



Sandwell Youth Service Report

Sandwell Children's Services Authority Area

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Introduction

1. Sandwell youth service delivers youth work through a series of projects and activities based at 16 community centres, 4 schools and in 4 specialist centres. It extends its provision through neighbourhood projects in partnership with other providers including the voluntary sector, schools and the Connexions service. A central team of three, including the Principal Youth Officer, oversee the work. The full-time equivalent staffing complement is 60.1. In 2004/5 the budget was £2,667,300 and the service was able to attract additional funding of £713,500. The service reports that it reached 6,625 of the 25,979 young people aged 13-19 some 25.5% of the total.

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 officers and a cross-section of staff. They reviewed key service documentation and carried out direct observation of a sample of youth work sessions across the borough and as part of the JAR neighbourhood study area.

Part A: Summary of the report

Main findings

Effectiveness and value for money

3. Sandwell has an adequate youth service but it does not yet demonstrate satisfactory value for money as staff deployment and rates of staff absence are unsatisfactory. This is however an improving service as well as an expanding one. Most young people with whom the service regularly works make at least satisfactory progress and, where appropriate, a growing number gain relevant accreditations. The quality of practice is adequate. Projects are not evaluated regularly enough in terms of their impact and quality assurance arrangements generally need to be strengthened. Some individual sessions are poorly planned and fail to focus sufficiently on the intended outcomes of the work.

Strengths

- The service is making a positive difference to the lives and aspirations of some of the boroughs most vulnerable and hard to reach young people.
- Relationships between staff and young people are nearly always good.
- Service managers have a clear vision for developing the work.
- The service knows most of its main strengths and weaknesses and its self-assessment was broadly accurate.
- Accommodation and resources are good.

Areas for development

- Introduce more robust quality assurance arrangements including better collection, analysis and use of data.
- Increase the capacity of the service through the better deployment of staff and by reducing the high rates of staff absence.
- Broaden curriculum provision to include more work with looked after children, lesbian and gay young people, and minority ethnic groups generally.
- Further develop partnership and commissioning arrangements.
- Develop ways to measure the impact and cost effectiveness of the work.

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: A service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users:
 Grade 3: A service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users:
 Grade 2: A service that delivers only minimum requirements for users:
 Grade 1: 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 an adequate contribution to outcomes in a number of areas. Some important strategic links with other services have been established, enabling the youth service's voice to be increasingly influential. Where it is targeting work through its projects and activities, it is providing many young people with enjoyable opportunities to develop personal qualities, self-esteem and skills. Young people are not sufficiently involved in shaping the agenda for the service despite their work in youth forums and the youth parliament. Outreach work helps to reduce anti-social behaviour by providing alternative activities. All youth centres include effective health-related activities within their programmes. There are significant projects underway on the promotion of arts, outdoor

pursuits, IT and developing motor vehicle skills. There is an established culture of safeguarding young people.

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 standard of young people's achievement is adequate. Most young people with whom the service has been working on a sustained basis make steady progress and many achieve high standards. For example the Voice 21 magazine group are responsible for a high quality magazine. They were fully involved in decisions affecting all areas of the magazine's production and took their responsibilities seriously. On a few occasions, activities did not challenge or engage young people appropriately. At one centre, the activities provided were mundane and the young people disinterested.

6. Most young people observed were making at least satisfactory progress in their personal and social development and in acquiring skills although a much smaller proportion were not. At the Malt House Stables, the Duke of Edinburgh award provided the incentive for three groups of young people to achieve. Those working for their bronze award were developing their canoeing skills and also training for their imminent trip to Birmingham to help celebrate 50 years of the Award. Those working for their silver award were deciding how to restore an old barge, while those aiming for a gold award were developing their mapping skills with the aid of some very helpful computer software. In all cases, there was clear evidence of progress over time as well as a strong sense of teamwork. This work contrasted with the unsatisfactory progress made in a few youth work sessions which consisted of little more than supervised recreational activity, with too little opportunity for the young people present to take the lead in planning what they were being asked to do.

7. On most occasions young people behaved responsibly towards one another, although a few did not. In one very good session at the Arts Centre, the young people performing in the show provided a demonstration of teamwork at its best. They responded brilliantly to the not inconsiderable challenge of writing and acting in a show that allowed the distinctive voice of young people with disabilities to be heard. At the dress rehearsal, each young person contributed capably and several made good suggestions for further last minute improvements. These levels of high achievement were not found universally. At some centres, many young people remained overly dependant on the workers to do even the simplest things for them.

8. Overall, the quality of the youth work practice is adequate. At its best the practice is varied and well judged. Workers show not only a real commitment to wanting to help young people but have the ability to do so. They strike a successful balance between being able to listen, guide and support while enabling the young person to acquire the confidence, knowledge and skills necessary to

succeed. In well over a third of the work seen, including one outstanding outreach project, these qualities were observed. At one location, a group of vulnerable young people judged to be at risk of involvement in gun crime were successfully engaged in writing, performing and recording songs. They had learned how to use using some very sophisticated equipment confidently and were keen to share their knowledge with others. The outcomes of their work were impressive. In about a fifth of sessions, there was too great a focus on the perceived needs of the whole group rather than the identified needs of the individuals that made up the group.

9. The quality of leadership shown to support, guide and challenge young people was generally adequate although examples were seen of very good and poor practice. The differences in the quality of the planning of the sessions often reflected the range of practice observed and also the extent to which workers involved young people in developing the tasks they were being asked to take part in.

Key Aspect 2: Quality of curriculum and resources

10. The quality of the curriculum is adequate and the resources to deliver it are good. The service is working hard to target those young people most in need and those who are not being supported by other agencies. The range of provision is now broader than was the case only a year ago but more changes are still needed. While targeted work has rightly grown in importance, some gaps remain. For example, more work needs to be done with looked after children, lesbian and gay young people, and some minority ethnic groups.

11. The curriculum process is clearly set out in a policy document although the content of the curriculum is less clearly defined. The service has a stated set of priorities for developing its work. It could now usefully start to articulate the distinctive contribution of the youth service to the Every Child Matters agenda including decisions to be made about allocation of resources to introduce new projects successfully.

12. The resources to deliver the curriculum are good. The accommodation visited was appropriate, well located and generally of a high standard. There is a good spread of venues across the Borough providing a welcoming environment for young people. These sites are well resourced and, where there is specialist equipment, competent and qualified staff are employed to maximise the use of it. However, staff training needs currently exceed the capacity of the service to meet them: this issue has been identified in the self assessment. While appropriate training is provided on how to develop a programme of work, many workers still need more help. Too often they are unsure how to act on their own without guidance from more experienced colleagues.

Key Aspect 3: Leadership and management

13. Strategic and operational leadership and management are adequate. Senior managers have a clear vision for developing the work. Most of the main strengths and weaknesses are known and the self assessment report was broadly accurate. While the service is making a positive difference to the lives and aspirations of some of the Borough's most vulnerable and hard to reach young people, there is a need to increase capacity through the better deployment of staff and by reducing the unacceptably high rates of staff absence.

14. The council now provides support in many of the most important areas, for example, support for the development plan and appropriate resources. These resources are timely and needed. The precise contribution that the youth service is expected to make to the council's priorities, however, is less well defined and understood. This has led to a situation where provision is not regularly appraised to check its contribution to these goals, and the service is not represented in those areas where its voice needs to be heard, for example on the 14-19 committee.

15. The promotion of equality, inclusiveness and diversity is satisfactory. The service is providing an increasing number of targeted projects for the most vulnerable and hard to reach young people, including some of those who are refusing to attend the borough's Pupil Referral Unit as well as groups of young people with physical disabilities. Steady progress is being made towards meeting requirements in respect of Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act 2001. Appropriate policies for equality and diversity are in place and the Borough provides workers and young people with a healthy and safe working environment.

16. Some progress has been made in listening to and acting on the views of young people but not enough. The Voice 21 Magazine and the work of the Mixed Young People's Committee for those with disabilities are examples of well-judged projects that allow young people to work with one another to express their hopes and concerns. Those involved in youth forums and the Youth Parliament also benefit from their engagement. Despite these examples, most young people spoken with during the inspection feel that their voice is still not being listened to or taken sufficiently into account in shaping priorities at either the strategic or local levels. Young people do not yet routinely sit on interview panels for youth service and council appointments.

17. Partnership working is undertaken with enthusiasm. However, the extent to which the youth service's ambitions are based on a shared understanding of local needs varies. While the need to work with particular groups of young people is widely recognised, not all partners fully understand their contribution to the youth service remit. Improvements in partnership and commissioning arrangements would help to improve clarity.

18. The effectiveness of the day-to-day management of the service is adequate overall but ranges from excellent to poor. The quality of leadership of projects, while satisfactory, shows significant variation between settings.

19. The identification of the needs of priority groups is satisfactory. Developing capacity to address these needs is an issue identified in the self-assessment but is not helped by overly complex management arrangements. The current management structure needs simplifying and the elimination of overlapping responsibilities which occurs particularly between area managers and specialist youth officers. Despite these issues, the morale of staff is generally high.

20. Quality assurance arrangements are inadequate. The service acknowledges that its management measure performance and progress accurately against standards or targets. It is working hard to address the deficiency, but its lack of accurate management information makes the monitoring of the services progress and impact difficult. The peer review system has been in place for two years and is in need of review. It is not being applied consistently nor is it, in many cases, leading to improvements when they are identified.

21. The service does not have in place robust measures of its cost effectiveness or convincing measures of the impact of its work.