

Kent Youth Service

Kent Children's Services Authority Area

Age group: All

Published: 3 June 2008

Reference no: 886

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Introduction

1. Kent County Council provides youth work through Kent Youth Service which is located in the Communities Directorate. The head of service leads a strategic management team comprising three assistant heads and a business manager. Provision is organised mainly on a geographical basis with six teams, each led by an area officer. Outdoor education, youth participation and alternative education programmes are managed centrally. Support for youth work is provided by a team of specialist officers who take a lead on curriculum development, accreditation (including the Duke of Edinburgh's Award), international work, equality and diversity, and staff development and training.
2. In 2007-08, the council spent £7.5 million on youth work, of which £420,000 was allocated through service level agreements to voluntary organisations. An additional £3 million was attracted from external sources. The Youth Opportunity Fund and the Youth Capital Fund for 2006 to 2008 was £2.7 million. The service employs 786 (288 full-time equivalent) staff which includes 112 youth workers and 483 (93 full-time equivalent) youth support workers. Nineteen workers are deployed as community youth tutors in schools and two are seconded to the care leavers' service. Almost 1000 volunteers also contribute to the work of the service. The council has recently approved the creation of a new division within the Communities Directorate comprising the youth service, the youth offending service and the drug action team. This, together with new commissioning arrangements for Connexions, forms the basis of integrated youth support and development services operational from April 2008.
3. Kent has around 128,000 young people aged 13 to 19, of whom approximately 5.3% are from minority ethnic backgrounds. While the majority of young people lives in urban areas, some 30% lives in rural settings. The county has pockets of significant deprivation which contrast with areas of prosperity.
4. 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 was enhanced to enable coverage of youth work.

Part A: Summary of the report

Main findings

5. Kent County Council secures effectively the provision of youth work. The quality of youth work is good with some outstanding features. New arrangements for integrated youth support and development services build on the strengths of the well established youth service. Firm foundations have been established which are improving collaboration between key youth agencies, although detailed delivery plans are at a very early stage. Young people are served well by an excellent range of high quality activities to support their personal and social development. The youth service reaches a relatively high and increasing

proportion of 13 to 19 year olds and engages successfully some of the county's most vulnerable groups. Many young people make an excellent contribution to civic life and democratic decision-making, although their involvement in day-to-day planning and evaluation of youth work is not as well developed. Youth workers demonstrate good leadership and curriculum management. However, accreditation is not always used to best effect. The youth service is well led and value driven; morale is high and team work is strong. The quality of area and unit plans is variable with a lack of detail in some targets and timescales. Quality assurance arrangements do not always focus sufficiently on the impact of the work and ensuring improvement where weaknesses are identified. The youth service has been instrumental in the development of many innovative and successful partnerships. Per head of the youth population, the council's expenditure on youth work is relatively low. The service, however, attracts substantial levels of external funding, with partners often confident to commission particular pieces of specialist work. Good use is made of resources, providing a very good return on the modest initial investment made by the council.

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	4
3	Leadership and management	3

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

Strengths

- Many young people make good progress and achieve well.
- Youth workers provide effective leadership.
- Young people enjoy an outstanding range of educational and enjoyable activities including specialist provision for vulnerable groups.
- Good use is made of high quality accommodation and specialist resources.
- The service makes an outstanding contribution to partnership work.
- The service is characterised by good leadership, strong values and effective team work.

Areas for development

- Involve young people systematically in planning and evaluating youth work.
- Develop further the skills and understanding of youth workers to use accreditation appropriately and effectively.
- Ensure quality assurance processes focus on outcomes and lead to consistent improvements in youth work practice.

Part B: Commentary on the key aspects

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

6. Achievement is good overall and some is outstanding. Young people enjoy taking part in youth work and make good progress in their personal and social development. They grow in confidence and are receptive to challenges from youth workers about their behaviour and attitudes. Active participation in discussions enables young people to develop a good understanding of topical issues such as personal safety, the law and the consequences of the way youth issues are portrayed in the media. Young people willingly seek out information and advice to help them make informed choices, for example, about relationships and healthy life-styles. Many acquire new skills, such as music-making, sport and life-saving techniques, and their achievements are recognised through accreditation, awards and qualifications. Young people are willing to overcome their apprehension and experience new activities and environments, for example on stimulating residential or international exchange programmes. However, in a few sessions observed by inspectors, young people did not stretch themselves, settling instead for undemanding recreation or relying on youth workers to provide activities for them.

7. Many individuals, as well as groups of young people, make an excellent contribution to civic life and democratic decision-making. For example, young people from Tenterden Detached Project have worked very successfully with the local council to develop a new youth club in Smarden. Kent Youth County Council and the district youth forums have an impressive track record of championing youth issues and making a significant impact on policy in areas such as public transport, personal safety campaigns, local youth strategies and sex and relationship education. In individual projects, young people gain good leadership skills and self-confidence acting as senior members or event organisers. In the best examples, youth workers and young people have a clear and agreed understanding of what is expected and training is provided to support the role.

8. The quality of youth work is good overall and sometimes outstanding. Much practice is characterised by effective team work, creative approaches and good curriculum management where learning objectives are negotiated and reviewed regularly with young people. Youth workers provide positive, sometimes

inspirational, role models which motivate young people to achieve and widen their horizons. Relationships are consistently good and often built over a considerable period of time. Support is given to those who need particular help in managing the challenges and barriers they face, for example when excluded from school or leaving care. Workers are responsive and resourceful: partnerships forged at local level, for example with community groups, libraries, arts organisations and town and parish councils, add significant value to the youth work offer.

9. Many sessions provide a stimulating range of activities matched carefully to young people's needs and interests. However, the way local teams have adapted county planning and review documentation leads to inconsistencies between units and areas. In some cases, session plans give insufficient emphasis to learning, and in others, the involvement of young people in planning and evaluation is limited. Accreditation has been introduced successfully in a variety of settings to recognise and celebrate achievement. Occasionally, however, accreditation opportunities are missed or frameworks used mechanistically without reference to young people's enjoyment and learning.

Key Aspect 2: Quality of curriculum and resources

10. Young people have access to an excellent range of provision and opportunities. A flexible and relevant curriculum has evolved in response to young people's changing needs and the aspirations of local communities. The new curriculum framework is well conceived, builds on best practice and successfully promotes equality and inclusion. Youth workers understand how their work contributes to the *Every Child Matters* outcomes. Well located universal provision, such as youth centres where young people meet and socialise freely, is complemented by carefully targeted detached and outreach projects. The spread and variety of provision is such that, once involved with the service, young people can experience a rich range of opportunities, which include outdoor education, sport and recreation, the arts and youth participation.

11. The service provides well targeted and effective support for vulnerable groups including care leavers, young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and those from black and minority ethnic communities. Recent analysis of attendance shows that young women are under-represented in some areas of provision and a survey of young people who currently do not use the service is in hand.

12. Staff are enthusiastic and highly committed. Full-time workers are well qualified, although part-time youth support workers are less so. Specialist instructors and administrative staff support local teams very well. The service has a very good track record of supporting the professional development of individuals; however this is not yet part of a clear strategic approach to workforce development in the context of the new integrated youth support and development service. The work of community youth tutors is being reviewed to achieve greater consistency in the range and quality of youth work undertaken and build on best practice in both the school and the community contexts.

13. Accommodation, including mobile provision, is good and some is excellent. There has been significant investment in the building stock over a number of years. Young people have access to very good specialist equipment such as Information and Communication Technologies and facilities for making and recording music. Excellent use is made of multi-media formats to celebrate young people's achievement or promote their views and concerns to a wide audience.

Key Aspect 3: Leadership and management

14. The council provides strong and effective strategic direction for the improvement of young people's well being and personal development through youth work. The Communities' Directorate has clear priorities which place young people at the centre. The youth service enjoys long-standing political support and makes a very good contribution to corporate priorities particularly in respect of participation, inclusion and community safety. Since the last inspection and the appointment of a dedicated diversity officer, notable progress has been made in embedding good equality and diversity practices in youth work. Plans for the integrated youth support and development service build on the youth service's many strengths: a high level strategy has been approved by the Children's Trust but there is still some way to go before the detail of implementation is agreed. Nonetheless, the alignment of services within the new division provides a firm foundation for improved collaboration and coherence.

15. The head of service provides good leadership. Teamwork at all levels is strong and morale is high. The roles of the new senior management team and the senior youth work practitioners are clear, although still embedding. Managers are readily accessible and support youth workers well in their day-to-day work. Area teams, the key building block for local delivery, work well with centrally-based policy officers to enhance provision. However, the quality of area and unit plans is variable with a lack of detail in some targets and timescales. Evaluation does not always focus sufficiently on the impact of the work. The procedures for safeguarding young people and ensuring the health and safety of staff meet government requirements.

16. Per head of the youth population, the council's expenditure on youth work is low compared with similar authorities. The service, however, attracts substantial levels of external funding, with partners often confident to commission particular pieces of specialist work. Good use is made of resources and at over 30%, the service reaches a relatively high and increasing proportion of young people. Resources are used effectively and efficiently and the council receives a very good return on its initial modest investment.

17. Partnership work is outstanding. Youth work has been instrumental in the development of many successful and innovative programmes, for example, with Connexions, schools and the health sector. Success is due in large measure to the service retaining its strong value base and commitment to flexible youth work approaches. The recent review of service level agreements with the voluntary sector has brought greater clarity and transparency to partnership arrangements.

The service is helping to build the capacity of new and existing youth work providers, however, formal commissioning arrangements are at a very early stage. District youth advisory groups provide a useful forum for the service, its partners and young people, but vary in their effectiveness and impact.

18. A well established quality assurance framework is in place and includes regular observation of youth work and the involvement of young people in area and thematic inspections. Regular user-surveys and benchmarking exercises are undertaken to inform service development. However, these actions taken together have not led to consistent improvements in the quality of youth work practice in all areas. Current arrangements do not focus sufficiently on learning and do not provide enough detail for staff on how to improve their practice where weaknesses are identified. Good use is made of management information to inform judgements on overall performance and a new electronic system is being introduced following a well managed pilot phase.