

St Helens Youth Service

St Helens Children's Services Authority Area

Age group: All

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Introduction

1. St Helens has a population of 176,500. There are about 16,780 young people in the 13 to 19 age group, around 1.2% of whom are of minority ethnic origin. Local authority youth work is provided mainly by St Helens Youth Service through three area teams using three youth centres located across the borough and a further 19 facilities which are leased or rented. The service works in partnership with several voluntary sector agencies including the Merseyside Fire and Rescue service and the District Sports Council.

2. Following a Best Value Review in 2006, a revised Youth Service (YS) structure was agreed in March 2007. The service is now located within the Corporate and Community Safety Directorate whose head represents the service on the Children and Young Peoples Service (CYPS) Board. The intention is to integrate the YS universal offer with the targeted work undertaken by the Youth Offending and Young People's Substance Misuse Services. A 38% increase in the core budget has been allocated for 2007-08 to budget for youth work taking the funding to £1.8 million, alongside £500,000 of external funding. The staffing complement for the YS is equivalent to some 87 full-time posts. A distinctive feature of the youth offer is the large number of volunteers that the service uses, over 400. Currently the service makes contact with some 28% of young people aged 13-19 of whom 16% participate in the provision made.

3. This inspection was carried out under section 136 of the Education and Inspections Act 2006, which provides that the Chief Inspector may inspect particular local authority functions. The joint area review (JAR) was enhanced to enable coverage of youth work.

Part A: Summary of the report

Main findings

4. St Helens values its youth service and its overall quality is adequate with several good features. There is a clear strategic direction and sufficient provision of youth work is secured with the recent funding increase enabling much needed additional activities to be introduced at weekends. Overall, achievement is adequate. Whilst some of the work is of outstanding quality too much is delivered inconsistently and this variability contributes to the wide differences in the standards of achievement observed. Many more young people are now gaining accredited outcomes from their involvement and the Duke of Edinburgh award is very well established. However, not all of the accredited provision has been well judged and on some programmes the paperwork is disproportionate and reduces young people interest and enjoyment in the activity. Useful progress has been made to increase the opportunities for young people to participate in civic affairs though more still needs to be done to involve them in other areas of service provision. An impressive contribution is being made to some *Every Child Matters* outcomes such as that made by the robust safeguarding arrangements but a more strategic overview as to what the overall contribution of the youth service should

be is needed. Recruitment to some senior posts has been slower than hoped for which has held back progress in developing the service. The welcome rise in staff numbers, particularly of part-time staff, is highlighting the need for better communications as well as more targeted support in some areas such as drug and alcohol misuse. Commissioning arrangements are still very much in their infancy and some partners report they are unclear about plans to shape integrated youth provision.

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	Leadership and management	2

*Inspectors make judgements based on the following scale
4: excellent/outstanding; 3: good; 2: adequate/satisfactory; 1: inadequate*

Strengths

- A clear strategic direction is provided
- The support of elected members is strong.
- The commitment to expand further the programme of youth work is high.
- There are several examples of high achievement by young people and much good or outstanding youth work practice.
- Safeguarding procedures are clear and are consistently implemented.

Areas for development

- Address the wide inconsistencies in practice and achievement.
- Review the curriculum balance between programmes designed to provide young people with accredited outcomes and those aimed at meeting other and wider personal and social development needs.
- Increase the opportunities for young people to shape, monitor and evaluate provision.

- Keep partners and stakeholders abreast of plans for delivering youth work.
- Improve quality assurance procedures.

Part B: Commentary on the key aspects

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

5. Achievement is adequate. Most of the 16% of 13-19 year olds who use the youth service enjoy themselves and make useful progress. How much they learn varies too widely from centre to centre and from activity to activity. High and low achievement was observed in almost all settings.

6. Only a minority of young people are proactive in either seeking or ensuring that their concerns are addressed by staff but where they do, as at the Foyer Drop-in Centre, they are well supported. Similarly at the Grange Valley Youth Centre the impact of the excellent and sustained work on sexual health, drinking, drugs and diversity was very much in evidence. Here young people spoke convincingly of what they had learned and the difference the work they were doing was making to the way they acted and thought. This contrasted markedly with some of the other sessions seen that neither motivated young people nor captured their interest.

7. Many young people gain accreditation either through the Duke of Edinburgh's award or one of the many other accredited pathways provided. Young people learn a good range of useful knowledge and skills such as how to plan outdoor expeditions and make music. Some, however, find the accreditation framework cumbersome and at times irrelevant to the task of learning and enjoying. At Click IT, two very skilled workers successfully engaged a challenging group in digital photography. Much of the group's interest evaporated when the amount of paperwork required to meet the accreditation requirements outweighed the benefits.

8. Most young people displayed tolerance, understanding, and sensitivity. Nowhere was this more in evidence than at the Youth Parliament. Eleven young people posed some well judged and challenging questions to a senior policeman and a youth service manager. They discussed issues of concern to them with maturity and insight and were sufficiently confident to disagree and challenge those answers they judged unsatisfactory. This approach provides a good role model for young people's involvement in civic affairs but was not widely replicated across the service.

9. The quality of youth work practice is adequate overall but is too inconsistent. It ranged from outstanding to poor. The most skilled workers such as those at the Windlehurst Centre negotiate the content of sessions with young people and reflect on how successful their interventions have been to help plan future work.

Here the outcomes are reviewed against the *Every Child Matters* framework. Nearly all workers establish trusting relationships with young people, many of whom are vulnerable to exclusion from school or are challenging either in terms of behaviour or because of their physical and emotional needs. Some workers are able to use this trust far more effectively than others to ensure those they work with both enjoy and achieve.

Key Aspect 2: Quality of curriculum and resources

10. The quality of the curriculum and resources is adequate. A wide range of provision is made at the main youth centres as well as through detached and outreach work. Over 400 young people take part in overseas trips, residential and outdoor activities. Participation by young people across the service is broadly in line with national benchmarks. The curriculum framework provides a sound basis for planning though many workers struggle to apply it effectively. Part-time workers particularly need more guidance and support in this area.

11. A notable feature of the offer is the emphasis given to work at weekends; provision has been expanded from 34 sessions to over 100 sessions over the last six months and by April 2008 even more are planned. Much of the increase has been in targeted work premised on young people achieving accredited outcomes. In reality, most of those spoken with were keen to enjoy as wide a range of opportunities as possible but gaining additional qualifications ranked lower on their agendas.

12. The service makes a very good contribution to some *Every Child Matters* outcomes such as staying safe. Here the service is making a very good contribution to community safety through its robust arrangements for safeguarding. Useful contributions are also made to reducing anti-social behaviour through the club, outreach and detached work. The contribution made to reducing drug and alcohol abuse and promoting sexual health was less well developed. Too little thought has been given as to what the overall contribution of the youth service should be and how the curriculum offer might be shaped as a consequence.

13. The service acknowledges that more work needs to be done before it can claim to be inclusive and properly promoting the principles of equality, inclusiveness and diversity. This work is being addressed energetically by a new postholder with the full support of senior staff.

14. The quality of accommodation for youth work is uneven although most is accessible, safe and well maintained. The centres with state-of-the-art music and Information and Communications Technology equipment attract good numbers of young people who take part with enthusiasm.

15. There has been an active recruitment programme to staff the additional provision. Full-time staff are well qualified but part-time staff much less so. At the sessions visited staff were not always deployed efficiently. Sometimes too many workers were present in relation to anticipated numbers of young people. With a

relatively high proportion of part-time unqualified staff effective deployment represents a real challenge. The service recognises the problem and in response has increased the training budget substantially.

Key Aspect 3: Leadership and management

16. Leadership and management of the service are adequate. The council's ambition for young people and youth work is high and there is a clear strategic direction. The support of elected members is strong and highly valued. A Best Value Review in 2006 subjected the service to close scrutiny and it has emerged strengthened with additional resources to carry out an enhanced remit with well defined priorities. Unusually, youth provision is located outside of the Children and Young People's Services Department but it is well represented on those forums where its voice needs to be heard.

17. Over the last year particularly, effective leadership and management has been hindered by difficulties in recruiting staff, particularly to some senior posts such as the Head of Youth Work Development. Among the workforce morale is uneven. Workers greatly appreciate the strong commitment made to developing the youth service and most are looking forward to the challenges this will bring. However, there is only inconsistent support for their day-to-day work and procedures for keeping staff informed about changes that affect their roles and responsibilities need to be improved.

18. Partnership working is stronger among internal than external partners. The service reports an extensive programme of partner and stakeholder consultation in support of local developments for integrated and targeted youth support services. This perception is not fully shared by some partners who consider discussions have not moved as far forward as they need to given impending national deadlines. Managers report that a Youth Strategy Integrated Youth Plan will be in place by 31 March 2008.

19. Good progress is being made to involve young people especially in civic affairs but there are still too few opportunities for them to influence decisions and to shape services. In 2006-07, the local authority allocated around £1.8 million to the youth service. This figure is broadly in line with comparable authorities but, as a proportion of the education budget, is below the national average. Decisions about priorities are not sufficiently informed by evidence of the impact of existing work on young people. As the service acknowledges, quality assurance arrangements are not as robust as they need to be to improve provision. In addition there is no systematic peer monitoring system in place and young people are rarely involved in commenting on, or evaluating, local provision.