

# Increasing young people's safety in a park

This case study is about how a location assessment helped to make a park safer for young people. It happened during the Covid-19 pandemic when youth clubs in a local area were closed down. Because of this, detached youth workers began working in a local park which was popular with young people of all ages as well as local residents. Youth workers began noticing that older adults were spending time with a group of children and young people, some as young as eight years old.

The youth workers were worried about young people using and dealing drugs and that they were at risk of criminal exploitation. They were also worried that young people may be exposed to violence because young people said they were carrying weapons to protect themselves.

## What was the response?

The park was referred to the Contextual Safeguarding team within Children's Social Care for a 'location assessment'. The location assessment was led by the Contextual Safeguarding team, who came up with a plan to keep young people safe in the park.

The Contextual Safeguarding team agreed that the detached youth workers, who already had strong relationships with young people, would carry on working with them. They would spend time in the park, listening to the young people and gradually learning from them how they felt about what was going on there.

A team, made up of social workers, youth workers and the police worked together to come up with a plan for the park. The response was to:

- Set up a "pop-up" youth club in the park that had a gazebo, seated areas, games and sports equipment for the young people. This was funded by the violence prevention unit (VRU)
- Advertise youth club activities and other events through local schools and social media, so young people knew what was on offer
- Have the community policing team working with the youth workers at the "pop up" youth club to support relationship building between the young people and police
- Develop a 6-week programme to look into and respond to the issues young people had raised about their experiences in the park, including any harm or violence they had faced. This programme was delivered by workers in the youth offending service and a voluntary organisation
- Organise a summer "fun day" to bring the community together in the park, with activities for children and young people, and community groups and stalls with information for people living nearby. The team managed to get some funding from another organisation for the fun day

## What were the challenges?

The Covid-19 pandemic meant that the Contextual Safeguarding team found it difficult at first to do direct work with young people and that their response was delayed. As the work went on, they realised that they needed to be flexible and creative. For example, the team re-directed funding that had been previously allocated for traditional young club based activity to the park outreach work. This helped them stay flexible in their approach, which they quickly learnt was important when doing this work and engaging young people.

## What difference did this make?

Lots of young people attended the "pop up" youth club - around 60 young people visited on some days. A local community group that run events for people working and living in the area really liked the idea. They talked to the Contextual Safeguarding team to see how they could be part of the efforts to keep young people safe and where they could support. This now means that the community and the youth services have stronger relationships and there are more people looking out for young people when they are out and about in the area.

There were also other services who wanted to develop new things for young people to do in the area because they saw how great it was for the young people. The response was so successful that the Contextual Safeguarding team convinced the local council not to close the park's fire-damaged 'youth hut'. Instead, it will be renovated so young people can continue using it, and young people will help with renovations including helping paint the hut.

Over time, outreach work in the park has helped break down barriers between the young people and the police. It's been really helped by the police listening to young people and doing things in response to make the park safer for them.

The older adults that workers were worried about, who used to hang around in the park with the young people, have stopped coming. The Contextual Safeguarding team thinks that this is because those people are put off by youth workers and people who lived nearby looking out for the young people in the park. This means that workers can now work even more closely with the youngest of the young people who come to the park and the outreach work can carry on there, even after the park case has been closed to the Contextual Safeguarding team (because the significant risk of harm had gone away). A few months later, there haven't been any more reported safeguarding concerns for young people that use the park.

Youth workers put the young people in touch with other services that helped them to get work experience and employment guidance. Other young people (who said they needed that kind of support) were put in touch with sexual health support or counselling services. People living nearby, who were members of the community members' social media group, fed-back that they felt much safer going to the park.

## What did we learn?

We have learnt about how important it is to make safe spaces for young people. Not only do we need spaces to be safe, but they also need to be places where young people have fun and enjoy themselves!

The case showed how working in a way that puts the wellbeing, safety, and enjoyment of young people first can help workers develop creative responses to exploitation. By focusing on increasing safety in the park for young people, rather than trying to "fix" young people's behaviour, workers stopped young people from simply being moved on to other places and helped to create an outcome where young people can spend time in a place they have chosen to be in.

The Contextual Safeguarding work reinforced the vital role that workers, local residents and other community members can play in looking out for young people (we sometimes call these people 'community guardians'). For example, building up the relationship between youth workers and young people led to the youth workers being better guardians, because they were more likely to be trusted by the young people. We also saw how their physical presence in the park led to adults who could harm young people moving on.

Finally, engaging the wider community as partners brought people together, helping change how the public view the park. This also led to the local council and others being more willing to invest in creating safe spaces for young people.