

## The Equality & Diversity of an Accessible Youth Service

In a youth offer, like almost all things, one size does not fit all. Woughton is a diverse parish and youth is a very broad range of people, factor these things together and we have the necessity of our offer being eclectic in simple terms and methodically planned in reality. Our residents are fortunate that our council have consistently prioritised youth services and we've seen both a successful response to need as well as a commitment to the rights of every child to achieve, thrive and enjoy.

What we \*'know' about the youth WCC is privileged to serve:

- They range from ages 13-19yrs (in official Youth status). 11-18yrs in reality of youth culture and those aged up to 25 yrs are expected and required to be covered if they present as SEND or specifically vulnerable young adults.
- They are represented by both male and female genders, alongside an ever-growing number of gender identities.
- Our levels of SEND children & youth is in line with the national average at approx. 13%. Although experience and service delivery has substantiated that this figure is for the diagnosed only. Furthermore, that a high proportion of our parents feel unequipped and unable to access advice or support to gain diagnosis or EHC Plans for their children, meaning our SEND numbers are undoubtedly higher.
- They are more than frequently living in blended, complex familiar settings.
- A high proportion are living in identified poverty (12.5 thousand children in MK are living in poverty, 40% of these across just four wards, Woughton being one). 48.4% of children are recorded in the 2019 data as living in identified poverty (the highest in the city). The latest census is due to be released but it is expected that this number has climbed to over 60%.
- The reading level and rate of physical activity are lower in the 13-19yr age range than previously recorded.
- We have a high number of young carers on parish.
- There is an increasing number of home-schooled / un-schooled youngsters on parish (city wide in reality).
- We have a high statistic of FSM students on parish. Children eligible for Free School Meals in Woughton consistently sits between 65-80% in recent years. (note the home/ unschooled are not accessing even this one hot meal per day- which is a genuine consideration for us when service planning).
- City wide, so Woughton included, MK's statutory systems of mental health and crisis support are failing at worst and too slow/ too late (often) at best, with those in need not meeting threshold of care due to ever moving thresholds, not the levels of need within our youth. Children's Social Care is under immense pressure and the number of children entering the care system and 18yr old's care leaving are increasing. In summary, we have more vulnerable youth and more struggling families.
- We have seen a decline in independence and basic life skills, alongside a growing apathy to try or achieve.
- A high proportion of CYP report being 'unhappy', worried or feeling unsafe.
- The numbers of CYP presenting with self-harm, eating disorders and mental health difficulties is reported to be higher across all statutory services and some community groups, during and following Covid.
- During Covid CYP and the wider family have learnt new ways to live which appear to be less community engaged, active or interested.
- Young people aged 13+ appear to dislike the title youth club and have voted with their feet many times when we market projects as 'youth clubs' for seniors, leading to a rebrand of 'youth cafes'.
- Our CYP respond best when we apply a strength-based approach.
- They also engage more consistently and positively when we utilise consistent staff members and are more likely to access signposting to other services. (This is substantiated by beginning youth work with families and children from age 8yrs, in order to forge and develop trusted relationships).
- There are no organized gangs in Woughton at this time and crime is proportionately low at approximately 9.3% compared to other wards, where it is significantly higher.

## The Equality & Diversity of an Accessible Youth Service

Council have committed to provide a youth offer across the parish, they also hold the core values of striving to be as inclusive as possible at all times. As such there is a requirement on the youth team (often working alongside the Community, Operations and Environment teams) to create an offer which will genuinely reach as many young residents as possible, or at least meet the need and be accessible to as many as possible. Although we have no statutory obligation to deliver, by choosing to, we have taken on a duty of care for those accessing our services and a desire to serve all. We do genuinely also know that the social return for youth services is massive, even if not easily measurable.

Our website, policies and core values list us as *'Inclusive'* and *'offering services that are reviewed and adapted to reflect the needs of the community'*.

And our website youth page states: ***"Safe accessible and safe: We are led by the needs of our community and respond by focusing on the strengths of individuals and the communities within parish – we know that Woughton is hugely diverse, and we aim to ensure a welcoming, inclusive approach to all our projects, taking a zero-tolerance approach to discriminatory language and actions. This means that when children and young people attend our services, they know that they are safe, supported, and able to express themselves"***.

What can we do/ are doing in response to make our youth service as accessible to as many as possible?

- Ensure our offer includes varied activities- we need an offer for the sporty, the unhealthy, the crafty, hungry, bored, hurt and angry. And of all ages, genders, abilities & socio-economic situations.
- Ensure wherever possible (only one exception currently) that our projects are open access.
- Make all possible effort and adaptations to make our facilities and resources accessible to those with physical, emotional or learning difficulties.
- Keep our staff consistent to develop relational youth work, for greater outcomes.
- Keep our relationships with other professional bodies and people, positive, professional, and informed.
- Ensure all youth team know how to signpost and who to. Or how to share with another staff member as necessary.
- Offer food in as many settings as possible, signpost the hungry to additional services.
- Design projects to offer the greatest pull for even the most apathetic appetite. • Provide opportunities to upskill where possible
- Listen to our youngsters and be adaptable.
- Work holistically, seeing the whole child and working within the constructs in which they live (community, family, school, peer groups).
- Market our projects in response to feedback (eg: a youth club by any other name).

We cannot make them attend but we can increase the chances and make it as easy and accessible as possible, so that those who want or need access to youth professionals, can and will access us. One size does not fit all, but all sizes should be able to find an element of our service to fit them!

*\*Information researched through the Indices of MD, MK Child Poverty Commission report, WCC Equal-Opportunities-and-diversity-policy, iLivehere.com, MKCF Vital Signs, Child Poverty Forum, Period Poverty group, direct conversations with TVP, Young Carers MK, Public Health, Leap, Foodbank, Baby Basics, St Marks Meals, Arthur Allen, CAMHS, Q alliance, YIS and our own practice and the youth & families we engage with.*