

Investing in Children Membership Award™

Re-evaluation of Dublin Mid-Leinster Region Youth Advocate Programme



Introduction

Youth Advocate programme

Youth Advocate Programmes Ireland is a leading provider of intensive support programmes for young people and families. The organisation was established in Ireland in 2002. The YAP Model is a unique way of providing intensive, focused support to children, young people and families with a range of needs referred by the Child and Family Agency Social Work teams. The YAP model is based upon the development of a trust relationship built between a supportive, trained, skilled adult advocate, the young person and their family. An individual service plan based on the strengths of the young person and their family is developed and offers a wraparound approach to address all aspects of the needs of the young person within their family and local community. YAP's goal is to empower young people and their families with supports that will remain in place after programme involvement has ended. Youth Advocate Programme provides a range of support services to young people and families: Intensive Support Programme, Crisis Intervention, Family Support, Aftercare and a Disability service.

YAP Ireland's mission is to build partnerships between vulnerable young people, their families and communities to support their full potential through a community based, strengths focused, intensive support model which provides a more effective and economic alternative to society's reliance on the direct provision of state institutions and out of home care services.

YAP was first awarded Investing in Children Membership Award in 2014.

Participants in the re-evaluation

Donna O'Kane and Caoimhe Coyle met with six young people who travelled to the YAP Head Office in North Dublin with their advocate. The re-evaluation took place on 29/06/19. This meeting provided the opportunity for us to converse with the young people about the how they are involved in making decisions about YAP. The young people were able to talk about groups such the Youth Forums that take place within localities and within these participation forums they plan and carry out community-based projects. We were able to discuss with the young

people how they are listened to and how their involvement in these Forums' impact on personal and organisational changes. We also chatted with young people about their involvement in the re-launch of the young people CEO Group. This group seems to be a very successful aspect of YAP as it allows young people to have direct input into decision-making and change at an organisational level within YAP.

We had the opportunity to meet with staff and young people from the Dublin and surrounding areas. We met with **Reece 11yrs, Ben 17yrs, Ester 17yrs, Chloe 15yrs, Megan 17yrs, and Lauren 17yrs**, the young people we met with have been taking part in YAP from three months to one year.

Opportunities for dialogue

Individual Work

Each young person, when they begin their journey within YAP, start with an Individual Service Plan. This is a plan devised with each young person when they become begin working with their YAP advocate. The plan highlights the types of goals each young person would like to achieve with the support of a Youth Advocate. In order for them to achieve their goals, the plan also details the types of activities they will do with their advocate. All young people involved in this re-evaluation meeting confirmed that they select their goals. This is an important part of their participation within YAP. Each young person stated that they feel as if they have ownership over their plan. They set the goals that they think they can achieve along with the support of their YAP advocate.

Ben explained that one of his goals was ***“to control his anger... I am short tempered”***. And stated that he decides what he wants to do with his advocate. He says that his advocate is ***“good craic and listens to what I have to say”***. He says he likes going to play football with his advocate and this helps reduce his stress levels to help him control his anger. Reece also agreed that that his advocate also lets him choose all their activities when they are out on a one-to-one. He goes to the cinema or goes for something to eat with his advocate. He stated that having someone who understands him and helps him explore the things that make him lose his temper, helps him not become stressed out in certain situations. He says that since working with his advocate he has noticed that there he has not become angry as often in fact he does feel more relaxed in general.

Both Megan and Chloe have the same advocate and spoke very highly of her. They both select the activities they want to do with their advocate, some examples include: going to the Cinema, shopping, getting nails and eyebrows done. Their advocate has even taken them to Howth Head Beach and Cliffs. They have a choice of going together or meeting with their advocate separate. One goal both girls chose to do together was to get fitter and in order for them to do this, they both chose to attend Zumba and Boxercises classes with their advocate.

Lauren explained that one of her goals was to do her Driving Theory, as well as exploring ways of improving her CV. She plans to go to do a make-up course as she wants to be a make-up artist so she can work with a company. ***“My advocate is helping me research this and spends time with me looking at the Driving Theory Test”.***

Ester’s goal was to progress her singing voice and her advocate helped her get a voice coach to enable her to sing in a Country and Western style. She has also been given the support by her advocate to explore business and computing courses at college. Chloe also stated that her advocate is helping her look at suitable colleges to do a career either in hairdressing or childcare.

All of the young people Caoimhe and Donna spoke to said that they were actively involved and listened to from the very beginning. They feel listened to and valued by their advocates and know they can also get help when they need it. They all agreed that they were actively involved in making the plan and their views and ideas taken into account. Reece says ***“it is important to be able to talk to your advocate especially if you can’t talk to your parents”***. Each one of the young people spoke very highly of the support received from their advocate. Caoimhe and Donna agree that it was very evident that all young people have gone through very positive personal changes since becoming involved in YAP.

Group Work

Within YAP, all young people have an opportunity to take part in the Participation Forums that involves group activities. As part of the process all young people confirmed that they have the opportunity to choose and decide what activities or group projects they want to be involved in. The young people themselves make suggestions and then they take a vote on which activity/group project they prefer to do. Ester talked about the having the opportunity to talk about how they think the group should be run. She says that staff ***“have no agenda”***. From

the conversations with the young people, we get a very strong indication that the activities and project are self-directed by the participants. Most young people can take part in these programmes even though they have finished their time with an advocate. These participation programmes help them stay in touch with YAP. Lauren highlighted that she did not attend these group but this was her choice and did not feel any pressure to attend anything other than meeting with her advocate. ***“I am not forced into a participation group”***. All other young people said they choose to be part of the participation group work programmes in their area. Reece says he loves the group because ***“we get to talk to each other because we don’t get to see each other unless we are in the group”***.

The young people stated that within each of their participation forum there is a community project. The common themes throughout each of the community projects are that it must be a benefit to the community or help make a positive change to their community. Ben stated ***“we [group participants] get to decide what projects we wanted to do that will benefit the community”***. Ben and Reece talked about choosing the Dogs Trust as their project. They helped design artistic posters promoting the care of pups. Reece wrote a letter asking the Dog Trust’s how YAP participants could help. In response to the Reece’s letter, the group was asked to donate blankets. The young people gathered many blankets from their own homes took them to the Dog Trust location. Then some of the young people volunteered at the Dog Trust. Another project suggested and chosen by the participation group, was ***“Adopt a Fire Station”***. Reece was also part of this project. He was able to explain how the young people in his group gathered food for the fire personnel and took it to the Fire Station by way of thanking the fire men and women for all their hard work. In Ben’s locality he was able to also talk about another community project that his group had chosen as part of an environmental theme. Ben’s community project selected by the group was ***“Adopt a Road”***. Ben explained they chose the road so that the participants had to pick up litter in this particular area of Dublin.

Caoimhe and Donna agree that there is evidence that being part of a group, the decision of the projects, the planning and co-ordination of the project is very much lead by the young people. They hear confirmation that the staff listen to what the young people want, help with how they want to deliver the project and then support the young people to carry out the project. There is indication of personal change for the boys as they talked about the impact of taking part in such projects made them more aware and more appreciative of how hard other people work including those in the fire service and in the Dog’s Trust and the people who clean the streets.

Interview Panel

Through the participation programme, Ester mentioned that she had been provided one day training along with 7 or 8 other young people to sit on the interview panels to recruit the current intake of Advocates. She remembers completing training on employment law and discrimination. Ester said that she along with the other young people had guidance from the Human Resource Department to decide on what suitable interview questions, the format of the questions and who would ask each question. They were then trained in recording their feedback and that would be provided to senior YAP staff to reinforce the selection of the staff. She said she loved this because it allowed her and the other young people to have a say in the employment of the new advocates and team leaders within YAP

Young People's Summer Conference

In the summer of 2019 all young people involved in YAP are given an opportunity to go to Croke Park, to attend YAP's annual Young People's Conference. This year the choice of themes was homelessness. A theme chosen by the Young CEO's. According to Ester, a member of the Young CEO's, as in the past years, the young people vote on the theme. She states that the young people are involved in the planning of the conference based on the evaluations of young people from the previous year. For example, ***"we will change the layout of the room this year because last year, those young people at the back of the room could not hear."*** In last year's evaluation, young people did not like the fact that there was an adult meal and a young persons' meal. Therefore, it has been agreed that at the conference this year one meal and dessert will be provided for everyone. Caoimhe and Donna agree that this was another example of YAP staff listening to the young people at the planning stages of the conference and affecting change that will help make the conference as success for everyone this year

According to all the young people they say that young people in each of the YAP areas choose projects that best represent their theme. The young people then are provided the opportunity during the conference to present their project in different formats, including video presentation, writing and performing a song, or presenting a PowerPoint presentation.

Young CEO Group

Other evidence of dialogue and change that takes place within YAP between the young people and YAP is The Young CEO group. Like seven other young people, both Reece and Ester stated that they were recommended to join the Young CEO group by their advocate and where given the option to join or not.

This group have got together and meet at least once a month, however at the suggestion of the young people it will increase to every two weeks in the summer to help with the planning of the YAP Annual Conference. Reece informed Caoimhe and Donna that every local participation group look at something that impact their community as a way of providing information for the Annual Conference theme. He said that in his local participation group looked at mental health and suicide as it is a major issue in his local area. However, both young people stated the members of the Young CEO look at all the choices and then take a vote. Homelessness is the theme for this year's conference. Ester mentioned that the Young CEO group also meet with Siobhan to and give her their ideas. For example, Ester wanted to tell her story of homelessness and Siobhan helped her to share it at the Children's Rights Alliance. This was then commissioned as a collective complaint to the European Commission. Reece says everything in the Young CEO group is led by the young people.

Opportunities for change

All the young people have stated that having an advocate does help them make a personal change. **Megan said "my advocate is always there for me, at my beckon call. She won't let me down"**. Lauren also mentioned that having an advocate has helped her get a job in a local store. This a monumental change for someone who would have gone missing on a number of occasions. Lauren says now she would never think of running away. Megan also stated that **"I used to run away at least once a week, now I am completely different – there is no running away"**. Ben noted that as a result of being involved in YAP he has **"become more mature"**. Whilst, Reece stated that he **"feels more responsible"** since being with YAP. Ester says that being involved with YAP has **"definitely given me more confidence"**.

Ester, Chloe and Megan have sang for the YAP Board of Directors and Megan is singing at Croke Park. The girls says this is a huge step for them and it has really boosted their confidence and given them a sense of achievement, something to be proud of.

According to Ben ***“the group work programme helps with behaviour and socialising with other kids”***.

Recommendations made by young people

All of the young people we spoke were very complimentary and positive about YAP and their advocate. When asked if they would change anything about YAP. Below is what they had to say:-

- Five of the young people who have been in the programme for more than three months, know that their time with their advocate is ending. All five young people have really enjoyed that time and would like it to extend beyond 6mths. They suggested that rather than an intensive 15hours per week. It could be a few less hours but over longer weeks, extending their time with their advocate beyond six months.
- All the young person said they can make the decisions about what activities they want to do and how they spend their 15.00euro. However, Megan recommended that they should be ***“able to carry forward the money into the following weeks or save it to do something bigger”***.
- All young people loved their group-work programmes and the projects they were involved in. However, four of the young people said they would like more trips out of Dublin and even suggested an overnight residential.
- One young person suggested that the two participation groups did not need to be separated according to age. He has recommended that both groups should be amalgamated into one group. He says because he is at the borderline age, he has friends in the both groups, but he can only attend the older age group. ***“It was better when everyone was together, it was better craic”***.
- Three of the young people recommended that two or three young people should sit on the Board of Directors, to represent all the young people involved in YAP.
- One other young person mentioned that he would like a sensory room in the YAP building or somewhere in the local community because it would benefit someone who has sensory issues like his brother.
- Another young person stated that if he was YAP CEO he would look at getting a building that could have a fun room/games room

Conclusion

All of the young people reported that there were lots of opportunities for them to be at the centre of decisions about the support they receive through YAP. They were all able to describe how their personal situation had changed and improved as a result of the support they received during their time on the programme.

Some of the young people also had the chance to take part in group activities and events which were not only fun but which also allowed them to meet young people with similar experiences which they really valued. The community project gives them and insight into how other people work but also a sense of social responsibility and appreciation.

The young people made a number of suggestions that would enhance YAP further, Caoimhe and Donna suggest these recommendations could be discussed within the Young CEO group and then taken forward to the Board of Directors via young people who could potentially sit as members of the Board of Directors.

Caoimhe and Donna would like to thank all the young people Ben, Reece, Ester, Megan, Lauren and Chloe who participated in this evaluation for their open and honest opinions and congratulate them on their achievements on the programme. We would like to thank the staff members for supporting their young person to attend the assessment. It is obvious that there is a mutual respect between the advocates and the young people from the interactions and conversations that we have taken part in.

We have no hesitation in recommending YAP to continue as member of the Investing in Children Membership Award™ Scheme. I wish the staff and young people the very best in the next 12 months.

Endorsement by Young People

The following young people have read and agreed with the report and recommend that Dublin-Mid Leinster Regional Youth Advocate Programme's membership of the Investing in Children Scheme is renewed. There where Reece, Ben, Ester, Chloe and Lauren.

Donna O'Kane and Caoimhe Coyle
On Behalf of Investing in Children CIC UK
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