Youth Centres: Attributes of Effectiveness


Overview

Youth centres are created for a variety of purposes, some positive (helping youth achieve their full potential) and some negative (keep youth off the streets and out of trouble).

Youth centres, with their open access nature, have difficulty demonstrating value for money when compared to specific programmes that enrol a finite number of people and track the programme outcomes.

Youth centres can play an important preventative role, because for some young people in difficult personal or domestic circumstances, the centre is the one place where they can meet safely and obtain the support they need.

What is a Youth Centre?

A youth centre is an open access, or universal service, for all young people as opposed to a targeted service/programme for a few young people. At a minimum a youth centre will have a physical space in a fixed geographic location that youth can use.

Youth Centres and Outcomes for Young people

Most studies on the quality of youth work focus on youth workers, not youth centres. In part this is because a youth worker can be effective without using a youth centre, but it is hard for a youth centre to produce positive outcomes without good youth workers.

The evidence for youth centres making a positive difference for young people is mixed. Outcomes depend strongly on the young person’s individual context. Disadvantaged youth are often over-represented in youth centre use, and while participation in a youth centre will reduce the time they spend on the streets, just being trouble free does not mean they reach their full potential.

Youth centres that bring together antisocial peers are likely to promote antisocial behaviour by new attendees. This is made worse when the youth centres lack structured activities or skill development programmes (Mahoney et al., 2004).

One analysis of United Kingdom cohort studies in 1970 found youth club attendance was associated with negative later-life educational outcomes; the more time spent at the youth club, the poorer the later qualification attainment (Robson & Feinstein, 2006).

Outcomes for young people are improved by engaging in structured activities elsewhere (eg in a church group) or through structured activities at the youth club (Robson & Feinstein, 2006). Participation in the youth centre can also identify at risk youth for other types of intervention.
Attributes of Effective Youth Centres

Youth centres do not operate in a vacuum, and a key part of the effectiveness of contemporary youth centres is through integrated provision. This is where different agencies and organisations providing services to young people join up in a holistic approach. Information is shared to avoid duplicating effort, or missing opportunities to help young people (Sorhaindo & Feinstein, 2007).

Activities sponsored by youth centres should be relevant to the needs of the local community. Youth centres should talk with parents, as parents are major stakeholders in the education and well-being of their children (Oireachtas, 2003).

Effective youth centres share many of the characteristics of successful youth work (Merton et al., 2004). In their own right, youth centres are effective when they give young people:
- somewhere to go
- something to do
- some space of their own
- someone to talk to (Williamson, 1997).

Somewhere to Go

Purpose built youth centres are uncommon. Typically a youth centre adapts an existing space to its purposes, making it welcome and accessible to young people. The youth centre may share this space and its resources with other organisations.

An expensive facility is not required as long as there is a safe environment in which the other three attributes of effectiveness are met. Services at a youth centre can include:
- an information centre
- a quiet space for computers and the internet, studying and reading
- a dedicated relaxation space, for meeting friends and having fun
- spaces for more structured activities
- access to specialist services, such as counsellors (Sorhaindo & Feinstein, 2007).

Geographical location is important, as the centre needs to be accessible to young people, who may be reliant on public transport. A ground floor space is desirable, as is a safe outdoor space (Atkinson, 2003). An effective youth centre can relocate, and retain participation among its youth participants (Mercier et al., 2000).

Something to Do

Magnet activities are what youth are attracted by – fun stuff to do and the opportunity to form relationships with their peers. A key characteristic of a youth centre is the variety of activities available for young people – this is what distinguishes the youth centre from hobby and sports clubs.
These magnet activities form the basis for entry into the structured activities with youth workers where experience, learning and development can occur. Structured activities reduce the opportunities to engage in antisocial behaviours.

Good structures for activities will incorporate:
- regular meetings
- rule-guided engagement
- skill development with increasing complexity and challenge
- activities that require sustained active attention
- leadership by at least one competent adult
- clear feedback on performance (Robson & Feinstein, 2006).

Some Space of their Own

The involvement of young people in running individual activities and the youth centre can be an important contribution to their development of autonomy and self-esteem. The balance between adult facilitation (not adult control) and youth control is both delicate and important, and should lead towards creating an environment of supervised freedom.

This can be difficult to do in a shared facility, but where possible young people should be involved in designing the youth centre layout and decoration (Sorhaindo & Feinstein, 2007).

Youth workers need to be creative to find ways of learning what young people want without over consulting them or limiting their participation.

Someone to Talk to

Young people in youth centres need support from adults, who can be important role models. It is helpful for a youth centre to have staff and volunteers that are both male and female, and that reflect the ethnic and language diversity of their community (Mercier et al, 2000).

Desirable attributes for staff working at a youth centre include:
- understanding of and commitment to young people
- youth work qualifications and experience with young people
- ability to adapt holistic models to the needs of young people in their community
- engagement with young people.

Funding

Consistent and stable funding helps make youth centres effective. Although youth centres can have user charges for activities, secure funding usually requires partner agencies, and clear accountability mechanisms. Membership schemes can, however, encourage young people to take ownership of the facility.
Summary

Effective practice for modern youth centres relies on youth workers, the integrated provision of holistic services, and a variety of structured activities to ensure that young people have:

- somewhere to go
- something to do
- some space of their own
- someone to talk to.

References


Houses of the Oireachtas, Joint Committee on Arts, Sport, Tourism, Community, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs, *Effectiveness of Youth Clubs in the Local Community*, 2003.