

Quality Youth Services

Lessons from Leicester West
October 2012



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I remember how boring youth clubs were when I was growing up: going to an old, shabby hall with maybe a pool table and some naff music playing on the stereo.

But I've seen at firsthand in my constituency how quality youth services have changed and how they can make a real and positive difference to young people's lives.

This short paper has been written to coincide with an event I'm hosting in Parliament to showcase the best of Leicester West's youth services

I hope the lessons we are learning in Leicester will feed into Labour's Policy Review and support the work of other local and national policy makers.

1 Quality youth services are a sound economic and social investment, which should be supported

In 2011, Sir Peter Soulsby became Leicester's first directly elected City Mayor. He began his term with a commitment to fulfil 100 pledges in 100 days. One of these pledges was to begin discussions with local stakeholders on how our youth services can become a "gold standard" of provision, which genuinely responds to the needs of our communities.

With the full backing of Assistant Mayor, Cllr Vi Dempster, and myself as one of the City's local constituency MPs, these discussions are now well underway.

We are seeking to provide the very best youth services at a time of unprecedented cuts to local council budgets. These cuts have seen some local authorities reduce their funding for youth services by more than 50%. Leicester City Council has had its overall budget slashed by more than a third in real terms but has so far managed to maintain a spend on youth services of £3.53m.

This demonstrates Leicester's strong commitment to youth services in a city that has a rich history of developing effective youth and community work. De Montfort University runs the oldest and largest national training programme for youth workers in the country and we are home to the National Youth Agency.

It's vital that policy makers recognise and invest in the added value high quality youth services bring. By empowering young people to make positive choices, youth services can play a vital role in raising aspiration and attainment. Youth Services can also help reduce the associated costs of poor outcomes, such as crime and antisocial behaviour, substance misuse and teenage pregnancy.

2 The best youth services are based around the needs of young people

Leicester is a young city that's famous for its diversity. Like all good public services, our youth services are at their best when they're designed around the different needs, challenges, aspirations and lifestyles of the young people that use them.

Quality youth services are flexible and innovative. They reach out and support young people on their own terms.

Soft Touch is a voluntary organisation that takes its services to where young people are, rather than expecting young people to come to them. They use novel, eye

catching approaches to engage young people, including with their locally famous Beatsmobile. This is a bright pink or green, retro car covered in graffiti. Operating out of this unusual vehicle, young people can learn how to rap and create their own music. Once on board, they can get involved in a wider range of activities such as Positive Vibes, a programme which helps promote friendships and tackle bullying at school and in the community.

Founded with support from Labour's New Deal for Communities programme and now self sufficient, Streetvibe is another fantastic voluntary organisation in Leicester. They use mobile dance pods, a mobile football cage and a Youth Bus to take their work into the community. Other services work alongside Streetvibe, such as sexual health advisers and drug and alcohol addiction services.

Politicians often talk about groups of young people who are hard to reach but Soft Touch and Street Vibe show that if youth services work in different ways, this doesn't have to be the case. I've seen the hugely positive impact of their work, which ultimately boosts young people's self-confidence and self-esteem, helping them to get on in life.

3 The best youth services are shaped by young people themselves

Central to the success of both Soft Touch and Streetvibe is the fact that young people are at the heart of developing of their activities. Young people directly participate in the process of both designing and delivering their services. For example, Soft Touch's Youth Bus was designed by young people and many of the activities run from the bus are also delivered by young people themselves.

This culture of participation is actively championed by Leicester City Council, which has supported a very successful Young People's Council and team of Young Advisors.

The Young Advisors help a range of organisations improve services, train staff and deliver projects to young people across the Leicester area. For example, the Advisors worked with Catch 22 on the first ever National Citizen Service that ran during the summer of 2011 by supporting the recruitment and mentoring of young people and by providing input into the evaluation process. They also attended the national focus sessions on the future of the National Citizen Service to give honest opinions about what could be improved.

4 A mixed economy of provision offers real benefits

Grounded in strong partnerships, the youth service offer we make to young people needs to fully exploit the strengths found across a range of agencies and organisations.

Our experience in Leicester West shows that local authorities play a key role in enabling this mixed provision, and in providing a strong voice for young people in the democratic process, particularly through our Youth Council. Voluntary organisations like Streetvibe and Soft Touch are able to bring greater flexibility and innovation to the mix.

Together, this partnership between the local council, voluntary organisations and young people themselves is the key to success in developing high quality youth services that genuinely meet the needs of local communities.

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STREETVIBE

YOUNG PEOPLES SERVICE



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