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Evaluation of the New Horizon Youth Centre 'Youth Outreach Project': Final Report

Executive Summary



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Content

Background and Project Focus	3
Methodology	3
Young People's Findings	4
Stakeholder Findings	7
Conclusion	8
Recommendations	9
Best Practice Guide for the Sector	10

About New Horizon Youth Centre

'Youth Centre' may be in our name, but we are so much more.

Every year, thousands of young people across the capital become homeless because of family breakdown, domestic abuse, poverty, experiences of violence, or war and persecution in their home country.

We are a vital support network for 16-24 year olds with nowhere else to go. Through the 'one stop shop' services we provide at our day centre and outreach we support thousands of young people experiencing homelessness in London to improve their wellbeing, change their economic circumstances and find somewhere that they can call home.

For as long as young people are homeless and vulnerable in London, we will be on a mission to give their potential a home.

We would like to thank the National Lottery Community Fund for their support of the project.



1. Background and Project Focus

The Youth Outreach Project (YOP) at New Horizon Youth Centre (New Horizon) supports young people to reduce offending behaviour and make positive life choices through one-to-one support, drop-in services and group work sessions. The project was delivered by New Horizon and was funded from 2016-2018 by the National Lottery Community Fund.

YOP provides open access to drop-in services, including accommodation advice and referrals, accredited education and training programmes, counselling, and music production workshops. One-to-one support is tailored-to-need and provided alongside group work to meet young people's needs. Life skills workers deliver a wide range of taster sessions and other activities for young people. Transitional workers provide outreach and pre-release support as well as one-to-one and group work with some young people (e.g. young women at risk, young men in gangs). The project is London-wide and targets young people aged 15-25 leaving young offender institutions, as well as those identified by referring agencies as high risk.

The aim of the evaluation was to understand the experiences of young people with the project (including high-, medium-, and low-risk clients), all of whom will have complex needs.

2. Methodology

This piece of research evaluated the outcomes set out by the National Lottery Community Fund for assessing the impact of YOP. While New Horizon tracked individual-level indicators related to young people in the project, the wider evaluation sought to explore the project outcomes beyond the individual level to think about how salient the project was to young people (how much it mattered) and the ways in which these outcomes were met (the process of creating change).

- **Project Outcome One:** High-risk young offenders will have reduced reoffending rates and therefore an impact on improved community safety;
- **Project Outcome Two:** High-risk young offenders will have increased self-confidence and make positive choices to alter lifestyles;
- **Project Outcome Three:** High-risk young offenders will have improved employability skills and increase their take up of employment and training opportunities;
- **Project Outcome Four:** High-risk young offenders will have greater safety and better access to shelter and security.

This final report presents findings from questionnaires, interviews with clients, interviews with New Horizon staff, interviews with external stakeholders, and observations derived from an organisational ethnographic approach. The in-depth data presented here evidences the impact of change on young people and the community, and details the ways in which they have made positive changes as a result of their involvement with the project.

Guidelines on research ethics as set out by the British Sociological Association were adhered to, and the Ethics Committee in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research at the University of Kent reviewed and approved the research proposal and all documentation for the evaluation. All participants gave their informed consent to take part in the research, and all name and identifying details have been anonymised to protect their right to confidentiality.

3. Young People's Findings

3.1 Housing and safety

Over 95% of the sample had been or were currently homeless (this includes sleeping rough, couch surfing, and sleeping in homeless shelters), while many were housed in temporary hostel accommodation. Young people who had been housed in safe places were better able to make positive choices about their futures, while those who were still homeless or living in hostels had a much more difficult time in accessing services, in staying engaged with services, and with continuing or furthering positive changes that they had made. Housing emerged in almost every single interview as a key issue, and this concern was echoed by the New Horizon staff, as well as by external stakeholders.

Having a safe place to stay was critical in terms of young people being able to move towards making positive changes, and this was an issue that faced almost every single client in the evaluation. It is hard to underestimate the importance of housing security for this vulnerable population, and it is clear from their interviews that having someone help navigate this helped establish trust and also gave clients the emotional space to start thinking about going to 'the other side' – in this case moving away from selling drugs and getting involved in training and work.

While New Horizon staff were often able to locate a place to stay for young people and worked with a wide range of local authorities to do this, in many cases where young people were at risk in their own boroughs but no reciprocal arrangement could be made, young people were effectively left homeless. YOP would often pay for young people to stay in a hostel or hotel, but this is not only economically unsustainable, it also fails to give young people a sense of stability and security in a time of crisis. In some cases I observed, young people would often only stay for a short while and then try to return to their local area, even if it was known to be dangerous for them or their families. Ensuring that all local authorities work together to address this situation is critically important for keeping young people safe and giving them the best chance to make positive changes.

3.2 Mental health

Many of the young people were experiencing significant mental health issues. For those that had exited gangs or who had faced extreme violence, they were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, anxiety, and/or depression. Those who had been in prison or were currently in prison also described feeling anxious or depressed as a result of being incarcerated, particularly in institutions where staffing levels were low. While a small number of them had accessed counselling or GP services as a result of their interactions with the YOP team, it is clear that the mental health needs of vulnerable young people are not being adequately addressed. Additionally, it was clear that many young people had undiagnosed mental health issues that were making it difficult for the YOP team to work effectively with them in cases of severe mental illness (e.g. during a psychotic break breakdown).

While most of young people in the study had experienced serious events as children that would almost certainly have required intervention from a social worker, only 50% of the sample had been in the care system or had worked with a social worker due to family problems. Some participants talked openly about growing up with parents who had addiction or mental health issues, although this was not something that was discussed in every interview. All of the participants had grown up in poverty, and many of them spoke about not having enough to eat at various points in their lifetime. All these factors can impact young people negatively, and increase their chances of engaging in offending behaviours at young ages.

A significant proportion of YOP clients have been exposed to incidents of violence; it was important that they were able to trust the YOP workers. Many disclosed their histories of violence and were able to turn to the YOP team for help with mental health or emotional issues. However, it is difficult to work effectively with clients who have mental health issues that are either undiagnosed, or are not being treated by a trained professional. As a result of the recommendations in the interim report, the YOP team recently recruited a clinical psychologist and a counsellor to work with clients at the centre to help better support young people with complex needs.

3.3 Increasing confidence and recognising achievements

All of the young people we spoke to said that their interactions with the YOP team had increased their confidence and their sense of self-worth. They identified the practical help that YOP had provided, and specifically mentioned help with accommodation, help with drugs and alcohol, help accessing health services (including mental health and sexual health services), help with engaging with other appropriate statutory services, and help in accessing/securing educational and training opportunities. It was clear from the interviews that every single young person that engaged with YOP had made better choices as a result of their interactions with the team. In some cases there were dramatic results – some young people were able to undertake training and were continuously employed for long periods of time. Others went back to education – for some young people gaining their English certificate was an incredible achievement, which had an impact on their self-esteem and confidence. Other young people were able to progress much further, with some completing their undergraduate degrees at university.

3.4 Building trust

Being able to have someone in their lives that they trusted was one of the most important elements that helped young people make better choices. Trusting relationships were invaluable for these types of clients, many of whom had attachment disorders from childhood trauma, and working in a drugs market makes it difficult to trust even the closest of friends. In their world people often die, go to jail, move away, or sometimes just disappear. They had few expectations about being able to really trust anyone, and so building these relationships was incredibly important for them as it meant they could really rely on someone to help them, sometimes for the very first time in their lives.

3.5 The bumpy road to change

While some young people are able to make dramatic changes to their lives in short periods of time, for other young people the road to making positive choices takes longer. The long-term support that YOP offers is a key part of their theory of change model, and is something that is particularly effective for clients who have often been let down by other people in their lives, or who don't have support networks in place to help them make positive changes. Not only does this reinforce trust, but it also means that if young people face problems, even if they have been seen as 'successful' in moving on (obtaining employment or going back to education), they can always go back.

There is no clear linear path for young people moving from 'bad' activities to 'good' activities in a straightforward way – rather, the adjustments they have to make take time. The New Horizon approach to building trust with young people over a long period of time means that the door is always open. Even if they have made a lot of meaningful progress, small things can derail that trajectory and having the YOP team as a source of support they can always come back to is both reassuring for them psychologically, but also practically.

3.6 Loneliness and social isolation

Social isolation and loneliness emerged in the data in a number of surprising ways. For young people in this study, social support was important for them being able to 'go straight'. Many young people in the project grew up in areas with high levels of social deprivation. Their social networks were limited to other young people who were usually engaged in offending or gangs. Moving away from areas where they were known was key for them being able to make a new start, but this often meant moving away from family and the only friends they had ever had. Recognising the importance of social isolation and loneliness to young people wanting to make changes to their lives is a key finding and something that is relatively unexplored in academic literature, but can be seen across the evaluation as one of the most salient issues to young people's movement away from offending.

3.7 Prison and key moments of change

Young people often highlighted their experiences in prison as a key moment where they felt they were ready to seek out support services. Participants frequently highlighted the letters they received from the YOP team as important, and the consistency with which the YOP team followed up and engaged with young men during their prison sentence was crucially important.

Participants suggested that having regular visits from the YOP team was a source of emotional support, and the young men noted that they felt the YOP team delivered on their word (e.g. if YOP said they were going to visit on a certain day, they did; if the YOP team said they would follow up on something for a young person, they did) and that this helped develop a sense of trust and respect for the YOP team. It meant then that when young men were released from prison, they had a direct point of contact that they trusted and that they knew personally, and this helped facilitate their move back into the community.

4. Stakeholder Findings

The qualitative data collected makes clear the complex needs of the young people in YOP. All young people who participated in the study expressed high levels of satisfaction with the services offered, and indicated that working with the project had a positive impact on their offending behaviour. Interviews with a wide-range of stakeholders echo this. Working with clients over long periods of time (without any sense that clients should be moved on at a specific point) is extremely effective when working with vulnerable, high-risk clients, and professionals in the statutory and voluntary sector were very positive about their work with New Horizon. The interviews also made clear that the increasing number of referrals from a range of different agencies is an indicator of the efficacy of the YOP project.

Part of the reason YOP gets so many referrals is because their work is recognised across London as exemplary. Interviews with stakeholders evidenced the value ascribed to the work being carried out by YOP and every interview revealed that statutory and voluntary sector professionals who work YOP can see meaningful differences for the young people in the project.

5. Conclusion

New Horizon, as a third sector organisation, and its YOP project are well placed to deliver services and manage to make real, meaningful changes to the young people they work with. However, without appropriate funding for children and young people, particularly young people that are known to be at risk, New Horizon are engaging with young people who should have been helped far earlier. Without the excellent support from the YOP workers, many of the young people in the study would be in prison or dead. Yet it is hard to erase years of trauma and expect this vulnerable group of people to be somehow transformed into what society would see as the 'ideal citizen'. Indeed, acknowledging how vulnerable these young people are and seeing them as victims has to be part of the solution.

New Horizon do an amazing job at seeing them as people – not criminals or offenders. They learn about their lives and the terrible things that most of them have suffered, and by working with them for longer periods of time allow them space to make changes when-and-as they are ready. It is true that some may never be able to change and it is likely that some will die or end up serving long sentences for violent offences – but as a result of the services offered by YOP many of these young lives will be transformed for the better.

“Indeed, acknowledging how vulnerable these young people are and seeing them as victims has to be part of the solution”

6. Recommendations

While many of the recommendations from the interim report have been taken up and are already having positive impacts on service delivery, there are a number of wider recommendations that should be considered.

1. Mental health continues to be a key issue facing young people with offending histories, and ensuring that mental health professionals are funded to work with the team and young people in a range of settings is key for ensuring that New Horizon can provide the most appropriate support and guidance. Embedding mental health professionals in the team will undoubtedly help the YOP team work with high-risk clients more effectively. It is important, however, to consider the impact new additions to the YOP team have, specifically the clinical psychologist and the counsellor, and include a mechanism for systematically evaluating the impact on YOP clients.

2. Long-term relationships with young people is one of the strengths of the project, and ensures that young people who might disengage from the project can come back at any time without having to tell their stories all over again. This is a critical element to the success of the project, and something that should be considered in the sector more widely.

3. Effective risk assessment is fundamentally important for keeping young people and staff safe – continuing the development of a specific risk assessment tool that understands ‘risk’ from multiple perspectives and takes a holistic view is critical here, and once the tool has been refined and evaluated, sharing the model across the sector would help establish New Horizon as a leader in this area. Current tools are often reductive or fail to understand risk as a complex and dynamic concept, so sharing best practice around the process of developing and implementing a risk-assessment tool that is fit for purpose for this client group would be of benefit to the wider sector.

4. Homelessness and housing emerged as being some of the most pressing issues for ensuring that young people can reduce offending and keep them safe. While the YOP team do an excellent job with this already, it is important to keep this as a high priority on the agenda and continue to find ways to address what is clearly a crisis situation. Ensuring that reciprocal arrangements are in place across London is an important way to start addressing this issue, but third sector organisations need sustainable funding for vulnerable and at-risk young people so that they can be housed quickly and in an area that keeps them safe.

5. Social isolation and loneliness are also key issues for young people who are trying to make positive changes and move away from offending activities. Working with clients over a long period of time and moving away from the idea that ‘professional’ boundaries should exclude meaningful relationships with young people helps address this key issue. As such, considering how this particular mode of working fits into the organisational theory of change model is important and could be shared as a model of best practice across the sector. However, more focus on loneliness and its impact on reoffending needs to continue to be considered across the sector.

7. Best Practice for the Sector

Based on the findings from the project and in the context of the wider literature on working with young people, a number of best practice guidelines have been identified for consideration:

1. Many youth organisations take the view that mentoring is the best route for giving young people, especially young men, a (male) role model. In many cases this approach may prove effective, but the findings here suggest that having staff that are trained and properly supported to work with young people is critical. Gender did not emerge as salient for young people, and they were clear that they wanted to work with people who could work efficiently to help them with jobs, training, housing, and other key issues. As such, focusing on training staff and volunteers to ensure they have the knowledge and ability to assist young people is of the utmost importance, and should be a more pressing consideration when developing a theory of change model.

2. Developing a risk assessment tool that was flexible and met the needs of high-risk young people while also keeping staff safe was an important element of the evaluation. Ensuring that risk assessments are flexible enough to understand risk as dynamic and changing is important – and in the case of New Horizon a specially designed risk tool was created to give a 360-degree view of risk. The positive impact of this is already being realised with YOP, and this is something the wider sector should consider in their own programmes.

3. Making sure that data about clients can be easily and securely recorded by frontline staff is critically important. Software and hardware need to be fit for purpose to ensure that information about clients can be shared amongst the team and the wider organisation. Accurate data is important for managing and assessing risk, and sharing information across teams helps inform action plans for helping young people.

4. As the public sector has responded to austerity measures and in many cases have withdrawn services for the most vulnerable, the third sector has stepped in to ensure that young people have the support they need to make positive changes. Workloads for many frontline staff have increased, and managing large caseloads with limited resources was one of the issues facing the YOP team and New Horizon. Changes were made after feedback from interim findings were reported, and the situation is significantly better and staff were better able to cope with the demands from clients. Making sure that workloads are managed should be obvious, but in some cases the most dedicated frontline staff do not always realise how much they are taking on, or the impact this might have. Proactive management strategies that regularly check work/life balance is best practice and should be an important part of staff appraisals.

5. The YOP team, like many people working at the frontline with vulnerable groups, take on an enormous amount of trauma through their work. The physical and emotional toll that this work requires not only that workloads are effectively managed, but that staff are able to seek help from qualified professionals when needed. Anyone working with gang-affiliated young people and hearing their stories of abuse and violence should have regular access to a clinical psychologist who can help them process the trauma.

Disclaimer: All views contained in this report are the responsibility of the authors, and should not be assumed to be of New Horizon Youth Centre or of any of the evaluation participants

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Giving potential a home