



Better
education
and care

North Somerset Youth Service Report

North Somerset Children's Services Authority Area

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Introduction

1. North Somerset Youth Service provides programmes for 11 to 25 year olds, with two thirds of participants aged 13 to 19. Youth work is delivered from four youth centres, 14 other sites in partnership with schools, the voluntary sector and parish councils, together with 11 weekly Avon Youth Association (AYA) mobile youth bus sessions. Provision also includes the Youth Information and Support Service (YISS). Seventy-one staff are in post, comprising a principal youth officer and two youth officers, eight full-time and four part-time youth workers and forty-six in part-time youth support and administration roles. At the time of this inspection line management responsibility for the service was preparing to move from the council's Development and Environment Directorate to Children and Young People's Services. The service has carried vacancies in senior staff positions for a number of months. The budget for youth work in the current year is £952,000, which is augmented by approximately £115,500 from external funding. Some 24% of young people in the 13 to 19 age range use the service, which is above the median for performance nationally and only marginally below the national benchmark of 25%.

2. The joint area review (JAR) was enhanced to include the inspection of the youth service. Inspectors took the service's self-assessment into account and met with managers and a cross section of staff and partners. They reviewed key service documentation and carried out direct observation of a sample of youth work sessions including some in the area of Weston-super-Mare selected for the JAR neighbourhood study.

Part A: Summary of the report

Main findings

Effectiveness and value for money

3. North Somerset Youth Service is good and provides good value for money. The majority of young people achieve well and make good progress in their personal and social development, particularly in project work or when they are involved with youth provision over a long period of time. Arrangements for young people to gain formal accreditation are satisfactory. The quality of youth work is good overall. Among the staff group there is an effective mix of qualified or appropriately experienced and skilled workers. The budget share is low in comparison with similar authorities. Within this constraint, leaders and managers set a clear strategic direction which is widely supported and understood by most stakeholders. An effective range of partnerships extends the scope of provision across an appropriately broad curriculum. Some aspects of evaluation and quality assurance need further development. Service managers are aware of areas for improvement. They have redirected resources as necessary, making the best use

of available staff, premises and partnerships to maintain provision at a good level overall.

Strengths

- Most young people achieve well and enjoy their involvement in youth work
- Staff form good relationships with young people including those at risk of social exclusion.
- The range of the curriculum is broad, well balanced between learning, recreation and social activity.
- Resources and partnerships are used flexibly and staff at all levels work hard to maintain the service during times of change.
- The youth service makes a very strong contribution to the corporate strategy and promotes wider positive outcomes for young people, such as their participation in local democracy.

Areas for development

- Young people are insufficiently involved in planning the curriculum and in evaluating work.
- Quality assurance systems are underdeveloped with some inconsistencies in practice.
- The quality of premises is variable.
- Communication is not always effective in ensuring that all partners fully understand the overall youth service strategy.

Key aspect inspection grades

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

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 a strong contribution to broader outcomes, particularly in the way it enables a diverse range of groups and individuals to participate in democratic activity and put their views across. The curriculum offers young people a wide variety of opportunities to be physically active and to learn about healthy lifestyles, healthy eating and substance abuse. Youth projects are well linked to national health awareness campaigns such as No Smoking day. The participation of the service in the local Young Person's Key, a leisure discount scheme, improves the accessibility of recreation activities. Groupwork is well targeted at groups in need, such as teenage parents and young people with learning difficulties. Well-resourced drama and video activities help young people explore ways of challenging bullying and racism. Many participating in youth programmes, including those at risk of exclusion from school or offending, develop positive attitudes and are helped to behave responsibly in the wider community. Programmes and activities are risk-assessed to promote the safety of young people taking part in them and staff are appropriately vetted.

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 standards of young people's achievement are good. In the best examples observed during the inspection, young people succeed in developing high levels of self confidence and autonomy. One such group had enlisted older youth club members as volunteers with increasing levels of responsibility, while others were developing strong membership committees. There is an established history of young people being actively involved in the wider political arena through the United Kingdom Youth parliament and volunteering. They are also well supported in putting their case to local councils, for example regarding a local youth facility threatened with closure. Those getting involved in community regeneration projects through youth activities have acquired keen awareness and understanding of disability issues.

6. Young people enjoy the opportunity to meet and, in the majority of cases, relate well to each other and to the youth workers over sustained periods. Their attitudes towards learning and achievement are generally good, although challenging behaviour by small numbers in a couple of settings undermines the progress of others. However, the great majority of young people are able to identify positive changes in their attitudes, especially on health and social issues such as bullying, through attending youth clubs and projects. Those taking part in music, video, sports and performance skills projects make significant technical progress. The Clevedon group horror-story video 'Come and play' won international acclaim.

7. Until recently the use of formal accreditation was undeveloped. Previously, for instance, very few young people progressed beyond bronze in the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. Efforts are now being made to improve the scheme as well as the implementation of a local award scheme in 2005. Young people are attracted to and are signing up for these awards in good numbers, as they appreciate the value in relation to their further education and employment prospects. As yet it is too early to see the impact of these measures.

8. The quality of youth work practice is good overall. Staff are flexible, use their individual skills and knowledge well and the majority demonstrate high expectations of what young people can achieve. Short-term planning is thorough. Staff understand and use available resources effectively. Many workers are adept at building good relations and act as good role models. In a small number of cases workers failed to challenge young people's difficult behaviour or take the opportunity to have them reflect on its impact on others. Staff work well with other professionals, for instance drawing in expertise from the Drugs and Alcohol Team within sessions on alcohol abuse and setting up innovatory complementary health-practitioner sessions to foster well being. Intensive work to improve the self-esteem of young people disaffected from school has resulted in their reintegration. This skilled practice is valued by colleagues in schools.

Key Aspect 2: Quality of curriculum and resources

9. The quality of curriculum and resources is good overall. A balance is achieved between general recreational provision and specific project and targeted work. A revised local curriculum, clearly linked to established youth work principles and the Every Child Matters agenda, is in place.

10. Implementation of the new curriculum has been well managed with adequate time allocated for drafting, launch and training. This has helped staff adapt to new ways of working with increasing confidence. Standard enrolment and evaluation forms were put in place to support implementation. Staff use the new forms systematically at the local level although there are still some weaknesses in links between the documents, limiting their effectiveness in helping staff plan at the higher level.

11. Youth work takes place in a wide range of settings. The four council youth centres are fully risk assessed and have been made reasonably attractive to users, for instance through creative use of displays and layout. Partnerships, grant funding and service level agreements (SLAs) increase the accessibility of youth provision in line with the service's assessment of need. Not all shared premises are ideal because of specific access, lighting and storage issues. However, the service has effectively achieved its paramount consideration of geographical spread by reasonable compromise on these standards.

12. Open sessions offer a wide range of safe and challenging activities, with good levels of participation in indoor and outdoor physical activities and sports, the use of information technology, creative and performance activities, cooking

and games. The service actively promotes personal development in health and social issues such as sexual health, racism, sexism and drug abuse. Topic packs, skilfully created by the YISS, extend the staff's knowledge and enable them to respond to young people's concerns. Outdoor pursuits, residential visits are planned occasionally to enrich the curriculum. The technical resources used in projects specialising in video and music are particularly stimulating.

13. Inclusion is a cornerstone of the work undertaken. This is clear in the projects targeted at young people with specialised or complex needs. Supportive groups are tailored to the needs of young people with learning difficulties, teenage parents and single-gender groups. Some grant-funded provision has been placed in target areas to reduce antisocial behaviour and offending, to good effect.

14. Steps have been taken to secure an appropriately qualified work force. Comprehensive training arrangements and regular supervision encourage a satisfactory level of staff development. Staff at all levels are committed to the improvement of the service and are generally well deployed. That said, there are occasions where staffing gaps have led to the occasional closure of sessions.

Key Aspect 3: Leadership and management

15. Strategic and operational leadership and management are good. Service managers provide a clear sense of direction and, despite staffing difficulties have raised the profile of the youth service well. Managers are aware of the importance of bringing local strategies into line with the national Change for Children, Youth Matters and Every Child Matters programmes. In addition, managers have a thorough understanding of the needs of different communities in the area.

16. Managers measure performance well. A recent service review has been acted on and changes have helped improve efficiency. There are few opportunities to draw in external funding although some has been obtained from local sources. The low level of funding available for the service limits flexibility but managers reprioritise resource allocations continually to minimise gaps in provision.

17. Funding to voluntary sector partners is a vital aspect of service delivery. AYA buses and parish-funded provision contribute to regular coverage in isolated areas. The proportion of young people participating regularly in youth work is relatively high. Joint projects such as the sexual health roadshow enabled the service to contact an estimated 70% of young people in the target age range during the year. Diversity and inclusiveness principles are particularly well supported through partnership work. Youth service managers have given active support to the Portishead regeneration project on disability access issues.

18. Monitoring arrangements ensure that grant funded and SLA provision maintains satisfactory standards of compliance with relevant legislation and ensure that young people using the provision are safe. The service has ensured safeguarding procedures connected with participation of older youth club members (aged 19 to 25) in roles of responsibility. The level of contact and

communication with voluntary sector partners has been inconsistent and in some cases partners are not fully in the picture about overall strategy and priorities. Partnerships with Connexions and the Youth Offending Team provide satisfactory means of referral between the respective organisations.

19. Day to day management of provision and the YISS is good. Morale in sessions is high and staff work well together. However, quality assurance processes are not rigorous. Senior managers recognise that they have not always been able to carry out a systematic programme of visits to provision due to the impact of vacancies. Although staff use session forms well to evaluate and collect data on attendance and performance, there is room for development of systems to analyse this information centrally, including the views of young people, to improve service delivery. Young people are invited to participate in session evaluation by a broad variety of means. They feel their involvement in planning and evaluation is satisfactory and that they have a say when consulted on specific issues.