

Suffolk Youth Service Report

Suffolk Children's Services Authority Area

Age group: All

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Introduction

1. Suffolk Youth and Connexions Service is located within the Children and Young People's Directorate of the County Council. Full-time youth service staff comprise: one county manager; three area youth officers; six youth officers and 24 youth workers. In addition, around two hundred part-time youth workers are employed. The service's budget provided by the local authority for 2007/08 is £2,586,469 and £192,420 additional income was raised in 2006/07. Suffolk has 60,551 young people aged 13 to 19 and 24.8% of these participated in the service's provision in 2006/07.

2. The Joint Area Review (JAR) was enhanced to enable coverage of the youth service. Inspectors considered the youth service's self assessment and met with managers and a cross section of staff. They reviewed key service documentation and carried out direct observation of a sample of youth work sessions throughout the county.

Part A: Summary of the report

Main findings

Effectiveness and value for money

3. This is an adequate service that provides satisfactory value for money. Managers provide a clear strategic direction and have an accurate understanding of the service's strengths and areas for development. Eighteen months ago, they recognised the quality of provision was inadequate and took appropriate actions; staff teams were re-organised and quality assurance procedures were strengthened. These and other actions have led to improvements in the quality of provision. Of the work viewed by inspectors, little was inadequate although a high proportion of provision was no better than satisfactory. Partly this is due to insufficient target-setting with individual young people. Young people's achievements are improving and more obtain accreditation, although the number doing so is low. The service provides a wide range of curriculum and delivery methods that are strengthened by strong partnerships. Despite being an integrated service, young people are not deriving the full benefits of joint working between youth and Connexions workers. Staff are well-qualified and provide good support to some vulnerable groups. Young people participate well in staff recruitment and the making and approval of funding bids, but they are insufficiently involved in the planning and evaluation of work locally. The major barrier to further improvements in the quality of provision stems from the persistent under-funding that permeates all aspects of the service.

Strengths

- Managers have a clear strategic vision and good record of recent improvement.

- Strong partnerships with a broad range of statutory and voluntary organisations enhance provision.
- Well qualified staff provide good support for vulnerable young people.
- The involvement of young people in staff recruitment and funding bids is good.
- The broad range of curriculum and wide range of delivery methods meet young people's needs.

Areas for development

- The persistent lack of funds detracts from the quality of provision.
- There is insufficient integration of youth and Connexions work.
- Too few young people gain accreditation.
- There is insufficient target-setting with individual young people.

Key aspect inspection grades

Key Aspect		Grade
1	Standards of young people's achievement	2
	Quality of youth work practice	2
2	Quality of curriculum and resources	2
3	Strategic and operational leadership and management	2

The table above shows overall grades about provision. Inspectors make judgements based on the following scale:

Grade 4: Excellent/outstanding: a service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users:

Grade 3: Good: a service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users:

Grade 2: Adequate: a service that delivers only minimum requirements for users:

Grade 1: Inadequate: a service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users.

Part B: The youth service's contribution to Every Child Matters outcomes

4. The service makes a satisfactory contribution overall to the outcomes for young people. Health issues are covered well, for example through good use of national awareness weeks to highlight health-related issues. Strong partnership work between youth workers and school-based nurses and other agencies provide good information and advice on personal and health issues for young people at school. There is insufficient positive promotion of issues around racial diversity. Health and safety procedures and risk assessments are carried out systematically.

Young people enjoy participating in activities and many make good progress in their personal development. Many young people learn new skills through their involvement in water sports and other outdoor pursuits. The service coordinates activities for the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme and other bodies, but generally too few achieve qualifications for their work. Young people participate well in democratic decision-making through youth panels, but they are insufficiently involved in planning and evaluating youth work at a local level. The service works well with some groups of young people who are difficult to engage, including Gypsies and Travellers. There are effective projects to support young people who are excluded or at risk of exclusion from school. Teenage parents receive effective support and care leavers are helped to find jobs, education or training.

Part C: Commentary on the key aspects

Key Aspect 1: Standards of young people's achievements and the quality of youth work practice

5. The overall standard of young people's achievements is satisfactory. Annual surveys demonstrate that young people enjoy attending clubs and project work, gaining self confidence and improving their interpersonal skills. Their attitudes towards each other and staff are positive. Strong partnerships in some localities, such as the Lowestoft Moving-on project, enable care leavers to gain independent life skills and help them find employment, education or training. Inspectors observed young people developing good skills in Haverhill, where feelings of violence and aggression were skilfully challenged and channelled into lyric writing. Outdoor and residential educational work, particularly water sports, enables many young people to develop new skills.

6. The number of young people gaining accreditation for their work is low. This is acknowledged by service managers and efforts made within the past year have resulted in a substantial increase in the proportion of young people gaining qualifications. However, accreditation is too often only available for young people through specific courses, rather than being integrated into the daily work of the service.

7. Young people take part enthusiastically in democratic decision-making, particularly in the Waveney area. Their skills are evident in the very effective bids developed by young people for the Youth Opportunity Fund and Youth Capital fund. These bids are evaluated stringently by panels of young people.

8. The overall quality of youth work practice is satisfactory. Intensive work during the past year has eliminated almost all inadequate practice, but too many sessions are no better than satisfactory. Inspectors observed pockets of outstanding work, but there is insufficient sharing of this good practice. Staff have very good relationships with young people. Many committed individuals give

substantial amounts of their own time generously. The effective sessions are carefully planned and evaluated for group and individual learning outcomes, incorporating the views of the young people involved. Inspectors observed some skilful challenges to young people who were making inappropriate remarks, but generally the positive promotion of diversity and equality issues is under-developed. Too few workers set personal targets with young people that are negotiated, based on their needs and lead to specific outcomes.

9. Although the outdoor residential and education work is predominantly skills-based, staff succeed in meeting the needs of diverse groups of young people. Staff are increasingly using their activities-based approach as a vehicle for youth work.

Key Aspect 2: Quality of curriculum and resources

10. The quality of curriculum and resources is satisfactory. A broad range of youth work is delivered through youth centres, detached and outreach youth work, school-based work often in conjunction with health agencies, outdoor and residential education and various specialist projects. Effective provision meets the needs of Travellers and Gypsies. Young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities attend good provision in discreet clubs, but they are insufficiently integrated into open access centres, even those who go to mainstream schools. Most staff have a good knowledge of their local area and the needs of young people, but systematic needs analysis as a basis for programme planning is often lacking. Some groups of vulnerable young people receive good support, such as care leavers and teenage parents. Gaps in provision for other groups are acknowledged by staff, including recent immigrants to the area from Eastern Europe, gay, lesbian and bisexual young people and those in rural areas.

11. A new youth work curriculum framework is in place and will be implemented later in the year, after further consultation with staff and young people. It provides a clear introduction to key curriculum issues and the Every Child Matters agenda.

12. The service has well-qualified and experienced staff. All full-time staff have nationally recognised qualifications or are in the process of acquiring them. New staff receive a thorough and supportive induction. Training opportunities are good, although evaluation of the impact is not carried out systematically.

13. Most accommodation is of a good standard. The outdoor education and residential team operate from high quality venues and deliver a broad range of water sports and other activities with schools and community organisations. The service lacks specialist equipment which is a reflection of the low level of funding. The range of curriculum offer is curtailed by resource restrictions, but workers are creative about accessing resources from partners to maximise what they can offer. There is no service-wide audit of equipment and learning materials to facilitate sharing. A few centres or projects are well-equipped with information technology

(IT) equipment and provide access to the Internet. Overall, IT is not used extensively to promote learning. The service has recognised this and has secured an investment of £100,000 this year to purchase equipment.

Key Aspect 3: Leadership and management

14. Leadership and management of the service are satisfactory. Senior managers have a clear strategic vision and encourage a self-critical culture. They have a good understanding of the service's strengths and areas for development. Some eighteen months ago it was recognised that there were severe shortcomings in the quality of youth work provision. Vigorous action led to many changes in the service, including a re-structuring of staff teams and a greater focus on the observation of practice to monitor the quality of work. This has significantly improved the quality of provision in a relatively short time. The number of young people participating in youth work has increased from a low base to satisfactory levels and the amount of inadequate practice is now low.

15. The major barrier to further improvement is the low level of funding. The service has been historically under-funded and is still resourced more poorly than most other youth services. This shortage of resources impinges on all aspects of provision. For example, youth centres and other projects receive insufficient funds for consumable items, some are poorly equipped and some key staffing positions are under-resourced. The service also has a diminishing presence supporting rural clubs. Much of the recent improvement in quality is a result of the hard work and goodwill of staff and managers. This may not be sustainable in the longer term without a commitment to more realistic funding levels.

16. The local authority responded well to the Government's agenda for developing integrated youth support services and an integrated service was set up in April 2006. Some good work takes place between staff previously belonging to the Youth and Connexions services, such as the Teen Parents club in Sudbury. Despite being an integrated service, young people are not deriving the full benefits of joint working between youth and Connexions workers. Interaction between youth workers and personal advisors is limited and the full benefits of joint working are not being exploited.

17. Strong partnerships are in place with a broad range of statutory and voluntary partners. Effective multi-agency work takes place with many organisations, including schools, the police, the youth offending service and those concerned with the health of young people. Good joint working is evident between the voluntary and community sectors and youth workers. Generally, clubs in rural communities, often run by volunteers, do not receive sufficient support from the service, either in terms of funding or good practice visits from professional youth workers. A total of £83,600 in grants was allocated to the voluntary sector for each of the last two years. The monitoring and evaluation of the quality and the impact of this work is not carried out rigorously. This is recognised and there are plans to strengthen evaluation procedures.

18. Young people are trained and participate in the recruitment of all youth workers. They are closely involved in the planning and evaluation of provision in some areas, but this aspect is generally under-developed. Young people are not currently involved in quality assurance procedures.

19. The service meets its statutory duties required by legislation concerning race relations and the special educational needs and disabilities act 2001. Child protection training takes place regularly and Criminal Records Bureau checks are carried out for all staff and volunteers working directly with young people. Policies and procedures for health and safety are in place and thorough risk assessments are carried out for all activities.

20. Provision is managed well on a day-to-day basis. Staff value the individual supervision they receive. Quality assurance procedures have tightened up considerably over the last eighteen months with extensive observation of practice. Training took place for the staff making these observations, but moderation to ensure their judgements are consistent is not carried out.

21. Management actions are taken to improve the efficiency of work, but few performance indicators are used to measure the cost-effectiveness of provision. The number of young people taking part varies widely; some centres, such as Haverhill, have high attendance, but at others it is too low. Plans to increase the reach of the service are hindered by the lack of a budget to fund part-time workers. Marketing and promotional activities have a low profile. For example, there is no web-site to promote the activities of the service.