

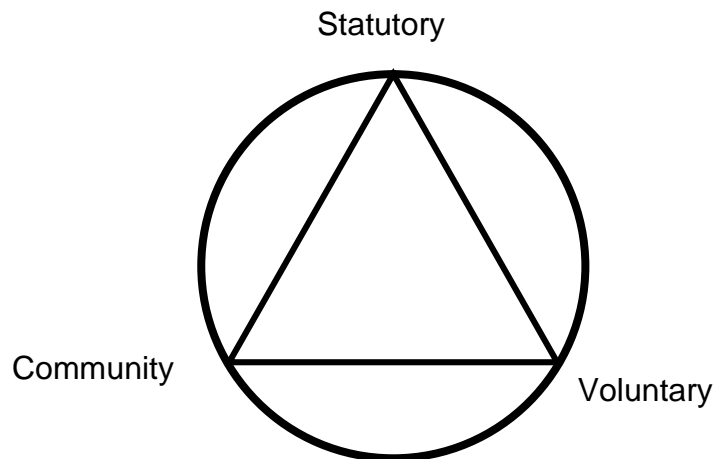


Reflecting on: Community based Youth Action Groups



Contents

1.0 Introduction and background of the YAG	P3
2.0 A Key moment in the life of the YAG: Bonding Social Capital	P4
3.0 The functions of the YAG	P5
4.0 Six considerations for successful YAGs	P6
5.0 A Typical YAG Agenda	P10
6.0 Summary	P11



Introduction and background of the YAG

Introduction

This booklet is based on 7 years of research regarding the Youth Action Group (YAG). It contains some key findings that are aimed to be useful for practitioners and managers, and is presented in an easily readable and digestible form.

Background context

The background context of the YAG can be traced back to policy relating to area based partnerships (Burton, 2006). Partnerships research itself dates back to the 1960s but the rationale for partnerships like the YAG is located within Communities First policy (Welsh Government, 2006).

The first YAG was developed within a Communities First partnership in the community of Splott, Cardiff. Following a heated conversation between a resident-volunteer and

the Communities First Coordinator at the time, there was disappointment with the apparent lack of *action* over five years of the programme running, which had still not transcribed into any meaningful delivery.

Two weeks later a Youth Action Group was set up and was aimed to coordinate youth activities in Splott and Tremorfa. It was aimed to be **practice based** with a membership of individuals and community organisations planning and coordinating **local** youth activities. It was based on the idea that collective **synergy** would make delivery stronger than if individuals and groups operated in isolation. The YAG was based on a **three thirds membership principle involving** statutory, voluntary and community residents.



A KEY moment in the life of the YAG: Bonding Social Capital

A key moment in the lifespan of the YAG was when the group first undertook planning for a Halloween event in 2006, shortly after it was formed. It was decided that there would be a Halloween fancy dress competition in Splott park and following this, inflatable rides would take place in the sports hall of the local leisure centre. While the fancy dress activity was a huge success the inflatable activities were poorly attended, despite costing thousands of pounds.

Partners were disappointed with the apparent lack of success. However, the event was discussed in the following YAG meeting as a form of **reflective practice**. Although at first, partners were disappointed that not all of the

event was well attended, discussion quickly moved on to partners being proud of what had been achieved. It soon became agreed that this event would serve as a platform to build on for the future. At this point **something special happened**, the group transformed from being a collection of individuals to a group, thinking and acting like a team. In literature, Putnam (2000) would describe this process as building **social capital** and more specifically **bonding social capital**.

It is this ethos that was initiated 15 years ago that still exists today; it created a sense of cohesion between the area's youth services which has lasted for many years.



The Functions of the YAG

It may be argued that there are certain functions of the group that may explain its effectiveness. Below are some key functions of the YAG.

- Support and advice
- Networking and information exchange
- Planning and managing the area's services
- Reflective practice
- Avoiding duplication
- Challenging other partners and raising concerns
- Shared resources
- Skills sharing and training
- Have a (rotating chair person and rotating venue)



Six considerations for successful YAGs

Although it should be recognised that partnerships should take their own organic journeys, here are six important considerations which may enhance the effectiveness of YAGs. They are explained in more detail below.

1. Service providers updates (Creating a culture of equality & democracy)
2. Delivery and issue focussed
3. Consistency of meetings
4. Considering youth involvement
5. Process versus Outcome and Needs Led
6. Safeguarding and the YAG as a junction-block between services

1. Service provider's updates (Creating a culture of equality & democracy)

At every meeting each partner should have the opportunity to take their turn to have their 5 minutes to report back on their work since the last meeting. This is arguably one of the most valuable aspects of the YAG meetings. Partners may report back on how they have found delivery, any youth issues arising, challenges they have faced or any forthcoming events that they are delivering or are aware of. This is important because it makes a powerful statement about **equality** and the **democratic principles** of the group.

Each partner having their say demonstrates that everyone comes to the table as equals – whether you are a senior Local Authority manager or a local community resident. This process helps to overcome barriers of **social exclusion** and is particularly valuable for community residents and members of small voluntary groups who can sometimes feel alienated when attending meetings which are attended by more formal professionals. To achieve this you should also have a rotating chair person and rotating venue.



Six considerations for successful YAGs cont.

2. Delivery and issue focussed

People can sometimes be frustrated with holding meetings just for a meeting's sake, particularly with such busy working lives. With the meetings being project and issue focussed, tangible activities can be planned and delivered collectively and issues relevant to the area's young people discussed. It is also good to have guest speakers at the YAG meetings which can be useful for wider strategic goals as well as keeping the meetings interesting for partners.

3. Consistent meetings

It appears that holding meetings between every month and every two months is most suitable. Partners have sometimes found that every month is too often, whereas every two months people can lose touch with each other and the partnership may fail to support the networks that are created outside of the meetings. By having no meeting over the Summer break and on some occasions running approximately every five to six weeks, rather than every month, a more suitable balance of approximately ten meetings per year can be achieved.

4. Youth involvement

The involvement of young people is not a clear cut matter. Sometimes there are barriers to young people attending, especially if sensitive issues are being discussed. Experience has shown that it is sometimes important to adopt a flexible approach. For example if young people are due to attend a YAG then ensure that those sensitive matters are not on the agenda for that particular meeting. Additionally, young people's input and views can be built into the functioning of the YAG without young people having to physically attend the meetings. Indeed youth workers can report back on the involvement of young people in activities from their respective youth clubs and services (Cardiff Youth Service, 2021).



Six considerations for successful YAGs cont.

5. Process Vs Outcome and being Needs Led

Another of the key findings from the research on the YAG relates to the overall **focus and value base** of the group. This finding is identical to a **well known principle in youth work: Process Vs Outcome**.

In previous years the group has gravitated towards being focussed on the monitoring and achievement of outcomes. However, it was found that this had a detrimental impact on the dynamic of the group. Focussing too heavily on outcomes creates a barrier to open discussion and imposes an unequal power balance between attendees. This in turn, can disrupt the group's capacity to openly plan and focus on the area's youth related issues, the very matters which are fundamental to achieving its outcomes.

In essence, the principle goes like this – *“nurture the YAG's network, issues and members and the group's outcomes will look after themselves, but if you focus on only the outcomes, the group's membership will deteriorate, and with it, so will the chance of achieving any outcomes too”*

This principle is almost **exactly identical to the process versus outcome principle in Youth Work** (Ord, 2007). As youth workers we know only too well the down fall of entering into a youth work relationship by solely focusing on achieving outcomes. It de-humanises the relationship and no rapport is built. In the end very little outcomes are achieved.

This principle also ties in with principles in youth work of being **needs led** and based on **voluntary attendance**, principles which are fundamental to building an environment for achievement and success in youth work.

If we are serious about achieving the maximum potential from these groups, then let's do the things that are most likely to achieve their success!



Six considerations for successful YAGs cont.

6. Safeguarding and the YAG as a junction-block between services

Imagine having a serious case review meeting with a group of senior managers within the Local Authority. A meeting also attended by the police by which they shared with you that one of their colleagues has had to knock on the door of the parents of a child who had tragically lost their life due to a knife incident. Well this can be the every day reality of a Youth Service Manger. This is why they place safeguarding and the safety of young people at the centre of what they do.

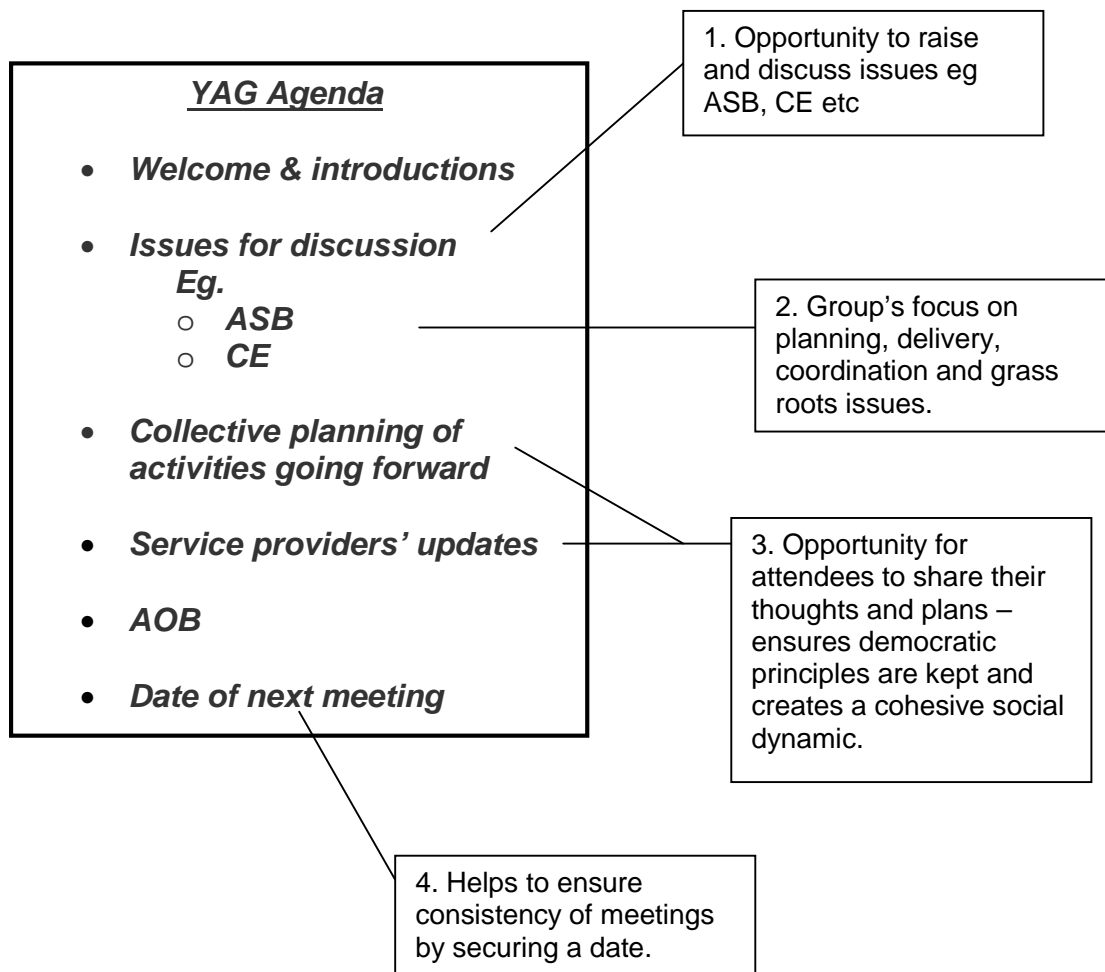
In the same respect that the YAG provides a valuable function to residents and community members, the group also provides a valuable point of contact for senior managers of key services (Youth, Police, Fire, Social Services etc). It provides an identifiable group and a **point of contact** to be able to disseminate important messages about safety. In the past valuable messages including about **CSE** have been raised which have allowed service providers opportunity to disseminate to the rest of the group. Of course it is important to take a balanced approach, and these messages should not dominate the **delivery and issue based focus** of the group. Nonetheless, YAGs do provide a key opportunity for the safeguarding of children and young people.

Sometimes it can be all too easy to focus on the needs of the community, but let's try to consider the pressures that youth service managers can be under too. **This is why there can be such an emphasis on safety** and partners should recognise the importance of these concerns.



A Typical YAG Agenda

Below is a typical agenda for a YAG meeting. The key items are presented below with strengths for each item briefly explained.





In Summary

The YAG has enabled youth services to be more coordinated and has generated a culture of cohesion which is able to influence and impact networks of young people at the community level.

This YAG strengthens community youth groups, community members and services as a whole. But the networks need to be supported if they are to achieve the benefits that we expect them to achieve.

Youth Action Groups can play a key role in bringing together service providers including residents from community groups, practitioners and managers from a range of backgrounds. By creating a sense of cohesion, the group is able to overcome barriers of **social exclusion**.

Key principles for the success of these partnerships are identical to some of the pillars of the youth work process: process vs outcome, being needs led and having a voluntary attendance. This is why youth services are well placed to lead these partnerships. With the right direction, Youth Action Groups really can play a key role in strengthening work with young people in our communities.

What Next?

What can we do to help maximise the success of YAGs going forward?

1. Training and facilitation sessions
2. Presentation and seminar sessions
3. Administration and support services
 - a. Minute taking and dissemination of agendas



Reflecting on community based **Youth Action Groups**

This booklet was based on 7 years of research. For a copy of the original research, a summary of the research or a pdf presentation please get in contact: ministryoflife@live.co.uk.

(NB Thank you to the providers of photographs included in this draft version, copyright held with the owners with thanks for their use. Full permissions and/ or alternative stock photos shall be provided in final version on request)