



Northamptonshire Youth Service Report

Northamptonshire Children's Services Authority Area

**Better
education
and care**

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Introduction

1. Northamptonshire youth service delivers youth work through a range of projects and programmes. Information, advice and counselling are delivered through grant-aided organisations. The service is managed by a Youth Service Manager, four area managers, a business manager and a planning and development manager. The service is organised across four geographical areas that include specialist teams. A total of 197 full and part time staff equates to the full time equivalent of 81 youth workers. The budget of the service is £3,800,550. Managers estimate that 23% of 13-19 year olds in the area are reached annually by the service.

2. The joint area review was enhanced to enable coverage of the youth service. Inspectors considered the youth service's self assessment and met with officers and a cross-section of staff. They reviewed key service documentation and carried out direct observation of a sample of youth work sessions.

Part A: Summary of the report

Main findings

Effectiveness and value for money

3. Northamptonshire youth service is inadequate and gives poor value for money. Weaknesses identified at the time of the last monitoring inspection have not been sufficiently addressed and the local authority has failed to support service development effectively since then. While young people achieve well and make good progress in some settings, their achievement is inconsistent across the county. Youth work practice is inconsistent, with good quality work sharply contrasting with too much weak practice. The curriculum on offer is of variable quality and too few young people access provision. There are weaknesses in leadership and management at both the strategic and operational level and key initiatives have not impacted sufficiently on the quality of youth work and the outcomes for young people. Safeguarding arrangements are unsatisfactory. Overall, it has significant weaknesses.

Strengths

- Some effective youth work projects in which young people achieve well.
- There are good inclusive programmes catering for vulnerable young people.
- Staff at all levels are highly committed to supporting young people.

Areas for development

- Improve the consistency of young people's achievements.
- Ensure that youth work practice is of good quality across the county.
- Implement consistently a coherent and effective curriculum.
- Improve strategic and operational management.
- Ensure that staff are competent in applying child protection procedures and confident in dealing with child protection matters.

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's contribution to the Every Child Matters outcomes is modest overall although some programmes do make a good contribution. The Virtual Baby programme enables young people to learn about caring for a baby, sexual health and alcohol use. There are examples of good work with schools that encourages young people to form a more positive attitude towards their education. Good work is undertaken with young people with disabilities. For example they learn personal and social skills, have fun, try new activities, develop practical skills and gain in self esteem. The Youth Involvement Team supports a range of youth forums and activities giving young people a voice at district and county level. Through their involvement with youth forums, young people make good progress in their personal and social development and are able to make their views known to policy and decision makers. Young people in the Entry to Employment (E2E) programme in Corby are well supported to move into further education, employment and 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. Overall the standards of young people's achievement are unsatisfactory. While there are examples where young people achieve well, they do not do so consistently across youth work programmes.

6. In the best practice, young people make good gains where programmes tackle important issues to improve their life-chances. Through E2E in Corby, young people learn practical skills such as first aid and improve their basic skills in literacy and numeracy. They gain accreditation for their achievements and a good proportion move on into education, employment or training. At the Connaughty Centre, young people engage constructively in a wide range of activities and develop social skills through mixing with those from different areas. They broaden their understanding of issues such as HIV, breast cancer and of international issues through the 'Make Poverty History' campaign. In youth forums, young people make good progress in their personal and social development and are able to learn through taking responsibility; at the East Northamptonshire youth forum, young people developed an information leaflet for others on their rights. In Corby the forum raised funds for local projects and organised events for their peers. Where young people achieve less well, programmes are limited in content and consist of unimaginative activities that do not engage them effectively. When little is on offer except for uninspiring activities, young people's behaviour is poor. There are inconsistencies in youth work practice and, taken as a whole, its quality is unsatisfactory. In the best work, young people are involved meaningfully in determining and reviewing programmes and their own learning. Youth workers accurately assess their needs, develop relevant activities with them and, as a result, young people make good progress and achieve a range of good outcomes. In these instances, sessions are well organised and effectively managed.

7. Most youth workers plan and record their work systematically but, in the poorer practice, this is done superficially and does not lead to coherent programmes that respond to or meet young people's needs. In these instances, staff lack sufficient understanding of the educational purpose of youth work and the skills to implement relevant learning programmes.

8. Though all projects regularly seek feedback from users, some do so only cursorily. Most youth workers have good relationships with young people and, in the best examples, these are used well to support young people's development. Youth workers' response to tackling equality issues lacks consistency. While some deal well with these issues, in other instances youth workers fail to identify and respond effectively in tackling issues such as racism. The service uses a satisfactory range of accreditation and there are examples where it is used effectively to support young people's learning. However, its use generally is underdeveloped.

Key Aspect 2: Quality of curriculum and resources

9. Overall the quality of curriculum and resources is unsatisfactory. The range of provision is satisfactory overall. However, needs assessment does not consistently inform service development. There are a number of good inclusive programmes designed to meet the needs of a variety of groups, particularly vulnerable groups including young mothers, deaf young people and those at risk of exclusion from school. Effective work is undertaken with young people with learning difficulties and disabilities. Whilst the tackling of equality issues is uneven through its direct work with young people, the service has successfully developed specific programmes for young people from black and minority ethnic groups, asylum seekers and refugees. Information, advice and counselling services are provided through funding voluntary organisations.

10. The reach of the youth service is low. The proportion of 13-19 year olds taking part in youth service activities that are directly delivered by the council is just 6%. Although a further 17% of young people are claimed to be reached through grant aided work, the reliability of these figures has not been tested.

11. A curriculum framework has been developed and staff training undertaken. The development and implementation of the framework has been slow and not all staff understand how they should use it. It has not yet impacted sufficiently on the quality of youth work and there is too much inconsistency in what is on offer to young people. Curriculum activities in youth work projects are of variable quality. In the best sessions, there is an array of relevant activities that help young people learn and develop over time. By contrast, in the weaker sessions these are not linked effectively to the needs of users and fail to engage them in either appropriate or interesting activities. In light of these weaknesses, the management of the curriculum is inadequate.

12. Generally the quality of premises and resources used is adequate, though some poor accommodation remains, including premises that are cold and unwelcoming with poor lighting and signage. On some occasions, the poor environment is a factor affecting the quality of youth work delivered. An ongoing in-service training programme is in place and the service has successfully supported staff to develop their youth work careers. Staff are encouraged to develop their own skills and build on their particular interests. Staff at all levels demonstrate a high level of commitment to young people and most are qualified: not all, however, demonstrate an ability to implement learning programmes effectively. Youth work staff are not always deployed effectively in areas of greatest need. In particular, there is some provision in inadequate premises where staff are struggling to work effectively in communities where young people need the most help.

Key Aspect 3: Leadership and management

13. Strategic and operational leadership and management are unsatisfactory. The local authority has failed to support service development effectively since its last monitoring-inspection in 2004. Since May 2005, a new administration has been in place and, since August 2005, a new senior officer team has had responsibility for the youth service but has not sufficiently focused on its development. Current plans for standing down the current structure in favour of a new commissioning model have been developed hastily and without the necessary groundwork; for example, there has been insufficient identification of how monitoring and quality assurance processes will ensure high quality provision. Vitality, and contrary to the local authority's own aims, the strategy has been developed without consultation with young people or partners.

14. The financial resources made available for youth work are sufficient though levels of external funding generated to supplement these are low. The management of the service's revenue budget is satisfactory; however a large amount of locally generated funding has not had sufficient management oversight or control.

15. Well-conceived quality assurance processes have been developed. Staff are compliant in completing quality assurance documentation. Supervision and performance appraisal takes place regularly. A good system for judging the effectiveness of youth work practice has been recently introduced and includes young people, who, with staff, have undergone training to prepare them for this role. However these measures have not been sufficiently effective in securing improvements across the county and have failed to tackle ineffective youth work.

16. Arrangements to safeguard young people are unsatisfactory. Managers have addressed weaknesses in the application of Criminal Record Bureau checks for all staff; however, not all staff are trained in child protection issues or referral processes and not all are confident in dealing with these matters. A satisfactory range of policies is in place to cater for other aspects of the health and safety of staff and young people. The service has made adequate progress in implementing measures under the Special Educational Needs and Disability Act.

17. A system for data collection has been introduced and supported by the introduction of county-wide access to information and communications technology for staff. Staff routinely collect data and the service has the capability to use this information; however its use in contributing to the improvement of the service and provision is underdeveloped.

18. There are some good instances of young people's involvement in service development. For example, they have developed their own version of the curriculum and played an active role in quality assurance visits to projects. Young people have contributed to the appointment of staff and undertaken positive work within their local community.

19. Generally partnership work enhances the breadth of provision. Although a range of service level and partnership agreements are in place, the monitoring of the effectiveness of this work is underdeveloped. In particular, the monitoring of grant-aided work lacks rigour and no records are kept by the service of monitoring arrangements.

20. Managers know the strengths and weaknesses of the service, which were identified at the last inspection, and have been keen to respond to these. There have been some improvements. Managers have put in place the basic requirements for service development such as quality assurance arrangements, data collection, a curriculum framework for youth work and staff training. However the issues that the service has been attempting to tackle are long standing, and actions to address weaknesses are not yet sufficient to improve the quality of youth work.