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RESEARCH REPORT

Youth, community and social well-being: Investigating the role of youth groups in the health and social well-being of young people in semi-rural areas in the North of England.

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OfS Uni Connect Programme

futurehy

YOUTH, COMMUNITY AND SOCIAL WELL-BEING:

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Executive Summary

About the Research

This research was conducted as a commissioned project by FutureHY, the York and North Yorkshire Uni Connect partnership. Formerly known as the National Collaborative Outreach Programme (NCOP), FutureHY strives to provide a variety of support to young people across York and North Yorkshire in terms of wellbeing, positive social identities, educational and career opportunities. Nationally, Uni Connect's focus is broad, working with schools, colleges and community groups to provide higher education opportunities predominantly for years 9 to 13 and to those in underrepresented areas. FutureHY has taken a hands-on approach from the start by getting to know the areas it serves and the communities within, in order to offer both core and bespoke outreach programmes for youth groups. This research adopted an evaluative approach of the youth groups in 4 semi-rural areas in the North of England. The aim of this was to examine how youth groups facilitate a collective sense of wellbeing, whilst providing opportunities for young people to engage in a variety of activities. This included a series of film workshops that were used to develop positive social identities for the young people and improve social cohesion within the wider community. This research was an important evaluative piece for Uni Connect to gain valuable feedback on the projects and youth groups operating within their area for further and future development.

The Literature

Existing literature suggests a variety of contemporary issues are present in youth service provision in the UK. As such, a government policy entitled 'Positive for Youth', A New Approach to Cross-government Policy for Young People Aged 13 to 19' (HM Government 2011) which seeks to provide better education achievement opportunities and support for vulnerable individuals has been created to aid youth centres in being successful at improving young people's development. Studies examining anti-social behaviour and moral panic place young people at the centre of a cause and effect scenario, where any reports of trouble, damage or anti-social behaviour are immediately blamed on the young people of the local area. This common misconception of young people by wider society in urban areas highlights the lack of literature on semi-rural areas and provides a rationale for this study. Rises in austerity in Britain have also been documented as problematic for the complex sector of youth provision, whilst little to no literature documenting the thoughts and reflections of the young people themselves outlines a lack of depth in youth service knowledge. With this in mind, this research sought to give voice to the marginalised young people in the 4 semi-rural areas with the view to aiding our knowledge on how and why young people use youth groups.

The Research Process

This research utilised a qualitative case study design where semi-structured interviews with young people and youth workers/ youth personnel were conducted. These interviews provided the opportunity to explore the reflections and opinions of those using and providing the front-line services in the 4 semi-rural areas. The interviews were then transcribed, and thematic analysis was conducted to allow for reoccurring patterns and themes of the data to be identified.

The Findings

The key finding of this research was that in agreement with existing literature, a one size fits all approach in terms of the government's 'Positive for Youth', A New Approach to Cross-government Policy for Young People Aged 13 to 19' policy is not sufficient nor fruitful for the young people in the North of England. The young people cited various reasons for attending their youth group which included socialising with friends, engaging in activities and managing their mental health. Significantly, the data highlighted that the differences between the formalities of school and the informalities of the youth group environments were key to the young people's level of enjoyment and engagement. This was particularly crucial in ward 3, a targeted youth group where the young people had experienced family estrangement and trouble with the law. The activities undertaken in each of the wards were enjoyed due to the autonomy the young people were given and the trusting social bonds that the young people formed with their youth workers, arguably increasing the volume of social capital each young person was able to accumulate. The opportunities to engage in workshops and activities with the wider community were also positively received and demonstrate the positive relations that youth groups are able to achieve with wider society. Finally, despite the rise in austerity and funding cuts that influence how the youth groups are able to operate, there appears to be a positive relationship between lower levels of anti-social behaviour and moral panic between the young people and the wider community.

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Introduction

General Overview

There is a growing body of literature that explores the issues, provision, development and outcomes of Youth Centres and/or clubs across the globe (Robertson 2001; Glover 2004; Smith et al. 2005; Sharpe et al. 2019). Research suggests that engagement in youth community groups can create positive benefits for young participants, such as improved self-efficacy, improved mental health, self-confidence and strengthening social development (Checkoway and Gutierrez 2006). However, more often than not, young people are misunderstood, being described as delinquent, disengaged and different. The reason for this is often a cause and effect scenario where young people are inextricably linked with anti-social behaviour, in that if there are any reports of this in an area, young people are often the target for the blame. This is perpetuated by media portrayals of a type of 'street-corner society' where young people take drugs and are disengaged from school. This can trigger 'moral panic', a term that describes societal fear of the safety and normality of a community, resulting in people feeling threatened by 'gangs' of young people in public spaces (Cohen 2011). County lines is another issue that is becoming more prevalent amongst young people given that drug lords are using young people as the distributors of their drugs out of urban areas and into harder to reach rural areas (Robinson, McLean and Densley 2019).

Other youth service provision research has focused on the rise in austerity in Britain and the funding cuts youth centres have experienced (Cooper 2012). Other research has focused on inner city, urban areas (Farmer 2010; Nolas 2014) whilst little is known about semi-rural areas. Furthermore, there is little research that has been undertaken that provides the young people themselves with the opportunity to voice their reflections and thoughts on the service where they play the key role. The role of youth centres as a social space that can develop an individual's social identity and wellbeing is arguably key, particularly as youth is regarded as an impressionable life stage where young people face the biggest moments and challenges of their life to date (Lahelma and Gordon 2003).
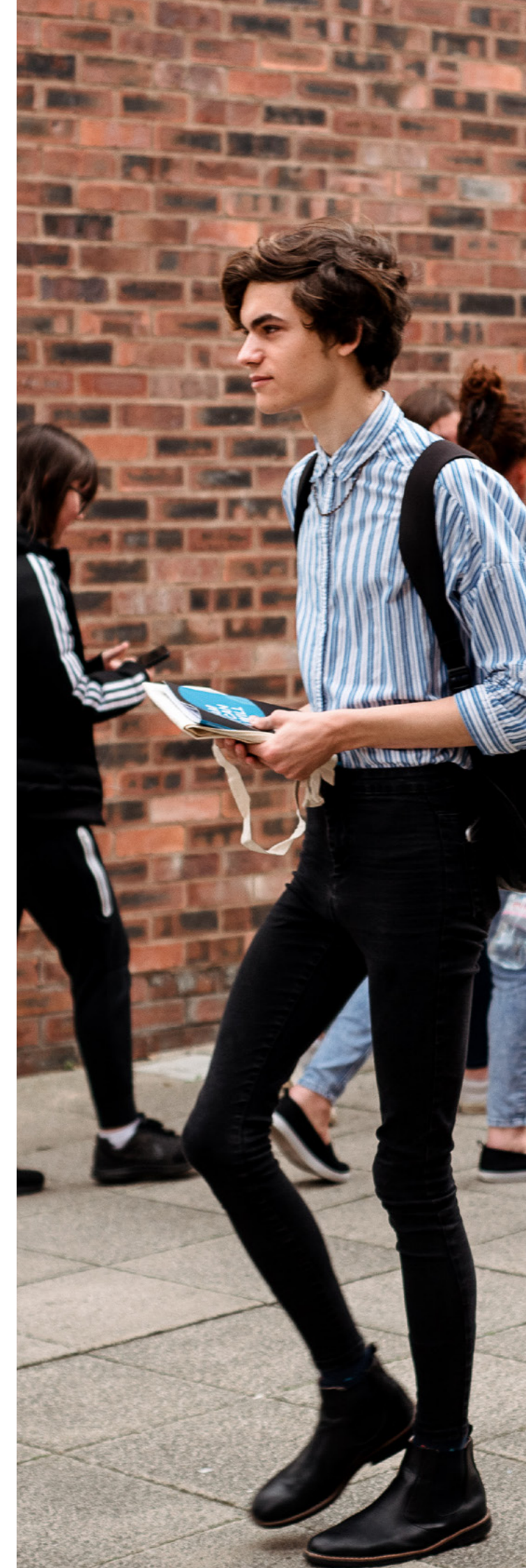
- According to the National Crime Agency (2016), 71% of police forces in Britain report county lines to be established in their constabulary.

- County lines is the exploitation and usage of children as young as 12 as runners for the drug products, as drug lords have long been known to use those of lower socio-economic status to transport the drugs (May and Hough 2004).

- Youth service provision cut in some areas by 75% and higher Cooper (2012)

What does the literature say?

'Positive for Youth', A New Approach to Cross-government Policy for Young People Aged 13 to 19' is a policy document written with the aim of aiding youth service providers with an outline as to how they approach their service in relation to their allocated funding. The policy states that better education provision and support for families with issues is high on the agenda with one plan for everybody, whilst statements discerning away from negative analysis of youths is a key focus (HM Government 2011). This is despite other research that suggests young people use their youth centres for more reasons other than education (Glover 2004; Pope 2016; Sharpe et al. 2019).

The reasons for participating in youth centres/groups has been suggested to include socialising with friends in an informal setting whilst in a safe environment (Coburn 2011; Nolas 2014). Despite the reduction in over 4,500 youth workers according to the charity YMCA (The Guardian 2020), research suggests that youth workers face moral dilemmas of how they are to run their sessions to maximise output for all concerned. For example, Pope (2016) found that youth workers are torn between meeting government guidelines and providing sessions that are appropriate for the individuals who engage considering their personal circumstances. This is despite their 'shop-floor' understanding of the young people who need and use the service, which arguably makes them the best people to make sensible judgements on the types of activities provided.

According to Putnam (2000), life within a community can be made considerably easier if there is an accumulation of social capital within a society. Social capital is a term often associated with sociologist Pierre Bourdieu and its use has gradually increased as a tool for offering explanations in various domains such as leisure and sport. Social capital is a notion of connectedness between people that includes trust and reciprocity. Perhaps importantly, Putnam (2000) states that as networks are built upon through this sense of connectedness and belonging, that the volume of social capital held by an individual can increase. Providing the exchanges between people are meaningful, the social capital can be exchanged for other types of capital, such as economic and cultural. This framework is useful for exploring how youth groups facilitate network connections between individuals and between themselves and wider society.

Studies such as the one by Coburn (2011) demonstrate that the activities provided in youth groups can engage individuals in opportunities that would not be available to them outside of the service. In her study, Coburn (2011) found that the planning and execution of cultural exchange with a group of young people from another country, resulted in an increase in discussions between the young people as to how they would organise the exchange. Additionally, the young people were able to gain cultural capital by challenging their own ideologies of others, which evolved their understanding of the lives of others.

Key Points for Consideration

- Young people are generally misunderstood and identified as the cause of anti-social behaviour in community public spaces.

- Youth workers are the best placed individuals for understanding young people of the area.

- The activities engaged in are enjoyed and beneficial for the young people when done on an informal basis.

- Social capital can be accrued through meaningful interactions with others.

Findings

The analysis of the interview data combined with the existing literature generated several key themes. Some of these that were identified include: (i) the role of youth centres; (ii) reflection on activities; (iii) social wellbeing and participation benefits; (iv) the importance of youth groups and anti-social behaviour.

The Role of Youth Centres

Responses from the young people highlight several reasons for their participation in the youth group(s) and included: socialising and meeting friends, engaging in various activities, aiding their mental health and helping the local community. The young people and the youth workers stressed the importance of the youth group as a place that differed significantly in terms of formality from that of school. The bonds between the young people that were discussed by themselves and the youth workers demonstrate the youth groups' potential of developing bonding capital suggesting the role of the youth centre is far more in depth than purely for education. Furthermore, the autonomy given to the young people to choose which activities they engaged in was highlighted as very important and demonstrates that a 'one plan' policy such as the 'Positive for Youth' one does not necessarily work for all youth groups.

Reflections on Activities

Youth workers suggested that young people living in semi-rural areas are particularly keen to engage in hands-on activities, whereas urban young people spend a lot of time using technology, i.e. mobile phones and social media. This was particularly prevalent for several participants who stated that their family circumstances meant that the visits and trips to colleges that they attended would not be possible without the youth group. The most successful and beneficial activity was the film workshop that was entirely devised, planned and made by the young people. The films purpose was to portray information about the young people of the area to the wider community, with the aim of changing misconceived ideas regarding young people. The film increased self-confidence levels amongst the young people, thereby building their social capital. The films from across the three researched wards were well received by local authorities and the general consensus was for more of this kind of activity to be planned in the future.

Social Wellbeing and Participation Benefits

Multiple physical, mental and social benefits were discussed by all the interviewees. As previously mentioned, the social bonds created between the young people and then between the young people and the youth worker were a prominent theme of the data. The consistency of the same staff member at each youth group was highlighted as important, as the young people formed extremely strong bonds of trust with their youth worker. Furthermore, these bonds were built over time, which according to Putnam (2000) is demonstrative of developing meaningful social capital which can be exchanged for other capitals. Participation in the youth groups was said to calm anger, reduce anxiety, increase friendships, build confidence to speak in public and apply for jobs. Perhaps crucially, of the 4 wards studied, it was apparent that each group contained a different demographic of young people- some who were there to avoid being in trouble, some who were there to not feel alone or isolated and some who were there to engage in activities to better themselves. This highlights that a 'one plan' policy is not sufficient to cover all youth service provision in the UK.

The importance of youth groups and anti-social behaviour

A rise in the globalisation of technology has meant that communication with people across the world from a small device is now easier than ever. Youth workers highlighted that this is impacting how young people interact with one another, increasing levels of isolation and making youth group gatherings all the more crucial. Workshops conducted in the 4 wards around county lines provided educational sessions for the young people on current issues that they could be exposed to. These were received very well due to the informal setting within which they were delivered. In ward 3, the targeted youth group, the attendance at the youth group was suggested by the youth worker to be positively contributing to reductions in anti-social behaviour in the area, by providing a safe, welcoming and non-judgemental place to go. Finally, and in line with findings from Coburn (2011), the work done with local communities such as help the homeless, was positively received by both the young people and wider community, which arguably contributes to challenging longstanding stereotypes of young people as troublemakers.

Quotes

"It's just like a sibling relationship that they are extremely close, they all look out for each other and if you upset one, you've upset them all. And they will stick up and fight tooth and nail for each other. Even when they know that what they've done is wrong."

Participant 9, Young Person

"I've been to interviews now for jobs, and I've gotten the job and I think before that, I would have been a lot more shy and a lot less confident."

Participant 10, Young Person

"If they were behaving the way they behaved in school setting, they'd be suspensions and detentions and all sorts going on and there probably wouldn't be many people left in the room, but you can't do community projects like that, cos you exclude the ones that really need the help."

Participant 15, Youth Worker

"young people have more opportunities and before I came here, I wouldn't be able to go [name of place] and other places that we've been, because, I can't, we can't afford it." Participant 6, Young Person

"They're given guidance and I think by us role modelling, they see that, if they're left to wander the streets they're going to fall into bad habits. It's about listening to their voice, it's about being socially included, look at us, we're here, listen to us, we make sense, we're not the bad guys."

Participant 14, Youth Worker

"[the film was] engineered around what the young people want to say… what young people feel like, we want to know what dreams and aspirations young people have, or what barriers and challenges they're facing."

Participant 15, Youth Worker

"I don't think a single parent came to see any of those shows and as a parent yourself, I was so proud… That's where I'm the advocate for them, cos I'm also a bit of surrogate parenting."

Participant 4, Youth Worker

"you've got to build up that trust up with them otherwise they wouldn't sit and have that conversation [referring to sexual health/ family crisis]. If that young person trusts you and they feel safe with you… but they're not going to sit there all of a sudden and go this happens, unless they really trust you."

Participant 13, Youth Worker

"It helps with your mental health and like your social- I wouldn't' be able to speak as much if it want for these groups, cos how bad I used to get with anxiety and everything. It's calmed down my anger."

Participant 2, Young Person

Opportunities for Development

1. Continued specialist workshops

The young people spoke positively of their engagement and involvement with workshops such as the film production, county lines and anti-social behaviour issues in their areas. The youth workers involved suggest that repeats/ expansions of these sessions would be beneficial given that there are new young people coming into the youth groups as they move through their school years.

2. More visits to colleges and other recreational day trips

The young people suggested that both educational and recreational day trips were beneficial for boosting their confidence levels. Furthermore, the trips themselves are crucial to offering the young people the chance to see what they can do post-school as for many the opportunities to visit these places are off limits due to their home circumstances.

3. Continued work with local communities

The work done by these groups suggests that it may be possible to begin challenging the longstanding stereotypes of youths as troublemakers by engaging the young people to create their own projects for and with local people.

4. Citizenship

The understanding of what it means to be a citizen and what citizenship is was very varied, suggesting this is an area where improvements can be made, as this will aid links with the wider community. Workshops on understanding this would arguably help young people to understand their place in the wider world and how they can strive towards their own goals.

Conclusion

In line with existing literature, this research has shown that the youth sector is both complex and constrained by policies such as Positive for Youth (HM Government 2011). The data from the interviews showed that the reasons for participating in these groups are varied; a safe place to be away from the streets, to stay out of trouble, to socialise, to engage in activities and to manage mental health. As such, a one plan policy is not necessarily sufficient for the 4 wards in the North of England. The voices of these young people highlight that they thrive on the activities provided for them and particularly enjoy the autonomy they are given to engage in their personal preferences.

The relationship the young people form with the youth worker is also particularly significant in this research. The reliance on the youth worker as an advocate, surrogate parent, advisor and therapist, demonstrates the 'shop-floor' approach the youth workers must take to gain the trust of these often vulnerable young people. Once the trust is in place, the young people are able to engage in activities that positively contribute towards their bonding and bridging social capital. The potential impact of accruing and developing social capital is arguably broad, with a variety of educational, recreational, social, personal possibilities available through forming new networks with new individuals. The groups themselves have positively given these young people a whole host of benefits and it is crucial that these groups continue on this pathway, not only for these young people, but for the next groups that will undoubtedly join in future years. This has been achieved despite heavy financial cuts to youth service provision in the UK. This research highlights how important sustaining staffing levels and therefore the ability of youth groups to function is key for the young people if we are to challenge negative youth stereotypes and other social issues such as anti-social behaviour and moral panic.

In terms of future opportunities, there is room for development in understanding citizenship and what it means to be a citizen of society. By understanding these fundamental principles, it is hoped that the young people would be better equipped to make positive choices and contributions to their local communities and the nation as a whole. Furthermore, workshops on key issues such as county lines and anti-social behaviour in these informal settings are extremely beneficial and informative, making them a definite consideration of activity for future groups.

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