



Youth Advisory Board



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‘Trying hard and being well meaning is not enough we want to get the results that help change young people’s lives’

St Basils is a youth agency which uses housing as the medium to work with young people aged 16 - 25 to enable them to find and keep a home, to develop their confidence, skills and opportunities and to prevent homelessness. To do this we provide a range of services to young people in Birmingham and some of the surrounding areas of the West Midlands.

This briefing paper tells you about one aspect of the range of services we provide

Summary

The Youth Advisory Board or YAB has become a key part of St Basils’ governance and development structures and has helped us to connect with the young people we work with in a meaningful and challenging way.

The young people who use our services have a unique perspective which cannot be found elsewhere. Their ideas, commitment and energy can help improve the services we offer and the YAB helps us to tap into that expertise.

The YAB is a separate board for young people who currently use our services. It is not a shadow board or a junior version of the management board, it has its own functions and tasks that we feel adds a new dimension to the overall governance of the organisation.

The YAB has direct and formal links to the management board and to the management structure within St Basils, it has a dedicated worker who supports and works with the YAB members.

The YAB is one part of the range of options we use to consult with, listen to and learn from young people.

The YAB has been in operation since the beginning of 2005. It has 15 young people on the board at any one time and each of them has a specific area or portfolio of interest that they develop and work on for the YAB.

To date there have always been more young people wanting to serve on the YAB than there have been places for them to occupy. We feel this is a good indicator that we are getting something right.

The challenge facing us

Like many service providers we struggled with developing and sustaining effective ways of engaging young people in the running of the organisation.

We knew that young people had things they wanted to say to us but we were not able to capture and harness this consistently.

We knew that involving the young people who used our services was going to help us to improve the results we achieved by helping us stay focused on their needs and aspirations.

Before the YAB was developed we had a structure of project based young people’s representation but practice and implementation varied across the St Basils network and we felt that we were not getting consistent or coherent involvement from young people using this approach. We thought that this was more to do with how we structured ourselves and less to do with how young people felt about being involved in principle.

The challenge we faced was to tap the energy and desire for involvement that we perceived in a way that valued the unique contribution of young people and had real opportunities to promote change.

We felt that some of the standard approaches to involving young people, for example having a small number of young people on the management board, were not the right place to start for us. Not because the management board or the young people could not cope with that but because we felt it would not maximise the contribution of young people. We needed to co-create the processes and structures with young people and jointly develop the right response for St Basils.

Developing the Youth Advisory Board

We wanted to develop robust structures that:

- Were relevant and real for young people
- Gave young people the opportunity to make a positive difference to the way St Basils operated
- Would be sustainable beyond the first flush of enthusiasm
- Would recognise the unique perspectives of young people
- Made young people want to contribute and commit themselves
- Took young people seriously

It is important to note that when we started out on this process we did not have a solution 'we had made earlier' tucked up our sleeves.

We decided that the best way forward was to take a co-production approach and get young people directly involved at the very inception of the process of developing the YAB.

We began by carrying out a detailed review of how we were engaging young people in the organisation and capturing their ideas etc. This highlighted for us that we needed to develop a new approach so we began by encouraging and stimulating interest amongst young people for the idea of developing a new approach to involvement.

All young people using the services at St Basils were invited to take part in a development session which focused on jointly designing a new approach to involvement, later to become the YAB. We had no preconceptions about how it might look and used a variety of methods to stimulate discussion and thinking in the early days. The key was to be creative and open with the young people involved and to take their suggestions, questions and ideas seriously.

The resulting model was refined with young people and then shared with the key people in the organisation. This included young people doing research into how other organisations and structures functioned. Some of the young people who were involved at the design session presented the proposal, which included elements that need funding, to a full management board.

The structures, rules, procedures etc were all developed by and with young people. Support is provided by the

Company Secretary who now acts as part of the support mechanism for the YAB.

Once the structures and approach had been finalised the YAB began its work in April 2004.

How it works

The YAB has 15 members who live in or use the St Basils network of services and includes one co-opted member who is a former service user.

Each member of the YAB has a specific area of responsibility as well as their general role as a YAB member. So for example there are YAB members with special links to Finance, Human Resources, Quality and Standards, etc.

The YAB has a young person as Chair and a nominated Vice Chair, they are responsible for linking with the YAB support worker (Youth Participation Coordinator) to ensure that the YAB is running smoothly and meeting its agreed aims and objectives.

All meetings are chaired by a YAB member with the YAB support worker available in the background for support if needed. The Youth Participation Coordinator is an essential part of ensuring that the YAB works effectively BUT is not a member of the YAB nor do they have a role in influencing the decisions made by the YAB.

The YAB meets on the first Saturday of every month in full session but there are numerous smaller meetings in between the main sessions. It is the responsibility of YAB members to make sure that they inform the meeting if they can not attend any meetings or fulfill tasks they agreed to carry out.

The YAB developed its own 'Terms of Reference' that include all the rules for operating the YAB, the responsibilities of the YAB members and their recruitment procedures etc. These Terms of Reference were developed by young people during the initial YAB set-up phase and are reviewed as part of the YAB's on going development.

The YAB has a budget of £10,000 per year to support its activities, this includes resources for expenses, training, equipment, stationery etc. The YAB manages this budget with the support of the YAB support worker.

The members of the YAB are not representatives of specific services or areas of the St Basils network, they come as individuals but they do have a responsibility to keep other young people in St Basils up to date with what is happening.

It is the job of the YAB and the worker to make sure that the diversity of young people using St Basils is reflected in the make up of the YAB and to use any vacancies that arise to help maintain a diverse mix and spread of membership.

YAB members commit to serve for up to one year on the board and are selected through a recruitment and interview process managed by the YAB and the YAB support worker.

The YAB has a formal link to St Basils Board and to the Senior Management Team and have regular slots at key meetings where they request and make recommendations and give updates and feedback on the key issues they are working on at anyone time.

Equally the main Board does regularly communicate with the YAB with specific queries or areas they want more feedback on from young people.

The YAB is not a junior version of the Main Board it is different and equally important to the way St Basils is run and developed.

For example it carries out the following functions:

- Acting as youth representatives on training, conferences and relevant forums
- Advising staff and young people on involvement practice
- Reviews of policy, practice and strategy either as part of wider reviews or in their own right
- Acts as reference point for the views of young people on the 'big' decisions for St Basils

Key principles and assumptions

There are some key principles that we think underpin the success we have had, these are not complicated or hard to understand but they can be hard to put into action.

- Being flexible about how young people contribute
- Taking what people say seriously
- Being honest about what can and can't be done
- Providing support and encouragement for YAB members

- Being prepared to try out new ideas and learn from them
- Treating young people with dignity and respect and responding to their energy and commitment positively
- Valuing and promoting the diversity of young people
- Promoting fair access to all young people using St Basils

We have a set of assumptions about involvement and working with young people which underpin all our work including the YAB, the most relevant are shown below:

- The more young people can be engaged in deciding about their own lives, their environment and their communities the more likely they are to successfully move into independence
- When young people have tangible evidence that they can succeed and change their own world for the better they make rapid progress on their journey
- The more young people can contribute to the running of St Basils the more effective and relevant we will become and young people will see that they can influence the world around them
- Young people need to understand their experience both from an individual perspective (the inside) and from a collective perspective (the outside) by joining these two perspectives together young people can develop a critical analysis of the world they live in
- Positive social networks reduce the risk of further exclusion, increase the range of resources and skills available to a person and helps to smooth out the inevitable up and downs of growing up
- Services and networks that reflect a young person's cultural and emotional world make it more likely that they will form positive relationships and find positive role models
- Services that are seen by others as socially valued can contribute to a young persons sense of self worth and promote positive change

Impact

YAB has now been in operation since 2005 and we feel it has made a significant difference to the way St Basils feels and operates as an organisation. Some of this is hard to pin down as it is a cultural change for the organisation and hard to verify. However there are some hard examples of where young people's involvement has made a positive and unique difference to decisions and the way St Basils runs.

A good example is the way in which YAB members are directly involved in the development of the re-design and re-provision of our direct access accommodation.

The physical design and some of the processes of the accommodation will be directly influenced by the YAB so that it reflects their experiences of the way in which direct access works and can be most effective. This is not just about the colour of the curtains but about the whole service experience.

The YAB has had an influence on internal reviews and structural change on a more day to day basis being directly involved in the review of policy and procedure and the YAB input has helped to keep that well focused on the needs and experiences of young people.

The YAB took a crucial role in talking to young people as part of the most recent round of business planning for St Basils and helped shape the way in which St Basils responded to priorities.

Young people who have been involved in the YAB have grown in confidence and have achieved key personal goals as part of their involvement, we also have some soft data that suggests that it has helped young people to feel that they can make a difference to the world around them and as a result helps to keep them motivated to make changes in their own lives.

Our assessment is that the YAB has improved service delivery, organisational awareness of young people and helped individual young people directly.

What young people have said about the YAB

"YAB is a great way for young people to get involved in the organisation and we get all sorts of training and learn loads of skills. There are lots of opportunities to get our view across as we are the voice for young people."

"YAB is good because young people now have a channel to get their voices and opinions heard. Some young people find it easier to talk to their peers about things and on the board we aim to support young people's views as well as putting ideas into St Basils. The management of St Basils listens to what we say and value our views. It's great also as you make lots of friends who you would not normally meet. There are benefits to board members personally with the skills that we learn and opportunities that are offered to us, and also benefits to St Basils who listen to our views to make change."

Lessons learned

We think these are the key lessons we have learned through developing and supporting the YAB, they may be helpful if you are thinking of following a similar route or want to refresh your existing approach.

- You need to create opportunities for people to talk and be prepared to listen and act.
- All forms of involvement require continued and well-balanced support
- It takes time to help people develop the confidence and skills to become fully involved
- It takes skill from the involvement worker to manage their role with the involvement structures and with the organisation
- You need to use all available forms of communication, from text messages to notice boards, and never assume people know what is going on until you have checked it out
- The structures of involvement will vary but the essence of involvement will not; empowerment, diversity, honesty and valuing people
- Involvement is the job of the whole organisation, it needs to be embedded into all aspects of the work and is not just the job of one person.
- To keep people involved the approach needs to stay fresh and relevant
- To keep people involved their contributions need to have helped create changes that people can see and feel in their every day lives
- It costs and you need to resource it properly

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Further Information

If you want further information about the YAB and how it operates, how it was set up then please contact:

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YAB members are already acting as peer trainers and advisers to help promote involvement beyond St Basils, they have expertise and insight that might be helpful.



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