



investing in children

Evaluation for Investing in Children Membership

West Region Youth Advocate Programme

For the purpose of this evaluation for Investing in Children membership I had the opportunity to meet with David, Gabe, Leigh, Tiernan, Rachel, Corky, Arran, Joseph who have all accessed the Youth Advocate Programme (YAP) in the West Region of the Republic of Ireland.

The Advocacy programme is established across the Republic of Ireland and has teams based in Galway and Cavan, supporting these communities and surrounding areas.

Each team comprises of a case managers and several community-based advocates, using a “strengths based” approach with young people and their families. This approach finds out what the young people are good at and encourages them to use these skills. The approach allows young people and families’ voices to be heard regarding what can be done when facing a variety of social and personal circumstances.

Young people who are perceived as being at high risk of being placed into care, secure care and custody are referred to this programme. The main volume of referrals come from the Health Service Executive’s, “Children and Family Services” and, where appropriate, from other organisations. YAP staff will then work with the young person and their family to develop an individual service plan (ISP) and identify what goals they want to achieve.

A young person will then be matched to a local advocate according to shared interests and individual strengths, who will offer up to 15 hours of face to face contact every week for six months. I had the opportunity to meet with a group of young people from Galway and Cavan, who told me about the numerous opportunities that exist to participate in decision making within the programme.

This report will highlight these opportunities young people have had to participate in decision making and will identify any changes that have taken place.

Opportunities for Dialogue and Change

Needs Based Assessment

Before a young person can access the advocacy programme they will meet with a case manager to complete an assessment.

Corky explained: “**I got the chance to meet up with the programme manager, to talk about how I am doing and what I am good at.**”

Gabe gave details of what he spoke about. He explained: **“I talked about living in isolation with my parents and wanting to live independently.”**

Rachel expressed: **“I got a chance to say what type of advocate I would like and what things I would like them to be interested in.”**

Arran told me: **“They came to my house and talked to me about what things I want to do.”**

The assessment is structured to allow a young person to talk with the case manager about how YAP can support them, looking at the young person’s strengths in order to improve their circumstances.

Individual Service Plan and Goal Setting

The individual service plan is carried out at the beginning of the young person's involvement with YAP.

Rachael told me about the individual service plan she helped to devise. She explained: **“I had my social worker, mum and sister at the meeting, where we discussed how things were going and what I wanted to change.”**

Young people told me that they are supported during the ISP meetings to establish their own goals and discuss what they would like to work on at the start of the programme.

David explained: **“I did not want anything to do with it at first because I was too angry and thought my advocate was a bit arrogant.”** He then added: **“He then started asking what I wanted from YAP and I told him that I wanted to see my sister, who I had not seen for two years.”** David has been supported by his advocate to meet up with his sister more frequently.

Corky confidentially explained about setting his own goals. He said: **“I set my goal, which was to go back to school, and they have been helping ever since, and I have just started to go back to school.”**

Joseph told me: **“I want to have more friends and to get on with people and they are helping me with this.”**

Tiernan spoke to me about what was going on in his life and what he got YAP to support him and his family with. He highlighted: **“I want to stop fighting with my little sister, control my anger and not curse at my family.”** He then added: **“My advocate found out, on nights when he was taking me home in the car, that I would like to play the drums, after tapping my fingers to songs on the car radio and, because of this, they are organising drum lessons for me.”** Tiernan also acknowledged that things are much better at home since he has been supported by his advocate.

Joe informed me: **“I have been getting help with homework because I explained that, before I started the programme, I never bothered doing it.”**

Review of Service Plans

These take place at the two, four and five month stages of the programme so young people can review their goals, their experience of their advocate and the overall support they receive from YAP.

Rachel demonstrated: **“At another meeting I changed one of my goals and decided that I want to get on with my sister better.”**

The entire group of young people explained how they talk about their achievements and discuss how they feel they are working towards their goals. They also identify any potential barriers to achieving their goals during the reviewing stage of the advocacy programme.

Group work

Young people are given the opportunity to participate in various group based activities, exploring a wide range of issues and taking part in community based activities, if they choose to.

Joseph told me: **“We have been involved in a project where you had to plant flowers to give to some old people.”** He added, **“We also did a big mural about what people do in communities.”**

Rachel described how some young people have been meeting up to cook. She explained: **“I and some young people thought it would be good to meet up and do some cooking, which we have done and made some pizza.”**

Leigh added: **“There are a few of us who want to play the guitar so they are going to set some lessons up for us.”**

These meetings also allow some young people the opportunity to discuss the overall aims and objectives of YAP. Young people who attend these groups are also given the option to attend national YAP events to further discuss their ideas.

Working with the Advocate

All the young people with whom I met viewed this as a very important aspect of the project in respect to how they are listened to.

Arron expressed: **“It’s good that you get to choose where you want to meet and what you want to talk about.”** He added: **“I have just started to meet with my advocate and decided it would be good to meet at Subways.”**

Joe told me: **“It is fun and they take me to fun places and talk about how things can be better for me.”**

Leigh added: **“My YAP worker works with me on things I want to do and will meet me at the times I want to meet.”**

They all discussed how the programme allows them the opportunity to identify what is needed to make their lives better, and how changes have occurred and they have reached their goals.

Gabe told me: **“It’s not like any other support I have used before because the previous support I received was too rigid.”** He added: **“This is so different because there is someone there who really does listen to your opinions and what you need.”**

Rachel explained: **“My advocate took me and my sister out for a meal to help us get on better, after listening to what I had to say.”**

Corky informed me: **“I have seen problems resolving in my life and am really pleased.”**

Conclusion

The West Region Youth Advocate Programme provides some really positive opportunities for young people to come together to meet with staff to discuss their experiences of the social and personal circumstances that are impacting on their lives, and identify solutions to improve outcomes.

All of the young people expressed how their advocates listened to them and articulated how the individual support received from YAP was adapted to suit their circumstances. They also explained how they were able to set their own personal goals and evaluate the programme at different stages of their involvement.

YAP also provides many opportunities for young people to make their views known and influence how other services provide support. Young people’s views and ideas are respected and can influence the direction the project is taking, working to enhance the programme nationally. It will be interesting to discover when re-evaluating the project next time, how young people continue to get involved in decision making. It is, therefore, for the above reasons that I have no hesitation in recommending that West Region Youth Advocate Program receive Investing in Children membership.

The following young people have read and agreed with the report and recommend that West Region Youth Advocate Programme receives Investing in Children Membership. They were Joe, Joseph, Aaron and Corky who all accessed the programme when the report was written.

I would like to thank everyone who helped me to write this evaluation and finish by saying, “Well done”.

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