

Oxfordshire County Council

Targeted Youth Support Service

Peer Review

Report

21 - 24 January 2025

1. Executive Summary

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) agreed to participate in the Peer Review for youth services (January 20-24, 2025), designed and delivered by the National Youth Agency (NYA). The Peer Review is a programme to support Local Authorities meet their Statutory Duty on services to improve young people's well-being (Section 507B of the Education Act, 1996)

Oxfordshire is a County with a diverse mix of urban and rural areas. The youth population (Year 7 – 13) is 41,127, including 16,909 Free School Meals Children. Despite having lower levels of deprivation and child poverty compared to other South East areas there are significant pockets of deprivation. Oxfordshire is significantly impacted by unequal income and housing affordability.

Targeted Youth Support Service (TYSS) directly deliver a youth offer with the following key areas: groupwork, including non-groups in school (lunchtime drop ins), community support and detached youth work, one-to-one support and advice and signposting. The majority of open access provision is delivered by a wide and diverse VCSE partnership.

Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) recognise that the offer is currently inconsistent in terms of quality, funding and sustainability and levels of qualified youth work force. It is apparent that OCC are working to address this and have political and strategic commitment to develop the youth offer and secure quality preventative services.

2. Key messages & recommendations

There are a range of observations within the main section of the report that will inform practical actions Oxfordshire County Council may want to consider. The following are the review team's key messages and recommendations to the Council:

Messages

- 2.1 We witnessed impressive political commitment, cross-party support and strong strategic leadership of services for young people.
- 2.2. Staff across the organisation felt well supported by leaders who were seen as being approachable, open and transparent in their communication. Many commented on a positive working culture. Similarly partner agencies reported confidence in the council's senior leaders.
- 2.3 The persistence and determination of elected members and senior officers has enabled the council to re-establish a youth service. Leaders are ambitious for young people's futures and understand the value of youth work.
- 2.4 Targeted Youth Support Service (TYSS) has a clear sense of purpose and a delivery model, which is widely understood throughout the organisation and most partners; and valued by young people.

- 2.5 As a new service TYSS have created a new diverse, passionate, skilled and committed youth focussed work force, who have developed strong relationships with many partners and across communities.
- 2.6 There is a clear strategy and purpose for the realignment of services into an integrated adolescent service offer for young people, which most staff appear to understand and welcome.
- 2.7 The recently refreshed Children's Trust has potential to drive forward the Children's and Young People Plan and to strengthen governance arrangements across the County.

Recommendations

- 2.8 There is a good offer to schools, enabling youth workers multiple contact with young people in addition to community and youth provision, but this is not consistent and partners reported that many schools are difficult to engage or access. The Peer Review team recognised that the Local Authority have created strong relationships across schools and academies and work is happening to build and strengthen this. The peer review team heard that some VCSE organisations and youth workers had difficulties accessing schools to offer support. The youth service has a good model for supporting schools and engaging young people in multiple settings and we feel this could be used to increase access to schools.
- 2.9 There are some strong formal models of youth voice and participation, most notably an impressive SEND Youth Forum who have made a big difference in a small amount of time. We recommend building on the participation strategy, using a recognised model such as Lundy, to widen the engagement and representation of diverse groups of young people, particularly those facing socio-economic disadvantage. The development of the strategy should seek to create mechanisms for young people living in communities and involved in open access provision, including VCSE partners, to feed into decision makers and create influence.
- 2.10 It is good to see youth workers being encouraged and enabled to access level 3 and 6 Youth Work Apprenticeships. We would recommend consideration to formalise a career pathway to level 6 JNC qualification. Alongside this work, we recommend that the Local Authority continues to work with Oxfordshire Youth (current survey) to map the level of professional youth work qualifications (levels 2-6) in the County. This is important to understand the gaps and grow confidence in delivering a sufficient offer with qualified and trained professionals, as required by the Statutory Duty (Section 507b).

- 2.11 There is an understanding of youth work, but this seemed informal and inconsistent across the partnership. We recommend work to develop an agreed Oxfordshire Framework and Charter for Youth Work. Developing a Framework and Charter will provide a consistent understanding of youth work across the Authority and partners.
- 2.12 While good partnerships across the VCSE are evident, there is an appetite to develop a broader overarching youth alliance which builds on collaboration, quality assurance and sharing resources such as funding, training and spaces. We recommend further consideration of this, and the NYA can share examples from other Local Authorities where this is working effectively.

3. Summary of the Peer Review approach

Independent external evaluation and feedback from the sector has endorsed Peer Reviews as an approach that promotes learning from a sector-led improvement perspective. All Local Authorities and their partners are responsible for improving outcomes for children and young people, and it is recognised that an external and independent view can help to accelerate or consolidate progress.

The Peer Review team was sourced specifically to address the areas of focus highlighted by the Council. The team consisted of senior colleagues with significant experience of leading and managing children's and young people's services within local government and the VSCE sector, supported by an experienced Peer Review manager.

The Peer Review team

Peers were selected based on their relevant experience and expertise. The peers who delivered the Peer Review were:

Ivan Brosnan	NYA Young Reviewer
Kemi Odeyemi	NYA Young Reviewer
Helena Williams	Shropshire County Council PeerReviewer
Kirsty Burden	NYA Youth Work Specialist
Laura Keegan	NYA Quality Practice Manager
Kevin Hall	NYA Associate
Andy Lloyd	NYA Head of Quality & Standards

The process

The peer review team prepared by reviewing a range of documents and information to ensure they were familiar with the Council and the challenges it is facing. The team then spent four days onsite during which they:

- Heard from over 40 people, including: young people, leads members, senior leadership team, front-line practitioners and manager and partners
- Visited local teams and partners
- Read background documentation
- Undertook visits to settings; observing sessions and talking to professionals.

This report provides a summary of the Peer Review team's findings. It builds on the feedback presentation provided by the peer team at the end of their on-site visit on Friday 24th January 2025. By its nature, the Peer Review is a snapshot in time. We appreciate that some of the feedback will include areas that you are already addressing and progressing.

4. Scope and Focus

Oxfordshire County Council identified three areas of focus for the Peer Review and these were agreed at the beginning of the scoping process. The three areas are listed below:

- **Practice and Impact** (skill, needs assessment, impact and evaluation)
- **Sufficiency** (statement of offer and secured resources to deliver, accessibility for all young people – target and open access)
- **Partnerships** (LA and VCS sector, distinct youth work within allied services)

During the on-site visit, the Peer Review team identified several cross-cutting issues that were covered in the final day feedback presentation, and these are included in the main findings below.

5. Young Reviewers

The Peer Review Team had the benefit of the insight and knowledge of two NYA Young Reviewers; Ivan Brosnan and Kemi Odeyewi. While their views and opinions have been integrated throughout the report, below is a summary of the key areas they observed and wish to emphasise.

Ivan Brosnan:

“It was a pleasure having the chance to see the fantastic work that is taking place across Oxfordshire to support young people. I was particularly impressed with the political support that exists for the youth service and the positive culture that exists within the organisation. The youth workers I spoke to knew the areas in which they worked well. I felt as if there were strong relationships with other services across the board; Targeted Youth Support Service (TYSS) has evidently made its mark in the short time it has been up and running. The digital Oxme offer is also strong and should continue to be used. Some areas to consider do include how to resolve the issue with the impasse over the use of a particular community based centre and looking to promote a positive working relationship between Thames Valley Police and young people, especially in the areas that have a particularly strained relationship with the police. There is also something to be said on better mapping the youth voice offer in the county and ensuring that all young people across the county know how they can influence decision-making in the county.”

Kemi Odeyemi:

“During the peer review, it was encouraging to see the significant effort being put into supporting young people in Oxfordshire. It’s clear that the council is deeply committed to making continuous improvements in the youth services available, and there’s a genuine focus on adapting provisions to meet the needs of young people. The positive impact of these efforts is evident, particularly in the range of services being offered and the dedication of staff across the sector.

That said, there are still opportunities to enhance the overall effectiveness of these services. One area for improvement is the strengthening of partnerships within the Oxfordshire youth sector. Improved collaboration between different organisations could help extend the reach of youth services, particularly in more rural areas. This would allow resources to be spread more evenly, ensuring that all young people, regardless of where they live, have access to the support they need. Additionally, fostering a greater sense of partnership could alleviate the competition for resources that has been highlighted by several stakeholders, leading to a more harmonious and coordinated approach to service delivery.

Overall, while there are areas to refine, the efforts already in place are promising, and with further collaboration, Oxfordshire's youth services have the potential to make an even greater impact.”

6. Main Findings

Practice and Impact

Strengths:

It was evident to the Peer Review Team that Targeted Youth Support Service (TYSS) have an impressive and energetic youth work force. The team are highly regarded by other practitioners and partners and are delivering some high-quality youth work. As a new service this has been purposefully developed through good recruitment and now has a clear remit and a flexible approach to need. It was evident there is a person centred, strengths-based approach to their work.

Quality detached youth work is being delivered in some areas of the county, with youth workers clearly knowing their communities well and engaging diverse and under-represented groups. We spoke to a number of new youth workers with lived experience and representative of Oxfordshire communities. This was evidence of a positive ‘grow your own’ approach to building the local workforce. This includes the development of both level 3 and 6 Apprenticeship opportunities. This has had a positive impact on those undertaking the apprenticeship and equally they have opportunity to share their learning with the wider team.

There is a strong understanding and use of the referral pathways mechanisms into TYSS, alongside effective triaging, which sometimes includes appropriate signposting to other services. TYSS also offer a self referral pathway via the Oxme website for young people and parents/carers. While this is welcomed by many, there was some evidence this can become a 'short cut' referral pathway to be exploited by schools.

We saw evidence of good quality preventative work in some schools with a range of partners. Where this is working well, and schools are open to partnership, youth workers are able to build multiple points of contact with young people; seeing them in the community, 1:1 settings and group work in school, to build relationships and develop positive interventions. However, we also heard from partners and staff that access and engagement with schools was inconsistent and often a source of frustration and we will discuss this further in areas for consideration and recommendations.

TYSS make a significant contribution to innovative practice models in Oxfordshire, including SMG's (the 4 P's approach) and Communities Around the School Offer (CASO). We understood that intelligence is appropriately shared and used well to deploy services in the right spaces and places. We were impressed observing a CASO by a clear effective multi-agency response to contextual needs in an identified area.

We met with two leaders and a young person of the SEND Youth Forum and enjoyed a presentation demonstrating their achievements in the last twelve months. We were impressed by the journey they have travelled, how much they have achieved in a short period of time and become a beacon for participation. It was obvious how much the SEND Youth Forum has transformed over the last 6 months, creating a space where young people with a range of disabilities and needs can feel safe, heard and important, which is invaluable. It was clear the support the group receive from a senior and strategic level, clearly impacted their influence on decision making.

Areas for consideration:

While it is positive Level 3 and 6 Youth Work Apprenticeships are available and encouraged it was felt there is no clear professional pathway in place and further development was the choice of the individual. The NYA would welcome consideration for TYSS to develop a formalised career pathway, strongly encouraging qualification up to level 6 youth work (or equivalent). Such a qualification pathway will provide a framework for youth work practitioners to operate within and professional development. More information around NYA CPD offer can be found here [Continuing Professional Development \(CPD\) - National Youth Agency](#)

We recognised some excellent partnerships with schools, but further work can be done to develop effective wider relationships with the best placed staff in schools (notably pastoral leads and school leaders), where access is not as open. Where examples of good practice and strong relationships exist with schools they could be used more to evidence outcomes and the value to other schools to replicate.

There is evidence of good, formalised youth voice practices, most notable the SEND Youth Forum and the development of a new Participation and Engagement Strategy. However, we had no sense of mechanisms in place for wider young people's voice to be represented at a decision making level. We had a sense that young people living in diverse and under-

represented communities may have their voice heard by local VCSE organisations, but there is a question how they feed into and influence strategic decision makers and policies, such as the Future Generations Policy. We would encourage some thinking about how this can be enabled and advocate that learning from the SEND youth forum be used to empower more young people.

The NYA provides a free online self-assessment framework to plan, develop and evaluate youth participation, which would be helpful to organisations across Oxfordshire: [Hear by Right – Youth Participation Framework - National Youth Agency](#) The NYA would also advocate for the adoption of a uniformed participation model, such as The Lundy Model, which is informed by article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child: they have the right their views are listened to and acted upon.

Sufficiency

Strengths:

The Peer Review Team were impressed by a thorough and detailed self-assessment completed by TYSS against their Statutory Duty (Section 507b). There is good and emerging understanding and knowledge of provision across the County through mapping. The self-assessment and mapping places TYSS well in the development of new aligned service, as the County strategically bring services, notably TYSS, Youth Justice, Exploitation teams and Turnaround, for young people together. In this realignment of services TYSS have a strong knowledge of themselves and clear in their remit and purpose.

We have already highlighted (in Practice & Impact) a strong detached youth work presence delivering effective interventions in identified areas. To add to this, staff teams have a good understanding and approach for community capacity building to develop new provision. Equally we saw effective partnering with the VCSE and City Council to expand reach into communities and deliver seamless services for young people.

Areas for consideration:

The review team recognised a strong partnership across the county and effective working with VCSE. There was some indication of a shared, but informal understanding and definition of youth work for partners. However, we felt this understanding was not formalised nor consistent. We would welcome work across the sector around shared values and developing a framework, with a defined and formal understanding for youth work.

It was evident and spoken about in pre-visit documentation that mapping has not happened to understand the scale of JNC professional youth workers (levels 2-6) practising across the county. Oxfordshire Youth have now included in a recent survey a question about JNC qualification. TYSS will work with Oxfordshire Youth's final results to map and better understand the gaps and be more confident in delivering a sufficient offer, as required under the LAs Statutory Duty (section 507b). Alongside this we have previously advocated (in Practice and Impact) that the service formalise their professional progression plan for youth workers, adding to a sufficient offer.

While we saw some good examples of practice it was notable (and highlighted in pre visit documentation, including the self-assessment and mapping) that there are gaps in areas, most notably North Oxfordshire and Rural West areas. In these areas provision is more limited and more fragile; and for some young people this is critical when facing ruralisation and isolation. To further strengthen the offer, we would support work on a gap and needs analysis to identify priorities for development, including the identification and development of partnerships in these areas.

Partnerships

Strengths:

The review team were impressed by some partnerships and relationships across Oxfordshire County Council (OCC) at both an operational and strategic level. It was clear these relationships were strong and built on mutual respect. We were pleased to be welcomed and briefed by several members of the strategic leadership team who demonstrated a commitment, forward thinking and ambition to achieve the best outcomes for children and young people living in Oxfordshire.

There is a well established set of strategic governance arrangements in place, including the Early Help and Prevention Board, the refreshed Children's Trust and the countywide Youth Offer Steering Group. Initially the review team felt unclear on the governance arrangements and specifically how they work together. However, as we spoke to more people, through the review, it became apparent these fully complimented one another and across departments there was a cohesive understanding. The team understood that the Youth Offer Steering Group are co-ordinating services and provision to meet the County's Statutory Duty (Section 507b), working within the direction of a newly developed and well understood Early Help and Prevention Strategy.

Operationally partners have strong and respectful relationships to deliver effectively. We saw and spoke to many of these including Community Safety Partnership, Public Health, Youth Ambition, City and District Councils, Employment and Education Team (EET), SEND Team, CASO and many others across the Voluntary, Community and Social Enterprise Sector (VCSE). We spoke with and saw some excellent examples of VCSE partnership, Project PT, Sweatbox, Banbury Children & Family Centre, The Hill Community Centre and Community Albums. One partner quoted: *"Working with TYSS was the foundation to the success of this project"*. While strong partnership work between OCC and the VCSE is already evident, we clearly heard a strategic ambition to build stronger links with the VCSE, which we expand upon in areas for consideration.

We spoke with colleagues from Oxfordshire Youth [Home - Oxfordshire Youth](#). Oxfordshire Youth pride themselves on delivering quality services to young people through a youth voice network, supported housing and sector support, including skills and training, with a membership of some 85 other Oxfordshire based youth organisations. It was evident the key role played by Oxfordshire Youth for delivering effective sector support and their potential and capacity to work with the Council in developing partnerships and greater collaboration across the sector.

The team were disappointed not to visit the new Blackbird Leys Youth Hub, which had been scheduled in as a final visit on the last day. Unfortunately, due to amber weather warnings

for travel we had to cancel to ensure safe journeys home. However, we are confident from feedback received from sources including OCC teams and VCSE organisations, this visit would only have added to our picture of cohesive and effective partnerships.

Each partner spoke highly of the ambition in Oxfordshire and a collective understanding of effective partnership.

Areas for Consideration:

While a strong commitment to partnership working was evident between OCC and VCSE it became clear to the review team that there is space to improve and cement a more cohesive and strategic alliance between partners. There is a long and rich tradition of VCSE providing youth services across the County and we heard of encouraging green shoots, however there is a message that now is the time to develop and cement these partnerships.

Whilst there was understanding about the purpose and intent of the Youth Offer Steering Group some reported that this now felt “stuck” and needed reviewing to make progress. The challenge remains in securing a strong and successful overarching VCSE partnership that can support and sustain a youth offer.

Organisations articulated well that they would welcome a more collaborative approach, leading to mutual support rather than a model based on competition and bidding rounds. In partnership with the VCSE we feel OCC should consider developing a broad Sector-Led Youth Alliance, across all partners promoting collaborative working, quality assurance, shared funding and shared training. The NYA can provide good case study examples from other Local Authorities who have been on similar journeys and have developed new sector led alliances, most notably the Bristol Youth and Play Alliance and Coventry Youth Partnership.

We also would recommend some attention given to the engagement with schools. Whilst we saw examples of good practice, some VCSE organisations and practitioners reported barriers and frustrations in engaging and accessing schools. Given the positive relationships OCC hold, we would recommend they can play a critical role in supporting VCSE partners to access these schools.

We also saw the potential for restorative work in particular communities, to increase access and opportunities for the most vulnerable young people and families. Whilst we saw this most notably in one area it was felt this could be indicative and required in other more rural areas where there is less provision available. We have noted since finishing the review colleagues have already conducted meetings (October 2024) to initiate restorative work and to work alongside a particular community organisation to find restorative solutions.

7. Next Steps

We hope that you will find the above findings to be a considered and true reflection of the discussions we had with you, your staff, your partners and young people in Oxfordshire. You and your colleagues will now want to consider how you can incorporate the Peer Review team's findings into your ongoing planning. We would welcome the development of an action plan against this final report and offer the NYA's ongoing support to this including a six-month review.

Relevant details are included below should you wish to access further support via the NYA.

For further improvement support you can contact the NYA's Head of Quality and Standards: Andy Lloyd - Tel: 07842 437176, email: andyl@nya.org.uk

Once again, thank you for participating in this review and please pass on our gratitude to everyone involved, particularly Kieris Mace, Susann Haehnel and Jessie Dobson for their preparation work and day-to-day support of the Peer Review team.

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