

YMCA WALES : EVIDENCE TO NATIONAL ASSEMBLY FOR WALES CHILDREN & YOUNG PEOPLE'S COMMITTEE REGARDING ATTENDANCE & BEHAVIOUR JANUARY 2013

Background to YMCA Wales

YMCA (Wales) is the umbrella body for 24 local YMCA organisations across Wales. The YMCA movement in Wales works to support children, boys, girls, young people, adults and families of all faiths and none in local communities across the length and breadth of Wales. We have a long and proud history of community based provision to improve the wellbeing of local people; our brand is recognised, valued and trusted. Our particular skills and expertise lie in working with children and young people who are disadvantaged, disaffected excluded living in poverty and/or who are vulnerable through family or personal circumstance, mental health, substance/alcohol misuse, offending behaviour, homelessness, family breakdown, caring responsibilities and/or who are care leavers etc.

We promote a human rights based approach in all our work and in particular we aim to underpin our activity to support children and young people aged 0-18 with the UN Convention on Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

We believe that the third sector in general and YMCA in particular can offer unrivalled value for money in assisting the Welsh Government/ National Assembly for Wales to support every child and young person in Wales to achieve their full potential and enjoy improved wellbeing. This is particularly relevant in the current financial climate, when our commitment, "can do" attitude and ability to maximise the use of volunteers and focus on measurable outcomes for young people ensures that we maximise the return on every pound and penny of funding we receive.

YMCA philosophy regarding school attendance and pupil behaviour

In recent years, we have developed and run a number of projects which are targeted at young people of school age who have attendance and behaviour problems, and we can evidence significant success in improving their self confidence, motivation, self-esteem and re-engagement with formal learning.

Evidence shows that the majority of pupils who have attendance and behaviour issues do so for underlying and often complex reasons and they are frequently vulnerable. They may come from chaotic families, be victims of bullying, have caring responsibilities in the home, have health/mental health issues, be looked after, and may possibly have special education/additional learning needs.

School pupils who have attendance and /or behaviour issues are unable to fully benefit from their right to learn and enjoy learning; as a result they may become NEET (not in employment education or training) at age 16+.

A large proportion of young people who end up known to the criminal justice system have unidentified and/or unmet special educational needs/additional learning needs; they experience alienation, "boredom" or frustration with the school environment because of their difficulty in engaging with mainstream provision.

Patterns of absence and /or disruptive behaviour in many cases can be identified in primary school; YMCA Wales takes the view that effective early intervention, far from stigmatising a child, can be of huge benefit in "nipping problems in the bud" and setting the child or young person on a more positive pathway within the formal education system.

Some primary schools in Wales have begun to introduce human rights based approaches to the school within the wider community; an excellent example is Hafod Primary School in Swansea which recently received a UNICEF Rights Respecting Schools level 2 award for its work. Through learning about and accessing their own rights young people feel valued as a community member - sometimes for the first time in their lives. They also learn about the importance of respecting the rights of other people and have opportunities to put this approach into practise, which can often lead to significant improvements in their behaviour.

However, if the right or sufficient support is not provided in school, these young people often "vote with their feet" by absenting themselves more regularly or misbehaving more seriously; this can ultimately, in extreme cases, lead to criminal activity.

Doing little or nothing to tackle poor attendance/disruptive behaviour can be extremely costly both to the individual young person in terms of lack of motivation, learning, self worth, and to society as a whole in terms of levels of community fragmentation, worklessness, benefit payments, reduced social capital and the cost of dealing with a young person within the criminal justice system (including both community and custodial sentences). There is of course a cost involved in investment in additional support for early intervention, however this is significantly lower than the cost of doing nothing until a much more significant intervention is required at a later stage in the young person's life.

Early intervention is therefore extremely cost effective.

A new direction which recognises the vital importance of community-based non-formal learning and informal learning

"If you keep doing what you've always done, you'll get what you've always got"

The present arrangements for tackling attendance and behaviour issues across Wales do not in our view appear to have had a significant impact in reducing the numbers of young people presenting with attendance and behavioural issues. We believe a change of policy direction is necessary, which recognises and promotes the important role which non-formal learning (such as youth work and community work) can play.

Non-formal learning delivered in a community setting seeks first to engage the young person through involvement in activity which appeals to them such as music, drama, art/craft, fitness, dance, beauty, holistic therapy, healthy eating/nutrition, sport, community volunteering experiences, or intergenerational work. Skilled youth or

community workers then support the young person to develop emotional intelligence, self awareness, and to learn anger management , alternatives to violence, negotiation and conflict resolution skills. Over time, there is a proven high success rate for non-formal learning interventions in re-engaging young people in the formal learning agenda through accreditation of skills gained and remotivating them to look forward with confidence to a positive future. For many of these young people achieving such accreditation may be their first experience of "success" being recognised, and this in itself can be a powerful force in terms of future motivation.

Non-formal learning alternatives to formal education cannot normally be provided by schools on their own; by definition the school setting and the pedagogical relationship between teachers and students may well be perceived by the young person as part of "the problem". However the third sector in general and YMCA in particular can offer a range of cost-effective non-formal learning programmes and activities which have a track record of delivering positive outcomes for young people such as these.

For example our Newgale Centre provides a life skills toolbox for young people, families and communities through the medium of outdoor learning and choice theory which supports young people to take control of their choices and to understand the impact of the choices they make. This in turn leads to improved aspiration, motivation and personal effectiveness. Further information is available at www.newgaleymca.co.uk.

Swansea YMCA alternative curriculum programmes work with young people that are identified as being most at risk of leaving school with few qualifications and becoming NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training). Many of these young people have attendance and/or behaviour issues. By working with schools to identify and work with young people before they drop out of the system YMCA can raise their self-esteem and help to realise their potential through tailored activities and enabling prevention rather than reaction. There is a developing evidence base that through the Swansea YMCA alternative curriculum programmes and support programmes, young people can and often do change from a path of negativity and risk, to one of hope, respect and positive direction.

During the last 5 years, Swansea YMCA has developed a range of non-formal learning support programmes for young people utilising a team of specialist workers across youth work, health, employment support and arts. It now provides programmes for 200 young people per annum in Swansea and 700 young people across Wales. Programmes include one to one and group interventions which aim to engage, develop skills, challenge stereotypes, provide positive role models, volunteering opportunities & apprenticeships and gain access to training & employment where appropriate. These include Swansea YMCA Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) weekly intervention programme (14-16yrs); Engaging Learning in Swansea Alternative Curriculum Provision (11-16yrs); Gypsy Traveller Education Service Provision & Youth Forum (11-16yrs); Arts 4 Life (Reach The Heights ESF funded) NEET Service provision – self referral; Drugs and Youth Offending Service Provision (11-18yrs); ESF Priority 1 Employment Support Programme (Pan Wales - 14-19yrs); Y Hub (14-24yrs) providing an alternative to statutory provision to enable young people to reach their full potential via tailored programmes of activity and a mix of self referral and referral

from partner organisations across statutory and voluntary sector partners. Further details are available on request.

YMCA Wales are about to initiate a 2 –year pilot programme (The Journey/Y Daith) working with young people aged 16- 25 who are NEET and younger young people who are disengaged from or disaffected with formal learning . This programme will be fully evaluated on a formative basis as it progresses. It will include personal development elements which specifically aim to improve young people’s self-awareness, self esteem and self confidence such as Pacific Institute PX2, the 7 Habits of Highly effective People, and the Circle of Courage, and will use non-formal learning methodologies to support vulnerable young people to gain skills and experience for to equip them for life, employment and making a contribution to their communities. These programmes can potentially be delivered to younger age groups with equal or greater effect and we intend to ensure an assessment of potential transferability to younger young people is included in the evaluation criteria.

In many of our local centres across Wales YMCAs work in close collaboration with other agencies including Families First partnerships, Communities First clusters, youth offending & prevention services and a wide range of other third sector organisations. We strongly support collaborative working and would urge a Welsh Government policy approach towards improving attendance and behaviour in school which requires schools and local authorities to be more proactive in seeking to work with us than has previously been the case in order to achieve positive outcomes for young people with attendance and behavioural issues.

We would welcome an opportunity to attend the Committee to discuss these issues further if that would be helpful.