

Safeguarding Young People in Practice: What England's 2025 National Youth Strategy Means for Risk, Protection and Transition

Introduction

England's 2025 National Youth Strategy, *Youth Matters*, arrives at a time when youth policy is being asked to do several things at once: prevent harm, widen participation, rebuild local infrastructure and support young people through increasingly complex transitions into adulthood.

The strategy's emphasis on relationships, safe spaces and opportunity reflects much of what the evidence tells us works. Yet when these ambitions are viewed through everyday safeguarding realities, particularly for adolescents and young adults whose needs do not sit neatly within service boundaries, questions emerge about how protection is enacted, not just intended.

This article explores how safeguarding, including **transitional safeguarding**, is implicitly relied upon within the strategy — and where greater clarity may be needed to ensure that prevention does not drift into risk containment.

Relationships as Protection and Pressure

At the heart of *Youth Matters* is a commitment to ensuring more young people have access to a trusted adult outside the home. For policy teams, this reflects a strong evidence base: trusted relationships are often the first line of defence against harm.

In practice, youth workers, mentors and educators frequently become the people to whom young people disclose anxiety, exploitation, violence or unsafe living situations. This relational proximity is protective, but it also carries safeguarding responsibility.

The strategy largely frames trusted adults as a solution, without fully addressing the systems required to support them when risk escalates. In a context where one in five young people has a probable mental health disorder, trusted adults increasingly operate at the interface between universal provision and statutory safeguarding.

For policy teams, the key issue is not whether relationships matter, they clearly do, but whether the **infrastructure around those relationships** is sufficient. Without clear supervision, escalation routes and shared thresholds, relational models risk holding risk rather than reducing it, particularly as young people approach adulthood and statutory responsibilities shift.

Safe Spaces and the Reality of Contextual Risk

Investment in youth spaces and community provision reflects a growing recognition that young people's safety is shaped by where they are, not just who they live with. This aligns with contextual safeguarding research, which shows that harm often occurs in peer groups, neighbourhoods and public settings.

Youth spaces can offer genuine protection: they provide consistency, visibility and trusted adults who understand local dynamics. However, safety within these spaces is not guaranteed by environment alone.

In practice, youth settings increasingly encounter peer-on-peer harm, exploitation indicators and complex behavioural presentations. The strategy's focus on access and inclusion is welcome, but there is less attention to how youth provision connects into wider safeguarding systems when serious concerns arise.

For policy teams, this raises practical questions:

How are youth spaces supported to respond when voluntary engagement meets statutory concern? How is information shared across agencies? And how are staff protected from carrying unmanageable risk?

Participation, Voice and Whose Safety Is Heard

Youth Matters rightly prioritises youth voice and participation, aiming to reduce inequalities in access and influence. Participation can be a powerful safeguarding mechanism, particularly for adolescents whose risks are often minimised or misunderstood.

However, there is a difference between being heard and being protected. Evidence from safeguarding reviews consistently shows that young people at greatest risk are often the least likely to engage in formal participation structures.

For policy teams, the challenge is ensuring that participation mechanisms do not unintentionally amplify the voices of the least vulnerable, while those navigating exploitation, mental ill-health or unstable transitions remain on the margins.

Embedding safeguarding into participation means asking not only *what young people say they want*, but *what their experiences tell us about risk*, and how services respond when those experiences sit uncomfortably with existing thresholds.

Transitions: Where Risk Often Intensifies

Transitions sit at the centre of the strategy's ambitions, particularly transitions into education, training and employment. Yet transitions are also the point at which safeguarding risk often intensifies.

As young people move beyond age 16 and towards adulthood, support frequently becomes fragmented. Mental health services, social care, education and youth justice operate to different age thresholds, leaving some young people without a clear safety net at precisely the moment they need one most.

While *Youth Matters* recognises the importance of positive destinations, it largely treats transitions as economic or skills-based challenges. What remains less explicit is how safeguarding responsibility is maintained as young people move between systems.

For policy teams, this highlights the absence of an explicit transitional safeguarding framework within the strategy, a framework that recognises vulnerability as developmental, not age-bound, and that supports continuity of protection alongside independence.

Workforce Capacity and System Responsibility

The strategy's commitment to workforce development is essential. Youth workers and educators are increasingly working with young people experiencing trauma, exploitation and serious mental health challenges.

Yet safeguarding is not delivered by training alone. It relies on supervision, shared accountability and system-wide clarity about who holds responsibility when concerns escalate.

Policy teams may wish to consider whether current workforce investment sufficiently recognises the emotional labour and safeguarding complexity now embedded in youth-facing roles and whether systems are designed to absorb risk collectively, rather than locating it within individual practitioners.

Conclusion: Making Safeguarding Explicit

Youth Matters sets out a positive, relational vision for youth policy in England. Much of what it proposes aligns with what young people say they need and what the evidence supports.

However, safeguarding within the strategy is largely implicit, assumed to flow naturally from relationships, spaces and participation. For young people with complex lives and uneven transitions, this assumption may not hold.

For youth and education policy teams, the task ahead is not to add safeguarding as an afterthought, but to make it explicit within delivery frameworks, particularly at transition points where risk increases and responsibility becomes blurred.

If prevention is to genuinely protect, it must be underpinned by clear safeguarding pathways, shared accountability and continuity beyond age-based boundaries.

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