

Bracknell Forest Youth Service Quality Review

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Harriet Gore is a freelance education consultant with extensive experience in leading and managing work with young people. She has worked in a wide variety of settings including in the statutory and voluntary sectors and leading the inspection of young peoples' services for Ofsted. She has worked with strategic managers in local, regional and central government on designing and implementing packages of consultancy to improve the standard of services and provision targeted at young people. This has included the design structures, processes and action plans that ensure young people have access to a seamless range of universal and targeted youth support services.

Harriet currently works as an independent consultant, as an Associate Consultant with the NYA and as an Associate Consultant with FPM Training. In addition to her work as an education consultant, Harriet has organised and delivered a variety of events such as conferences and training to keep the field informed of the changing policy climate for work with young people and to share good practice. Her writing on improving services for young people has been published by the NYA and the Open University.

1. Introduction

1.1 Bracknell Forest Youth Service has a well established suite of quality assurance and performance management procedures that provide information upon which to base assessments of its quality and performance. The service uses Ofsted criteria to assess the quality of face to face work with young people through direct observation of youth work. This is achieved through regular cycle of observations of youth work by managers, staff and young people. The evidence produced through these processes allows the service to make accurate assessments of the overall quality of youth work provided by the local authority. The service collects information on its performance using the Best Value Performance Indicators for youth work identified in Transforming Youth Work – Resourcing Excellent Youth Services (Department for Education and Skills 2002). In November 2011 the youth service commissioned Harriet Gore, an independent education consultant, to carry out a review of the youth service and produce a report assessing its quality and performance using elements from the Ofsted criteria for the inspection of local authority youth services.

1.2 The evidence used for the report included a desk based analysis of data and information on the local area, the local authority and the youth service and a review of documents such as the Children and Young People's Plan, the Children and Young People's Needs Analysis and the Sustainable Community Strategy. Fieldwork included interviews with young people and staff and observations of youth work practice in clubs and projects. The report outlines the main findings from the review, identifies strengths, areas for development and provides a commentary on the standards of young people's achievement, the quality of youth work practice, the quality of the curriculum and resources and the service's progress in responding to the needs of vulnerable young people.

2. Background

2.1 The borough of Bracknell Forrest is situated 28 miles west of London in the county of Berkshire. In 2009 the population was estimated as being 115,100 by the Office of National Statistics (ONS). The borough has experienced a higher than average growth in its population; between 1991 and 2001 the population grew by 14 %. The area is relatively affluent; lying in the bottom quartile of the Index of Multiple Deprivation. However, there are small but significant pockets of deprivation in local areas. The most deprived wards in the area are Great Hollands North, Priestwood and Garth, Wildridings and Central Old Bracknell and Harman's Water.

2.2 There are around 11,100 young people aged between 13 and 19 years old in the borough. Their performance at GCSE (5+ A*-C including English and mathematics) is above the national average and increased by 5% in 2011. Around 10.9% of children are classified as living in poverty. This is well below national averages and lower than the average for the region. The overall health of children and young people is good, however, there are significant differences in health outcomes when comparing the most deprived with the least deprived wards. Good progress has been made in reducing the levels of teenage pregnancy although this issue remains a concern in areas where teenage pregnancy are still higher than average. In recent years there has been a steady increase in the numbers of Black and minority ethnic (BME) children and young people living in the borough; in 2001 6% of school pupils were from BME groups, in 2010 this figure rose to 15%.

2.3 Bracknell Forest youth service is located in the Council's Children, Young People and Learning Directorate and the majority of the service is directly delivered by the local authority. It is managed by the Acting Head of Youth Service. There are 26.73 full time equivalent posts and the majority of the service is delivered from seven youth centres.

3. Main Findings

3.1 The quality of youth work provided in Bracknell Forest is good overall. Most young people develop valuable knowledge, skills and abilities as a result of their involvement with the youth service. Young people successfully develop their personal and social skills and many engage in exploring and taking action on the issues that affect their lives. A growing number of young people participate in delivering the service as volunteers; they are involved in training and are articulate in describing their learning and achievements. The quality of youth work is good. Staff generally know the needs of their areas in which they work. They engage young people in planning programmes that address their needs, engage their interest and enthusiasm and result in learning. In the best practice the learning from youth work is transferred to other aspects of young people's lives and results in improved life chances. In a small minority of instances young people engage in basic recreational activity with little opportunity to learn or develop personal skills.

3.2 The curriculum provides for a good range of activities and many young people develop new interests as a result of engaging on programmes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award. The service's youth centres are well equipped and welcoming although the location of many of them is historical and they are not situated in areas where needs are highest. The service has a well established suite of quality assurance arrangements that enable it to make accurate assessments of the overall quality of youth work. Performance in relation to the service's own targets has been improving over the past three years. The service exceeds targets for reach, participation and recorded outcomes but has yet to achieve its target for accredited learning.

3.3 Although the service targets groups of young people that are at risk of social exclusion, there is an insufficient focus on promoting equality and diversity in youth work programmes. Data on the ethnicity of service users is incomplete; the service is not able to assess its success in engaging young people from a growing number of Black and minority ethnic backgrounds. The service's work with vulnerable young people is good; there are strong examples of how staff have supported young people at risk of social exclusion to overcome personal difficulties and crisis. This work has yet to be linked into the strategic priorities of the local authority and the Children and Young People's Partnership.

4. Strengths

- Young people achieve high standards developing personal and social skills and gaining new interests
- The achievement of many young volunteers is generally good and in a few instances it is outstanding
- The service supports vulnerable young people to overcome personal difficulties and make positive changes in their lives

- Youth workers understand and respond to the needs of young people
- Youth workers successfully engage young people in decision making in clubs and projects
- Quality assurance procedures are good and provide an accurate assessment of the quality of the youth service.

5. Areas for development

The service should take action to:

- enable more young people to evaluate their learning and apply it in other areas of their lives to enhance their life chances and improve outcomes
- ensure that all its centres engage young people in personal and social development
- identify strategies to ensure that youth work is provided in locations and settings that are accessible to young people living in areas where needs are greatest
- address issues of equality and diversity in youth work programmes
- gather accurate data on ethnicity and use it to analyse the service's performance.

6. Standards of young people's achievement

6.1 Overall, young people achieve high standards and there are examples of young people whose achievement is outstanding. Many young people develop knowledge and skills about the issues that affect their lives. They develop new interests as a result of engaging in accredited programmes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's Award or programmes that promote specific interests such as performing arts. Their participation in youth work programmes promotes personal development and leads to the acquisition of valuable skills such as teamwork, communication and problem solving. In the best practice, young people transfer this learning into other aspects of their lives and build on these experiences to improve their prospects in the world of education, employment and training.

6.2 Most young people in the clubs visited during the quality review have engaged in youth work programmes that explore issues such as alcohol, drugs, sexual health and relationships. The young women that attend the Girl's Project at The Zone have been engaged in exploring relationships, sexual health and abusive sexual relationships. At a session delivered by an external organisation they displayed maturity in considering the dangers of drifting into exploitative relationships. They remained focussed throughout a DVD that explored how a young woman drifted into an abusive relationship. The group then participated in a discussion about the issues raised in the film. Two of the young women that regularly attend the group spoke about how much they value the support of the full time youth worker and the genuine concern she shows about the issues they face and their general wellbeing. They particularly value regular Friday evening cooking and eating sessions that promote a feeling of being part of 'a family' and provides an environment where they feel safe and at ease.

6.3 At the Duke of Edinburgh's Award sessions at Priestwood Youth Centre and the Zone young people learned about the country side code and developed their

teamwork skills. The young people at these sessions were articulate in describing the knowledge and skills they have gained, citing learning how to read maps and plan routes. The group at The Zone learned a valuable lesson about the importance of good communication in working well as a team through a well facilitated but simple group activity. In addition to learning about team work and planning expeditions, the group spoke about how their confidence had improved as a result of engaging in the programme and how much they enjoyed meeting other young people from across the borough during the orienteering day that took place in October.

6.4 The young people that attend Trax senior youth club were enthusiastic in speaking about the issues they have explored as part of the youth work programme. They have created displays of their learning on issues such as alcohol and drug misuse. A few of the group have successfully undertaken the Duke of Edinburgh's Award at Bronze level and described the skills they had developed. In addition to organisational skills the group had learned how to work as team, communication and problem solving skills. They were particularly proud of having learned how to ride and care for horses as part of the skill section of the Award.

6.5 The portfolios of a group of young people at Sandhurst Performing Arts session illustrated a diverse range of learning gains. There is evidence of the acquisition of performance skills such as singing, dance and drama as well as the evidence of improving levels of confidence, self esteem and the ability to work well as a team. The session was effectively facilitated by two senior members who led a group of younger young people in a warm up before involving them in choreographing a dance routine that is to be performed in their Christmas Pantomime. The young women leading the session were self assured and competent. One of them has been attending the group for around three years and supported the other, newer, young leader well. Although there were times when the leaders had to interrupt the routine to work on specific steps the younger members of the group remained engaged and did not lose focus on the task in hand.

6.6 The young people that attend Fuse – a drop in facility targeted at young people that are not in education, employment or training (NEET) or unemployed – are learning to accept the consequences of their actions and seek guidance to help them find work or training. They demonstrated good learning gains particularly in relation to their personal circumstances regarding employment. One young man who was engaged in job search spoke of his aspiration to live away from his family home, describing the scale of difficulty in doing this whilst in low paid employment or training. He acknowledged that he is currently unemployed as a result of not “being bothered” about turning up to work and said he now wanted to change his pattern of working and being sacked after a short while. The young people that attend Fuse said that they value the introduction of new ways of working such as developing individual action plans with staff. These plans enable them to identify short and long term goals and consider the actions needed to achieve them. There is an element of challenge in this way of working and one young man said that he knew the staff would ‘nag’ him to carry out the actions he had identified.

6.7 The service provides a good range of opportunities for young people to be involved in decision making and in youth centres and projects. Young people are

effectively involved in decision making about appearance and equipment in most youth centres. The young people at The Zone described how they were involved in the design, furnishing and decoration of their new youth centre. They had fond memories of a residential experience to choose colours, furnishing and equipment for the centre. They are aware that they developed a valuable range of skills such as budgeting, negotiation and teamwork, through engaging in this process.

6.8 Most young people are proud of their centres and demonstrate a deep sense of ownership. At Trax two young men spoke with pride about how young people had chosen paint colours and participated in decorating the centre. The group have an appreciation of the facilities and equipment available at the youth centre. The walls are covered with photographs and displays of the activities young people have undertaken. These displays provide a useful aide memoir for young people to reflect on, evaluate and describe their learning gains. There is a high level of trust between the staff and young people; the kitchen cupboards are not locked, squash and water is freely available and equipment such as the games console is left out for young people to use as required.

6.9 Similarly, at Whitegrove community centre the staff and young people have worked together to furnish and decorate a space that has been set aside to be exclusively for young people's use. The youth room provides young people with space to call their own and the staff have made good use of this facility to ensure that young people have a sense of ownership of the club and the building. The young volunteers have developed a club scrap book and use it to record events, activities and examples of their learning.

6.10 The youth service provides a good range of opportunities for young people to make a contribution to their own communities through volunteering. There is a tradition of involving older young people in the delivery of youth work as volunteers. Young volunteers and senior members were present at several of the sessions observed during the quality review and the achievement of this group of young people was good overall and in a few instances outstanding. They described the sense of achievement they have gained from their volunteering and how engaging in the training programme has contributed to their personal development and extended their knowledge and skills. A few young people described how their learning from their volunteering has made an impact on other aspects of their lives, for example; helping them to secure training and employment. A young woman that volunteers with Duke of Edinburgh's programme as part of the her own preparation for the Gold Award said that achieving the Silver Award assisted her in finding part time work. Achieving the Award has boosted her self confidence and the selection panel it as evidence of her commitment, staying power and ability to work as part of a team. The service should consider how to enable more young people to evaluate their learning and apply it in other areas of their lives to enhance their life chances and improve outcomes.

6.11 A growing number of young people are gaining nationally accredited qualifications. Although the service has yet to achieve the its targets for accredited learning outcomes the number of young people gaining accreditation has risen substantially over the past year. There are opportunities for young people to gain qualifications in a diverse range of subjects including first aid, baby sitting,

performing arts and moped riding. They engage in Award programmes such as the Duke of Edinburgh's, Youth Achievement and ASDAN in growing numbers. The number of young people whose learning is formally recognised through the service's procedures for recorded outcomes is also increasing and has exceeded targets for the past three years.

6.12 Although the standard of young people's achievement is good in most settings there were isolated instances where young people are engaged in basic recreational activities that do not result in learning. The young people in these settings were able speak about joining in activities and having the facility to spend time with one another but there was little evidence that their engagement with the youth service has promoted their personal or social development. The service should take steps to ensure that all its centres provide access to personal and social development as part of a curriculum offer that engages young people's interest, provides opportunities to have fun and promotes learning.

7. Quality of youth work practice

7.1 The quality of youth work practice is good. In general, staff are well deployed and qualified for the roles they undertake. Most youth workers understand the needs of the young people with whom they work and involve them in developing programmes that meet their needs and engage their interest. At the Zone there is a recognition that many of the local young people are at risk of engaging in drug and alcohol misuse, taking risks with their health or drifting into anti social behaviour. The youth work programme addresses these risks and develops young people's capacity to make healthier and safer choices. The staff at the Zone and Trax have identified that many young people do not have the opportunity to sit down for meals with their families and have negotiated programmes that involve young people in preparing food and eating together. These programmes are very popular with young people and contribute to their sense of belonging and contributing to their youth centres.

7.2 Youth workers also respond well to the needs of individual young people and there are many good examples of young people being supported in gaining access to help and support from other agencies. There are examples of youth work that supports vulnerable young people as individuals and through group work processes such as at the Zone Girl's Project. Young people that find themselves in crisis situations or need assistance with issues such as housing and benefits are provided with a good level of support at Fuse. The project has recently refocused its work and introduced individual action plans that aim to support and encourage young people to manage immediate issues, such as being homeless, and identify actions that should enhance their longer term opportunities and outcomes.

7.3 Most youth workers understand the educational aspects of the work and implement programmes that capture young people's interest and enthusiasm and provide them with an element of challenge as well as fun. When young people speak about their involvement in youth work they describe their learning as well as the fun and enjoyment they gain from their participation. Most of the staff encourage young people to participate actively in the planning, delivery and evaluation of youth work programmes. In the best practice programme plans respond young people's needs, sessions are well linked to the youth service curriculum and evidence of achievement is captured through effective evaluation processes. In a few instances,

session plans were cursory with insufficient focus on meeting the needs of young people or supporting their learning. They provided young people with little more than access to facilities such as table tennis, ICT, electronic games and pool. The service should take action to ensure that all young people have access to activities that result in learning.

7.4 Young people's behaviour and response at all of the sessions observed was very good. The staff have negotiated codes of conduct and young people adhere to these well. They enjoy good relationships with one another, often displaying tolerance and sensitivity to the needs of others. Relationships between staff and young people are good; young people are appreciative of the support they receive from youth workers and their interactions demonstrate respect and mutual trust.

8. Quality of Curriculum and Resources

8.1 The quality of the curriculum is good overall. Young people have access to a wide range of educational activities that promote their social and personal development. Youth work programmes engage young people in opportunities to develop specific skills such as performing arts, first aid and self defence and assist them in acquiring more general skills and abilities such as team work, problem solving and leadership. There is also good access to a range of nationally accredited awards and qualifications and a growing number of young people are engaging in these opportunities. The Duke of Edinburgh's Award is especially valuable in promoting social and personal development. It extends the scope of the curriculum, enables young people to develop and pursue new interests and supports them to achieve valuable qualifications.

8.2 Most of the service's youth centres are purpose built and provide a good range of resources and equipment. The buildings are well maintained and young people value the facilities they provide. The youth centres provide good access for young people with physical disabilities. The results of the annual satisfaction survey revealed that most young people are happy with the facilities in youth centres times and number of days that they are open. However, the location of many of the buildings is historical and not well enough related to local needs. The recently built youth centre in Great Hollands is an example of provision that is well placed to respond to a higher level of needs in the local area and the youth work programme responds well to the issues that local young people face. The service should explore strategies to ensure that youth work is provided in locations and settings that are accessible to young people living in areas where needs are greatest.

8.3 Overall the service's response to promoting equality, inclusion and diversity is satisfactory. There are examples of provision that is targeted at young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, young parents, BME young people and those that are NEET. The service has recently extended its work with young people aged between 11 and 13 years old to ensure the needs of this age range are being met; Whitegrove Junior Club is attracting growing numbers of young people from the local area. At Sandhurst youth centre a group targeted at Nepalese young people provides young people with space to socialise but has yet to engage them in effectively in non formal learning opportunities that address the issues they experience as new comers to the area and the UK.

8.4 There is insufficient emphasis on equality and diversity or on promoting good race relations; there was little evidence of equality and diversity being addressed in youth work programmes. Given that the numbers of young people from BME backgrounds in the area are growing the service should do more to involve young people in exploring and understanding equality and diversity. Data on the ethnicity of young people that use the service is incomplete; information about the ethnicity of young people is missing on too many registration forms. This makes it impossible for the service to assess how well it is engaging and responding to the needs of BME young people.

8.5 Most of youth work staff are either nationally qualified or working towards qualifications. Staff are well deployed and full and part time staff work well in teams. The curriculum is generally well implemented and is consistent with the service's curriculum document that links youth work with the Every Child Matters outcomes and provides useful tools on planning and developing youth work programmes.

9. Quality and Performance

9.1 The youth service has well established procedures for observing, assessing and reporting on the quality of face to face youth work. Managers, staff and young people engage in regular observation of youth work practice. The evidence reports from these visits are mostly well presented and provide staff with valuable feedback on their practice. In a small minority of cases the grades awarded were inconsistent with the written assessments. However, for the most part, the assessments made in the service's own quality assurance visits are consistent with the findings from this quality assurance review.

9.2 The service has chosen to maintain the former Best Value Performance Indicators targets for youth work. Information from performance monitoring shows that for the 13 to 19 age range the service has exceeded its targets for reach for the past three years. In 2010 to 2011 the service reached 33% of the 13 to 19 population against a national benchmark of 25%. The proportion of young people that participate in youth service provision on a regular basis has been growing for the past two years. In 2010 to 2011 the proportion of young people that regularly participated in youth work rose to almost 20% against a national benchmark of 15%. The target for recorded learning has been exceeded for the past three years. However, despite a significant increase in 2010 the service is yet to meet its targets for accredited learning. This data indicates that the service is not only in contact with a high proportion of young people, it also engages them in youth work provision over long periods of time. This is consistent with the findings from fieldwork; many young people at youth clubs and projects have been members for long periods of time and a growing number progress from being members to becoming volunteers and subsequently gaining employment as part time youth workers.

10. Vulnerable young people

10. 1 Bracknell Forest's Children and Young People's Plan identifies a number of priority groups that are at risk of achieving poor outcomes. These priority groups include young people with learning difficulties and disabilities, looked after young people, those that are not in education employment and training and those that offend or are at risk of drifting into anti social behaviour and offending. The youth service works with a number of these groups. The last time the service was

inspected by Ofsted as part of a Joint Area Review the report commented that 'young people from vulnerable and marginalised groups are well served'. This is consistent with the findings from this quality review. However, although there are strong examples of the service providing a high quality support for individuals and specific groups of young people that are at risk of social exclusion, the work is not well enough linked to the local authority's strategic priorities. There is little recognition of the youth service's role in preventing young people from becoming vulnerable or supporting those that are vulnerable or in crisis. The service has yet to develop effective protocols and relationships with other departments of children's services such as education welfare and social care to ensure that vulnerable young people are provided with holistic support and development opportunities.

10.2 The NRG project has recently been rebranded as Fuse and re-focused to ensure that it targets young people that are NEET or in crisis. The newly appointed project manager works in partnership with Connexions to ensure effective targeting and has changed the way in which the service operates so that it addresses the immediate needs of young people that are homeless or experiencing crisis as well as involving them in action planning to meet longer term goals. In other areas of the service there are a growing number of outstanding examples of how youth workers have supported individual young people, such as those at risk of exclusion from school, to remain in mainstream education.

10.3 The service has recently introduced case studies that require staff to capture how support from the youth service has made an impact on the lives of vulnerable young people. These case studies demonstrate how involvement with youth workers on a one to one basis and in groups has resulted in young people overcoming personal difficulties such as mental health issues, homelessness and insufficient parental support, that might otherwise have resulted in social exclusion. The discipline of recording the impact of youth work interventions in case studies provides valuable evidence of the service's role in supporting vulnerable young people and should be undertaken by all full time staff on a regular basis.

**Bracknell Youth Service
Quality Review November 2011
Interviews and Projects visited**

Interviews

The following individuals and groups were interviewed as part of the fieldwork for the quality review:

- Full time staff
- Focus group of young people that are involved with the youth service
- Quality Assurance and Training Manager
- Acting Head of Service

Observations

The following observations were undertaken as part of the fieldwork for the quality review:

Monday 31 October 2011

- Duke of Edinburgh's Award at the Zone
- Sandhurst performing arts group
- Zone juniors
- Trax seniors

Thursday 3 November 2011

- Fuse
- Sandhurst after school project
- Zone girl's project
- Whitegrove juniors
- Duke of Edinburgh's Award at Priestwood