

Youth workers in social work pods having a positive impact on young people's outcomes: Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead

Region: South East
Remit: Children and families services

Provider background

The Royal Borough of Windsor and Maidenhead is a unitary authority to the west of London. Approximately 33,000 children and young people under the age of 18 years live in Windsor and Maidenhead. This is around 23% of the total population in the area.

Brief description

This good practice example shows how having youth workers based within the social work pods in Windsor and Maidenhead is improving the engagement of young people and, through this, having a positive impact on their outcomes.

The good practice in detail

Senior management

As a result of restructuring, the youth service came under the management of the assistant-director-level post of Head of Early Help and Safeguarding. The management team was keen to think radically about how it could best make use of the resources available to it and saw opportunities to adopt the [Munro principles](#), cut down on transitions and strengthen early help.

The Head of Early Help and Safeguarding went through a process of discussion with the early help service managers new to her management structure to identify where best to distribute staff. Youth work was already strong within the local authority, but they were wary of simply adopting a multi-disciplinary team model. They chose to develop a clear methodology incorporating small pod working, which would be better

for young people and support social workers. The central question was how best to populate pods with workers from other disciplines. The changes were mostly achieved within existing resources.

Frontline workers

From the youth workers' point of view, one of the biggest challenges was to help social workers understand what youth work is and how best to use youth workers' skills to support young people. Most importantly, youth work is targeted, so needs to be a specific piece of work focused on an assessed need. For example, a request such as 'needs a male role model' is not clear enough about the young person's need or the change that needs to be made.

As always, good-quality assessment is central to identifying the need for youth worker involvement. This often happens at the point that cases are being assessed by the referral and assessment service, although social workers in pods may equally identify the need through their ongoing work with young people. In either case, it will be the pod social worker with long-term responsibility for the young person who makes the referral and works with the youth worker.

To help youth workers and social workers better understand each other's roles and ensure that youth workers were being assigned to the right cases, joint training was provided. This helped to identify how they could together and individually best support young people and their families using their combined skills and experiences.

Review of the work of the youth worker takes place within the statutory review framework, such as child in need reviews already in place for the young person.

Statutory functions and responsibilities are clear, and youth workers do not carry cases. The social worker continues to undertake statutory visits and, to try to engage reluctant young people, even where a youth worker may be having regular contact with them. The youth worker is clearly not a substitute for the social worker in these cases; indeed it is important for youth work that young people see the relationship as voluntary. Workers have found that young people can make sense of the different roles if the social worker and youth worker are themselves clear about these.

Youth workers make initial approaches to young people where they are most comfortable; for example, this may be on the street. During this approach, they arrange an initial meeting at which they agree a short plan, often no more than three points, with the young person. Youth workers have in-depth knowledge of local resources, such as voluntary organisations and the housing and benefits system. Their work with young people is recorded on the children's social care system, so social workers have ready access to this. Endings are planned, though young people may maintain some level of contact with the youth worker through the pod system.

Youth workers are supervised by social work managers, who are responsible for allocating cases to youth workers and monitoring their workload. This is a learning journey, in which communication and dialogue between managers and youth

workers has been vital. Social work managers find that regular meetings with youth service managers are important to test things out and help develop their understanding of the youth worker's role.

Cases are discussed in weekly pod meetings, though there is currently no joint supervision of the social worker and youth worker. The local authority feels this could be developed further.

Young people

Young people feel youth workers are more relaxed and 'bubbly' than social workers. One young person described a powerful example of a youth worker helping her to find a school place after being out of education for two years. The young person felt it was particularly important that the youth worker came to school meetings. One young person described a youth worker as 'basically being a best friend for me'. Another felt she could tell a youth worker a problem and 'leave it there', as opposed to sharing with, say, family, where it would cause ripples.

Young people were aware of the plans for them and had been part of making these plans. They had worked with the youth workers for some time and had built strong relationships with them, but they knew that the support from the youth worker had a purpose and would end. One young person said: 'If I don't have her, it means I'm back on track – that's a good feeling.'

Outcomes

Outcomes seen included:

- young people fully engaging in their own care planning
- young people able to identify pathway plan needs and then implementing the plan, with the youth worker providing practical input
- young people supported to engage with services, leading to a reduction in their drug use, and increased attendance at Child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS)
- young people having a better understanding of services available to them and how to access them
- establishing wishes and feelings of young people where parents are reluctant to engage
- young people having increased confidence, stopping self-harming, making positive decisions about health issues, being better able to manage relationships, completing educational courses and considering going travelling.

Overall, and as identified in the recent single inspection, pod-based youth workers are making a positive contribution to the engagement, and thus the improved outcomes, of young people. The local authority is also planning a survey to capture young people's views of their experiences of youth workers.

Key questions

There are a number of key questions that any local authority wanting to develop its own version of Windsor and Maidenhead's model should look to answer from the outset.

How can close working between social workers and youth workers be facilitated and supported at a strategic level within the local authority's structure?

For Windsor and Maidenhead, the opportunity to place youth workers in social work pods came from restructuring of services, which brought the youth service under the management of the assistant-director-level post of Head of Early Help and Safeguarding. This meant that there were no barriers to overcome in terms of the senior strategic management of the two roles being in different parts of the organisation. Despite this, the Head of Early Help and Safeguarding had to think carefully about negotiating and developing understanding with the service managers responsible for youth work, to 'sell' the idea successfully.

This may present a challenge in local authorities where responsibility for children's social work and youth work rests under different strategic managers. Senior leaders need to establish a partnership culture that values both professions equally.

How do social workers make sense of the role of the youth worker, and vice versa?

Workers' approach to joint working might be influenced by previous experiences, both positive and negative. To make joint working successful, there needs to be a clear and shared understanding of roles and responsibilities.

Social workers will need training and support to be able to make appropriate use of youth workers' skills. Similarly, youth workers will require support to fully understand their role in the context of a statutory social work service; for many this will be a new experience.

What sense do young people make of the difference in the roles?

This is closely linked to how well social workers and youth workers understand each other's roles. In Windsor and Maidenhead, it is clear that young people are able to differentiate between the two roles. This has only been achieved by social workers and youth workers proactively ensuring that young people are clear about this, reinforcing and supporting each other's roles as needed.

How are the management and supervision of youth workers managed within a social work service?

In the Windsor and Maidenhead model, youth workers are not based in every social work pod, but may work with young people allocated to any pod. They have the opportunity to discuss young people's circumstances in the weekly pod meetings,

which are part of the model. However, formal joint supervision of social workers and youth workers is recognised as an area that requires further development.

Social work managers will also need support and training to enable them to understand and effectively oversee the work of youth workers. This may include regular contact with youth service managers.

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