

Opportunities for young people in Merthyr Tydfil post pandemic

A Bevan Foundation report

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Summary

The pandemic has had a big impact on young people in Merthyr Tydfil as well as the provision of youth services. This impact has been felt by those of all ages but especially young carers and young disabled people. The impact of the pandemic has only increased long standing issues such as a decade of funding cuts and lack of employment for young people. We see that increases in mental health issues, potential for young people to disengage from provision altogether or the lack of access to services, training and employment opportunities are important issues to tackle.

Therefore to help improve youth provision for all young people in Merthyr we recommend that:

- More collaboration between organisations of all types to streamline provision but to also help as many young people as possible with their hopes and concerns.
- More long-term secure funding and help with grant applications for youth charities.
- A far better understanding of the experiences of young carers and disabled people and the stress they face, though increased education for organisations and the general public.
- Offer young people discounted rates to local facilities and attractions such as Bike Park Wales.
- A local employment scheme should be developed to provide young people with a wider range of opportunities for work experience and job entry.

1. Introduction

Young people (those aged between 16-24) have been severely affected by the pandemic, losing learning time, opportunities for social and emotional development as well as job opportunities. They are at greater risk of loneliness, unemployment and homelessness than any other age group. Public Health Wales highlighted that the average mental well-being of young people worsened in the first months of the pandemic and the proportion of them declaring that they were less happy than usual increased by 12 percentage points between 2019 and April 2020.¹

The impact of the pandemic and pressure on local services comes after a decade of cuts to local authority budgets. The reduction is estimated at £1.6 billion across Wales with the result that 193 youth centres have closed since 2010.² A report by Wales Fiscal Analysis shows that the biggest cuts per head of population in 2017-18 were in those local authorities with the largest spend per head in 2009-10. Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council was one such and thus has seen a 14 per cent cut in spending per head.³ Worries about the Council's ability to deliver services in the future saw it ask for external statutory support.⁴ In 2020 the then leader Councillor Kevin O'Neill stated that the council is only just "keeping its nostrils above the waterline" and has a projected deficit of £15m to 2022-23.⁵

Added to these pressures is the fact that the number of 16-24 year-olds has increased by almost 2,000 in a decade from 7,048 in 2011 to approx. 8,900 in 2021.⁶ While the long-term impact of the pandemic is uncertain the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has declared it is likely to be 'dramatic' in Wales.⁷

1.1. Project and background

Because of concerns about the impact of the pandemic on young people, we undertook the project to better understand the current state of youth provision in Merthyr Tydfil; to get a snapshot (as at summer 2021) of the activities on offer ranging from statutory services through to sport and recreation activities that meet young people's needs, concerns and aspirations. We wanted to also identify any gaps in provision and offer practical recommendations for change.

Most importantly we wanted to speak to young people themselves to understand their hopes and concerns, see whether their needs are being met with regards to current provision and identify potential them to get more involved in community groups. We especially wanted to talk to young disabled people and young carers.

1.2. What we did

The project focused on the specific concerns of three groups of young people: young carers, young disabled people and young people seeking work. We engaged with seventeen organisations across Merthyr Tydfil through a mix of face to face, virtual and telephone interviews. These organisations were a mix of stakeholder, statutory, youth and volunteer organisation. We also spoke to three groups of young people aged from 16 to 24 through a series of in person and virtual focus groups. Getting young people to speak

to us was difficult, especially young disabled people, as the duration of the project (10 weeks) meant we had limited time in which to build a relationship of trust with them. This reflects a wider problem of participation by young people and should be borne in mind when we analyse gaps in provision. Finally this report is by no means an exhaustive list of youth provision in Merthyr Tydfil or the issues to be addressed. However we hope it provides a useful indication of the needs and concerns of young people and the extent to which they are – or are not – met currently.

2. Youth provision

Merthyr Tydfil has a wide variety of provision for young people ranging from statutory services to youth clubs and sports and recreation services. Here we set out a brief snapshot of those services in summer 2021, the type of activities they provide, providers' views of the issues facing young people and crucially the impact of Covid-19. We have focused on provision for different groups of young people.

2.1. Provision for young carers

Care Inspectorate Wales have stated that "care providers local authorities, health boards, police and other relevant agencies should work more collaboratively to improve children's well-being".⁸ Our research shows there is evidence of collaboration between organisations in Merthyr Tydfil for young carers. An officer from MTCBC told us '*carers are a focus*'. Merthyr Mind run a project for young carers in partnership with Primary Care CAMHS (children and adolescent mental health services) to provide art classes, psychotherapy and talking treatments for those ineligible for the CAMHS threshold. Merthyr Mind are looking to work with Barnardo's to identify gaps in provision regarding their young carers project.

Barnardo's themselves work with 120 young carers across the borough with twenty more on their waiting list. They told us that "*referrals are coming in thick and fast.*" Eight young carers are community ambassadors for the Children's Commissioner's campaign '[Here I am](#)' which aims to tackle stereotypes of young carers and help them share their experiences. Barnardo's have an early helper referral process to identify young carers in partnership with MTCBC. The importance of organisations like Barnardo's to provide long-term support for young carers is highlighted by the experiences of one young carer:

"I never wanted to come initially, I was timid and shy, but now after 4 years, I like coming and think I've come out of my shell."

They provide activities for young carers including a community choir. The choir is invited to sing at the Royal Albert Hall with Royal Philharmonic Orchestra in November (the only community choir invited). They also helped young carers produce a book, through collaboration funding from VAMT and Stephens and George Charity, called 'Scarers and Carers', to highlight their experiences to a wider audience. The book has been purchased by local schools and Public Health Wales have purchased four for each hospital in Wales. It won a high sheriff's award and a digital project of the year award at Merthyr's [Academy of Success](#).

2.1.1. The impact of the pandemic

The pandemic has had a huge impact on young carers in Merthyr which has only exacerbated the challenges they face in their lives. A stakeholder told us that:

"It has been a nightmare for young carers locked in the house. Their caring duties increased simply because they are there."

They have to worry about taking care of their family, doing chores as well as school work or jobs. One told us of their concerns:

"When I ask friends do you do chores they look at me funny but in this group they all know what I'm going through."

Those in their care also have acute health issues and therefore are extra sensitive to the virus but it could also affect young carer's future ability to return to a form of normality as restrictions ease and highlights the different priorities and concerns they have:

"I'm still going to keep my distance, because I am vulnerable to the virus. It isn't just me in the house that has problems."

While connecting with other young carers over Zoom has been helpful many cannot wait to meet their friends in person although even here we see the constant worry that they face:

"I think even when we open up, a lot of carers families are vulnerable so they won't come [to young carer meetings]"

There has been a benefit of the pandemic and that is the increase in availability of funds not normally available. Merthyr Mind told us that:

"Funding flowed into the sector at the beginning of the year."

They benefitted from a range of Covid-related emergency funds from both Welsh Government and Wales Council for Voluntary Action and transformational funding on the local level to help fund the carers project with primary care services stated above.

2.2. Provision for young disabled people

An example of provision for young disabled people is EliteSEA. They work with people between 16-25 with learning difficulties. Once referred from a partner organisation such as Social Services, Careers Wales or the Department for Work and Pensions (DWP), clients are assessed to produce a vocational profile. EliteSEA then provide support with employability training, vocational training and work to offer their clients paid placements. Once on placements or if the client had received a job offer EliteSEA can provide job coaching which is slowly withdrawn as their confidence grows. Vacancies are obtained through the [Kick Start](#) and [Engage for Change](#) programmes.

Budget cuts in the DWP means that the role of Disability Employment Advisors has changed and they no longer offer specialist disability advice Their working relationship with Elite has ended so they longer provide case work referrals. This means new advisors may not have the skillset or time to deal with the claimant. Elite told us:

"Participants are making claims for Universal Credit but are given no advice to the different categories within UC so are automatically put on 'all work requirements' which only serves to increase their anxiety and unlikely to get them employment."

An example of provision for more general mental health and wellbeing provision is provided by Barod. They offer advice and guidance for young people and their families ranging from low level basic conversation on substance abuse to comprehensive packages of care in collaboration with mental health partners such as MTCBC's youth offending or child protection services. These had been provided virtually during the pandemic but told us they were pleased that outreach is starting back. They ran a no bad vibes campaign about self-care and self-love in a local skate park. Interestingly a young person on a separate point told us:

"There's one place that has a range of people is the skate park [...] there is no organisation that goes there to offer outreach services."

This point shows how difficult effective provision can be in engaging as wide a group of young people as possible, it takes time to successfully embed service change.

2.2.1. The impact of the pandemic

Our research suggests that the impact of the pandemic has been severe. A health and wellbeing report found that 70 per cent of young people in Cwm Tâf Health Board felt lonely during the pandemic.⁹ Mind Cymru have found that 87 per cent of young people with pre-existing health conditions in Wales said they have worsened.¹⁰ Concerns for the health of young people in Merthyr was high. One youth club manager told us:

"We can't talk to the children or identify safeguarding needs with the centre being closed. I am worried this will potentially increase their mental health issues."

All stakeholders we contacted stated they had seen an increase in mental health and wellbeing issues with young people to varying degrees. MTCBC told us that:

"Mental health is currently underlined in blue not in red. Last summer [summer 2020] we saw an increase in suicidal issues especially with young men."

As a result they have provided a Youth Support Grant to upskill staff to identify emerging mental health issues. Barod told us they have seen increases in those feeling depressed with schools closed during a crucial time in young people's development. Being at home more is also affecting 'concerned others' - those affected by the misuse of substances of others e.g. parents or friends stating *"that hidden harm has become highlighted during lockdown."* Barod highlighted the importance of early intervention which had been delayed during the pandemic but now the Universal Credit backlog had been cleared staff can return to specialised work.

The pandemic has impacted young people in different ways. One organisation told us that:

"Wellbeing is a massive issue, emotional needs, anxiety and depression is huge. The referrals with those types of issues are the worst I've seen in 32 years of working in this sector."

However another told us of a young person who has ASD and has enjoyed being at home with a comfortable set routine. Nevertheless this has brought challenges when they had to return to school and re-learning socialising skills has been difficult.

2.3. Provision for those seeking education or employment post-16

Once a young person reaches statutory school leaving age they have the option to continue in education, seek work-related training or enter employment. Some also become unemployed.

Figure 1 shows that for the year to March 2021, less than half of 16-24-year-olds are in employment, with a similar proportion being in economically inactive. Typically they are inactive because they are in full time education although some do not have or seek paid work because they are carers or are too sick to work.

The table also shows that one in five people aged 16-24 were unemployed, a total of 800 young people.

Figure 1: Economic status of people aged 16-24 in Merthyr Tydfil, Apr 2020-Mar 2021

| | Number | Percent |
|------------------------------|--------|---------|
| Employment | 3,100 | 44.5 |
| Unemployment | 800 | 19.9 |
| Economically inactive | 3,100 | 44.4 |
| Total population aged 16-24 | 6,900 | |

Source: Annual Population Survey via ONS¹¹

Note: numbers are rounded to the nearest 1,000 and so may not sum.

Figure 2 shows the number of apprentices in Merthyr Tydfil. In total there were 205 apprentices aged 16-24, less than a quarter of all apprentices resident in Merthyr Tydfil. Within the age group, it is also clear that there are very few apprentices amongst younger people – just 45 were under 18 years of age.

Figure 2: Numbers of apprenticeships in Merthyr Tydfil 2019/20

| | |
|-------------------------|------------|
| Aged 16 | 10 |
| Aged 17 | 35 |
| Aged 18 | 35 |
| Aged 19 | 35 |
| Aged 20-24 | 90 |
| Total aged 16-24 | 205 |
| Total all ages | 935 |

Source: Stats Wales¹²

As part of their youth service provision MTCBC provide an Early Identification Toolkit (EIT) which identifies those who are vulnerable, have mental health issues, are potentially facing homelessness or likely to not be in employment, education or training

programmes. MTCBC are currently reviewing the toolkit to see if it can be more robust ready for school return.

Tydfil Training provide a youth programme for those aged 16-19 with a goal to stop them becoming not in education, employment or training. The programme includes:

1. Pre-engagement programme with Princes Trust, team building, problem solving, confidence building. To prepare young people for the engagement programme.
2. Engagement programme 21 hours a week over 3 days' work experience and employability skills.
3. Traineeship Level 1. Opportunity to impress an employer and get an apprenticeship.
4. Options for further education or can leave to start work

Tydfil Training also provide a Summer School Programme specifically for tier four learners (those who are at risk of disengaging from work or learning entirely post-16), referred by school careers officers. The Summer School is run at the college to give students valuable experience, support services to discuss finance options such as the Educational Maintenance Allowance, guest speakers, trips and visits, employability skills, Welsh language skills, team sports building and geocaching. Tydfil Training currently have 28/29 learners signed onto the course.

Statistics on the number of people classed as not in employment, education or training are not available for Merthyr Tydfil. When asked to give a rough impression of the numbers in Merthyr an officer told us:

"...numbers fluctuated but not by a great degree. We would generally see around 60 from the four high schools in Merthyr."

MTCBC recently completed a presenting needs analysis for those leaving school post 16. The analysis shows that the main barriers to engagement in further education are poor attendance (71 per cent); low attainment (37 per cent) and challenging or risky behaviour (35 per cent).¹³

2.3.1. The impact of the pandemic

The impact of the pandemic has been huge. Schools, colleges and training providers switched their learning to online or blended learning but this has had a bigger effect on some more than others. An organisation that provides help for young carers in the borough told us:

"We were able to source sixty three Chromebooks with the help of MTCBC social services who have been great. One family were sharing one laptop between seven children. How are they meant to do homework? Families struggle to help them and they fall behind."

On the impact of those not in employment, education or training, one officer told us that they were confident they were not looking at a big drop off in numbers due to Covid-19:

“Most have enrolled in FE [further education] courses in the college from the high schools and we are busy with those who didn’t feel FE was for them and wanted more vocational training and experience.”

However there remains a worry about the impact of the pandemic for those that are already furthest away from these services. Even prior to the pandemic Active Merthyr reported that their Inspire to Achieve programme which works with those most in danger of becoming NEET was the only one of their delivery programmes that failed to meet its target.¹⁴ An idea of the impact of the pandemic can be seen in a conversation with a local food bank:

“I remember one young person who came to us from Troedyrhiw after being made redundant. He spent a long time finding out how to make food last a week.”

There has been a need to increase work experience opportunities to meet a growing demand. One such provider told us:

“The places are so soft after, we distribute 15 per annum for under 25s through our partners such as Communities for Work or Remploy. We started just before Covid-19 but had to run a second and have applied for funding for a third. I have two vacancies for August but have had 80 responses.”

The importance of the experience is highlighted by one young person:

“It is difficult to get into something like this. There are not a lot of opportunities out there for people who don’t think they are smart enough or have the confidence.”

2.4. General youth provision

Merthyr Tydfil County Borough Council’s (MTCBC) Youth Service provides the bulk of ‘open-access’ services for those aged between 11 and 25 in the borough. The service currently runs at nine locations. Three are core funded: Treharris Boys and Girls Club (south of the borough), Georgetown Boys and Girls Club (near the town centre) and a Street Based Youth Team that works in partnership with organisations like South Wales Police and Cwm Taf Health Board to provide responsive services for those unable to access a centre including a mobile youth bus. There is a commissioned service at the Willows Centre in Troedyrhiw (south of the borough) and three sites are legacy funded: Dowlais and Pant Engine House, Merthyr Valleys Homes Youth Project in the Gurnos and the Gellideg Foundation (all in the north of the borough).

A recent significant change in the structure of services has been the closure of a number of part-time centres to create three centralised hubs at specific geographical locations: Pen y Dre school (north), Georgetown (centre) and the Willows (south). Prior to the pandemic these offered a range of services from evening drop-in sessions, advice and guidance and are looking to open again soon.

All the above services deliver a form of outreach work, virtually during the pandemic but slowly getting back to face to face. Targeted services are an important aspect of the provision either to refer young people to partner services (such as mental health) or improving employability skills such as BTEC training.

An important opportunity for participation is the Merthyr Tydfil Borough Wide Youth Forum (MTBWF) facilitated by the charity Safter Merthyr Tydfil. The forum, for those aged 11-25, is funded as part of the council's Youth Participation Service and looks to identify and help with issues young people face, increase their self-esteem to help them achieve their aspirations. The forum has young people on their scrutiny committee to give them a voice in service delivery. An officer told us:

"It is important that young people are informed in their life choices. We talk about issues around domestic abuse and raising awareness of healthy relationships."

In May 2021 Voluntary Action Merthyr Tydfil (VAMT) re-established a Children and Young People's Forum after it merged with Health and Social Care Forum in 2018 to become a Health and Wellbeing Forum. The officer responsible told us:

"I wanted to re-establish a dedicated children and young people forum as the wellbeing forum tended to focus on older people."

The forum acts as a dedicated meeting point for a number of organisations throughout the borough to identify the pressing needs of young people. The officer highlighted the importance of the forum:

"An important point to consider is that all young people are individuals with individual needs that can be hard to work with to a tight budget or restrained time-frame so collaboration is important."

Aside from youth clubs and services, sports and recreation organisations have an important role in providing an outlet for young people to socialise, keep fit and active and also provide educational skills. Merthyr Scouts provide a 'skills for life' agenda which looks to prepare young people with key skills for employment such as help with CVs and confidence building. Similarly Friends of Nant Llwynog, who manage a park in Bedlinog in the south of the borough on behalf of MTCBC told us:

"We try to introduce young people to nature to address health and wellbeing issues. The park has sporting facilities that provide a space for younger children."

Active Merthyr Tydfil is the sport and physical activity development department for MTCBC. They state that "Active Merthyr believes sport and physical activity plays a huge part in people's wellbeing." They work with a number of sports clubs in Merthyr Tydfil to increase participation of young people. The importance of initiatives such as this can be seen from what one young person told us:

"I never went to youth clubs, my social life was based around football, that's where my friends were."

2.4.1. The impact of the pandemic

The pandemic has had a significant impact on youth services. Centres and clubs were closed for over a year and many are only now opening up. Stakeholders told us of the effect that gap has had in reaching young people. While crisis services could switch online many admitted they will not simply reach as many as face to face. They worry too that some young people will not return to services after such an absence. Young people not being able to socialise normally will surely have an effect on their general wellbeing. One told us:

"I would like to go out shopping and see my friends again."

The worry of the long-term effect of young people not returning to is highlighted by Merthyr Scouts who told us that new members generally come through the system from Beavers and Covid has halted the 'feeding system'. They told us:

"Scouts need the experience of the whole system to get the most benefit, not just in terms of experience but the top awards can be used towards their educational qualifications."

Some stakeholders said that young people do not have the basic skills to look after themselves properly. A food bank that opened a pantry which provides cooking classes on a budget as a direct result of the pandemic, told us of a young couple, one of whom had lost their job and another who was on furlough:

"They joined for a short time, I gave her a lime and she replied 'what is this', is it like the yellow one? What do I do with it?"

Despite these concerns there was a sense of optimism from some organisations we spoke to that as restrictions ease they are confident numbers will rise. That many young people have been bored in the house or unable to burn off steam and are so fed up that they will jump at the chance to play sport or recreation again. A football club told us

"It is encouraging to say numbers at all levels is well and truly on the increase. Girls football has had a tremendous response coming back from the pandemic."

3. Gaps and barriers

Understanding where the gaps in provision is important to inform where change is possible. Here we set out some of the biggest gaps from our research and conversations.

3.1. Collaborative working

Our research shows there is evidence of collaboration between organisations offering youth provision and in some cases this has strengthened because of the pandemic. However there is also evidence of a complete lack of collaboration that is hindering the provision of services and therefore the future potential of some young people. Collaborative working should be encouraged, supported and where possible increased post-pandemic. It is especially important in Merthyr Tydfil where budgets are tight and issues such as long-term health conditions and a lack of job opportunities are long standing.

Existing initiatives such as Regional Partnership Boards (established as part of the [Social Services and Well Being Act](#)) the [NEST Framework](#) and NHS Wales' [Together for Children and Young People](#) help facilitate collaboration and many stakeholders told us of their value in facilitating collaboration especially during the pandemic. Examples of positive collaboration include MTCBC's Raising Aspirations Raising Standards programme which looks to improve outcomes for young people in schools and collages "which can only be achieved through partnership working." The Lloyd's Bank Foundation is [currently funding](#) a series of workshops in Merthyr to see how to improve service delivery and system change through increased collaborative working – currently with mental health services for young people but will look to widen their scope. Their officer told us Merthyr Tydfil was chosen as:

"looking at the statistics it was clear the need was higher but the choice was also informed by regional grant managers informing us there was an appetite for change."

However we saw evidence of a reluctance of some organisations to engage in collaboration. One potential reason could be as a service provider told us:

"Some organisations are very precious and not interested in working in partnership, it is about the young person not the credit for doing the work."

Active Merthyr stated in their Impact Report in 2018 that they recruited twenty schools to their borough-wide football league despite a target of eight.¹⁵ When speaking to one sports club that provides youth football they told us that *"the facilities in Merthyr are appalling, awful, shocking."* 3G all year round facilities are severely lacking in the borough which affects being able to train and play in the autumn winter and that schools, especially Pen-y-Dre, have the best facilities – pitches, floodlights and changing rooms. However on the potential of using school facilities for their youth teams the club told us they had been trying for three years and that:

"...they are very uncooperative. I would go as far to say they have been one of the biggest hindrances over the years."

The lack of collaboration means that some organisations can be unaware of the needs of young people and this therefore affects the level of help and support they receive. Barnardo's told us that many local schools are unaware of many young carers. When invited to a school breakfast for Young Carers Week:

"There were twelve carers there, seven of whom were unknown to Barnardo's. Plus a lot who we did know of were not there, why not?."

The lack of understanding one carer felt they experienced in school meant they told the college of their situation:

"I've told college and they will let my tutors know. Schools should be like that, if we are late it's not my fault."

However it should not be the responsibility of the young carer to tell the college of their situation, it should be recognised and catered for which can only be done through collaboration between local education providers and young carer organisations to better understand the needs of young carers and adapt their services to meet them.

3.2. Funding and gaps in transition services

The availability and short-term nature of the funding system is time consuming and a constant worry for organisations that rely on it. A provider of training for disabled people told us that their Engage to Change programme (National Lottery and National Centre for Mental Health funded) looks to work with schools and employers to run an internship scheme. It is currently helping young disabled people get vital employment experience but is only funded for a further eighteen months. They hope the Welsh Government will step in and continue the programme otherwise:

"...what will happen to the young people currently on the course? Will they still get the support they need or just drop of the system?"

Another organisation told us there is a gap in care services in the borough as young people switch between young (to 16) and adult (16+) services which can mean some get "lost to the system". This places an added burden to the funding process. They told us for example that Cwm Taf Health Board has no services offering help for a recently adopted young person. There is no provision for more informal counselling services. Rolling funding streams mean there is a gap in the transition from Specialist Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (S-CAMHS) to community mental health services. Therefore they have had to step in to provide a transitional worker to help those aged 18-25 transition between young and adult services. Another told us that short term funding is an issue and that:

"Our budget is on a shoestring, there is a massive gap in provision for young people. There is a dedicated service for those 3-15 who have suffered some sort

of trauma but nothing for those 15-25. At 16 they can go into adult services but these are not adults, they are children who have suffered a lot and need services with a young person focus."

It is an issue that is also affecting the sport and recreation facilities too. A sports club told us that from 16 onwards "there is a bit of a drop" in participants as they don't want to jump to adult football but there is limited availability due to funding for youth football teams. A youth club provider told us:

"Youth provision was hit hard by Welsh Government cuts. At one point we would have £300k to offer provision, now we get £75k – this is for services but also the building and staff. It doesn't go far."

3.3. Improving knowledge

One reason for conducting the project was to test whether young people had a knowledge of available provision and therefore to inform whether there was a need to find ways to improve participation. There are certainly encouraging signs as seen in section two with young people sitting on MTBWYF's scrutiny committee and Active Merthyr working with sports clubs to actively increase participation of young people. Barnardo's told us their relationship with MTCBC social services was "excellent". Again though there is room for improvement.

It seems the financial pressure on youth services in Merthyr Tydfil had not gone unnoticed with young people:

"It's completely different now, as far as I know there is only one youth centre that is really active in Merthyr and that is Dowlais Engine House."

While this is clearly not the case the perception among young people is such that it could affect their choices when looking to use services and assuming there are none available. The opportunities arising from attending youth services can be significant:

"I got to work with an organisation that sent me to America for a few weeks, I would not have known about that without being at the youth club."

Of those sitting on the youth committees, a youth worker told us:

"Those that sit on committees are politically astute. They either tend to be those who were in care or are politically engaged. They don't engage with the public, that is not a criticism but they attract a certain type of person."

Therefore while it is important to give young people a voice in service delivery it is also important that a wide a range of possible of young people are involved to get a varied mix of experiences.

In terms of mental health services we saw evidence of a lack of knowledge that mirrored findings Wales-wide. Commenting on a survey by Welsh Government on appropriate

access to healthcare, Cwm Taf Morgannwg University Health Board's Director of Primary Care stated that *"some people are confused about the best way to get help for any health issues they are concerned about."*¹⁶ In 2018 the then National Assembly commissioned 'Mind Over Matter' to reform wellbeing services for young people in Wales after finding they were 'limited'.¹⁷ In 2020 The Welsh Parliament reviewed the progress and found that "change is not happening quickly enough", that "the capacity of local primary mental health support services remains a significant concern to us" and that therefore they were "far less confident" of these services to deal with the "collateral damage to children and young people caused by the pandemic".¹⁸

Similarly Barod told us that they had seen a sharp rise in cases of mental health issues in young people for a number of reasons; existing issues exacerbated by the conditions of lockdown, worry and stress about the lack of jobs but also 'concerned others' those affected by the misuse of others. This too has increased during lockdown with people more likely to be indoors for long periods. Barod offer concerned other support but that many don't know about it. They told us:

"It is said seven people are affected from the misuse of one person – but the referral numbers are not matching that. Where are they going for help?"

A youth club told us of the importance of talking to young people to better understand their concerns which has been difficult during lockdown. They fear for the mental health of young people starved of socialising opportunities. On the promotion of their services they told us:

"We use the council website but what young person uses that? Young people don't go on the website. There needs to be much better use of social media to reach them, or maybe a magazine that can be put in schools, colleges and workplaces."

Speaking to young people it seems that word of mouth is the most common way they know about services. An example of a typical response is:

"I found out about Barnardo's from my friend and filled out a form, I'd not heard of them before that"

One important way to improve participation is through work experience. Of those we spoke to it is something that is both valued and hard to access. We have seen earlier of the issues with cuts to DWP budgets affecting referrals to EliteSEA. When we asked young people about the value of Citizens Advice Bureau's work experience described in section two, one told us

"I wouldn't have known about this if I hadn't been with Remploy looking for a job. If people don't know about things they can't benefit from them."

3.4. Cost / facilities cut

Spending on 'learning' and 'social services' – of which the bulk of youth provision funding falls – accounts for almost 77 per cent of the council's 2021/2022 budget.¹⁹ Generally spending on social services by local authorities has seen a 12.6 per cent real terms increase by local authorities between 2009 and 2018²⁰ However while cuts have not been as severe as other areas, closure of provision from cuts have had an effect on youth services. Three youth centres are now legacy funded: Dowlais Engine House, Merthyr Valleys Homes Youth Project and Gellideg youth centre. This means they receive less central funding and have to make up the shortfall from other pots. One officer told us:

"During Covid we were able to apply for a number of grants to provide meals and food packs etc but where future funding comes from is always a concern."

Also the closure of clubs has had a marked effect on young people. The Oasis Youth project used to run out of offices above Merthyr Tydfil central bus station but has since closed. It provided education classes, parenting and dance classes. One young person told us

"The setup was really quite good, I thrived – I went on to be a youth volunteer and it pushed me to where my career path is now."

Bumblebees in the Gurnos was another club that is no longer running and its loss is keenly felt with one young person said:

"...they used to take us on weekend trips kayaking. It was nice because my cousins would go and I knew everyone, it was a friendly thing. There was a mix of older and younger children."

Cost is a big barrier for young people. Places for young people to socialise is important especially for those without large houses, gardens or access to technology. According to Wales Fiscal Analysis local authority expenditure for libraries, culture, heritage, sport and recreation between 2009 and 2018 fell by 36.3 percent, the second biggest change behind planning and economic development.²¹ One young person told us:

"I love doing drama but the cheapest class I could find was £10 per class which is a bit expensive."

While much is made of recent developments such as Bike Park Wales or the Zip World development in Hirwaun many cannot afford to go:

"The Bike Park is expensive, there is no facility for people who cannot afford the full price where people can use it for a few hours."

"You get outpriced of experiencing things. I couldn't afford the £50 for Zip World or £25 for the new rollercoaster."

A factor here too is the level of wages for young people. A recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation report showed Wales had the worst median hourly pay especially in

hospitality and retail.²² These are the jobs young people are most likely to be employed in. Wales also has the highest level of jobs at risk.²³ So they will typically receive lower wages until they are 21, likely in already poorly paid sectors and thus less likely or able to afford to use local facilities.

3.5. Switch to virtual services

The pandemic has meant many services have had to switch to online delivery from college lessons to crisis support. Despite possible assumptions that young people would be comfortable with an increase in virtual services we have found this not to be the case. In fact there is evidence to suggest the switch may mean some young people do not engage with services at all due to not having sufficient access to equipment or likely to drift away from services without the face to face commitment.

All organisations told us that while young people are perhaps more able to adapt to online services than older people a number prefer face to face and miss the interaction or level of support this brings. A youth officer told us:

“Online delivery started out well but trailed off by the summer, many want face to face engagement – you cannot beat that in any shape or form.”

Not having sufficient equipment is also an impediment to engagement. Barod used a winter fund grant during Covid to purchase tablets and 500 power banks (to charge mobile devices) for young people. This was important not just for support services but for young people to access their Service User Involvement Group which aims to involve young people in service delivery designs. Merthyr Mind used similar grants to provide hardware and stressed the importance of understanding the longer term impact of digital exclusion if virtual services are to stay in some form. They told us:

“We try to help young people access our virtual services however we are an interpersonal provider and we are keen to get back to that.”

That being said, the switch has in some cases allowed for an increased knowledge of services. An organisation that provides food told us that online promotion of their services *“has been useful in getting the message out there”* and they can help with referral forms at their centre for those without internet access. Barod also stated that their online advisor service has been useful for those concerned others who do not know where to turn or might not know where to ask for help.

It is clear that virtual services will be in place for the foreseeable future but for those without sufficient access or knowledge of services it will be an impediment to their being able to access vital services. Another youth worker told us:

“If anything face to face interventions need to be increased. We need to speak more to young people to find out what their needs are.”

3.6. Geography

It is perhaps inevitable that the areas of the borough with the largest population have better access to provision. Young people in the southern part of the borough need to travel further. MTCBC admitted that *"not all youths can get to places"*. They found in a recent restructure review that young people do travel such as from Merthyr Vale to the Willows Centre in Troedyrhiw. They continued that:

"We are told we favour certain areas over others, we don't do it on purpose it's just where the facilities are or where the highest demand is."

However, much like transport below this is likely to have an effect on those without access to a car or unable to afford public transport. Public transport in the borough is also less frequent at nights when many classes and activities take place. The uneven nature of services were not lost on young people themselves with one telling us:

"There is nothing from Treharris up, you are talking 5/6 villages with no youth services."

It is not an issue that only affects youth services. When speaking to Merthyr Scouts they told us that while they are worried about numbers returning post-pandemic they have a recovery plan in place to increase attendance. However:

"Our main HQ is near 80 per cent of the population. The smaller four groups, especially in the lower borough are likely to suffer the worst."

3.7. Transport

Lack of transport can be a barrier to participation. There are very few evening or Sunday bus services in the borough, even before the pandemic. The deep cuts to services made during lockdown have not yet been restored. The cost of bus travel can also be prohibitive for a young person. For example, the last bus from Merthyr Tydfil town centre to many areas of the borough is shortly after 6 pm: the last bus to Trefechan is at 6.21 pm, to Aberfan is at 6.30 pm and to the Gurnos is at 19.33. Fares vary but are, for example, £2.40 single or £3.40 return for the Trefechan route. These bus times and fares make participating in evening activities or working in hospitality or retail impossible for the majority of the borough's youth.

Many youth clubs provide their own transport because so few public services are available. However with fewer youth clubs operating there is added pressure on those remain to provide suitable transport. Dowlais Engine House has three minibuses but they are by far the exception and not the rule. Their ability to provide transport is possible thanks to the donation from a local private company. The importance of the buses can be seen with one young person telling us:

"They have a minibus they use to travel the length of the borough to pick up kids to use the facilities. I would travel from the bottom of the borough to go there to see friends, go on weekends away."

The Engine House also provided transport for Merthyr Young Carers pre-pandemic:

"Dowlais Engine house provides transport and a meeting place for young carers to have 3 classes a week in their centre."

However the lack of available transport is starkly highlighted when the group told us:

"If other organisations could provide transport it would give us the opportunity to go further afield."

It is not always possible or indeed fair for organisations to use their own transport to get young people to services. Covid has also added extra pressure on having to have fewer people on transport due to social distancing. The group told us that unless transport is secured they are unable to provide trips or activities as some carers do not have access to personal transport. Staff can transport some but not all so it would be unfair to pick and choose therefore the trip is often cancelled.

4. Recommendations and conclusion

4.1. Conclusion

This project has highlighted the varied nature of youth provision. Under its umbrella can be statutory, open access or voluntary provision, general sport or recreation provision or crisis and targeted services for a variety of important issues for those aged between 11 and 25. Participation could be improved but as one organisation told us, other than statutory, one organisation told us simply:

“These services are all voluntary, we cannot force youths to participate. Interventions too are only done with their consent.”

We have seen the impact of the pandemic on all services and especially those for young carers and young disabled people. The long-term effects of the pandemic on mental health, attendance, social skills or impact on education and employment services may not be known but all these have been impacted in the short term to the obvious detriment of young people’s health and wellbeing and future job prospects.

We have seen that funding is a constant issue for those providing youth provision of all kinds. In terms of MTCBC a recent report by the Welsh Audit Office stated that the Council’s financial position is still challenging.²⁴ Many organisations told us of the constant worry about future funding especially with the potential of funds linked to Covid-19 may begin to end. Nevertheless we believe there are actions that could be taken on the local level to help improve youth provision.

4.2. Recommendations

There needs to be more encouragement and support for collaboration between organisations. There are encouraging signs as outlined in this report such as work being done by Lloyd’s Bank Foundation and the re-establishment of the Children and Young People Forum by VAMT. However it needs to be the norm across all organisations - it is not necessarily the case. Collaboration would not only improve service delivery, potentially save money but would also ensure the maximum number of young people are helped and given support in whatever shape necessary. Indeed reviews of service delivery, such as that undertaken by MTCBC with their ‘presenting needs analysis’, should be much more common.

Funding models have to change on a national level to allow for long-term funding of projects. On a local level funding needs to be improved especially for the transition from young to adult services where we have seen there is potential to lose young people as new funding rounds are sought. Help to streamline grant applications and provide expert support by officers in the Council with grant and funding procedures could only help cash strapped and time starved local voluntary organisations.

There needs to be a far better understanding of the experiences of young carers and the stress they face on top of those of being a young person. We have seen that schools and

colleges are at times simply unaware of or unable to understand the specific needs and concerns of young carers in Merthyr Tydfil. More awareness days, promotional material or simply amplifying the voice of young carers would be a positive. Barnardo's are looking to fund an i.d. badge for young carers so " we don't always have to tell our story". This is something we support and think should be helped to see become reality.

Facilities, parks and open spaces have seen massive cuts in the last decade. However Merthyr does have a good number of facilities such as Bike Park Wales, Rock UK and the Leisure Village. However we have seen that they can be prohibitively expensive. While facilities are a commercial concern we suggest that more could be done to make them accessible to local young people.

There is a dearth of work experience opportunities despite demand from young people, the experience it brings and potential employment avenues it opens up. One area of potential is green jobs. The Welsh Government has provided £2 million to further education colleges for training for jobs in the green economy, with emphasis on those on lower-incomes.²⁵ However Merthyr Tydfil College, is not one of the six colleges identified which means local youth are losing out.

We appreciate that the pandemic has brought challenges for people of all ages and backgrounds. But for young people in Merthyr Tydfil the effects are likely to scar the rest of their lives unless there is concerted action by statutory bodies and charities alike to engage with young people, listen to their needs and provide lasting responses.

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