

Thurrock Youth Service Report

Thurrock Children's Services Authority Area

Age group:

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Introduction

1. Thurrock Youth and Connexions Integrated Service is located within the Children, Education and Families directorate of the local authority. The integrated service was set up in September 2005 and is organised into four areas that mirror the arrangement for schools in the authority. The following youth service staff are in post: an interim head of service; three centre managers (and one vacancy); four full-time youth workers; a resources and finance manager; a manager of drugs and sexual health; a Duke of Edinburgh Award scheme manager; 50 part-time youth workers (equivalent to 11.7 full-time posts); 21 volunteer staff (equivalent to 1.6 full-time posts); five part-time administrators; and one caretaker. The core budget provided by the local authority for 2006/07 is £667,075 with £392,647 additional income raised. Thurrock has 12,289 young people aged 13 to 19 and 1,802 (14.6%) of these participated in the service's provision in 2005/06.

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 area.

Part A: Summary of the report

Main findings

Effectiveness and value for money

3. Overall, the service is inadequate. Despite the commitment of senior managers to improve the provision for young people, there is currently a lack of strategic direction. No business planning procedures are in place, for the service as a whole or at a local level, and no performance targets are agreed with staff. As a result, work is planned by staff in isolation, without the benefits of a broad perspective. The service's budget has been reduced in recent years and is now below that of most similar authorities. This lack of funding constrains the way staff working in youth centres and on projects are able to meet the needs of young people. Operational management is poor. Supervision meetings do not take place regularly. Policies to promote racial diversity, equality and inclusion are not in place and these issues are not promoted sufficiently with young people. The availability of provision is limited and the number of young people in contact with the service is low. The rationale for budget allocation is unclear and no measures are in place to monitor or evaluate efficiency. Value for money is unsatisfactory. No quality assurance framework is in place and little observation of youth work occurs. Despite the dedication and hard work of many staff, the quality of youth work practice is too variable. Performance indicators and data to monitor the profile of young people attending provision are not available to inform curriculum planning. A new curriculum framework has been introduced, but planning for

youth work sessions is too often superficial. Some very good work takes place, particularly in projects, which have a clear purpose. Recreational work is too prominent and workers often fail to challenge young people to raise their expectations of what they can achieve. Young people enjoy their contact with the service, appreciate the high quality accommodation in some centres, and have good relationships with staff, but their standards of achievement are low.

Strengths

- Effective targeted projects provide good opportunities for young people to achieve accredited outcomes
- Relationships between young people and staff are strong
- Improved youth centres provide good accommodation

Areas for development

- The service lacks strategic direction and operational management is poor
- Insufficient budget constrains the effectiveness of the service
- There is insufficient promotion of racial equality, diversity and inclusion
- Curriculum planning and evaluation are superficial and there is an over-emphasis on recreational activities
- Quality assurance procedures are inadequate
- Young people are not sufficiently involved in planning and evaluating provision

Key aspect inspection grades

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

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 lacks the capacity to make a full contribution to the Every Child Matters outcomes for young people. Key weaknesses in leadership and management are detracting youth workers from making a full impact, although there are many examples of good work that benefits young people. An effective partnership between school-based nurses and youth workers provides helpful advice and guidance to young people on sexual health matters. Too many youth centres sell only sweets and other unhealthy foods, without offering healthy eating options. Young people enjoy their contact with the youth service. They develop skills through popular activities such as music tuition and football coaching. The service supports young people who are permanently excluded from school and those not in education, employment or training to gain qualifications and skills. Effective Prince's Trust and Duke of Edinburgh Award schemes provide good opportunities for individuals to gain self-confidence and make tangible progress in their personal development. The service promotes a safe environment for young people. For example, a recent road traffic accident involving a young person was used to emphasise road safety. An anti-bullying drama road-show, Sticks and Stones, received a very positive response from school pupils. Young people deliver very good peer education sessions on drugs misuse at youth clubs. Generally, there are too few opportunities for young people to participate in decision making.

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 unsatisfactory. Some targeted programmes are effective in improving the life skills and progression opportunities for young people. The Prince's Trust and the Duke of Edinburgh Award schemes enable young people to gain self-confidence and achieve accredited outcomes. The X21 project helps young people who are permanently excluded from school to gain basic skills and develop personal confidence.

6. Overall, the proportion of young people gaining formal accreditation for their work is low. Managers recognise this and have given a sharper focus to work that leads to qualifications. In some cases this has led to an over-emphasis on the teaching of skills such as music tuition and football coaching and opportunities for personal and social development are missed. Targets based on need and negotiated with an individual are seldom in place. Even where good outcomes are achieved, they are often inadequately recorded. Accreditation opportunities are not consistently offered.

7. The views of young people are sought informally by workers at a local level. Some youth centres have recently set up youth forums to engage young people but they are rarely involved in the planning and evaluation of provision or the running of their clubs.

8. The overall quality of youth work practice is unsatisfactory. Across the service, there is too much variability, with high quality practice found alongside work that is barely satisfactory or inadequate. This stems from the lack of quality assurance procedures. The less effective work is characterised by superficial planning. Workers identify topics and activities to be covered, but they often fail to identify learning outcomes or plan in detail how these might be achieved. Young people attending youth centres enjoy participating in recreational activities, but too often this is an end in itself. Provision is not differentiated to meet individual needs. There is insufficient challenge by youth workers to raise expectations and enable young people to make progress. Too often, the attitudes and values of young people are not questioned and homophobic and sexist comments go unchallenged.

9. The better practice is found where work has a clear focus and planned outcomes. For example, the small team of peer educators, trained and well-led by the coordinating youth worker, deliver very good advice and guidance on drugs misuse as part of youth club sessions. The C2U project, delivered in schools by youth workers and school-based nurses, is playing its part to reduce teenage pregnancy rates. After a confidential assessment, young people are given advice on sexual health matters, and where appropriate they are provided with free condoms. Despite the lack of central direction, youth workers have strong relationships with young people and are committed and enthusiastic advocates for them.

Key Aspect 2: Quality of curriculum and resources

10. The quality of curriculum and resources is inadequate. The curriculum is not planned in a coherent way and programmes are often set up through the initiative of individual workers. This has led to some very good youth work, but overall the service is having insufficient impact on young people. An analysis of needs is not carried out systematically and there is great variation in the knowledge held by workers about their local area. There is too little open access provision and the service is not available in all areas where a need has been identified. A limited amount of work with young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, and those from minority ethnic groups, takes place in partnership with voluntary sector organisations. The needs of other groups such as travellers and bisexual, gay and lesbian young people are not met. Detached workers engaging with young people not participating in the service are deployed in too few locations.

11. A new curriculum document was recently introduced to staff. This provides a helpful introduction to youth work but it is not yet established into the daily work of most staff. Inexperienced staff require more detailed information and training to enable them to plan effective sessions.

12. Most full-time staff are experienced and well qualified. Staff meet together twice a year for training and updating. Most are satisfied with the training opportunities available and most part-time staff are encouraged to become qualified. However, there is no staff development policy or monitoring or evaluation of training.

13. The service is operating with some key posts either vacant or with absences due to long-term sickness. This has hampered the effectiveness of leadership and management. Staff deployment is not managed well and sessions are sometimes under or over-staffed. Support staff are helpful and ensure that youth workers do not undertake too many administrative tasks.

14. The quality of accommodation has been much improved recently. Centres provide a friendly and welcoming atmosphere. Many have sports halls which are popular with young men for playing football and most clubs have kitchens that are used regularly. Trained staff ensure a well-equipped music studio is fully utilised by young people. No audit of learning materials is in place and there is little sharing of good practice and resources across the service.

Key Aspect 3: Leadership and management

15. Leadership and management of the service are inadequate. Senior managers from the local authority and Connexions partnership acknowledge the service lacks strategic direction. An interim head of service has been appointed to cover long-term sickness. No business planning procedures are in place and there are no service-wide or centre plans. Without a central perspective, provision is not planned or managed in a coherent way. Despite the lack of agreed performance targets, most staff work hard in the best interests of young people.

16. The service's budget has reduced considerably in recent years and is below that of similar authorities. Coupled with the lack of coherent budgetary planning, this is detracting from the effectiveness of the service. Additional resources are generated by selling services to other agencies, but there is no quality assurance or assessment of the way these resources are deployed. A large number of clubs and projects have limited opening hours, mainly due to insufficient funding for staff, despite the identified need among young people for more provision. The efficiency of provision is not monitored or evaluated. The number of young people participating in the service is low and value for money is unsatisfactory.

17. No quality assurance framework is in place and staff do not have an agreed understanding of the required standards and outcomes for making effective judgements about quality. Little observation of youth work occurs. Although staff

are highly committed, the quality of practice has too many unsatisfactory features and young people's standards of achievement are low.

18. Operational management is weak, although the daily running of clubs and projects is carried out well. Supervision of staff by line-managers is irregular. Performance indicators are not collated or used effectively. Basic information, such as the profile of young people attending, is not available to inform curriculum planning. Managers are aware of these weaknesses and a new management information system is being set up.

19. Partnership arrangements work well at an informal level and there is some good partnership and multi-agency work. At a strategic level joint working is underdeveloped. Few formal agreements are in place and partnership arrangements lack clarity. The integration of the youth and Connexions service in September 2005 has not led to the benefits that were envisaged, primarily due to poor communication between the partners.

20. Statutory requirements for race relations and the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Act 2001 (SENDA) are in place. Enhanced Criminal Record Bureau checks are made and staff are trained in child protection procedures. Risk assessments are carried out for all relevant activities and youth centres are safe. Policies and strategies to promote racial diversity, equality and inclusion are not in place. As a result, these issues are not promoted in a proactive manner with young people.

21. The weaknesses of the youth work provision are fully acknowledged by managers of the integrated service. They are included in a realistic and honest self-evaluation report and an improvement plan is being developed. Staff morale is high, despite the difficult circumstances. Senior managers and youth workers are willing to make changes and they are looking forward to a more coordinated and better managed environment in which to work.