

Children and Young People Committee

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Inquiry into Safe Place to Play and Hangout : Response from Fairbridge De Cymru

Fairbridge De Cymru is a national charity that supports marginalised young people to take the first steps towards re-engaging with society. Every year we succeed in winning the trust and commitment of young people that many other organisations find difficult to engage with. Our philosophy is simple, we believe that many young people become disengaged and disaffected not because they are 'bad', but because they lack the personal and social skills and confidence that allows most people to cope with and get on in daily life. We know that these young people can turn their lives around and cope independently if they are given the right opportunity to develop their skills and the support and encouragement necessary to achieve them.

Fairbridge De Cymru is a first step provider that prides itself on its ability to develop the personal, social and independent life skills necessary for young people to reengage in mainstream educational and recreational activities. Through a programme of challenging activities, coupled with intensive one to one support, we practice a holistic system of learning to develop the social and personal skills required for these young people to live independent and fulfilling lives. This support also allows young people to play a fuller, more positive role in their local community. We identify within a young person the specific needs that act as barriers to entering mainstream educational and recreational environments. This then tailors their involvement with Fairbridge and the personalised support programme they enter into. Our holistic nature ensures that the activities a young person takes part in always works towards addressing their needs to ensure that when they are ready to move on from Fairbridge they do so ready to fully reengage with education, employment and training programmes and get the most from their lives. Our success is well documented and the demand for our work continues to grow across Wales.

The young people we work with represent some of the most marginalised, deprived and disadvantaged in Wales who come to us with multiple presenting needs including substance misuse, exclusion from school, mental health issues, long-term unemployment and homelessness. In 2008/09 83% of the young people we engaged with us did so with three or more presenting needs.

Fairbridge works successfully with affected young people and last year 72% went on to achieve one or more positive outcomes, such as returning to the classroom, starting a college course or attaining a qualification.

Fairbridge De Cymru specialises in giving young people the skills they need to live independently and access education, employment or training opportunities. We achieve this through a combined programme of activities which are fun, challenging and engaging coupled with intensive one-to-one support and coaching. Our experience has shown that structured, fun and adventurous activities work well in engaging and developing young people's personal, social and interactional skills. What makes the Fairbridge programme different is that each programme is delivered in a format that is developmental rather than diversionary. Every activity is designed and delivered so that it becomes a vehicle for developing one or more key skills that will develop young peoples' ability to cope with, get on in and importantly, enjoy daily life.

Defining Play

"children's behaviour which is freely chosen personally directed and intrinsically motivated. It is performed for no external goal or reward, and is a fundamental and integral part of healthy development - not only for individuals, but also for the society which we live in". Definition of play, as defined in the UNCRC & Welsh Play Policy

Response to Inquiry Question: Consider the issues affecting the play and experiences of specific groups of children and young people.

Children and young people living in disadvantaged areas and in low income families.

For many young people play and the freedom to access recreational activities and safe places to play is very much a given in everyday life, however for the young people that engage with Fairbridge this is far from the reality. Our experience of working with some of the most disadvantaged and disengaged young people has shown that they face a number of barriers in accessing safe places to play and hang out with the most significant cited being cost and financial incapability. Young people from disadvantaged and low income families will often have to go without recreational stimulation as families struggle to meet daily essential costs such as housing, food, clothing etc over those such as travel to after school activities, bowling, cinema trips etc. For many disengaged young people the areas that they live in do not provide safe or engaging recreational areas.

We recognise that many of these young people will thus miss out on vital opportunities to socially interact and develop with their peers and their wider community. These core interaction and socialising skills are what many regard as the basic life skills needed for young people to progress in life and live independently. Tackling this deficit the Fairbridge programme uses a combination of fun and high energy activities coupled with one to one support and structured learning practices that are developmental and young people find fun, engaging and challenging

Children and young people from marginalised groups such as the Gypsy Traveller Community

It is widely accepted that Gypsy and Traveller young people represent some of the most marginalised and disadvantaged in our society. Historically a very closed off section of our community these young people often have little or no experience of mixing with young people from outside their communities, accessing wider community recreational activities or experiencing mainstream play environments

or services.

Many of these young people will also face additional barriers to participation including, cultural and community values, accommodation problems, health, frayed relationships with the wider community and prejudice and discrimination. Of all minority ethnic groups Gypsy and Traveller young people have the poorest attendance rates at school, overall educational attainment rates and are one of the highest 'at risk' groups of becoming 'NEET' and disengaged in Wales.

As a direct consequence of this irregular and often chaotic attendance within mainstream educational and recreational environments the young people can often lack the basic social and personal skills needed to both access and safely enjoy play activities and recreational areas in which to engage with peers. It must therefore be recognised that these young people will often require additional support and services to enable them to develop personal, social and life skills, so as to engage positively with their peers, the wider community and society as a whole.

Fairbridge De Cymru believes that there is an evident gap in the research and knowledge of Gypsy and Traveller young people's access too, and experience of mainstream provision of places to play and hang out in Wales and would recommend that the inquiry consult with this group directly.

Response to Inquiry Question: Examine the impact of specific barriers to safe places to play and hang out. Negative stereotypes of children and young people/ perceptions of antisocial behaviour.

Fairbridge works with some of the most marginalised and disengaged young people in Wales and continues to identify both community and generational barriers that inhibit young people engaging and positively enjoying their communities.

Hanging out on street corners, around shops or in parks has been an activity enjoyed by young people for generations yet in recent years a largely media lead campaign has sought to demonise this behaviour and criminalise the young people. We have all seen the "Ban the Hoody" and the Reclaim our Streets headlines focussed solely on removing young people from congregating and hanging out on streets. Yet very little evidence is presented that the young people targeted and ostracised by the campaigns have a history of offending or any intention of committing antisocial behaviour.

Young people often feel the need to be part of a large social network and very often the lack of additional recreational facilities means that they have very little alternative but to "hang out" on the street. Very often it is negative adult attitudes which are cited by young people as reasons why they do not engage in positive community activities. Young people often feel that their opinions and needs are not regarded as important by adults within their community and that most are intolerant of even their visible presence on the streets.

Community cohesion and generational respect is a two way street, it can only be achieved if reciprocated by all generations forming a sense of shared belonging to the community.

Through both community cohesion and generational projects Fairbridge works direct with young people and their communities to both challenge and overcome perceptions and barriers, enabling residents to feel empowered and welcomed within their wider communities.

Course Study 1 - Fairbridge Community Cohesion Course

IntergeneRATIONS

IntergeneRATIONS was a cross generation project, which brought together young people and local older residents to address the generational divide through the medium of cooking. The challenge involved two teams competing to whip up the tastiest food on the smallest budget, with a local community Church provided the setting and equipment.

The older generation used their experiences of living through the period of rationing post World war II and succeeded in impressing the Fairbridge team by producing great food with minimum ingredients. The project proved to be a great opportunity to strengthen links across a large generation gap and worked towards dispelling stereotypes and misconceptions. Both age groups thoroughly enjoyed the project and the feedback was really positive.

John, a Fairbridge young person who completed the course said "at first I really didn't want to do this course and thought it would be boring. When we first got to the Church it was all very quiet but soon everyone got talking and we was all mixing with the older people and staff. They had some really funny stories to tell and about how Cardiff used to be when they were young.....it was a really fun day and they even liked my cooking!"

education, employment or training environments. Many of these young people need intensive bespoke one to one support programmes that focus on their individual needs and lasts as long as the young person needs support.

The Fairbridge goal is simple: to build self-belief and motivation in the most challenging young people, offering them the foundations for a life full of choices, opportunity and achievement.

Our flexible approach and programme enables young people to add goals and courses as their confidence and commitment increases. Without these achievements and confidence building many young people would continue to lack the ability and self-belief to effectively communicate and socially interact with peers. Fairbridge De Cymru firmly believes that without key skills marginalised young people would be unable to access and enjoy play and recreational activities within the wider community leading to further marginalisation and

disengagement.

Long Term Exclusion

In 2009, all of the young people who entered the Fairbridge programme had either been excluded from mainstream services or had been identified as being at risk of disengaging. This experience of exclusion or the threat of exclusion often means that by the time these young people come to Fairbridge they have already experienced high levels of marginalisation, disengagement and segregation from both their peers and mainstream society. Our experience of working directly with marginalised young people has shown that periods of exclusion and disengagement can often have serious long term impacts on a young people's ability to interact with others and further deepen a cycle of underachievement, low motivation and poor social and personal development.

Without basic core skills a young person's ability to effectively socially interact and gain a sense of achievement and enjoyment from safe recreational activities is greatly hindered. This also becomes true of their capacity to socially and personally develop at a rate similar to that of their peers. "Joseph Rowntree Foundation "research highlights the significant impact disengagement and exclusion can have on a young person's life and their experiences in early adulthood concluding: ""there is a strong relationship between young people becoming involved in regular truancy, being excluded (or excluding themselves) from school, and the likelihood that they would become involved in drug use, delinquency and crime"."

The Fairbridge approach to the circumstances of our young people lives is with the recognition that as a result of past disengagement and often circumstances outside of the young person's control many will have missed out on core training and development in a number of key areas including social interaction, enjoyment of recreational activities and communication skills. With this approach in mind the Fairbridge model is tailored so that each course and activity undertaken by a young person is tailored to address their specific needs in a way that ensures young people get to experience new activities, learn the importance of team work and ultimately get to be a young person.

Ensuring that young people get a sense of enjoyment as well as supporting learning and development is at the very core of the Fairbridge programme. Through this approach we have found that young people slowly begin to trust both staff and the Fairbridge model and return independently to engage with our programme to take positive steps to turn their lives around.

Fear or Bullying

Children and young people who have been the victim of bullying can experience problems with their physical and psychological health, educational attainment and social development that can carry on long after the bullying has ceased.

Frequently young people who have been the victim of bullying within mainstream education environments often find that they are further marginalised from their peers in the playground and within the wider community they live in. The fear of attack, especially if they have exposed the bullying is often extremely high and many of these young people will choose, or feel they are being forced to choose to avoid play activities and environments. Young people who have been the victim of bullying will often lack confidence, have low self esteem, few friends and spend playtime alone - for many there is just no such thing as a safe place to play or hang out.

The Fairbridge programme works with a number of young people every year who have been the victim of bullying either within schools or wider communities.

From the start of their journey Fairbridge young people are expected to abide by their own "Fairbridge Agreement" which incorporates the principle that every young person should be aware of both their boundaries and needs and those of their peers. Fairbridge young people are expected to abide by the agreement that includes no exclusive relationships, no bullying, swearing, theft or drugs and lasts the length of time they engage with us.

We have found that by encouraging Fairbridge Young People to abide by a Fairbridge Agreement they slowly start to relax within a peer group situation again, understand the different needs of others around them and build confidence enabling them to rebuild trust with peers and enjoy new recreational and learning activities. The staff at Fairbridge are committed to helping young people who have been the victims of bullying Fairbridge Young People are treated individually with a combination of respect and patience by all members of the team ensuring that the young people gain the opportunity to rebuild their self esteem and confidence in both their peers and the wider community. Young people continually highlight the importance of this approach in their decisions to engage long term in the Fairbridge programme.

Case Study 1: Jonathon, 14 A Fairbridge Young Person

Before I came to Fairbridge I was being tutored from home. I had been taken out of school because I was being bullied every day. I was glad that the bullying had stopped but I was very lonely because my friends were still going to school all week and I was at home. This went on for a while and my confidence was very low, I felt self conscious and convinced myself that I wasn't good at anything. I really missed having people of my own age to talk to and I started to feel like I was missing out on things. I didn't know what to do to make things better.

When I heard about Fairbridge I thought it was going to be a waste of my time, I was worried that I would be bullied and disliked, and I was convinced that I wouldn't be able to do any of the activities. When I got there I realised nobody was judging me, I made new friends, tried some new things and got to build my confidence. I have found the staff at Fairbridge helpful, supportive and friendly, they have encouraged me to try things that I never thought I could do and have always made me feel positive about myself as a person. Fairbridge does not tolerate bullying and this has allowed me to have a social life without feeling intimidated. I look forward to going to Fairbridge every week to support others and to keep my confidence up. I trust the staff at Fairbridge because I know they are always there for me.

Statistics show that a young person who commits bullying is disproportionately likely to become involved in criminal or anti-social behaviour later in life. Many of the young people Fairbridge works with are either on the verge of exclusion or have been excluded from mainstream education and many have backgrounds that include a history of aggressive behaviour, truancy and bullying, both as the victim and the perpetrator.

Fairbridge De Cymru works with young people individually, recognising that often this behaviour in itself can be a cry for help. Our experience has shown that it is often the consequence of outside influences in a young person's life including, family breakdown, physical and sexual abuse, homelessness, bereavement and substance misuse. Ensuring that these young people are given the correct skills to deal with these issues and those of everyday life becomes central to the young person's development plan working towards the goal that each young person will leave Fairbridge with the ability to lead independent and fulfilling lives economically, personally and socially.

Gang Culture/Safety

In recent years there has been increasing concern around the involvement of young people with gangs. Young people often join gangs for a range of reasons including, recognition, acceptance and peer respect.

For many of the young people we work with gang membership or becoming involved with a gang continues to be a serious issue with long a reaching impact on their lives. We are increasingly seeing both visible and non visible territorial divides between young people greatly reducing their ability to freely socialise in safe environments. Many Fairbridge young people cite the need for involvement in gangs as a necessity for their personal security and social status.

At Fairbridge we are acutely aware of how memberships of gangs can greatly affect a young person's life personally and socially. We are constantly aware of the ever changing needs of these young people as they seek to make their way in the world and for many of these young people membership of a gang is the only 'family' environment they have experienced and the security this can offer far outweighs the dangers and negative impacts gang membership can have.

A large number of the young people that come to Fairbridge and are members of gangs openly acknowledge the risk this can have on both their lives and the lives of their families. More worryingly is the numbers of young people who have tried or are trying to stay away from gang membership but cite the lack of alternative services, support and peer pressure as reasons for involvement. A lack of engaging activities in their spare time and boredom are the number one reasons young people give for gang membership.

Geographical neutrality has proven to be an important consideration while working with young people at risk of being caught up in gang activity, as a result the city centre location of our centre is a positive factor in their decision to engage with us. In addition the activities young people take part in often require a residential element away from the young person's 'gang area'. Removing young people from environments that are strongly linked to their behavioural issues and gang activity enables them to build meaningful relationships with young people from other areas and reduce suspicion of supposed outsiders..

Case Study Two - Liam, 16 a Fairbridge Young Person

Before I came to Fairbridge I wasn't doing very much with myself. I was getting into fights with people from different areas of Cardiff; I always thought that people from different places were against me because of the gang of people I hung around with.

I was hanging around with a gang of about 10 people, sometimes more, people automatically assumed we were up to no good and when you get a reputation like that you feel like you have to live up to it. Fairbridge has stopped me hanging around on the streets and has given me something to work towards.

I have tried new things like climbing and gorge walking, these activities have kept me fit and made me realise that I that I am worth more than I thought I was. Fairbridge has allowed me to meet people from all kinds of different places, this has made me realise that gangs from one area going after gangs from another area is pointless, it doesn't matter where you come from or who you hang around with, it's down to you what you choose to do.

Fairbridge runs a number of projects, based around community cohesion, that aim to tackle the issue of gang membership and encourage young people to make positive, informed life choices.

Lack of Provision to suit needs

Twenty three years of working with some of the most disadvantaged and marginalised young people in South Wales has taught us that a diverse group young people require intensive support to overcome a wider range of challenges. As with any service the provision of safe places to play and hang out must both reflect and meet the needs of young people if they are to regularly engage and enjoy them.

Fairbridge is experiencing an increase in the number of young people engaged during the school holidays and half term breaks as they struggle to find "interesting" and accessible activities to participate in. The financial barrier to accessing recreational activities has proven to be a factor in young people engaging free to client services like Fairbridge.

Young people are acutely aware of the dangers of socialising with the wrong crowd yet for many there is little alternative due to lack of access and variety of alternative activities and resources available to them.

Conclusion

Fairbridge De Cymru welcomes the Inquires thoroughness into investigating the importance for young people to have safe places to play, learn and develop. In an ever changing social and economical environment it is vitally important that services and activities are designed and administered to reflect the needs of all young people and provide safe, relaxed and developmental services young people use and enjoy.

Working with over 170 of the most marginalised and hardest to reach young people from across south Wales Fairbridge is acutely aware of the need for young people to have access to safe places to play and hangout. For these young people the very real barriers of personal safety, financial inability, lack of community cohesion and bullying mean that all too often those young people who are most in need of safe places to socialise find that the provisions offered are either unattainable or inaccessible.

Through our established programme of challenging and fun activities coupled with intensive one to one support Fairbridge De Cymru offers young people an equal chance to learn, to achieve and to succeed in all aspects of their lives. We know that marginalised young people can turn their lives around, engage fully with all aspects of society and cope independently if they are just given the right opportunity to develop the skills they need, and the support and encouragement to do so.

Whilst safe places to play and hang can form a large part of a young person's social development it is important that these activities also form part of a wider programme that seeks to positively engage young people, empower them to make positive choices and result in them leading fulfilling lives reaching their full potential.