



London Borough of Bexley Youth Service Report

Bexley Children's Services Authority Area

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Introduction

1. Bexley Youth Service is located within the Learners Division, which is part the Children's and Young People's Services Directorate. The 13 -19 population is about 22,000, with the youth service reach around 14%. Interim management arrangements are in place with an acting head of the youth service supported by two managers, six full-time and forty-eight part-time staff, and one trainee. The budget made available to the youth service by the local authority for 2006/07 is £1,972,000. From this total amount, £962,000 directly funds the youth service and the rest is used to commission work from voluntary youth sector partners; the Danson Youth Trust, the Bexley Council for Voluntary Youth Organisations (BCVYO) and the Bexley Educational Business Partnership (EBP), of which the latter is commissioned to deliver the youth awards programme.

2. The joint area review (JAR) was enhanced to enable coverage of the youth service. Inspectors considered the youth service's self-assessment of its current practice and key service documentation. Inspectors met with officers, a cross section of staff, representatives of the voluntary sector and other partners, and representatives from the children's parliament and youth council. A number of observations at day and evening youth units were also carried out across the borough.

Part A: Summary of the report

Main findings

Effectiveness and value for money

3. The young people of Bexley are generally well-served by the local authority and the partner agencies who provide a range of youth services across the borough. Funding is adequate, and resources available to the young people are mostly good. The standards achieved by young people are good. The curriculum is broad and offers an adequate range of suitable learning opportunities. However, this provision has yet to reflect a detailed and up-to-date audit of locally identified needs and priorities. Strategic management is adequate but the authority's approach to assessing value for money within its youth service, particularly in its commissioning of work with the voluntary sector, is under-developed. The youth service is good and achieves adequate value for money.

Strengths

- Young people's achievements and the quality of youth work practice are good.
- There is some well-focused targeted work with vulnerable groups of young people.

- The range and quality of resources are good.
- Operational leadership and management are good.
- The service is well supported by enthusiastic and committed staff.

Areas for development

- Ensure that curricular provision reflects the needs of young people across the borough.
- Develop planning to identify more accurately the learning objectives and outcomes for young people, including those set out in Every Child Matters (ECM).
- Develop further the quality of action planning to identify more specifically timescales, success measures and costs, as an aid to monitoring progress and assessing value for money.
- Complete and publish the youth service strategy as a contribution to the future direction of borough-wide provision for all stakeholders.

Key aspect inspection grades

Key aspect		Grade
1	Standards of young people's achievement	3
	Quality of youth work practice	3
2	Quality of curriculum and resources	2
3	Strategic and operational leadership and management	2

The table above shows overall grades about provision. Inspectors make judgements based on the following scale:

Grade 4: Excellent/outstanding: a service that delivers well above minimum requirements for users:

Grade 3: Good: a service that consistently delivers above minimum requirements for users:

Grade 2: Adequate: a service that delivers only minimum requirements for users:

Grade 1: Inadequate: a service that does not deliver minimum requirements for users.

Part B: The youth service's contribution to Every Child Matters outcomes

4. The youth service makes a good contribution to the five ECM outcomes although there is variation in quality. The extensive range of curricular activities provide many opportunities for young people to improve their personal circumstances, but there has yet to develop a robust methodology that identifies

particular needs in relation to the ECM areas, and the extent to which these influence both provision and outcomes for young people. Improving health is recognised and supported in youth activities. Young people who attend youth clubs are safe, but a number are anxious about their personal safety in some parts of the borough. Improving achievement is well-supported in a number of established areas, including the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme. The youth service is helping young people to understand, develop and influence some of the aspects that most affects their lives. The youth council and children's parliament are good examples of this. However, the extent to which these opportunities impact on decision-making at strategic level across the local authority is less well developed than it is at an operational level in local units. The extent to which the service contributes to economic well-being is appropriately recognised and supported through project work, such as the 'world of work' and the 'opportunity+' programme.

Part C: Commentary on the key aspects

Key Aspect 1: Standards of young people's achievements and the quality of youth work practice

5. Young people's achievements are generally good. Almost all work observed during the inspection reached this standard. There is good work with targeted and vulnerable young people, the majority of whom receive well focused one-to-one support to help them address personal issues and problems. Some particularly impressive outcomes were seen in sessions when these young people talked about their personal needs in a confident and open way to inspectors, showing clearly that they have developed mature social and emotional skills to help them communicate and integrate fully into their school and local communities.

6. In the most effective sessions, where young people make the greatest gains in their learning, staff plan activities thoroughly, use available time and resources to good effect, engage the young people actively in purposeful and worthwhile activities, and provide opportunities for evaluation and feedback. Work of this standard was seen in both local authority run sessions and in commissioned or joint work from partner agencies. For example, the 'vibe' initiative for gay and lesbian young people is helping to develop the self-esteem of these young people within a safe and reassuring group. Similarly good standards of achievement were seen in the 'ball court league', a joint initiative between the youth service and a local professional club, which is providing regular coaching and reinforcement of correct behaviour when playing competitive soccer. In those sessions where provision is less effective, occasionally inadequate, insufficient account is taken of the needs of the young people, which bring about a mismatch between the young people's expectations and the session delivery. This, in turn, results in some disruptive behaviour that affects the learning outcomes and attitude of a minority of young people. An example of this was seen in the 'motorbike for schools' project, where a number of young people were repeating the course for a second

time, for no apparent reason, with their learning limited and not developing in line with their ability or prior attainment.

7. The overall quality of the youth work practice is good. Local authority youth workers, and those adults working for partner agencies, generally relate very well to the young people. Where these strong relationships exist, young people express confidence in the staff, and a willingness to engage in discussions about a range of issues, often including those of an individual nature that help to develop practice in the sessions. Most staff are sensitive to the varying needs of young people, including those identified with particular needs. Planning, overall, is satisfactory and generally conforms to an agreed style or content that covers important areas for all sessions. The recent inclusion of the five outcomes from ECM shows that staff are aware of the need to plan and assess for these important outcomes. However, there is a lack of detail in both the learning objectives used, which are often just a list of activities to be covered, and in the outcomes expected, especially within and across the five ECM outcomes. This, in turn, makes the accurate assessment of individual and group progress within each session, and over time, less rigorous than it could be. The approach taken to using the Government's Youth Opportunity Fund across the borough has enabled pockets of young people, especially the democratically elected youth council, to become involved in realistic decision-making activities that most affect young people and the local communities.

Key Aspect 2: Quality of curriculum and resources

8. The quality of the curriculum is adequate. Funding for the youth service is also adequate. Access to suitable accommodation and accompanying resources is generally good, although there are some units that are geographically isolated and difficult to get to for some young people. Overall, the general fabric of buildings is good, and in all sessions seen by inspectors young people used equipment sensibly and safely. The service uses a local specialist provider to make good provision for young people with a range of special needs.

9. Curriculum planning is adequate overall, and good in some areas. The current provision is based more on the maintenance of what has gone before, rather than on a clear identification of the emerging and changing needs of the young people of Bexley. Overall, however, young people of different ethnic heritage, age and gender have equal access to available opportunities. The youth service makes very good use of residential activities, which extend the range of curricular opportunities for young people. A good example of this is the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme, which has increased its number of participants significantly over the past two years and includes a substantial amount of residential work with young people. Youth clubs also make good use of residential activities.

10. There have been a number of changes to the youth service staff during the past 18 months, all of which have helped to support the local authority's improving provision. Procedures for safeguarding young people are secure, and the service is served well by a group of enthusiastic staff. Staff with no formal qualification are now working towards national accreditation.

Key Aspect 3: Leadership and management

11. Strategic leadership and management are adequate. While the local authority's strategic direction for children and young people's services is beginning to emerge, it has yet to develop fully in terms of its impact upon the youth service provision across the borough. There is not yet an overall accompanying strategic action plan that clearly matches with the nine thematic strands of the draft youth service strategy. The Bexley youth service development plan is a helpful document, but lacks a sufficiently clear link to the separate unit action plans, and to those of partner agencies. Current action planning is adequate at council level, and in individual youth service units, but almost all plans lack sufficient clarity in terms of identified actions that have clear timescales, success measures and costings, as a means of ensuring that the local authority can measure accurately its progress in improving its youth service provision, and how it is achieving value for money in all of its activities.

12. The service is in the process of introducing an electronic database to record and collate patterns of participation by young people across the borough. The approach, however, fails to discriminate sufficiently clearly between the work that the local authority funds directly and that which it offers in partnership with other agencies. Partnership links are, nevertheless, adequate and are continuing to improve the range of opportunities available to the young people of Bexley. Officers and partnership staff co-operate well, which often results in new provision or the strengthening of existing project work. The coordination of inter-agency youth projects in the borough is adequate, and has the potential to make a significant impact on the outcomes for young people, particularly those identified as the most vulnerable. However, the overall partnership approach does not benefit from sufficient strategic planning and overview. While relationships remain very strong between the local authority youth service and the voluntary sector, the monitoring of the outcomes achieved through grant aid is weaker and has yet to include a robust and fully transparent methodology for joint working.

13. Operational leadership and management are good. The acting head of service is attentive to the needs of staff and young people, and to the needs of the youth service. She represents the service well within the local community and within the council, although the strategic direction for the service has yet to develop fully to support and extend the current provision across the borough. Adequate quality assurance procedures are in place, and the service is beginning to collect valuable information about the quality of provision in each unit, but not yet to the same extent in commissioned work. Young people are involved in some evaluation of work, but the extent to which they are fully engaged in planning and developing future activities is more limited, but developing.