

Beyond the Walls

Youth Zones, OnSide, Manchester

Introduction

Professional youth services can often see young people reduced to commodities, lacking genuine relationships and quality of care. A localised, engaging youth club can help to transform young lives and have a vast impact on health and wellbeing that goes beyond the walls of the building, into families and the local community.

Origins of the project

Bolton Lads and Girls Club (BLGC) was launched in the 1800s to provide a safe space for young people, based on the principle that education and physical activity are essential to health and wellbeing. Eight Years ago, BLGC chairman and local entrepreneur Bill Holroyd set up a new charity, now called OnSide Youth Zones to replicate the BLGC model.

OnSide successfully applied for £20M of Big Lottery funding, opening four 'Youth Zones' in deprived areas of Carlisle, Blackburn, Manchester [known as The Factory] and Oldham in 2012, followed by Wigan in 2013. 5

Subsequent Youth Zones derive fifty percent of the project's capital funding and revenue from the private sector.

Partnership working

Each Youth Zone is a private sector-led, independent charity, driven by a partnership between the private sector, local authority, voluntary sector and young people. Collaboration with public health agencies provides advice on body image, nutrition and weight loss. Each Zone works closely with Public Health organisations, pharmacies and NHS smoking cessation services.

Approach and delivery

OnSide's vision is to offer "a safe, affordable and inspirational place for young people to go to in their leisure time". Zones are located in areas of deprivation, and are open seven nights a week, 361 days a year in order to be available when young people need them most. Physical activity forms the core of the Zones' offerings. Approximately 18,600 members attend the Youth Zones, aged 8-19 years.

Areas in which Youth Zones are located typically face lower life expectancy, heart disease, cancers, and poor diet – therefore the zones help to address some of the determinants of poor health outcomes.

Zones pursue an exemplary philosophy of affordable, healthy food provision for users, employees and volunteers. Nutritious, low cost, healthy meals, drinks and snacks are provided. The Factory also runs courses on food preparation and is reconfiguring the building to allow the facility to open as a community café with public access and an associated programme of courses.

Drugs and alcohol awareness is backed up by a zero tolerance policy on the premises. Advice on sexual health, contraception and chlamydia screening is also available for young people and to date, over 2,500 have attended these sessions. Staff are encouraged to develop and nominate programmes against an 'emotional fitness' model, which includes a health parameter.

Central to OnSide's approach is developing relationships of trust with Youth Zone members, families, the community and partner bodies. This moves beyond offering a safe place to go and builds the trust that allows them to identify particular issues and offer a support network for the young people.

Mentoring programmes offer one-to-one support for young people over the course of a year. These might focus on issues such as non-attendance at school, family breakdown, self-harm or abuse by others, isolation and bullying. Around 30 young people each month are involved in the mentoring programme.

Members have a clear understanding of both mental and physical health benefits from activity amongst members and in particular that a healthy lifestyle flows from and is linked to the strong relationships underpinning these activities.

The quality of these Youth Zones' builds, as well as the environment created within them, are of the highest possible standard – representing a stark contrast to the provisions of most youth clubs. The reasoning is that young people not only deserve the best but should aspire to it in their lives.

Success and outcomes

The average weekly attendance of 1,000 young people at a Zone means over one million hours of physical activity have been provided since opening. However, while each Youth Zone records its activities and the attendance of young people, actual participation in activities is only just starting to be measured and evaluated.

Police have reported a 58% drop in youth anti-social behaviour in the area surrounding The Factory.

The evidence points to improved social outcomes, reduced crime, raised aspirations, personal wellbeing, positive relationships, and skills for work and life.

Future plans and obstacles

Demand is growing and 15 new sites have been identified. OnSide is considering an extension of its programme to develop a better understanding of the health impacts they have on young people's lives. The challenge for OnSide is not only financial to fund growth to meet demand, but to understand and leverage the full potential its model is demonstrating.

Conclusion

OnSide's Youth Zones offer high quality venues and programmes that foster relationships of trust, encourage involvement and promote ownership of personal outcomes. Given the involvement of the private sector and the scheme's positive results, it represents good value

for money. The Zones' encompassing and health-driven approach is having a positive impact on young people and families.

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