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Building on the best: overview of local authority youth services 2005/06

**Better
education
and care**

Local authority youth services are inspected as part of the three-year programme of joint area reviews that began in September 2005. This report provides an overview of their performance in 2005/06. It is set against the backdrop of considerable organisational change in local authorities, and the Government's vision for youth work as set out in *Youth matters: next steps*. The report draws attention to the factors most likely to secure high quality youth work provision within new and emerging arrangements.

Of particular interest to:

Parents, local authorities, youth services, the Department for Education and Skills and other government departments.

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14–19

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Executive summary

In the academic year 2005/06, 33 local authority (LA) youth service inspections took place within the children's services joint area reviews (JARs) programme.¹ These showed improvements in the quality of provision: overall, the proportion judged to be good or better was higher than in previous years and the proportion of inadequate services was marginally lower. These inspections reinforce a key message in *Effective youth services: good practice* which linked the most successful youth services with forward-looking and informed strategic management at LA level.²

The aspirations underpinning the five Every Child Matters (ECM) outcomes manifest themselves well in many youth work settings and this report highlights some particularly good practice in this respect.³ It also reinforces the need for youth services to approach ECM curriculum planning thoughtfully and incrementally, in a manner that builds on best youth work practice and reflects local need.

Initiatives such as ECM and *Youth matters: next steps* are leading to the restructuring of local services and this report comments upon those factors that appear most likely to secure good quality youth work in the future. Indeed, most of the better youth services are well placed to face the future with confidence, albeit to varying degrees. In other cases, the prognosis is less optimistic and LAs have much to do to bring about the required improvement.

Key findings

- ❑ The quality of youth work is improving, with 15 of the 33 youth services inspected judged good or better. This is a greater proportion than in previous years but there remains a need for considerable improvement in one in five services inspected.
- ❑ The quality of strategic and operational leadership and management is a key factor in bringing about improvement.
- ❑ The most successful services meet a broad range of needs. They have a clear vision for youth work and match their resources effectively to meet local needs and circumstances.
- ❑ Youth services are increasingly taking the lead in involving young people in youth councils, local forums, conferences and other events.

¹ For information about children's services inspections see *Every child matters: Framework for the inspection of children's services* (HMI 2433), Ofsted, 2005; available from www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2433.

² *Effective youth services: good practice* (HMI 2445), Ofsted, 2005; available from www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2445.

³ The Every Child Matters website is www.everychildmatters.gov.uk.

- ❑ Youth services make the strongest contributions to the ECM outcomes 'making a positive contribution' and 'being healthy'.
- ❑ The factors that are most likely to lead to a recognition by local areas that youth work is an essential element of services for children and young people include:
 - an understanding of the educational contribution of youth work; in particular its potential to engage a wide range of young people, including those whose attitudes and behaviour are more challenging than the majority, and to offer a wider range of activities
 - the involvement of youth service officers at a strategic level
 - sufficiency of resources.

The differences between the strongest and the weakest LAs are stark and a significant minority are failing to take sufficient steps to ensure that youth work is secured within new and emerging structures.

Recommendations

Local areas are restructuring children and young people's services in line with new legislative requirements. In order to get maximum benefit from youth services and youth work, LAs should:

- ensure that processes are in place to enable elected members, senior officers and other decision-makers, including children's trusts, to understand the educational role of youth work in general, the quality of youth work provision, and its potential contribution to young people's lives
- seek to build upon the managerial and relevant experience of youth service officers and engage them in key strategic developments
- ensure that any future commissioning arrangements for youth work are focused on delivering high quality learning outcomes for young people.

Introduction

1. This report and its recommendations are set against the backdrop of considerable organisational change in LAs, and the Government's vision for youth work as set out in *Youth matters: next steps*.⁴ Part 1 provides a brief overview of the outcomes of the 33 LA youth services inspections since September 2005. Part 2 identifies particular contributions that youth work makes to the ECM outcomes. Part 3 considers those aspects of LA planning that are most likely to secure high quality youth work within an increasingly diffuse world of integrated youth support.

⁴ *Youth matters*, the youth Green Paper, was published in July 2005 and its consultation ended in November 2005. *Youth matters: next steps* is the Government's response. Both are available from www.everychildmatters.gov.uk/youthmatters/.

Part 1: outcomes of youth services inspections 2005/06

2. Youth services are currently inspected as part of the three-year JARs programme that began in September 2005. Services are placed in one of four categories: outstanding, good, adequate or inadequate. Of the 33 inspected in 2005/06, 15 were judged to be good or outstanding, 11 adequate, and seven inadequate. This is an improving picture; of the 31 services inspected in 2004/05, only six were judged to be good or outstanding and eight inadequate.
3. In some areas, councils have increased the youth service budget and tangible improvements can be seen in provision: for example, some services are better able to provide attractive, accessible venues and specialist equipment. Achievement of young people has improved and most services are increasingly confident in providing them with accredited learning opportunities. Aspects of quality assurance have improved too, notably the use of young people in observing and commenting on the quality of provision.
4. However, it is still the case that some LAs expect too much of youth services without sufficient attention being given to the resources required if they are to be of high quality. In many cases, this results in resources that are already limited being spread even more thinly. Too many youth service managers devise curriculum plans without proper consultation with staff and young people.

Part 2: contribution of youth services to ECM outcomes

5. The framework for youth service inspection emphasises the achievement and the personal and social development of young people. Evidence suggests that many youth services are incrementally developing curricula and provision that reflect the ECM outcomes, but they opt appropriately to place more emphasis on some outcomes than others. Factors such as local need shape their response. Inspectors comment on how well a youth service is contributing to the ECM outcomes in a local area. Overall, inspection evidence shows that youth services make the strongest contribution to 'making a positive contribution' and 'being healthy' and the least contribution to 'staying safe', 'enjoying and achieving' and 'achieving economic well-being' in that order.
 - **Being healthy** The relationships that youth workers develop with young people, and the informal settings in which the work takes place, lend themselves well to promoting healthy lifestyles. The contribution of youth services to this outcome is good, with a few examples of outstanding practice. In such cases, youth workers were addressing directly individual young people's risky behaviours in areas such as

drug misuse or sexual health. In many local areas, the youth work curriculum is increasingly taking account of health promotion, using sport, performing arts and outdoor activities as the medium to underpin youth work. The most effective health programmes reflect the needs and interests of young people, and also link with topical issues such as binge drinking and teenage pregnancy. Youth workers are in a stronger position to respond to young people's mental well-being concerns where there is access to youth information and counselling services. Such provision continues to vary across the country.

- **Staying safe** A more stringent culture is emerging in relation to safeguarding young people, with the majority of the youth services having well established training programmes and officers competent in managing child protection procedures. Policies on training to update officers' skills and knowledge are, however, not always clear. Where LAs contract youth work to other providers, respective safeguarding responsibilities are not always sufficiently clear. There are inherent risks in some youth work settings, such as adventurous activities or detached work, but workers are increasingly diligent in how they risk-assess such situations. Not all buildings used for youth work are fit for purpose.
- **Enjoying and achieving** During 2005/06 youth services have taken on a key role in providing a range of activities that promote young people's personal and social development, particularly with regard to the most vulnerable and those who are hardest to reach. Youth workers continue to provide alternative educational programmes for young people who might otherwise be disengaged from school or college. Improved practice in accreditation has further sharpened the quality of this work. Young people's voluntary participation in youth work activities often strengthens the relationship between them and youth workers. In the best work seen, young people socialised and enjoyed themselves. Established youth clubs, in particular, provide regular ongoing opportunities for all young people; the contribution they make to preventative work is vital. Services continue to work well with partner organisations: more enlightened LAs understand well and plan for the complementary role of youth work and Connexions. Services are generally reviewing curriculum guidance with a view to promoting learning outcomes that meet the challenges of the ECM agenda. The better among them are giving careful consideration to specifying those learning outcomes which are age-specific and most suited to youth work approaches.

- **Making a positive contribution** Involving young people in shaping services, alongside listening to their views, is inherent in good youth work. Youth workers have made a strong contribution in this area and a large minority of services have excelled in it. Youth services have engaged young people well through youth councils, forums and community action. They enjoyed participating and developed political literacy skills, as well as the more practical and essential skills of communication. They also enjoyed volunteering opportunities and peer mentoring. Youth workers often help other public agencies develop expertise in seeking the views of young people. Inspectors found that the most effective work tackling anti-social behaviour was carried out in conjunction with other agencies.
- **Achieving economic well-being** Youth services, often when working in partnership with Connexions, have been successful in developing preparation for working life programmes where young people were encouraged to develop the skills and confidence to move into work, training or learning. Planning took account of local strategies to develop 14–19 provision generally. Youth services provided individual young people with support in dealing with issues such as housing, finance, and parental relationships and responsibilities. As a result young people were often better placed to consider their longer-term options.

Part 3: securing high quality youth work

6. The current inspection cycle is occurring at a point where LAs are beginning to introduce significant structural changes to services for young people in response to Government proposals. Outcomes of inspection, albeit focused on specific aspects of youth provision, are beginning to identify some of the factors that appear most likely to lead to the satisfactory integration of youth work into services for children and young people.
 - **A confident and capable youth service** It is apparent that, within new and emerging children's services structures, better LAs recognise the particular educational role of youth work in its own right as well as its potential to bolster and support wider youth activities, be they sporting, arts based, recreational or political. They are aware that youth workers are particularly adept at engaging a range of young people, including those with challenging attitudes and behaviour and thus contribute to social cohesion. Such responsiveness on the part of a local area, however, is far from universal. Where LAs are failing to identify, support or use the strengths of youth services, it is difficult to see how they can commission future services for young people effectively.

- **Sufficiency of resources** In the absence of clear national expectations on the funding that LAs should allocate to youth services, some continue to fund at too low a level. Others have made efforts to dedicate more funding, generally to positive effect. Some, often larger, services have a core budget and external funding streams, as well as the resources of partnership work. This gives services the flexibility both to deploy staff to meet need and to integrate successful grant-aided work into the mainstream provision. With one exception, small unitary authorities were found to be struggling in this respect. Inspection reports have acknowledged the generally positive impact of good levels of funding on: the condition, geographical spread and accessibility of buildings; the provision of specialist technical equipment; the training of staff; and the availability of learning materials to support the curriculum. As reported previously by Ofsted, many LAs expect much of their youth services and these expectations are not always reasonable.⁵ Moreover, LAs tend to seek to provide a broader range of youth service activities while struggling to resource existing provision effectively. Good examples of this are when detached youth workers engaging with young people on the streets are deployed for too few hours a week, or buildings open for very short periods and not at weekends.
- **The value of partnerships** Inspection reports have identified for some time that youth services are good at working in partnership: there is also evidence that resources can be greatly enhanced by such arrangements. Competent and capable youth services are building partnerships for the benefit of young people, and in the better examples:
 - partners value and understand the role of the youth service, including its advocacy function
 - strategic objectives are evident in practice
 - good use is made of information and intelligence
 - joint planning arrangements are fruitful and forward-looking
 - buildings and resources are shared
 - specialist Connexions, youth offending team or youth service staff are seconded across organisations, including to the voluntary sector.
- **Young people's voices** In many of the local areas inspected, youth workers and officers play a key role in promoting young people's democracy, involving them in decision-making and ensuring that their voices are heard so that they are able to influence outcomes. Such approaches are already well established in youth work, but the ECM agenda has given them further impetus. Services have learned much

⁵ *Effective youth services: good practice* (HMI 2445), Ofsted, 2005; available from www.ofsted.gov.uk/publications/2445.

about the processes necessary to underpin continuing effective grass-roots and corporate involvement of young people.

- **Officer deployment** The ECM initiative has placed greater emphasis on building upon young people's potential and recognising their achievements outside formal institutions. Some LAs have begun to deploy the heads of youth services or their equivalent in lead managerial or strategic roles with regard to the ECM outcomes 'making a positive contribution' and 'enjoying and achieving'. The picture is, however, patchy. LAs with well performing youth services appear to turn quite naturally to such officers to lead developments, placing them in key strategic groups. In other instances it seems that the visibility and influence of youth service officers is decreasing, or the role itself is disappearing.
- **Equality and equity in practice** Good youth work takes full account of the underlying principles that relate to access, equity and diversity. Youth services demonstrate a firm commitment to working within these principles, for instance in their work with gay and lesbian groups, and in taking positive action in supporting those most at risk and other minority groups.

Appendix

Youth service inspection outcomes 2005/06 (September 2005 to August 2006)

Youth service	Service overall outcome	Value for money outcome
Barnet	Adequate	Satisfactory
Bournemouth	Adequate	Satisfactory
Bristol	Adequate	Satisfactory
Calderdale	Adequate	Satisfactory
Coventry	Good	Good
Devon	Good	Good
Doncaster	Outstanding	Very good
Dudley	Adequate	Satisfactory
Enfield	Good	Good
Gateshead	Adequate	Satisfactory
Hackney	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory
Haringey	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory
Herefordshire	Adequate	Satisfactory
Hillingdon	Adequate	Satisfactory
Hounslow	Good	Good
Isle of Wight	Good	Good
Manchester	Adequate	Satisfactory
Medway	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory
Milton Keynes	Good	Good
Newham	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory
North Somerset	Good	Good
Northampton	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory
Rotherham	Good	Good
Rutland	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory
Sandwell	Adequate	Unsatisfactory
Sefton	Adequate	Satisfactory
Slough	Inadequate	Unsatisfactory
Staffordshire	Good	Good
Stockport	Good	Satisfactory
Stoke-on-Trent	Good	Good
Wakefield	Good	Good
Windsor and Maidenhead	Good	Good
Wirral	Good	Good

