

Investing in Children Membership Award™

Re-evaluation of South Regional 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 using the model of The Youth Advocate Programme in the US. 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 in 2014.

Participants in re-evaluation

The re-evaluation took place from 4-6pm on Wednesday 29th May 2019 at the Youth Advocate Programme office, 1st Floor, Heron House, Blackpool Retail Centre, Blackpool, Cork.

The young people had travelled from 60-90 minutes to attend the reassessment meeting from parts of Cork and Limerick.

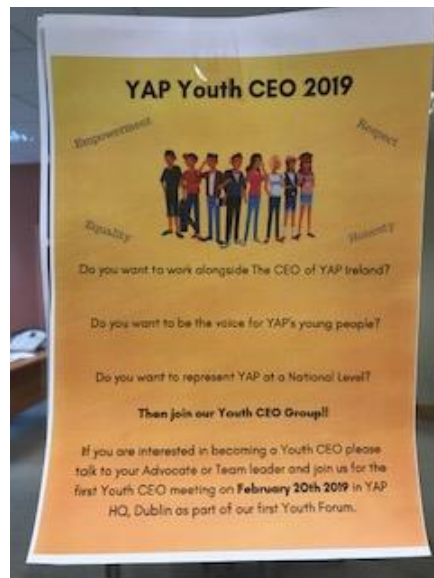
The meeting commenced with food and refreshments, and was followed by a group discussion with 5 children and young people aged 11-17 years old. I spoke to Chloe (15), Killian (11), Caitlin (17), Callum (11), and Sophie (15). The young people requested a group-based session rather than individual interviews.

The young people contributed to the discussions in different ways, some very lively, others a bit more reserved who needed some encouragement from their advocates, which was appropriate and accepted to enable their participation.

I also contacted a young person called Leon by telephone, to gather further evidence as part of the assessment on Tuesday 2nd July 2019. Leon was able to make a strong contribution to the assessment and provided some sound evidence.

Opportunities for Dialogue

There is clear evidence within the physical building of the opportunities available to children and young people to participate in dialogue. (Poster of Young CEO)



During the assessment some of the young people commented on how busy they are with school, social workers, respite, and their support from their advocate. They felt therefore unable to participate in the young CEO group. The young people also mentioned that these groups often take place in Dublin, so the logistics of getting to/from the meetings may be a barrier given the distance they would have to travel.

A suggestion from the young people was a local or regional group that would be easier to access so they would be able to participate.

All of the young people gave a very positive affirmation about the support they receive on a personal level from YAP, and the support that they receive from their advocates.

“I can talk to my advocate about anything, and I know they will listen and try to help me”. (Callum)

“Seeing my advocate regularly enables me to discuss my problems and frustrations which makes family life better”. (Chloe)

Throughout the assessment all of the young people clearly highlighted the need for an organisation like YAP, the benefits to them personally as well as their wider family.

“My mum wanted me to get involved with YAP, and I was matched to my mentor for 9 months – It has made my family life better as I was able to stay with my family, my behaviour is better, and it has helped my whole family really”. (Caitlin)

YAP Participation Service

From the last Investing in Children assessment in 2018 YAP Southern Area has developed a group participation service in the Cork area. The young people are invited to regular group activities, to meet other young people who also have a YAP advocate. The young people had

taken part in a range of social activities, which reduced the feelings of isolation thinking they were the only young person or family who needed help from YAP.

The group were able to discuss the many benefits of developing peer relationships, meeting other young people in a safe and supportive environment, and being challenged to do new things. The young people welcomed the efforts made by staff to facilitate this given that there is often a lot of travel involved as the area is rural.

All the young people commented on how they enjoyed the group activities as the costs for this did not come out of their advocacy budget. They have a clear say in the types of activities that they are engaged in and this is encouraged by the staff and advocates. All costs incurred are subsidised by the organisation which young people thought was very positive. This was a good example of dialogue and change from the previous assessment.

During a telephone interview, one participant was able to explain in detail how he was involved on a national level with the organisation, and had attended meetings in the head office in Dublin, and a regional event at Croke Park. He was excited to feel part of the bigger picture, and that his comments to improve the organisation had been listened to.

Group Work and Activities

The young people were able to reflect on the efforts the advocates are making to develop the participation groups locally.

“When we do participation group activities these are paid for, so you still have money to do things with your advocate”. (Sophie)

The young people and others explained that they benefitted from doing activities together and would like to discuss this approach further with YAP.

The young people were able to provide multiple examples of fun activities, including meals out, cinema, going for walks etc, and give clear evidence of their input and voice being heard in choosing activities. There was clear evidence of the young people being involved in decision making, and their influence over groups and activities.

“My advocate brought me to a farm to try farming, it was fun, but not a job for me”. (Killian)

This was a good example of dialogue and change as the young person was given choices and supported to achieve his goals, as well as reflect on the experience. The young person was working through a list of goals with his advocate, who was supporting him to try new things.

The young people had the opportunity to meet other young people who had similar life experiences, and develop positive peer relationships and reduce the social isolation they often faced. The group activities let them realise other young people can face and overcome challenges in a positive way.

The group were asked about how they are involved in the wider organisation in YAP, for example the Young CEO programme or Youth Forums. Many of the group were relatively new to the organisation, so have not had these opportunities yet at the time of the assessment.



One young person was able to explain his involvement with YAP on a wider organisational level, attending meetings in Dublin, Limerick and Cork. They were able to reflect on how the organisation listens to the suggestions they have to make the organisation better, and give feedback on how YAP is working and areas that could be improved. An example of this was speaking to the leadership team and managers about having more opportunities to come together, more regional activities for children and young people in their Youth Forum, as well as larger one-off events. The young person felt that they were listened to and action was taken from their feedback.

Recruitment and matching of advocates

The group were asked about how the advocates come to work for YAP and if they have any say in recruitment and selection of new staff members. Some young people had very new advocates to the organisation, but were not involved in the recruitment. When asked if they thought they would like to interview and select the new advocates, the answer was yes, so a recommendation would be how YAP can involve young people in the recruitment and selection process of advocates in the future. The young people clearly stated that they would be the experts in recruitment, as they could work out who was dead on and fun, and would be good advocates. The young people suggested the idea of a young person's interview panel so they can check out the people who apply for jobs and who would be the best person for the job.

The young people were also able to explain the matching process, and how they could have ownership of the relationship, and make changes if they did not have a good match. They young people felt a sense of empowerment and control over the process, as they could change an advocate if they did not get on. The males preferred other male mentors and vice versa for the females, but the young people did not mind as long as they were friendly and committed to them.

Opportunities for change

The young people chatted about their journey of how they became involved with YAP. All of the young people highlighted that this had been a positive experience for them, and that it has helped them in their family life.

“My advocate is amazing! We do cool things together. Knowing I have someone to talk to really helps me with my behaviour”. (Callum)

“They teach me tips to help prevent me having a melt-down”. (Callum)

The young people were aware that the programme of intervention lasts 6 months. They did not feel that this was long enough, and all would like longer support if this was possible.

When questioned about opportunities for change, the young people commented on the relationship they have with their individual advocate, as this is their main point of contact with the organisation. They were aware that they can raise issues with their advocate and feel that they could do this if needed. There was clear evidence of strong person-centred relationships between the advocates and the young people, and a genuine warmth from the young people about their advocates and the supports they receive.

The young people were asked about the organisation's principles, and the main principle that stuck out for them was "NEVER GIVE UP". One young man felt this was very important, as you need to be allowed to make mistakes and still know your advocate will support you.

All 6 young people felt that YAP had made a positive change in their own lives and wider family life. The individual benefits to children was clear in terms of their personal and social development, but also the secondary benefits on support for the family and how positive the interventions were.

Conclusion:

The young people who participated in the reassessment have clearly enjoyed a positive intervention from their involvement the Youth Advocacy Programme (South). The young people gave great personal testimony of their experiences and the benefits to them personally and their wider family.

Given the make-up of the group who participated in the reassessment they found it difficult to look at what their role is in the wider organisation in terms of ongoing dialogue and change, and how they can have influence. This may be as some young people are new to the service, and the 6-month intervention period may be a barrier to wider organisational participation.

The young people were however, able to articulate some areas for development that are included in the recommendations.

The re-assessment finished with a question from one young man saying...

"So, you are not going to close YAP and I will still be able to see my advocate". (Callum)

I was delighted to tell him yes, thanked him for his participation, and suggested he may be an advocate working for YAP in a few years himself.

I have no hesitation in recommending YAP South for the continuing award of Investing in Children for the 2019-20 period.

Recommendations from the young people participating in the assessment:

More hours to have with your advocate.

To have the advocate for longer than the 6 months.

Involve young people in the local recruitment of advocates, possibly having a young people's interview panel.

Can I come back twice? Some young people wanted to know as they had a service at 11, can they come back as a teenager.

Consider how young people from other regions in Ireland can participate in national events, like young CEO group, or have more local groups in each region.

More local groups outside of Dublin, more accessible to young people.

Increase in 15 Euro per week budget as activities like cinema are expensive

Thank-you:

Thank-you to the staff, advocates, and young people for participating the liC re-assessment process, the preparation work, young people's meetings and follow up telephone calls that made the assessment possible.

Chloe, Killian, Caitlin, Callum and Sophie have endorsed this report.

Eddie Wallace

Assessor VOYPIC/IIC

On Behalf of Investing in Children CIC UK

December 2019

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