEWHERE

The Elevate Board at Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park is the closest precedent. Run by the London Legacy Development Corporation, facing the same task as EDC, the Board is made up of 18 to 25 year-olds from the host boroughs, interfaces directly with LLDC's main board, and shapes strategic priorities across four workstreams. It shows a development corporation can embed youth governance formally, not just consult on it.

The Mayfair Youth Forum, run by developer Grosvenor, shows the private-development version. Twenty-five young people co-authored a "Manifesto for Mayfair" used as a live test against design proposals, then spoke at the planning committee in support of the scheme. Grosvenor has sustained the relationship for five years since.

A wider NLA Think Tank on engaging young Londoners reinforces two principles worth building in: engagement should be a two-way exchange, with young people compensated through payment or employability opportunities rather than treated as volunteers; and post-occupancy evaluation, bringing young people back to review what actually gets built, is often missing and worth designing in from the start.

EDC & PARTNER CONSIDERATIONS

1. Commit to establishing a Youth Forum within the next twelve months, possibly hosted by Ebbsfleet Garden City Trust, with a paid core membership of fifteen young people drawn from across Ebbsfleet and the surrounding area
2. Commission the Forum, as its first piece of work, to develop a youth-friendly spaces framework that informs future facility briefs, S106 conditions, and the distribution criteria for the Youth-Friendly Spaces Fund
3. Ensure the facilitation commission under Recommendation 4 includes explicit support for the Forum's operation in its first twelve months



COSTING & DELIVERY FRAMEWORK

The recommendations in this plan span a range of cost levels and timeframes. The framework below sets out a high-level view of what investment is needed, when, and from where.

Investment builds in three stages. A Year 1 seed is funded by S106 developer contributions already agreed for youth provision. Years 1 to 3 use that early evidence to build the case for match funding. Years 3 to 5 see national, local authority, NHS, and employer sources take on a larger share. The S106 allocation is the full amount currently earmarked for youth provision. It is a starting point, not the long-term solution, which is why later stages are designed to lever in more than what it starts with.

£180,000
Year 1

Seed investment from S106 funding, establishing action on the five priority areas while generating the evidence for future years.

£500k-550k
Years 1 to 3

S106 funding continues alongside growing match funding. Sustained weekly sessions and activities across multiple providers & locations.

£400k-445k
Years 3 to 5

Majority match-funded by grant funders, with NHS ICB, local authority, and employer contributions taking on a larger share as S106 funding tapers.

A full breakdown by recommendation, strand and funding source is set out in the costings framework which you can find at youthleads.uk/yop

SPACES

A significant amount of community infrastructure is already open or in development across Ebbsfleet and the surrounding area. The table below sets out the current picture, drawn from EDC's Space in the Place community infrastructure framework.

Venue	Location	Scale / Size	Specialism	Delivery Year
Weldon Heart	Ebbsfleet Green	A-scale (c.250m²)	Community & play	Open — 2025
Weldon Wellbeing Pavilion	Ebbsfleet Green	B+ (893m²)	Sports & leisure	Open — 2025
Castle Hill Site D	Castle Hill	Meanwhile use	Youth & community	Being designated now
Northfleet Pathway Project	Northfleet	A-meanwhile (c.250m²)	Youth & workspace	2028
Alkerden Hub	Whitecliffe	D-scale	Health & community	2028
Castle Hill Cultural Hub	Whitecliffe	C-scale (c.1,500m²)	Music, arts & culture	2029
Health & Wellbeing Hub	Ebbsfleet Central	D-scale	Health & wellbeing	2030
Blue Lake — Outdoor Pursuits Hub	Blue Lake	C-scale (c.1,300m²)	Sports & leisure (water)	2033
Alkerden Sports (court hall)	Whitecliffe	S106 delivery	Sports	2026
Alkerden Pavilion	Whitecliffe	S106 delivery	Sports changing	2026
Rosherville School hall	Northfleet	S106 delivery (50% community)	Multi-use	2026

WHAT SIZE OF SPACE DOES A YOUTH OFFER NEED?

Not all community spaces are equally suited to a youth offer, and size matters. Drawing on the Space in the Place typology and translating it into youth-specific terms, the following framework gives commissioners and planners a practical guide to what different scales of space can deliver.

Scale	Size	Youth Offer Type	What the space could include
A-scale	c.250m²	Minimum viable youth offer	Drop-in social space, one or two activity zones, basic kitchen facilities, trusted adult present. Serves approximately 30 young people per session.
B-scale	500–1,000m²	Functional youth club	Multiple activity zones operating simultaneously, commercial kitchen, changing facilities, storage, outdoor link. Serves approximately 80 young people across a session.
C-scale	1,500m²+	Youth Zone-adjacent	Full multi-activity offer running simultaneously — sports, arts, gaming, music, enterprise, wellbeing. Dedicated youth programming, specialist spaces, café or food offer. Serves 150–200+ young people across a session.
D-scale	2,500m²+	Landmark / full Youth Zone model	City-scale provision serving a wide catchment. Multiple specialist spaces, employer partnerships, therapeutic services co-located. Requires specialist management and a sustained mixed funding model.

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