

Evaluation: Youth Homelessness North East

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

This evaluation report of Youth Homelessness North East (YHNE) was commissioned by Centrepoint and YHNE as part of its funding agreement with the Northern Rock Foundation. The evaluation period covers the period from 2007 but attention has been focused on YHNE's work over the last two years. The main themes covered by the evaluation reflect those set out in the original tender document: structure and management; relationships with stakeholders; progress against aims; achievement of vision and aims; key achievements; and, actions to improve the organisation. A Governance Day was designed and facilitated by GB Associates along with the development of a Social Impact Framework to assist YHNE demonstrate and communicate the difference it makes. The evaluation is based on a multi-method research approach that included a survey, group discussions and one-to-one interviews with YHNE members, staff and stakeholders. The research was carried out from July to October 2013 by Neil Gardiner and Judith Brown (GB Associates) with the report being produced in December 2013.

Key successes

This evaluation provides robust evidence that YHNE has made substantial achievements in a number of aspects of its work, exceeding targets in some elements. Through the research process, it is clear that YHNE has had a significant and growing impact, with particularly substantial rapid growth over the last two years. The main strengths of YHNE, achieved against the backdrop of a challenging economic environment, are outlined as follows:

Partnership working: There was a clear consensus in terms of the strong contribution YHNE makes in bringing together the various agencies and organisations with an interest in youth homelessness. The research identified that, though there is a broad spread of agencies linked to youth homelessness, YHNE managed to bring together this diverse range of organisations.

Initiatives: The research showed that there was strong positive support for the initiatives that YHNE had initiated and delivered during the organisation's lifetime. In particular, it was felt initiatives during the last two years had become more relevant, focused and targeted.

Raising awareness of youth homelessness: There was a clear belief that YHNE has played a strong and effective role in raising awareness of youth homelessness. There was concern that the issue of youth homelessness had become less of a priority in recent years for some agencies: YHNE's role was therefore seen as even more important in maintaining a focus on the issue.

Regional working: Regional events have contributed to the impact and influence of YHNE typically attracting around 60-70 people and including a mix of Commissioners, Senior Managers and Chief Officers from leading agencies in the region. The conferences have taken forward the work of YHNE, making a valuable contribution to local planning to address youth homelessness and helping to ensure the work of YHNE is used to inform local strategic development and service delivery.

Events: YHNE's themed events bring together young people, commissioners, service providers and strategists. All of the themed events have been well attended by all stakeholder groups with an average attendance of 70 people and around half of those being made up of young people. The events provide a place where providers and recipients of services can engage in a structured and purposeful conversation with the aim of improving those services. This approach represents a substantial change to the traditional approach of professionals, often working together without the involvement of or in the absence of service users. Themed events also have a clear focus on action.

Information management: YHNE addresses the challenge of managing and communicating relevant information. Numerous comments relating to YHNE's role in addressing the need for relevant and up-to-date information were mentioned, with specific reference to the way in which YHNE collates policy issues and synthesises strategy. Its website, newsletter and use of social media were seen as a positive by a number of research participants with steadily increasing numbers of participants using social media: YHNE currently has 500 Twitter followers. YHNE is seen as an important source of information and that the information it provides is both clearly targeted and appropriate to stakeholders.

Influence: YHNE's influence was also seen as a substantial positive through tackling what were referred to as 'big issues' in relation to youth homelessness. YHNE can also be seen to have a long term impact where organisations implement good practice so that long term benefits can accrue. There was also strong support for the role of YHNE as a good 'networking' mechanism, to bring together housing professionals and young people.

Expertise: Substantial professional added value was brought to YHNE via the Regional Manager and also the supporting Steering Group. As such, the experience, knowledge and skills that YHNE brings was considered by participants to add value to the organisation over and above what would otherwise be expected.

Campaigning: Key has been the strength of the difference made by the campaigning element of YHNE; developing and delivering information and research and promoting the issue of youth homelessness.

Evidence of progress: Some research participants noted that in its formative stages as the Regional Youth Homelessness Network, progress had been limited and relatively slow. However, these comments were qualified by observations that subsequent progress had been rapid, focused and effective, particularly in the last two year and in relation to the clarity and focus of the organisation, the links with key stakeholders and decision-makers, the makeup and role of the Steering Group and the delivery of key actions.

Research: A further achievement for YHNE has been the development and delivery of the annual homelessness surveys. The process of undertaking the survey is a huge task and YHNE acknowledges the support of the 12 North East local authorities, the VCS and other partners. What has been created is a valuable tool to support the development of strategy and services around youth homelessness: much useful information has been gathered and

key trends identified. No other UK region has such sophisticated intelligence on the size and nature of youth homelessness and the importance of this should not be under-estimated. The survey will become an annual feature of YHNE's work.

Sharing and promoting good practice: YHNE has developed its role as a conduit and supplier of information and data relating to homelessness and young people. Some of its achievements in this area have included: YHNE website providing a regional resource to members, partners and young people, with information, news events research and good practice; establishing and supporting the North East Homeless Think Tank; working with local authorities and other partners on a joint approach to 'No Second Night Out': information on which is available on the YHNE website and hosting the North East Regional Homelessness Group on the YHNE website; and, the 'hub and spoke' structure of the Regional Champions initiative which has done much to reach out to and provide young people with a voice and influence to inform youth homelessness strategy and provision.

Quality: Many positive comments were made by research respondents in terms of the overall high quality of activities and resources provided by YHNE: reports were produced to a very high standard and kept participants informed about key policy changes for example. An analysis of evaluation forms from various conferences and events hosted by YHNE supported this view that YHNE produces quality events and related documents.

Understanding issues around youth homelessness and the needs of homeless young people: A key research question related to the difference made by YHNE to the understanding of issues around youth homelessness and an overwhelming majority (85%) of respondents were clear that YHNE had made a difference in this area. The research has also demonstrated strong evidence of YHNE's proactive approach in terms of engaging young people: ensuring that young people themselves were involved in identifying and addressing the challenges around homelessness. In particular, there was recognition that many of the statutory agencies found such engagement a challenge and that YHNE made a substantial contribution to the work of engaging with young people and bringing young people together in order that others could hear their views and better understand their experiences. The provision or promotion of forums for young people and staff to work together to discuss the issues of youth homelessness is clearly a positive contribution made by YHNE.

Key Challenges

Alongside areas of substantial success for YHNE, opportunities to further develop and enhance the organisation have been identified as part of this evaluation, along with a number of important challenges. These challenges fall into four broad areas: sustainability; governance, independence and impact.

Sustainability: YHNE will need to be prepared to change and adapt to meet the challenges of achieving financial sustainability and moving towards a different business model. Integral to this is achieving organisational sustainability through the development of a robust membership offer alongside moving towards the delivery of contracted services. This

research provides some evidence that the potential for a rapid move to a paid for membership approach is not likely to be successful and that a more effective short term strategy would be to continue to build active participation in YHNE through the recruitment of 'partners' or 'supporters', (perhaps with a small administrative charge to cover costs) focusing on the very positive and constructive reciprocal relationship between the organisation and those with an interest in youth homelessness.

Governance: YHNE can develop its governance procedures and processes and in so doing, further increase its transparency, accountability and inclusivity. This relates to the role and function of the Steering Group, relations with YHNE members and YHNE staff. The role and make-up of the Steering Group would benefit from a review and consideration as would relationships with key groups such as Regional Champions and young people themselves.

Independence: Linked closely to YHNE governance is the independence of YHNE. YHNE's independence was regarded as vital for research participants. Currently, YHNE is hosted by Centrepont, a relationship that has benefits for both parties. Nevertheless, the issue of independence emerged from the research and discussions at the Governance Day. A series of options were prepared for the organisation that included retaining current structure; formalising the existing structure; or adopting a formal incorporated structure. Maintaining Centrepont as host organisation would give YHNE the opportunity to further build its reputation and delivery, strengthening its position as a strategic regional organisation. This would also give a greater time to explore and develop alternative approaches to financial sustainability, with the potential of a move to greater independence and a paid membership structure in the longer term.

Evidencing impact: As part of this commission a Social Impact Framework has been developed that will assist YHNE determine and communicate its impact. The Framework has been developed around three fundamental questions: for whom does it make a difference, in what way and how is difference communicated?

Whilst it is obviously important that YHNE finds an effective approach to addressing these challenges, the research and evaluation process has shown that YHNE has the capability and flexibility to manoeuvre itself as an organisation whilst at the same time, efficiently initiating new ways of working. YHNE is valued as an organisation by its stakeholders, delivering directly at a regional level (and indirectly at a local level) and is working hard to influence and shape activity, policy and delivery in a challenging area of work. There is much work related to the issue of youth homelessness across the region, involving substantial time and resources and there is a need for this work to be effectively integrated and reflect good practice. YHNE makes a positive contribution to addressing this challenge as an efficient, effective and productive regional organisation.