



Culture change is usually depicted as a complex process, and one that can take years to embed. But with exceptional distributed leadership, often in response to a crisis, it can be swift and transformative. Listening to formal educators and youth workers involved in the design and delivery of the Vulnerable Children's Hubs in Aberdeen, it's clear that they have experienced just such a shift in the quality of their partnership working over the last few months.

Conditions for Change

There is broad agreement, across the services, about the conditions that enabled this heightened effectiveness of multi-agency working:

1. **Simplicity of mission:** the hubs were fundamentally about child welfare. Everyone who was involved understood the need for a nurturing environment where young people would want to spend time - and would feel safe. Everything else was seen as a bonus.
2. **Highly skilled and motivated practitioners:** teachers and youth workers signed up to being involved in the hubs voluntarily. Those who volunteered were highly skilled and committed to the essential nature of the service.
3. **Crisis planning:** given the unprecedented situation at the start of lockdown, plans had to be made quickly and held lightly. This proved beneficial in terms of partnership working, because it meant that services reflected together and refined plans daily in response to what they were learning.
4. **Being 'in the work' together:** the hubs created a space where skilled practitioners from different services could observe one another's attitudes, behaviours and language in their moment-to-moment interactions with young people, and this provided opportunities for deep learning.
5. **Equity of partnership:** this was partly in the structures around the hubs - for example, youth workers appreciated how integrated they were in the planning and decision making process, from hub referrals onward. But it also showed up in the relinquishing of traditional roles in the interests of a more informal, flexible, child-centred environment and in the shared responsibility for day-to-day review and planning. Colin Lemmon, youth worker, succinctly describes this as 'a group of caring professionals rather than a group of caring professions - parity of esteem in action'.
6. **Shared understanding of young people's 'stories':** information sharing was more comprehensive; feedback loops were completed more quickly - for example when child protection issues were raised and actioned. And simple things, like picking young people up from their homes in the morning, helped to inform the positive approach to supporting young people during the day.
7. **The environment:** Visiting the Tillydrone Hub, Education Scotland Officers from the Regional Directorate remarked "The hub is not based in a school and so children and staff have taken ownership of the environment...The more relaxed atmosphere helps children to remain calm and feel they can take the lead in some of their activities and learning... the ability to use the resources in the community centre means that the hub is supporting the parents and carers as well as the children."
8. **Critical reflection on practice:** Aberdeen City Council plans to build on the success of the Vulnerable Children's Hubs by investing in three Family Wellbeing Hubs in the city for an initial two year period. All practitioners from the original hubs have been involved in a process of reflection and review to draw out insights and recommendations that will inform the set-up of the Wellbeing Hubs going forwards and an iterative, 'action learning approach' is proposed for their onward development.

The Role and Contribution of Youth Work

The Education Scotland report mentioned above, summarises the approach observed as follows:

“ The multi-agency working in the hub is highly effective. A broad range of partners works very effectively together to draw on each other’s skills and experiences to deliver a child-led service. The strong collaboration means that decisions are made quickly and outcomes reviewed without adding too much to workload...Staff are clear about their roles and responsibilities within the hub. However, they are flexible enough to pick up a range of work if it helps to meet the needs of children. They are empowered to use their professional judgement, suggest changes and initiate new thinking. Which agency is in the lead changes in response to the needs of children and very effective communication through twice daily meetings has resulted in cross-pollination of learning for staff. ”

The power of learning together was also highlighted by Laura Gray, St Machar Academy

“ Learners quickly established positive relationships which had a huge impact on their confidence to be involved, lead and learn new skills in a very short period of time... it provided an opportunity to ensure that young people were safe and to respond quickly to any concerns. As an educator, I also learned a lot from other professionals and built partnerships that will have a huge impact on my practice in the classroom. ”

Youth workers felt positively that their approach was being ‘seen’ and valued in an unprecedented way:

“ We were working side by side, and as a result, teachers and social workers gained a deeper appreciation and understanding of the youth work approach - perhaps more than at any other point in their working lives. ”

Madelene MacSween, Development Manager, Communities Team

Summing up the particular contribution of youth work, Mhairi Shewan, Acting QIO and Hubs Lead commented:

“ If we overlook youth work, we overlook a vital element of the service. Youth workers bring strong local networks and important knowledge of young people and their families. I value their flexibility and creativity – always bringing ideas and ‘what ifs’ to the table. More than anything, however, youth workers model an impressive kind of resilience in their support of young people – especially those whose behaviours are challenging. A bad day can be a bad day, but they never let that define a young person, or their relationship with them. This way of working has proved to be such an important expression of the values of the hubs. ”

So What?

What is the learning from this experience that can inform stronger partnership working between Education and Youth Work as we move forward?

1. Effecting change can mean working with resistance, but partnership can’t be imposed, and we’ll learn more, more quickly by establishing and developing partnerships between youth work organisations and schools that have a shared interest in building capacity.
2. We need to pay careful attention to structures and processes that support equity of partnership (who decides on purpose; how are values embedded; who has a voice; where does accountability lie?)
3. Some of the most powerful learning opportunities are those where practitioners can work and learn experientially side by side to build a deeper understanding and appreciation of skills and of difference.
4. Partnerships are enabled when we draw out expertise in the system by enabling action research processes that are led by practitioners themselves – and facilitate dialogue, relationship building and collaborative learning.
5. Appropriate, timely, comprehensive information sharing is key.
6. Partnerships thrive where there are frequent opportunities for feedback - and there is flexibility to redefine priorities and process in light of new learning.