



# Poverty and social exclusion: Review of youth services

## Background

The Wales Centre for Public Policy (WCPP) was commissioned by the Welsh Government to conduct a review of international poverty and social exclusion strategies, programmes and interventions. As part of this work, the Centre for Analysis of Social Exclusion (CASE) at the LSE was commissioned to conduct a review of the international evidence on promising policies and programmes designed to reduce poverty and social exclusion across twelve key policy areas. This briefing summarises the findings on youth services.

## Introduction

Youth services play an important role in helping young people negotiate the transition to independence and offer an opportunity for early intervention for young people who are struggling. They help to reduce social exclusion and address some aspects of poverty.

Access to youth services can be critical for disadvantaged young people. Ensuring that services are open access can avoid labelling and stigmatisation.

Youth services are likely to be increasingly important due to the disruption of the Coronavirus pandemic on the lives of many young people, affecting their transitions to independence.

**Open access provision promotes inclusivity and avoids the stigmatisation that often arises from targeting services to the most disadvantaged.**

## Evidence of policy effectiveness

The review covers evidence on youth participation in youth services, where young people are actively involved in developing programmes (i.e. not whether or not they attend), and open access youth work.

## Youth participation

Meaningful youth participation (as opposed to whether or not young people attend youth services) involves active engagement and real influence, not passive presence or token roles. Youth participation is very much in line with the Welsh Government's approach to youth services, as outlined in its Youth Work Strategy for Wales: 'Youth work in Wales is based on the voluntary engagement of young people as empowered partners'.

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been very influential in increasing young people's participation in matters that affect them. Under Article 12 children have the right to express their views freely in all matters affecting them and their views should be given due weight in accordance with their age and maturity.

Participation should be measured not only by scope, but also by quality. Shier's (2001) Pathways to Participation includes five levels:

1. Children are listened to.
2. Children are supported in expressing views.
3. Children's views are taken into account.
4. Children are involved in decision making.
5. Shared child-adult decision making.

Youth participation has benefits for young people, adults, programmes and communities as a whole. In relation to youth development programmes, there is evidence that involving young people in decision-making leads to more positive outcomes than traditional programmes which treat young people as recipients.

Qualitative evidence from the US finds that actively involving young people in youth services helps to develop a sense of responsibility. This was more common in programmes with more structure and which placed greater ownership and accountability on young people.

Evaluation of programmes also demonstrates evidence of positive benefits of youth participation. However, the impetus for wider participation can create tensions between 'hanging out vs. adult-led education' and 'letting the young be vs. participation.'

Young people may also be more likely to participate in youth services when they can take a greater role in decision-making. Where there are greater leadership or decision-making opportunities, young people have reported greater feelings of ownership and empowerment and higher levels of attendance.

Key elements of successful youth development programmes include opportunities for youth engagement, voice, and decision making and involvement of young people in the design and delivery of youth development/ work activities.

There are a number of ways in which young people can participate in developing and influencing youth services and there are clearly different levels and types of participation.

Involving young people in the development of

programmes has the potential to enhance their success in meeting participants' needs. Allowing young people to participate in the development of solutions that affect their lives encourages youth ownership of these solutions.

One strategy for participation is youth-adult partnerships which are different from typical adult-led or youth-led youth development programmes. These partnerships involve youth and adults planning, learning and working together, with both groups sharing equally in the decision-making process. Qualitative research exploring young people's perspectives on what was important for making these partnerships successful emphasised the following areas:

- Supportive relationships with adults and peers;
- Positive attitudes, respect and a safe space for voice;
- Mutual learning and skill building; and
- Community impact.

**Meaningful youth participation can lead to service improvements and benefits to young people.**

### **Open access youth services**

Open access youth services refer to services that are universally available to young people irrespective of their background or needs. Cuts to funding have put open access youth services under threat and one of the dangers is that young people who participate in a slimmed down service will be labelled and stigmatised, exacerbating rather than ameliorating social exclusion.

A common form of open access youth services is youth clubs, which have been shown to benefit young people in terms of:

- Fostering peer relationships;

- Providing the opportunity for informal, respectful relationships with adults; and
- Offering participation and association.

The diversity of terms used in the literature to describe this type of service presents a challenge in building up a body of evidence. They include universal provision, generic youth work, youth services, outreach, or positive youth activities.

Concerns about the increasing pressure to measure and demonstrate the impact of open access youth work provision have also been raised. Due to the nature of open access youth work, it is ill suited to types of quantitative experimental evaluation using 'treatment' and 'control' groups with pre-prescribed 'outcome' variables.

There are also concerns that non-rigorous quantitative analysis can lead to confusion between correlation and causation. For example, influential research reported youth club attendance at 16 being a powerful predictor of being an offender. This type of simple correlation can be misinterpreted as suggesting that youth clubs make offending more likely, whereas it is simply showing that those likely to offend are more likely to engage in or be referred to this kind of service.

As a result of the challenges inherent in quantitative evidence relating to open access youth services, qualitative evidence has a strong role to play. Such research has shown participation in open access youth work to have positive influences across a range of different aspects of life, namely:

1. **Society** e.g. social cohesion, taking initiative, influencing local decision making, increased volunteering, cultural awareness and inter-cultural relations, political engagement, active citizenship.
2. **Personal development** e.g. self-esteem and confidence, personal identity, problem solving, social skills, conflict resolution, raised aspirations, broadened worldview and beliefs, knowledge of self, self-control, dealing with setbacks, strategic thinking.

3. **Relationships** e.g. trusting, non-judgemental, feeling believed in, feeling heard and listened to, feeling supported, acceptance, respect, overcoming isolation, building capacity for positive relationships.
4. **Employment and education** e.g. training, developing social capital, improving job chances, entrepreneurialism, developing hard and soft skills for the workplace, voluntary or paid opportunities, developing non-cognitive skills, assistance with applications, preventing early school leaving.
5. **A safe place to be** e.g. getting away from home and tensions elsewhere, a place 'not like school', a place to socialise and have fun, a place accessible for free where they will not be excluded, a safe space away from challenges in the community, a place to just be, a sense of belonging.
6. **Skills development** e.g. opportunities to try new things, developing hard and soft skills, participating in music, dance, craft, art or sport activities, learning to present, organise, communicate and lead.
7. **Health and well-being** e.g. reducing detrimental and risky behaviours (e.g. substance abuse), providing a place of respite and sanctuary, enabling good decision-making, preventative approaches, increasing self-care.

However, not all youth work projects should expect to see the same impacts, and some may be negative. This is because their aims, services and the groups who participate can differ.

Evidence collected from young people finds that 'association' (which emphasises the relationships between young people and the generation of a 'club' environment) is a key driver of engagement. Young people value the relationships they form with youth workers and acknowledge the support and guidance offered to them which better enables them to reflect on and navigate what can be complex lives.

The value that young people place on the relationships they form may be missed from 'hard' quantitative impact evaluations focused

on outcomes such as educational attainment, criminal activity or employment. This is another reason why young people should be involved not just in determining types of provision but also the evaluation of interventions.

## Promising actions

The review concludes with promising actions to consider in the Welsh context as emerging from the analysis of the international literature:

- 1. Open access provision** promotes inclusivity and avoids the stigmatisation that often arises from targeting services to the most disadvantaged.
  - Experts have expressed concern about the **increasing pressure to measure** and demonstrate the quantitative impact of open access youth work provision which can lead to misinterpretation and damaging reform.

- 2. Meaningful youth participation** which harnesses the lived experience of young people through their involvement in the design, provision and evaluation of youth services can lead to service improvements and benefits to young people. Meaningful participation requires active engagement and real influence, as opposed to passive presence or token roles.

- There is good quality evidence that participation in youth service decision-making leads to **better social skills (efficacy and empathy)** and that leadership or decision-making opportunities lead to **greater feelings of ownership and empowerment and higher levels of attendance.**
- The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child has been a positive vehicle for change, leading to greater active involvement of young people in matters that affect them.

## Find out more

For the full report see Bucelli, I., and McKnight, A. (2022). *Poverty and social exclusion: review of international evidence on youth services*. Cardiff: WCPP.

## About the Wales Centre for Public Policy

Here at the Centre, we collaborate with leading policy experts to provide ministers, the civil service and Welsh public services with high quality evidence and independent advice that helps them to improve policy decisions and outcomes.

Funded by the Economic and Social Research Council and Welsh Government, the Centre is

based at Cardiff University and a member of the UK's What Works Network.

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