

## Annex A – Covering Template for Responses

Please complete the attached cover sheet when sending evidence, indicating the set of questions to which a response is being provided and contact details of the person for any follow-up queries.

Contact details for respondent	
Name	
Job title	Principal Youth Officer
Do you represent an organisation?  (if so, name of organisation and type: e.g. voluntary, public body, private company).	Walsall Youth Service – local authority
Postal address	Norwich Union House 17 Lichfield Street Walsall WS1 1TU
Telephone number	
Email	

	Which area of the review are you responding to? (please mark X)
Prevention strand	
Review of disabled children	
Strategy for youth services	X
Review of high cost, high harm families	

There are currently a wide range of levels of Youth Service delivery across the country. The level is determined primarily (but not exclusively) by the following factors:

The level of funding given to each service by the local authority.

The support for youth work both by politicians and senior council officials.

The previous levels of investment in the Youth Service.

The style of youth work delivery (the quality and level of provision is higher in authorities with dedicated and clearly defined Youth Services rather than those with unclear or 'generic' delivery as part of wider services).

The number of qualified and experienced full time youth workers.

The availability of suitable premises.

The level of involvement of young people, workers and managers and their commitment to delivering high quality services.

It is not yet clear how the services are likely to evolve. There is a worrying trend to yet again cut funding to Youth Services by many authorities – Northamptonshire being the most extreme example – and this will obviously reduce both the level and quality of the services available to young people. There is also a trend to combine Youth Services with other types of delivery – as part of what I feel is a misunderstanding of both the Youth Matters Green Paper and the Every Child Matters agenda – and all the evidence from current and previous practice shows that this harms rather than improves the overall services to young people. Being more optimistic, hopefully more local authorities will recognise the crucial and significant role of Youth Services and youth engagement activities and invest in and increase their development.

---

There are two major, relatively easy and straightforward actions that would make seed change improvement in the effectiveness of the delivery of existing services and activities. Firstly, local authorities should be instructed to spend all of the funding that central government allocates to youth work on the correct purposes. This would at a stroke increase the level of provision significantly and ensure a consistency of service across the country and reduce the post code lottery for young people.

Secondly, the Youth Service should be given a statutory base to ensure it gets equity of status with the other elements of the new children and young people's services such as education and social care. This would guarantee a consistency of service nationally and prevent certain authorities from cutting or devaluing these services and would ensure that all the positive aspirations of the Youth Matters agenda could be delivered for all young people across the country. In addition an increase in the proportion of skilled and qualified full time youth workers, up to the widely agreed and applauded level of 1 to 400 young people aged 13 to 19 would greatly improve the effectiveness of existing services.

---

The most potent barriers to young people gaining access to services are availability and awareness. Where there are well organised and high levels of services, young people are able to gain access to them. The Youth Service has been taking a leading role in enabling young people to gain access to services and in many areas, such as Walsall, there are participative youth forums for young people with disabilities which have contributed to making all services more accessible.

There are clearly some building access issues; under investment in many youth clubs and centres has resulted in poor conditions and buildings not being fit for purpose. The Youth Service has taken very seriously the challenges of SENDA and made improvements but central government and local authorities do need to make further resources available to complete this work.

Young people and especially those from some particular groups do sometimes appear to lack an awareness of what services are on offer. The Youth Offer should be a positive development which will assist access to a wider range of young people.

---

Whilst it is difficult to make exact comparisons between different countries in this field, the most useful learning can be drawn from Western European neighbours. Where central and local government has invested in statutory provision, young people have benefited from better life outcomes and have been able to contribute productively to their society.

The United States is certainly not a good exemplar in this field. Much provision is underdeveloped and lacking focus. The British system of youth work and a structured, publicly funded Youth Service is seen as a model of good practice by many Americans involved in youth work and related professions.

It is unfortunate that so much emphasis is being placed on the Feinstein et al study as this was based on research into youth clubs and other young people's activities over two decades ago; research which the authors themselves heavily qualify in a number of significant aspects. There have been significant changes and improvements to youth work since that time with a far greater emphasis being placed on social education, young people's involvement and challenging and positive outcomes. There is a body of research that endorses this change and improvement – recently the D.f.E.S commissioned research on the impact of youth work by Merton et al, (Research Report 606), the OfSTED guidance on Effective Youth Work and a plethora of other recent anecdotal and partially empirical works. Research I personally undertook as part of a masters degree also pointed to the fact that well resourced and well managed Youth Services provided major benefits and improved life outcomes to young people. This was also noted in Youth Matters: 'there are many examples of outstanding (youth work) practice across the country making a dramatic difference to young people's lives'. The issue is patently not the effectiveness of high quality youth work but the failure

of local authorities to provide a consistency of services across the country. There was even research by Coopers, Lybrand, Deloitte which acknowledged the very good value for money achieved by good quality youth work.

---

There are always going to be some problems in combining demand led and planned and structured provision. However, the experience of practitioners and managers in this field over many decades shows that there are significant areas of provision and activities that will both respond to young people's expressed needs and meet a structured social educational curriculum.

There are certain activities and curriculum areas that young people will consistently demand – social activity, music and arts activities, information and advice on a wide range of issues (health, housing, education, employment), sports and recreational activities, involvement in decision making – and skilled and experienced youth work practitioners are adept at structuring the curriculum of the youth clubs and projects to both meet these demands and develop a wider effective social educational programme to improve young people's life opportunities. The main barriers to this being universally available have been lack of resources made available by local authorities and lack of enough skilled youth workers and projects to deliver.

---

Where Youth Services are working effectively, young people are actively engaged in identifying and assessing their needs – demand side influence on provision. The move towards this high quality of service being available across the country will ensure that all young people can become more involved. The Youth Service is one of few, and the major agency that is able to make contact and build positive relationships with those young people who have lost contact or been failed by other services. Having a totally voluntary engagement, this relationship enables youth workers to build mature and longstanding links which result in young people becoming actively involved in decision making and thus a strong 'demand side influence on provision'.

There is however a point that should be highlighted at this stage. Sometimes young people's short term and immediate 'wants' may not correspond with their appropriate needs and they may also not meet the aspirations of the outcome led Youth Matters agenda. It will be necessary to have some clear guidelines on what activity and provision meets the ECM/Youth Matters requirements and what doesn't and therefore a clear steer on where resources, including staff, should be focussed. The tensions between provision of high quality, social educational, life improving services and the short term superficial attractions of commercially led trends will need to be resolved sensibly.

General experience shows that where young people are actively involved and constructively engaged with the decision making processes they respond both

maturely and positively. If the commitment is made by service providers to involve young people, they will take their responsibilities very seriously.

---

As previously stated, a major principle should be that those resources identified and allocated for work with young people should be spent on this purpose. Whilst it is important to target resources on those young people most in need of additional support, it is also vital that funding is available for universal services.

Whilst some young people have need of intensive Youth Service support throughout their adolescence, others may only need short term specific interventions (often as crucial to them and their social development at the stage they have need of it). There should therefore be enough funding available to provide a universally accessible service that all young people can take advantage of when they chose to (recent research has shown that, even with the patchy and inconsistent level of provision by some local authorities, over 70% of young people do have contact with the Youth Service at some stage during their adolescence).

In addition to this, there should be both funding and skilled staffing available to meet the needs of specifically targeted groups. It should however also be noted that youth workers already work with both universal and targeted programmes as part of their regular work. It is also the case that young people, in need of additional support, regularly come to the Youth Service initially as a social opportunity and then seek, or are identified as in need of this extra intervention. If there is no, or a much reduced, universal service these young people may well not get the services they need and deserve.

---

Whilst the current emphasis is rightly on the outcomes that are achieved from the work with young people, it is unlikely that these outcomes will be delivered without skilled, trained staff and sufficient resources. There are already effective monitoring and quality assurance processes in place in most local authorities both for their own services and those that are delivered by the voluntary sector and these can be easily adapted to assess performance in line with any further demands.

---

There needs to be a balance between the involvement of the Third Sector and that of local authorities in service delivery. To just commission out significant parts of the service to the Third Sector would neither work nor be in young people's best interests. Past experiences again show the damage this causes. To enable effective involvement, the Third Sector should have the capacity to deliver and be prepared to operate to the appropriate standards and to good and equal employment practices. This includes employing staff on the correct terms and conditions and with the skills and experience necessary to deliver the best possible service to young people. The

relationship between the Third Sector and local authorities needs to be one of partnership and not competition. There also needs to be an inspection regime to ensure quality and effectiveness at least as rigorous as that applying to local authorities.

---

Where there is an effective and well resourced universal service which is well used by young people, the staff are able to identify those young people with greater needs and work with more specialist agencies in meeting them. The way to ensure that this happens across the country is to build on the best practice. Youth workers are very effective at multi agency and partnership working in young people's best interests and the central involvement of the Youth Service in the developing Youth Matters agenda (rather than a peripheral role) would ensure improvements in this aspect of the work.

---

There are a considerable number of projects and programmes that demonstrate considerable impact and innovation. These include:

Peer education programmes

Mentoring schemes

Young people led projects and buildings such as Youth Houses.

High quality and responsive youth work – 'mainstream youth work' often achieves significant and sustained success.

Work around accreditation – especially some of the 'recorded outcomes' with young people who have rejected all 'mainstream' and formal achievement and that values those who don't get other opportunities to be celebrated.

'Specialist' projects working with groups such as young people with disabilities, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender young people, young women, BME young people.

Below are some very brief examples of effective work carried out in Walsall.

The Youth Opinions Unite (YOU) project is borough wide participation and engagement process that involves over 350 young people in decision making in their clubs and projects as well as contributing to borough wide deliberations. They have commented on Black Country developments, are an active part of the Walsall Borough Strategic Partnership and are asked to comment on the council's budget setting process. The young people involved in YOU have grown considerably in confidence and developed new skills. They have acted as peer instructors for the Youth Service quality assurance process and have advised the adult members of the Local Neighbourhood Partnerships on how to involve young people constructively in local community activity. Nearly 5,000 young people voted to elect their Members of the UK Youth Parliament this year.

A total of 72 17 and 18 year old young people have participated as mentors in the 'Ready Steady Summer' activity scheme. They provide advice, guidance and positive role models to younger people who have been identified as in need of additional support throughout the summer which improves the

outcomes for the mentors and the mentees. All the mentors have achieved accredited outcomes with 54 of them completing the Youth Achievement Award Platinum Award. 51 of the mentees have also completed a Youth Challenge award.

Peer mentoring projects in both drugs prevention work and sexual health education have achieved considerable positive outcomes, including contributing to the reduction in teenage pregnancy rates in Walsall.

The process by which the Youth Service has enabled young people to implement the Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital funds initiative in Walsall has also been recognised by the Government Office and others as an example of good practice.

All these projects have as common factors high quality youth work practice delivered by skilled youth workers, the active involvement of young people in decision making and positive outcomes that have enhanced their lives.

---

The enthusiasm and encouragement of skilled youth workers, the opportunity to try new and challenging activities in a non-threatening environment and the mutual support of a peer group are all factors that stimulate young people to try new and different activities. The availability of accessible information and publicity in a format that is 'young people friendly' is also helpful.

---

A range of research shows that young people benefit considerably from involvement in the design and provision of their activities. This involvement leads both to them achieving better outcomes and contributes to their greater participation in their wider communities in adult life. The social educational learning that takes place through this involvement is also beneficial to the young people of itself.

---

People are attracted to become youth workers for the following key reasons:

An opportunity to contribute positively to improving young people's lives and to effect real change.

A philosophical commitment to the values and processes of youth work.

A desire to 'put something back' into society; often the case with former youth club/project users who become youth workers.

A desire for an enjoyable, rewarding, varied and even life changing career.

Less attractive features include:

The work is stressful, often very hard and takes place during unsocial hours. Youth work is seemingly not valued as highly as other comparable professions.

The work is poorly paid in relation to other comparable professions.

The service appears open to political whims in terms of funding and support.

Youth workers have to constantly act as advocates for young people in a society that neither values nor supports them.