



# Delivering Activities for Young People: final findings from our evaluation



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In 2002, we appointed SQW Ltd, in association with the Centre for Guidance Studies at the University of Derby and NOP, to evaluate our Activities for Young People (AYP) initiative.

The evaluation began in 2002 and ran until 2005. Since then SQW have also reviewed the final year of the programme in Northern Ireland.

This document sets out the main findings across the programmes running in each country, but also highlights more general themes and learning that have emerged across the UK.

### Summary

- ▶ Young people who have participated in all programmes have overwhelmingly enjoyed the experience, even though the different approaches and contexts mean that results and achievements have varied between programmes.
- ▶ The programme in England aimed to help young people who needed support to make more informed choices about education, employment and training. While the programme was effective in doing that, it faced strong challenges of identifying, engaging and retaining young people from the target group, so projects tended to recruit a much wider range of young people with differing needs. Meeting the original aim is probably best achieved by operating on a smaller and more focused scale, perhaps as part of a wider youth activities programme.
- ▶ The programme in Northern Ireland

encouraged successful joint working between stakeholders at a time of significant policy change. The programme may well have driven some of the new agenda, and many of those involved have identified learning for joint working and ways of providing services that can be applied far more widely. As a result there are good prospects for mainstreaming the type of work that we have supported.

- ▶ Similarly, the programme in Wales offered a wide range of approaches to identifying and responding to local needs and priorities. The timeliness and flexibility of the programme may well make it more likely that projects and activities will be sustained after our support ends.
- ▶ Across all three countries, projects could benefit from standardised systems of tracking participants and young people in general. Improved monitoring is important not only for day-to-day management, but also for providing evidence of effectiveness.

The evaluation was undertaken by Graham Thom, Jo Hutchinson, Lisa McCrindle, Sarah Francis and Nick Gardner (all from SQW), Lindsey Bowes and Deirdre Hughes (Centre for Guidance Studies, University of Derby), and Richard Glendinning and Sarah McHugh (NOP). This is the Big Lottery Fund's interpretation and expansion of the evaluators' findings and was compiled by Steve Browning and Anna Grey.

# Background

Activities for Young People has run at different times in each country between 2002 and 2007. There have been separate programmes in England, Northern Ireland and Wales, each with its own target group and priorities. Basic details appear in the box below.

► In **England** we allocated £38.75 million to local partnerships in the 47 Connexions areas. The programme offered young people most at risk of losing contact with education and training a range of challenging activities backed by information and guidance. It aimed to encourage them to make more informed choices about their future. AYP in England was branded as *up*project and was a development of an existing programme run by the Department for Education and Skills (DfES).

► In **Wales** we allocated £3.25 million to 22 pilot projects, one from each Young People's Partnership area. The programme targets young people who are aged between 14 and 18 and who show signs of disaffection with formal education, training and employment structures. The projects have offered a wide range of activities and approaches to responding to local priorities and needs.

► In **Northern Ireland** we allocated £2.85 million to the five Education and Library Boards (ELBs), each of which has managed a portfolio of projects. The programme has targeted young people aged between 11 and 16 who are or may become disaffected and disengaged. While offering a wider range of activities, the programme has particularly focused on helping young people through the transition from primary to secondary education, and using a range of approaches to help older young people discover and develop their own interests and aptitudes in such a way that they can (re-) engage with learning, training and work.

## The evaluation

SQW Ltd led an evaluation covering the three programmes between 2002 and 2005, with a final review of the programme in Northern Ireland in 2006.

There were general differences in approach to the evaluation between England on the one hand and Northern Ireland and Wales on the other. Details are available on our website, but the broad lines follow:

► The general similarity between projects in England meant that the evaluation could survey young people who participated in the programme, and follow them up over following years to try to determine how effective their involvement had been. The evaluators also investigated how the

# Main findings

programme and projects were developed and managed by interviewing various stakeholders involved.

- ▶ Because there was wide variation in projects in Northern Ireland and Wales, and because the programme was new, the evaluators focused on the development of the programme and specific projects.

## Main findings for England

- ▶ At least 51,450 young people participated in AYP in England, although the extent of their participation varied.
- ▶ Projects targeted and accepted differing types of beneficiary. Participants' levels and types of need varied significantly. Overall, three-quarters of participants had not indicated that they were undecided about their future plans, and so they were not apparently part of the primary target group.
- ▶ The programme aimed to prevent young people from becoming part of the NEET (not in education, employment or training) population. But the scale of the programme meant that it could only have reached about 40 per cent of that group, even if all projects only recruited that type of young person. Many projects actively recruited young people from a mix of backgrounds.
- ▶ Information, advice and guidance (IAG) were integrated into the programme and affected participants' decision about their future, but the extent and quality varied. Young people from the target group who had received IAG were more likely to



choose to stay in education or to take up employment or education.

- ▶ Many young people reported that the programme had helped their personal and social development. This is likely to have increased their capacity to manage the transitions from school to adult life more effectively.
- ▶ Uncertainty about future funding arrangements and the future of Connexions meant that partnerships were unlikely to integrate AYP into mainstream delivery or to change the delivery of AYP during its lifetime.

# Main findings

## Main findings for Northern Ireland

- ▶ The programme as a whole exceeded targets for participation (reaching over 12,000 young people) and ran within budget.
- ▶ Project leads and partners have all hailed the programme as a success.
- ▶ Local partnership working had improved through programme delivery, particularly that involving Youth Service and schools. Many of those interviewed would not wish to return to previous arrangements.
- ▶ The programme has run at a time of major policy change in relevant services in Northern Ireland, notably moves to strengthen links between education and wider youth services. The programme has demonstrated successful ways of supporting this.
- ▶ Many projects have been concerned throughout with issues relating to monitoring and evaluation. The variety of the types of activities supported made it difficult to standardise definitions. Many projects in Northern Ireland – as elsewhere – would welcome the availability of more standardised approaches for recording and tracking participants and their achievements.

## Main findings for Wales

- ▶ At the time of the research in 2005, 1,400 young people in Wales had participated in AYP, although the scale of that involvement varied greatly between projects. The programme is due to end early in 2007.
- ▶ Case studies demonstrated the importance

of getting the original bid right. One project was seriously held up because those who wrote the original bid did not understand the requirements of outdoor activity provision and so underestimated the time and resources required to deliver such an ambitious plan.

- ▶ It is equally important for projects to dedicate sufficient time and resources to developing and setting up projects.
- ▶ A number of projects felt that the benefits they had demonstrated meant that they should be able to secure mainstream funding to continue their activities. But it will be important for them to have evidence of their success in order to influence potential funders.
- ▶ Projects were clearly aware of the need to match the structure and intensity of the projects to the extent of need of the target group and the desired outcome for the young people.
- ▶ It is essential to recruit experienced and qualified staff, in particular to projects working with young people with intensive support needs.

# Themes and issues

This section highlights some of the main themes that have emerged over the course of the evaluation.

## **Clear aims and objectives**

Those who design programmes need to be explicit about the overall aim of the initiative. This includes setting out the specific issues that the programme wants to address, the nature of the target group, and why and how the programme should meet specified needs. In some cases, the success of AYP projects was limited because those running projects were not clear about the relative importance of recruiting participants and providing particular types of support.

It is equally important to consider and respond to different stakeholder groups' perspectives about desirable outcomes for participants and ways of achieving them. In England, there were different points of view about the relative importance of providing information and guidance on the one hand and developing individual self-esteem on the other. Although both processes are valuable, the programme was unclear about relative priorities. In Northern Ireland and Wales, on the other hand, there was more freedom for individual projects to determine what they wanted to achieve and how best to do so. There would nevertheless be some benefit in encouraging all concerned – at all levels and in all countries – to address these issues more explicitly from the outset.

## **Partnership development**

In general, partnership working has been a successful feature of the programme,

although there have been difficulties (for example, some early reluctance from schools to get involved). The successful delivery of AYP required input at different stages from a range of organisations including funding bodies, schools, education authorities, youth services, careers and guidance services, community groups and activity providers.

The nature of the partnership varied between and within countries. The experimental and flexible nature of the programmes in Northern Ireland and Wales were particularly successful at encouraging positive partnership working, both at a management and an operational level. Working relations between schools and youth services in Northern Ireland have been a particular area of success.

## **Stakeholder consultation**

The programmes have demonstrated the importance of early and thorough consultation with all key stakeholders. This can help deal with the issues discussed above. Again, such consultation is likely to be more effective if stakeholders have the opportunity to contribute to the design and priorities of the project. Consultation can also contribute to earlier correction of teething problems once the project is underway.

The evaluation has also highlighted that the young people who may or do take part are a key group to consult and to involve in planning and delivering services. The extent to which this happened varied, but seeking young people's perspectives throughout is an invaluable way of marketing the project

# Themes and issues

and of predicting and promoting interest and attendance. Some projects in England gained credibility when participants returned in subsequent years to take part in delivery. More widely, involving young people in this way can help achieve outcomes relating to personal and social development.

This issue has become more central to the programme and the evaluation; see also page 11 for other outputs from the evaluation.

## Timing and duration

Thought needs to be given to when young people should be recruited, when the project will run, and when it will finish. Much depends on local circumstance and trial and error. For example, one area in England recruited early to ensure enough time for pre-residential activity, but found that if they undertook this too early, young people lost their enthusiasm and drifted away from the programme. Similarly, it is important for continuing projects to be clear about when their support for individual participants should end, and when and where they can direct participants for further support.

## Staff recruitment

Projects can get going more quickly if staff resource requirements are clearly dealt with. Project managers need explicit agreements with partner organisations about who is going to be working on the project, the number of days they will contribute over what period, and what they will be expected to do. Informal arrangements have often led to difficulties and frustration, particularly when running the project is simply added to

individuals' existing workloads.

Many projects in all countries emphasised that it had been difficult to recruit suitably qualified staff and that this had sometimes delayed their work. Funders and other stakeholders could do more to acknowledge those difficulties from the outset, although BIG was generally flexible and supportive when such difficulties arose.

## Recruiting and retaining young people

This was a particular issue for the programme in England, especially given its underlying rationale of maintaining contact with young people at a crucial stage.

Effective recruitment in all countries relied on good working relationships between stakeholders, as well as good understanding of the purposes of the project. In some cases, though, stakeholders referred inappropriate participants, and in others there was a risk that young people would resist taking part in projects that risked stigmatising them. Project managers often faced significant difficulties in overcoming these competing tensions, and in England in particular this problem was heightened with the concurrent launch of various summer activities programmes. Sometimes the target group for these programmes overlapped and there was even sometimes a sense of competition between different programmes.

BIG and Connexions responded to early concerns about recruitment by asking projects to focus on the target group rather than focusing simply on numbers. Many projects dealt with the issue by recruiting a

# Themes and issues

wider range of young people, defending this approach as being more positive and enabling participants to learn from a wider range of experience.

Drop-out by participants was another important issue in England. Many projects were reluctant to upset group dynamics by introducing new participants at a later stage. The nature of the primary target group suggests that retention was always likely to be a serious challenge. While some projects used imaginative approaches to maintaining links with young people who were not



attending, the absence of standardised monitoring measures meant that it was not possible to identify how effective those approaches were and to encourage sharing best practice.

## Tracking participants, monitoring and evaluation

Various issues relating to these processes have arisen. Because they are separate but linked they are best discussed together.

- ▶ Projects were often concerned about BIG's standard monitoring requirements. Some felt that beneficiary categories set out specific target groups (rather than contributing to wider reporting), while many felt that it would have been more useful to have been told about requirements at an earlier stage – both to set up appropriate systems and to establish baselines.
- ▶ A particular area of concern has been the definition of "beneficiary". This does not take into account the variety of types and levels of intervention in Northern Ireland and Wales, and even where there was a broad similarity in the types of intervention (as in England) the system could not track the extent of individual participation and levels of drop-out.
- ▶ Approaches to tracking and monitoring individual participants varied, and it is clear that there is a need for more consistent approaches and systems in all countries. Some professional groups tended to feel that tracking and following up participants who had dropped out was counter-productive, as well as bureaucratic.

## Next steps

Tracking participants was clearly essential to ensuring that projects in England met the underlying aim of maintaining contact with young people. Despite the wider desire for standardised systems, there was clearly a responsibility on projects to establish and maintain systems to track young people during and after their involvement.

- ▶ The absence of standardised systems means that there is little useful quantitative data about overall success. This can ultimately affect the sustainability of even the most successful projects. Some projects in Northern Ireland were particularly interested in this matter; several asked the evaluators for copies of the participant tracking questionnaires that had been used in the evaluation in England.
- ▶ In England, 97 per cent of participants surveyed said that they would recommend taking part in the programme to a friend, and large majorities reported a range of personal and social development gains. These figures demonstrate how successful the programme was at achieving additional or intermediate benefits. A standardised monitoring approach may not uncover these successes, so projects may wish to consider ways of capturing additional and useful information of this sort.

### Next steps for AYP

The timetables, approaches and national contexts for the three programmes have varied. This also means that approaches and prospects for sustaining the work of the projects we have funded vary. In brief:

- ▶ In England, the launch of various other programmes made it difficult to maintain a separate identity for AYP, as well as to identify a discrete target group. This evaluation has however demonstrated that the general approach can be effective at helping young people to make firmer decisions about their future. For this reason, some of the approaches to guidance have been incorporated into the Positive Activities for Young People programme that the DfES runs.
- ▶ In Northern Ireland we have worked with the evaluators specifically to consider lessons learned from the programme and prospects for mainstreaming the work that we had funded. In general, projects were developed through close partnerships between various stakeholders and at a time of considerable policy development. This has given the programme and individual projects an opportunity not only to embed themselves in new arrangements, but also to affect wider policy and ways of working.
- ▶ In Wales funding will end by early 2007. Our Wales office have commissioned a separate package of support work. Results from this should be available in spring 2007. Like Northern Ireland, the focus on responding flexibly to local conditions means that stakeholders have tended to understand and appreciate the aims of the projects and how they work.

## Other outputs from the evaluation

As well as the reports and summaries published every year, the evaluation has led to further work that has offered the following types of support to AYP projects and to stakeholders in related and wider programmes. Reports and further information are available on our website:

- ▶ Many projects want to involve young people more successfully but have not been certain about the best ways of going about it. We commissioned Madeleine Swords to produce a report, "Built-in, not bolt-on: engaging young people in evaluation". We summarised this as "Engaging young people in evaluation and consultation".
- ▶ SQW produced questionnaires for young people as part of the evaluation in England. As well as gathering standard personal details, these questionnaires offer an approach to measuring participant attitudes and progress (although they need to be adapted to individual programmes and projects).
- ▶ Some of the issues discussed in this document arise in other youth activities programmes, as well as in wider areas. To highlight and discuss some of these, we held a seminar in October 2004, and produced "Developing youth activities programmes: issues to consider", which sets out some areas for particular attention. Although aimed primarily at programme designers, the leaflet is also useful for people planning projects.
- ▶ Our Wales office is supporting self-evaluation by projects through a separate contract with ARAD Consulting. This helps projects to measure and share their success and to disseminate learning to other similar programmes and projects.
- ▶ We have worked with our Northern Ireland office and SQW to produce a final review of the programme in order to highlight achievements and issues for all interested stakeholders.

