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## Effective professional development in youth services: Bath and North East Somerset Council

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### Brief description

Bath and North East Somerset Youth Service provides targeted support for young people including those with learning difficulties and disabilities. A particular feature of its work is the attention given to the professional development needs of practitioners so that staff work effectively together to support one another and share information and good practice. This is one of seven case studies which forms part of Ofsted's survey, '[Critical issues in the provision of youth work for young disabled people](#)', published in January 2013.

### Overview – the provider's message

'Youth work should always begin with the young people. We get to know the young people well, listen to them, and involve them in identifying their needs. Having staff with the right skills is core to this work. We therefore encourage our youth workers to influence the shape of provision through their work. This allows the young people to have a voice and to help them integrate with others. We ensure that our youth workers also learn about specific medical and other conditions and how they impact on an individual's everyday life. Youth workers are also trained and trusted to work with families, especially those that are protective or reluctant to let their son or daughter engage in youth work. We develop the skills of our staff by enabling them to work together to support one another.'

*Paula Bromley, Principal Youth Officer*

### The good practice in detail

#### Background

The Bath and North East Somerset (BNES) Youth Service leads work with partners in the local authority, in schools and colleges, in the community, and in the voluntary and charity sectors to deliver a high quality, value for money service that meets the needs of young people. A particular feature of its work is the broad cross-section of adult workers who lead projects and support young people; volunteers, professionally qualified youth workers and specialist health and education staff.

Young people with disabilities often feel isolated from their peers. They may develop friendships with others at their special school, but due to wide catchment areas they may not have a friend who lives near enough for them to spend time together out of school. Moreover, some parents and carers can be overprotective and are cautious about their children mixing with other local young people.

The service has [identified](#) the importance of providing activities for young people with disabilities where they can integrate with other young people, as well as providing specialist sessions solely for this group, where this is agreed to be appropriate.

The BNES Youth Service's curriculum for life provides young people with a good choice of activities and programmes. Staff work well with each individual to initially assess their particular needs and identify the most suitable activities. There are always options which are accessible to young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Being able to make informed choices helps them build confidence and self-esteem. Many of the activities focus on problem-solving in a wide range of everyday contexts and they offer challenge and informal learning within an environment which is supportive, without being overprotective.

## Good planning and monitoring

The service has benefited from the strategic engagement and active support of the Executive Member for Children's Services and from the Children's Service Leadership Team. To deliver a service to young people within budget the youth service has worked to refocus on providing targeted work and the work with young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities is one aspect of that provision.

Resources and equipment are purchased to help make life easier and to support youth work sessions. Some young people choose to text youth workers when in need of support or on a social basis. The service responds to this by providing BlackBerrys for staff. A record of all text messages is kept, providing a safeguard for young people and for staff.

[The Youth Service Training Plan 2012-13](#) focuses well on supporting staff to work with young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and includes training to work within specialist competencies and guidelines. The service also ensures that staff are trained to use specialist resources for assessing the needs of young people with learning disabilities. Individual training records provide a log of the training that each practitioner has undertaken, including multi-agency training.

Team meetings and supervision sessions at the 'Youth Hubs' provide staff with good individual support and helps them to identify how their existing youth work skills can be developed or adapted to work with young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities.

## Thorough induction

The youth service induction and training programme for staff includes topics such as:

- young people's voice and participation
- risk assessments
- dealing with challenging behaviour
- dealing with harassment and bullying
- staff supervision and reflective practice.

## Effective ongoing staff development

Professional development activities include:

- sessions led by internal and external specialists
- meetings to cascade and share relevant training undertaken by individuals
- opportunities for workers who are less familiar with or less confident in working with young people to work with experienced members of staff during integrated and specialist youth work activities sessions
- the use of specialist websites, such as [Outcomesstar](#), to update staff about regional and national issues.

Youth workers also benefit from specialist training related to medical and other conditions. The service garners expertise from other sections of the local authority, school, colleges and other specialist organisations. Specialist training covers topics such as diabetes and epilepsy treatment. Staff are expected to undertake their own reading and research in areas such as Asperger's Syndrome. A reading list is provided and the service purchases books to support the training.

Multi-agency training is used well. The youth service is located in the local authority's Children's Service section of the People and Communities directorate. The Principal Youth Officer is a member of the Children's Service Workforce Reform Steering Group, which facilitates generic, multi-agency training. This vital training provides a foundation for youth work with young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities and includes:

- training for all staff on equalities, inclusion and diversity; child protection and integrated working
- understanding common assessments
- the role of the lead professional and team around the child support processes. Much of this training is multi-agency which enables the service to develop partnership working.

## Impact on services for young people

The programme of activities accommodates the specific needs of young disabled people. A BNES Youth Service manager oversees the Duke of Edinburgh Award for schools and other centres across the area. This manager has allocated time to provide specific training and support for school staff which has enabled young people from a special school to work towards an Award. The young people followed the usual process, taking as much time as they needed to reach the required standard. Five received a Bronze Award at a recent [celebration event](#).

Youth workers meet with parents and carers to discuss individual support for their young people and to ensure that they have a 'positive' experience when accessing services offered by the service in other venues, such as schools and colleges. These opportunities are used to challenge parents and carers where there is evidence that the family may be overprotective of the young person. Well-established informal support networks put parents and carers in contact with each other. Workers liaise with and mediate between young people and parents and carers when necessary.

The youth service works well with national charities, such as [Mencap](#) and the [National Autistic Society](#) to meet the needs of autistic children and young people and those with mental health issues and to cope with very challenging behaviour that often arises from issues relating to learning difficulties, disabilities and specialist educational needs. Engaging proactively with a number of schools and colleges, including those with specific provision for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, enables youth services to be delivered at that site or at alternative premises if that is more appropriate for the young people concerned. Work undertaken with BNES Trading Standards department has contributed to solutions to 'older' young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities, being persuaded or intimidated by under-aged drinkers to buy alcohol on their behalf.

The service worked with BOSS to produce a [pack](#) to support the delivery of job clubs for young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. Other materials have been adapted for use with young people with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The service has been working with Bath Spa University School of Education and the Head of BNES Virtual School for Children and Young People In Care to adapt their '[In Care, In School](#)' and '[In Care, In Secondary School](#)' materials so that they can be delivered by youth workers.

## Provider background

[BNES Council's Youth Service](#) provides open access and targeted services for young people aged 11 to 25 with learning difficulties and/or disabilities. The service is delivered from '[Youth Hubs](#)' and sites with accessible mobile provision serving outlying areas.

## Other examples in this series

[Birmingham City Council](#)  
[Kent County Council](#)  
[Merseyside Youth Association](#)  
[Norfolk Coalition of Disabled People](#)  
[Rochdale Youth Service](#)  
[Whizz-Kidz](#)

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