



United Nations  
Educational, Scientific and  
Cultural Organization



UNESCO Chair in  
Children, Youth and Civic Engagement  
Ireland



Institute for  
Lifecourse and Society

# The Strengths and Challenges of the YAP Community Based Advocate Model

## RESEARCH STUDY

### Final Report

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Youth **Advocate**  
PROGRAMMES IRELAND

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**Any citation of this report should use the following reference:**

Brady, B., Devaney, C., Crosse R., Rodriguez, L., and Silke, C. (2020). Strengths and Challenges of the YAP Community Based Advocate Model. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, National University of Ireland Galway.

ISBN: 978-1-905861-78-1

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## Acknowledgements

The authors of this report are grateful to all who participated in and supported this research. We would like to especially thank the young people, parents, referrers, staff, and board members of YAP Ireland for their valuable contributions and for taking the time to participate in the study. Thanks are also due to Dr Eamonn Furey, Dr Aileen Shaw, and Barbara Mirkovic for their assistance with the project. We would also like to sincerely thank the YAP Ireland Research Working Group – Andrew Chapple, Aisling Madden Nodwell, Marianne Breen, Katie Bird, Niamh Sludds, and Jean Kenneally. Thanks also to YAP Ireland staff throughout Ireland for their invaluable help with organising fieldwork for this study.



YAP



**Executive  
Summary**

## Introduction

This research study examines the unique aspects of the YAP Ireland programme – namely the use of community-based Advocates to improve the lives of young people and their families. The strengths and challenges associated with the Community-Based Advocate Model are explored from the perspectives of key stakeholders, including young people, their parents or guardians, staff, and referrers.

## Methodology

This study used a mixed-methods research design using a number of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The research design and methodology were agreed in collaboration with a Research Working Group from YAP Ireland. There were two key phases to the research:

### Phase One: Identifying the Key Components of the Model

The key components of the model were identified and agreed, based on interviews with key stakeholders and a secondary data analysis on all documents available on the YAP Ireland website. The final set of components selected is outlined in Figure 1 below.



Figure 1: Components of the Community-Based Advocate Model

## Phase Two: Examining the Key Components of the Community Based Advocate model

The key components of the model were identified by undertaking five specific research strands: cases studies, focus groups, staff survey, literature review and secondary analysis, the details of which are outlined in Table 1 below.

**Table 1: Research Strands**

Research Strands	Description	Number of Respondents
Case Studies x10	One-to-one interviews were conducted with the young person, parent, Advocate, team leader, and referrer for each of the ten cases, detailing experiences and outcomes of the YAP Ireland programme, and their views on the various components of the programme.	N = 50
Focus Groups x8	To establish the views of the young people, parents, Advocates, staff, and board members on their experiences of the model, as well as their perceptions of its strengths, challenges, limitations, and unique features.	N = 85
Staff Survey [online]	YAP Ireland staff, Advocates', and board members' views on their experiences of the model, as well as their perceptions of its strengths, challenges, limitations, and unique features.	N = 163
Literature Review	To examine theory and research in relation to each of the eight components identified.	N/A
Secondary Analysis	Existing YAP Ireland research for evidence in relation to the eight key components and the strengths and challenges of the model.	N/A

Individual reports were produced for each research strand. The findings in this report are derived from integrating the data from all strands of the empirical research in conjunction with both the literature review and the secondary data analysis.

## Findings

The findings of the study are very positive overall, indicating that the Community Based Advocates model is felt to achieve positive outcomes for young people. Young People, Parents, Advocates, staff, board members, and referrers believe strongly in the model and are enthusiastic about its unique strengths as an approach to working with vulnerable young people and their families. The key components of the Community Based Advocate model along with their strengths and any identified challenges are outlined.

### 1. Careful matching of young people at risk with a compatible Advocate, with a view to their developing a supportive relationship

The one-to-one, needs-led, intensive relationship-based approach was seen as an essential feature of the YAP model. The YAP Ireland programme facilitates the development of a supportive relationship between an Advocate and a young person, from which positive changes occurred.

There was a broad consensus among respondents in this study that creating a good match between an Advocate and young person is of critical importance to the YAP Ireland model. Compatibility is important because having similar personalities and interests helps the young person to feel comfortable and to engage better. Outcomes based on this trusting relationship that were reported include increased confidence on the part of the young person, reduced anxiety or social anxiety, improved anger management, greater sociability, enhanced social skills, greater involvement in local community activities, reduced drug or alcohol use, and better school engagement.



**Well to be honest I didn't think I'd actually be as good friends with [Advocate name] as much as I was. Like, I thought it would be more kind of serious ... it was better than I thought it would be, to be honest.**

*(Young person, case study 7)*



**YAP get young people to go out, to talk to about things; they are there if you have problems and help you have ways to handle these. ... They listen to you and show you ways how to handle it. Because normally I would lash out and everything, but now I don't really do that anymore**

*(Young person, case study 8)*

**Before this started, my daughter was very withdrawn and she'd no self-esteem, and sometimes she wouldn't feel comfortable around people or whatever. It's helped her through it, like. I thought it was brilliant.. She seems more confident now, I think.**

*(Parent, case study 3)*

Challenges with this component of the YAP Ireland model were also highlighted. A lack of engagement or challenging behaviour on the part of young people or families can make it difficult to form a relationship and to make progress in meeting the young person's needs. Furthermore, a large pool of Advocates is required to ensure a compatible match can be made.

### 2. Advocates are chosen for their abilities to relate to young people and families

In order for a close relationship to develop between the Advocate and young person, Advocates are carefully chosen for their aptitude and ability to work with young people in the community. While many Advocates have academic qualifications in social care or youth work, such qualifications are not essential. In this study, this emphasis on suitability for

working with young people was supported by the majority of respondents, who felt that the qualities of the Advocate were more important than their qualifications. The qualities seen as important in an Advocate were life experience, common sense, and the ability to relate to a young person. An Advocate was seen as someone who enjoys being around young people and is 'good' with them, understands their communities, and is able to link young people with supports.



**I've a little bit life experience. I mean, I'm here because I want to help, and I think the young people know that. It's very different from sitting across a desk and someone telling you that all these things are wrong with you ... You're a wingman, and that's what they need ... They don't need someone to sort their life out; they just need someone to be around.**

*(Advocate focus group)*

Advocates and their interactions with young people and families were frequently described as 'normal', 'relaxed', 'informal', and 'natural', which made it easier for the young person and their family to relate to them.



**For the kids, I think the impact is huge, because with a social worker it's a notepad, it's sit down, and it's a notepad and its questions. It's not very relaxed, where with YAP Ireland they go out and they have food and they can go on a walk and they can just relax. It's a huge difference.**

*(Parent, case study 6)*

Participants also emphasised how comfortable parents were with the Advocates. Parents found it easy to relate to the more informal approach of the Advocate and were willing to seek support and advice from them.

### 3. YAP Ireland works from a strengths-based approach

The strengths-based focus, which emphasises what is working for the young person, is seen as critical to the YAP Ireland approach. A core element of the model is that there is a focus on the positives and strengths of the young person and their family. The talents and abilities of the young person and their family are identified and built upon, and the development of resilience and self-esteem is prioritised. Linked to this, the organisation operates a 'No reject, no eject' policy, whereby they do not give up on the young person and family in any circumstance.

In all strands of the research undertaken as part of this study, respondents indicated very strong support for this component of the model. A strengths perspective was seen to build trust between young people, families, and YAP Ireland, to inspire confidence among young people and families that they had the capacity to move forward in a positive way.



**Before this started, my daughter was very withdrawn and she'd no self-esteem, and sometimes she wouldn't feel comfortable around people or whatever. It's helped her through it, like. Yeah I thought it was brilliant, now. She seems more confident now, I think.**

*(Parent, case study 3)*

**The focus on strengths is key, as it changes the dynamic of the relationship from the beginning. It also means that we do not give up, but continue to frame issues with a 'Well, that was a mistake, or a bad thing happened, but let's pick ourselves up and learn and get on with the goals we have'. There are no magic wands, but it is important to have a strengths-based perspective so that we can model how even when things are hard or do not work out, you can control how you respond to situations and can take something positive out of it. Hope is very important.**

*(Staff survey respondent 105)*

#### 4. YAP Ireland provides a needs-led, wraparound service

A key component of the YAP Ireland model is that services are tailored to the needs of the young person and their family, and are personalised and flexible. An intensive service is offered to respond to these needs as required, including an emergency line that is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

There was strong agreement among staff, Advocates, and management on the importance of having services tailored to the needs of the young person and their family. Many respondents said that ‘one size does not fit all’ and that there is a need for a personalised and flexible approach to meet people’s needs. Placing the young person and their family at the centre of the planning and review process and listening to their needs, experiences, and goals is seen as critical to the YAP Ireland model. There was also awareness that plans will not always work out and there is a need for flexibility and adaptation.



**I thought it was just going to be someone coming down and talking, and that’s it, like. But it was all about what you wanted to do. Like what you’d prefer to do, or if you wanted to go somewhere to talk about something, you could do that. If you wanted to stay at home, you could do that, like. It all revolved around you.**

*(Young person, case study 2)*

As part of the needs-led approach, the young person is placed at the centre of the planning process and supported to articulate what they want and need. The fact that meetings take place in the family home was seen as making it easier for the family. In the wraparound approach, there was also evidence of a strong emphasis on support for parents and families to support them directly and to build their capacity to support their young person.



**You may get a phone call on the Monday morning saying that this happened over the weekend, could you take out YP because she’s really low, you know, or I can’t cope with this; I think I might need to see a doctor, or Mam, I’d bring her to psychological visits and stuff. ... Just literally depends on the needs of the family. So you’re as present as they need you to be.**

*(Advocate, case study 8)*

**I’ve had, like the YP might have a crap day at school and he’d be like, ‘Can we just go for a spin?’ We might have planned to go to the library and study for his driver theory or do this, do that, but it’s like, ‘Okay, we’ll get a coffee and we’ll go for a spin and a chat.’ And that’s what he needs on that day. ... I suppose that then could mean that maybe he’ll go home much more relaxed and chilled out and maybe not go and meet friends and go drinking or do this or do that; go home and chill out for the evening. If I pushed my plans on him he’d just think, ‘Feck this.’**

*(Advocate, case study 2)*

While YAP Ireland endeavours to access the required support for families to meet their needs, there are cases where the required supports are not available or there are long waiting lists to access them. Managing expectations when the necessary resources are not available was identified as a challenge by some respondents.



## 5. Emphasis on community and social integration

Facilitating young people to access local community resources is a key component of the YAP Ireland model and was perceived to be a successful and important aspect of the intervention. Such supports were described by some young people as helping them to build confidence, improve sociability, and develop and maintain friendships. Advocates, referrers, and parents spoke of witnessing enhanced confidence, sense of purpose, and family pride as a result of these connections. An important task for the Advocate is to establish connections with relevant people in the community, such as youth workers or sports coaches, who could support the young person to integrate into community activities and look out for the young person on an ongoing basis.



**When I had my YAP Ireland worker, we did do like stuff with our community and stuff like, with dancing and Zumba dancing and stuff, but most of our thing was based with the community. It was helping me to like build my confidence.**

*(Young people's focus group 2)*

Respondents referred to the importance of social and community integration for young people, which can provide them with support, a positive social outlet, and a sense of belonging. Such social engagement was seen to reduce isolation, build confidence, and promote better mental health. Because YAP Ireland is a time-limited intervention, community engagement can be a means of ensuring that the young person has access to sustainable supports after they finish with the programme.



**Many young people often feel isolated within their own communities and don't actively participate in sports or know where to access services within their areas. So it is important that Advocates**

**help with this and encourage young people to link in with their own peer groups, which helps boost confidence and encourages young people to learn a new set of skills that they perhaps never contemplated doing before they came on the YAP Ireland programme.**

*(Staff survey respondent 77)*

A minority of respondents highlighted the challenges in supporting young people to become involved in their communities. Challenges identified include a lack of interest, mental health issues, or perceptions that their communities are unsafe or unwelcoming. Some young people may already be integrated into their communities and require a different type of support. Furthermore, logistical challenges, such as lack of transport or facilities, can make sustainable social and community integration challenging.

## 6. Youth and parental participation

YAP Ireland has a strong commitment to participation and listening to the voice of service users throughout the organisation. The organisation listens attentively to young people and families as part of the case planning and review and also operates a range of participation groups, youth forums, parent forums, and youth led research to hear the voice of service users on their experiences of YAP Ireland programmes and other issues affecting their lives. Advocates support young people and parents to articulate their needs and opinions and to have the confidence to share them with relevant others. The organisation also facilitates youth input into practices such as staff and Advocate selection and planning, and supports advocacy on issues affecting young people and parents identified through participation activities. There was positive feedback on all aspects of this work throughout this study, with only a minor challenge mentioned by some research participants that participation groups are not run in their areas.



**Kind of gave me a chance to get comfortable talking to people I didn't know more. Because before I joined YAP I just knew the few friends I had in my youth group, the other one I went to, and I wouldn't really talk to new people that often. But YAP gave me that chance to come into a new setting, new people, just gave me a chance to be a bit more comfortable, because there could be a new person every week you came. So just to make them feel welcome and stuff as well, was a nice chance to be able to do that.**

*(Young person, case study 9)*

**They have a thing on a Wednesday now for parents which is brilliant as well. You're not on your own, you know. I know most people think, 'Well, this is only happening to me', but it's not. Like it's a great thing that they have this on a Wednesday, because when you go to it, you go, 'It's not only me', and you can listen to the problems that they have and you can relate to them and then get ideas about going ahead.**

*(Parent, case study 10)*

## 7. Focus on quality, outcomes, and evidence

The YAP Ireland model implements a number of quality assurance policies, with a view to assessing the effectiveness of its involvement with each young person and their family. These include outcomes measurement tools, such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), to measure the impact of the YAP Ireland model for each case. Overall, this study found that there is a strong focus on outcomes in the model. YAP Ireland staff, Advocates, and board members indicated strong support for the organisation's focus on outcomes, quality assurance, monitoring, and evidence-based practice. Specific goals are set for each case, and progress is monitored on a continuous basis. Parents also welcomed this focus on goals.



**We'd sit down with the boys and say, Well, did we make it to the goals, what changed, what happened, will we do this. That was huge, like. It was very helpful to have stuff like that.**

*(Parent, Case study 6)*

**There was a goal, not just week by week. They actually did achieve those. It helped YP with the sleep and with opening up more as well. It did work and it was very good.**

*(Parent, case study 4)*

Outcomes data is also gathered across the organisation as a whole. Evaluation and monitoring are seen as critical to ensuring that the service is of a high quality. There is also an emphasis on fidelity to the model and continuous training for all staff.

## 8. YAP Ireland is a time-limited programme for young people

YAP Ireland offers a six-month programme to young people, with an option to apply for extension towards the end of that period if the outcomes have not been achieved. In this study, mixed views were expressed on the time-limited nature of the programme. On the one hand, many respondents emphasised the benefit of time limits in ensuring a focus on outcomes and preventing the Advocate and young person from becoming too attached or dependent. The option to extend the six-month period was also rated positively by many.



**Long-term sometimes isn't the answer, because it becomes repetitive, it becomes essentially very familiar; it becomes: I'm just calling for a cup of tea, and we're just checking in, and it goes on and on; I feel like it goes on too long. It's not goal-specific then, and things just, I don't know, they get a little bit fuzzy, whereas when it's a time-limited intervention you have the ability to push and challenge people a little bit more.**

*(Team leader, case study 4)*

Many Advocates and referrers who took part in case study interviews felt that the six-month timeframe was adequate. On the other hand, most parents and some young people interviewed felt that a longer intervention would be preferable. Some expressed a concern that vulnerable young people who have developed a close and trusting relationship with their Advocate would experience a sense of loss after the programme concluded. Some referrers and Advocates also felt that the programme should have a longer intervention period emphasizing that it takes time for relationships to develop and that the needs of the young person has not been met after the six months.



**You can't just start a relationship that fast; I mean you've got to start slow, that's why duration is important. I think we should have at least a year.**

*(Young People focus group 1)*

**The six months, like, it goes so quickly and it takes a few weeks to settle and get to know people and to get to trust the staff and their leader. It takes a while, and then when they settle, all of a sudden it's coming to the end.**

*(Parent, case study 5)*

The view was also expressed that older teenagers adapt to YAP Ireland more quickly, whereas the younger age group can take longer to adjust to working with an Advocate. Similarly, some took the view that longer time may be needed with young people with specific needs. Others felt that the boundaries can become blurred and momentum can be lost if the YAP Ireland worker is involved for too long.

## Conclusion

The YAP Ireland model is based on a number of core and essential service and practice components or principles. This study finds that the eight central components of the model as identified in this research are the 'critical ingredients' (Whittaker, 2009) in determining the success of the programme. These components are the essence of the YAP Ireland programme and how it operates.





## Introduction

The Youth Advocate Programme Ireland (YAP Ireland) model is a unique way of providing intensive, focused support to children, young people, and families with a range of needs, based upon the development of a trusting relationship between a supportive, trained, and skilled adult Advocate, the young person, and their family.

## 1.1 Introduction

The Youth Advocate Programme Ireland (YAP Ireland) model is a unique way of providing intensive, focused support to children, young people, and families with a range of needs, based upon the development of a trusting relationship between a supportive, trained, and skilled adult Advocate, the young person, and their family. This research study consisted of an in-depth examination of the unique aspects of the YAP Ireland programme – namely the use of community-based Advocates to improve the lives of young people and their families. Specifically, the study aims were to:

- **identify the key components of the Community-Based Advocate Model**
- **explore the strengths and challenges associated with each component of the model and the programme overall from the perspectives of key stakeholders: young people, their parents or guardians, YAP Ireland staff, and referrers.**

This introductory chapter describes the YAP Ireland programme in detail and situates it within the current children and family services, policy, and practice landscape.

## 1.2 The Youth Advocate Programme

YAP is an internationally recognised, non-profit organisation exclusively committed to providing community-based alternatives to out-of-home care through direct service, advocacy, and policy change. YAP was originally developed in 1975 in the USA as an intervention for young people who were considered 'high risk' (Fleischer et al., 2006). YAP Inc. currently has programmes in 17 states in America, as well as in Europe, Australia, and Africa.<sup>1</sup> The core principles upon which the model is based include carefully selected practitioners, skills-based training, supervision, process and outcomes evaluation, and a cyclical process of connecting each of these components (Bruns et al., 2011).

The model aims to benefit the community by providing an alternative to the institutionalisation of vulnerable young people, through the operation of integrated, family- and community-based programmes of support services for young people and their families in need or at risk. The young people and their families that are involved in YAP Ireland typically experience a range of adversities, including: family dysfunction and fragmentation; poverty, neglect, and abuse, community violence;

involvement in the criminal justice system, and mental and behavioural health concerns (Silva et al., 2019). Consequently, young people and their families are involved with a wide range of agencies offering a variety of supports and services (Youth Advocate Programmes Ireland, 2013, 2018a). The aim of a YAP Ireland intervention is to build a network of formal and informal supports for the young person and family, which in turn maintains the young person at home and out of residential care.

The YAP Ireland model is based upon the development of a trusting relationship between a supportive, trained, and skilled adult Advocate, the young person, and their family. YAP Ireland adopts a four-stage implementation programme: referral and young people and family engagement; assessment and planning; service delivery; and transition and discharge. Central to the programme is the recruitment, training, and employment of Advocates and matching the young person for a six-month period with a locally recruited Advocate. YAP Ireland provides intensive, focused support to children, young people, and families based on an individual service plan. The model works with the young person and family to develop

<sup>1</sup> [www.yapireland.ie/about-us/yap-international/](http://www.yapireland.ie/about-us/yap-international/)

their competencies, improve their coping skills, and support them in building networks of community support. The model focuses on the strengths of the young person and their family, offering a wraparound approach to address the needs of the young person within their family and local community. Wraparound is a process that informs the provision of intensive, integrated, and community-based intervention (Fleischer et al., 2006; Silva et al., 2019). YAP Ireland's goal is to empower young people and their families and to put in place supports that will remain after programme involvement has ended. The model is flexible and can be adapted to meet a range of needs.

YAP Ireland is a registered charity managed by a voluntary board of directors; it employs 35 permanent staff and approximately 140 Advocates on a fixed-purpose basis. It provides services to young people and families across 22 counties in Ireland. In 2018, YAP Ireland provided services to 462 young people and their families, including 330 young people who were referred to YAP Ireland for the first time. Tusla social work teams primarily refer these young people. The programme is informed by a set of future objectives as detailed in its Strategic Plan 2017–2020.

### These include:

- 1. To provide quality services to young people and families in line with the YAP Ireland model.**
- 2. To amplify the voice of young people and parents/carers in society.**
- 3. Organisational effectiveness: we do what we say we will do.**

YAP Ireland provides a range of supports to young people and their families. Their *Intensive Support Programme*, which is the focus of this study, provides support of up to 15 hours a week for six months to young people aged 10–18 years and their families, who are at high risk

of placement in care, secure care, and custody. These young people are deemed to be at a significant level of risk. The *Family Support Programme* provides support of 10 hours a week for six months to families in need of time-limited, focused support. The *Aftercare Support Programme* provides support of 8 hours a week for six months to support the transition from care to independent living to young people aged 17–19 years who meet Tusla criteria for Aftercare support. The *Disability and Mental Health Intensive Support Service* provides a 12-month programme to young people aged 10–21 years and their families to support independent living skills. The *Independent Advocacy Service* is being delivered in some Adolescent Mental Health Inpatient units. The service allows young people to access an independent Advocate, to ensure clarity and understanding of the service they are receiving and to enhance their participation in the service provision. This programme is also being piloted in Community Healthcare Organisation (CHO) West in the Inpatient Unit and for young people and parents using Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) in the community. *Intensive support services* are also offered to The Oberstown Children Detention Campus. Young people leaving The Oberstown Children Detention Campus can receive support of up to 15 hours a week for six months to support reintegration into family and community and reduce reoffending. YAP Ireland also provides a *Crisis Intervention Service* that supports a young person aged 8–18 years in crisis for a specific period. YAP Ireland also provides emergency *Out of Hours* support for young people referred by the Tusla Crisis Intervention Service Programme to support their temporary placement and care plan. Young people and parents/carers are involved in a range of *participatory groups and activities* that aim to ensure that the voices of young people and families are able to influence YAP Ireland services and social policy issues that directly affect them.

The key principles of YAP Ireland mirror the key principles of YAP internationally. YAP Ireland provides intensive one-to-one support for up to 15 hours per week over a period of six months

for young people and their families. It offers a flexible service tailored to specific needs, which uses a strengths-based, wraparound approach. Specifically in the Irish context, the YAP Ireland model addresses a range of needs that include young people at risk of care or custody, young people with mild learning difficulties or mental health or drug misuse issues, and those in custody moving to independent living. In addition, young people are matched

with Advocates from the same or a nearby community where possible. YAP Ireland does not refuse a referral, does not expel young people from the programme, and is committed to working with them for the six-month period. It provides an on-call support service 24 hours a day each day of the year. YAP Ireland responds to referrals promptly and responds to emerging needs and issues in areas where the programme is needed.

### 1.3 Outcomes associated with the programme

YAP Ireland is committed to measuring outcomes to assess the impact of the programme and provide parents/carers with an opportunity to feed back to YAP Ireland on the quality of the service received. YAP Ireland has conducted previous research examining the outcomes from the programme. Devlin et al. (2014) used a longitudinal, mixed-methods research design to evaluate the impact and effectiveness of the YAP Ireland model on young people and their families. The project had two components:

- 1. A quasi-experimental evaluation comparing scores on the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) from a YAP Ireland sample of young people and their guardians with scores from a comparative youth cohort. Online questionnaires were also carried out with the Advocates.**
- 2. A qualitative component, which involved a series of one-to-one interviews with participants, their guardians, and their Advocates, along with focus group, interviews with YAP Ireland Managers and Advocates.**

Qualitative data was also collected from open-ended questions in the online survey of Advocates and through observation of YAP

Ireland training sessions (e.g. note taking). At an overall level, the findings of the report evidences the positive outcomes achieved by young people and families through participation in the YAP Ireland Programme. It reinforces the positive impact of the strengths-based, needs-led, flexible model on their lives. The study reported some significant improvements in well-being among YAP Ireland participants. Both parents and young people said there were decreases in emotional symptoms, conduct problems, and hyperactivity in the youth cohort, but no significant improvements in prosocial behaviour were observed. Young people reported that the programme effects did not appear to dissipate over time, once they stopped taking part in YAP Ireland (e.g. from post-intervention to follow-up) (ibid.). However, it should be acknowledged that an increase in reported difficulties, once YAP Ireland was terminated, was observed in parent reports – while Devlin et al. (2014) note that interpretation of this finding may be impaired by the low response rate at follow-up.

Furthermore, the qualitative interviews revealed that young people believe that YAP Ireland helps to improve their mental health, stress, confidence, resilience, and ability to deal with challenges, while parents noted observing discernible positive changes in the young person's behaviour after joining YAP Ireland. Parents also commented on the support that was provided to the entire family. In the Fidelity survey administered to the YAP Ireland cohort, parents and young people reported positive experiences with the YAP Ireland programme,

which suggests that the programme is being implemented as intended. Similarly, the majority of YAP Ireland Advocates who were interviewed reported positive experiences of the YAP Ireland programme and felt supported by their manager – although a minority of Advocates reported negative relationships with their managers. While some Advocates and parents expressed concerns that the six-month YAP Ireland period may not be sufficient, the Devlin et al. (2014) report provides initial evidence to suggest that positive changes can be achieved within this period.

The YAP Ireland Annual Report 2018 included an analysis of data from 1,849 young people with whom YAP Ireland worked from January 2011 to October 2018. It measured the views of young people, families, referrers, Advocates, and managers when matched and again at the end of the six-month programme. The data shows high levels of improvements in all domains measured (Self; Family; Education; and Risky Behaviour), as detailed below.

#### Self:

- **81% improvement in Relationship with Peers**
- **82% in Self-Esteem/Confidence**
- **78% in Withdrawn/Isolated**

#### Education:

- **80% improvement in General Behaviour**
- **77% in Attendance**
- **79% in Aspirations**

#### Family:

- **78% improvement in Parenting Skills**
- **79% in Social Supports/Family**
- **87% in Home Environment – Physical/Financial**

#### Risky Behaviour:

- **82% improvement in Risky Behaviour (Self)**
- **78% in Impulsivity**
- **92% in Co-operation with Juvenile Liaison Officer/Gardaí**

## 1.4 Children and Young People in Ireland

According to the most recent Census data available, there are 1,218,370 families in the Irish State. 862,721 of these are families with children, which is reported as a notable increase since 1996. Married couples with children account for 568,317, while the number of cohabiting couples with children stands at 75,587. 592 families consist of same-sex couples with children, with the majority being female couples (82.9%). One-parent families with children account for 189,112 in the case of mothers and 29,705 in the case of fathers (CSO, 2016).

In 2016, there were 1,190,502 children living in Ireland; this accounted for about 25% of the total population of Ireland. Census 2016 shows that the population of the primary-school age group (5–12 years) stood at 548,693, an increase of 8.8 per cent since 2011. There were 371,588 children of secondary school age (13–18 years) in April 2016, an increase of 7.7 per cent (26,657) since 2011. Projections in child population growth indicate increases of around 88,000 to 100,000 by 2026 for 5–12-year-olds and of 105,700 to 116,800 for 13–18-year-olds (CSO, 2013).

As well as increasing, Ireland's youth demographic is also undergoing a transformation: in 2011, there were 93,005 foreign national children in Ireland. This accounted for 8.3% of the total child population. In the same year, there were 14,245 Traveller children in Ireland. This accounted for 1.2% of the total child population and 48.2% of the total Traveller population. Children with a disability accounted for 5.8% of the total child population or 66,437 children (DCYA, 2016).

Children and young people are deemed one of the most vulnerable groups in society. Approximately 230,000 children are living in

poverty (with incomes below the poverty line) in Ireland today – that is one in five children under 18. Approximately 110,000 children are living in consistent poverty – which means they are living in households with incomes below the poverty line and experiencing deprivation (Social Justice Ireland, 2019). The biggest adversity for contemporary Irish families arguably relates to the current housing crisis. Statistical reports from the end of April 2019 indicated that 1,729 families with children and 1,003 single-parent families are homeless in Ireland (Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, 2019).

## 1.5 Children and Family Services

The current child welfare system can be traced back to the 1970 Health Act, which established eight regional health boards through which health and social services would be delivered. The Health Services Executive (HSE) replaced the Health Boards in 2005. However, after various enquiries on the abuse of children at home, and enquiries on historical and more recent abuse of children in State care, the need for a standalone agency to deliver child protection and welfare services was identified (Malone and Canavan, 2018). This led ultimately to the establishment of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, legislated for by the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013 (Government of Ireland, 2013).

Since January 2014, Tusla has been operating as an independent entity responsible for the delivery of child protection, early intervention, and family support services. The Child Care Act 1991 mandates Tusla 'to promote the welfare of children in its area who are not receiving adequate care and protection' (Government of Ireland, 1991, II (3.1)) and emphasises the provision of family support services (Devaney and McGregor, 2017). The Act is presently under review by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs (DCYA), and it is expected that any new legislation is likely to broaden the scope of provision for supportive services and to consolidate protection responsibilities,

including mandatory reporting as established in the Children First Act 2015 (McGregor and Devaney, 2019).

Tusla's service provision includes an extensive range of what are generically titled Family Support services that it provides directly or via grant aid. These range from early years services through to those focused on adolescents; from universal services accessible by all children and families, to services targeted at children with specific needs; and across the care continuum, including support to children in state care and their families. Tusla is not alone, however, in providing prevention, early intervention, and family support services. There already exists a long-established tradition of service development and testing in Ireland, across health, local and community development, education, youth work, and juvenile justice, among other fields (Malone and Canavan, 2018). Ireland has historically relied heavily on voluntary/third sector organisations to deliver key services, and such organisations continue to play a central role in service provision (Dukelow and Considine, 2017). Tusla (and previously the HSE) has funded the YAP programme in Ireland since 2002, providing the majority of its annual income (Youth Advocate Programmes Ireland, 2018a).

## 1.6 Children and Family Policies

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs' *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The National Framework for Children and Young People, 2014–2020* (2014) and the *High-Level Policy Document on Supporting Children and Families* (2015) provide children and family service providers with a national policy platform to embed prevention and early intervention in service delivery. *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures* is the first national overarching policy framework that incorporates a 'whole-of-government approach' to improving the outcomes of children and young people aged 0–24 years. In advancing the vision outlined in *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*, the publication of the *High-Level Policy Statement on Supporting Parents and Families* was important in providing a framework to deliver the policy commitments set out. In realising this vision, the strategy statement envisaged establishing a system to support parents and families. *Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children* is Ireland's national guidance document for relevant organisations and individuals to help keep children safe and protected from harm. These guidelines were first published in 1999 and were revised in 2011 and again in 2017 (DCYA, 2017). The second revision occurred due to the enactment of the Children First Act 2015, which places several statutory obligations on specific groups of professionals providing services to children. This revised Guidance includes information on the statutory obligations and sets out the best-practice procedures that should be in place for all organisations providing services to children.

The Irish child care and welfare system has been shaped by learning from the widespread abuse of children in institutional care in Ireland, such as that captured in the *Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse* (Ryan, 2009). Over the past decade in particular, there has been increased emphasis on the importance of relationship-based and preventative practices with children and families, the challenging of dominant power relations, the promotion of partnership,

and the establishment of an ethos of children's rights (Brady et al., 2020). Indeed, Ireland has been developing its rights-based approach for children since its ratification of the *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child* (UNCRC) in 1992, and in 2012, the people of Ireland voted to strengthen the rights of children in the Irish Constitution. Tusla's founding legislation requires the Agency, in performing its functions and in planning and reviewing the provision of services, to ensure that the views of the individual child and children collectively are ascertained and given due weight, having regard to the age and maturity of the child (Government of Ireland, 2013). To support the government and its agencies to translate their legal commitments into practice, the Irish government published a *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-Making* (DCYA, 2015b). Underpinned by the Lundy model, this Strategy sets out a roadmap for the implementation of a child's right to participate. *Children First*, the national child protection and welfare guidelines (2017), also identifies a child's right to be heard as a key principle of best practice.





## Methodology

This study utilised a mixed-method research design using a number of qualitative and quantitative research methods. A ‘Concurrent Triangulated’ design was adopted, where different types of data collected at the same time were used to confirm or corroborate findings within the study (Creswell and Plano Clark, 2017).

The research design and methodology were agreed in collaboration with a Research Working Group from YAP Ireland. An overview of the study design is provided in Figure 2. There were two key phases to the research, which are now outlined.

## 2.1 Phase One: Identifying the Key Components of the YAP Ireland model

The purpose of the preliminary phase was to identify the critical components of the YAP Ireland model, which could then be studied in detail in subsequent strands of the research. Three key actions were undertaken as part of this process:

- 1. One-to-one interviews were conducted with the CEO, chairperson, and director of services to explore their views on the key components of the YAP Ireland Community-Based Advocate Model.**
- 2. All documents available on the YAP Ireland website (70 in total) were downloaded and imported into the qualitative data analysis software NVivo for analysis. Suitable documents were fully read and analysed to identify themes and relevant content that could inform the process to identify the essential components and values of YAP Ireland. A full list of themes identified and their frequency is provided in Appendix A. The themes arising most frequently were seen to indicate critical components or principles of the model.**

- 3. Based on steps 1 and 2, a draft set of components was developed and discussed with the Research Steering Group. The final set of components selected is listed in Table 2.**



Figure 2: Study Design

**1. IDENTIFYING THE KEY COMPONENTS OF THE MODEL:**

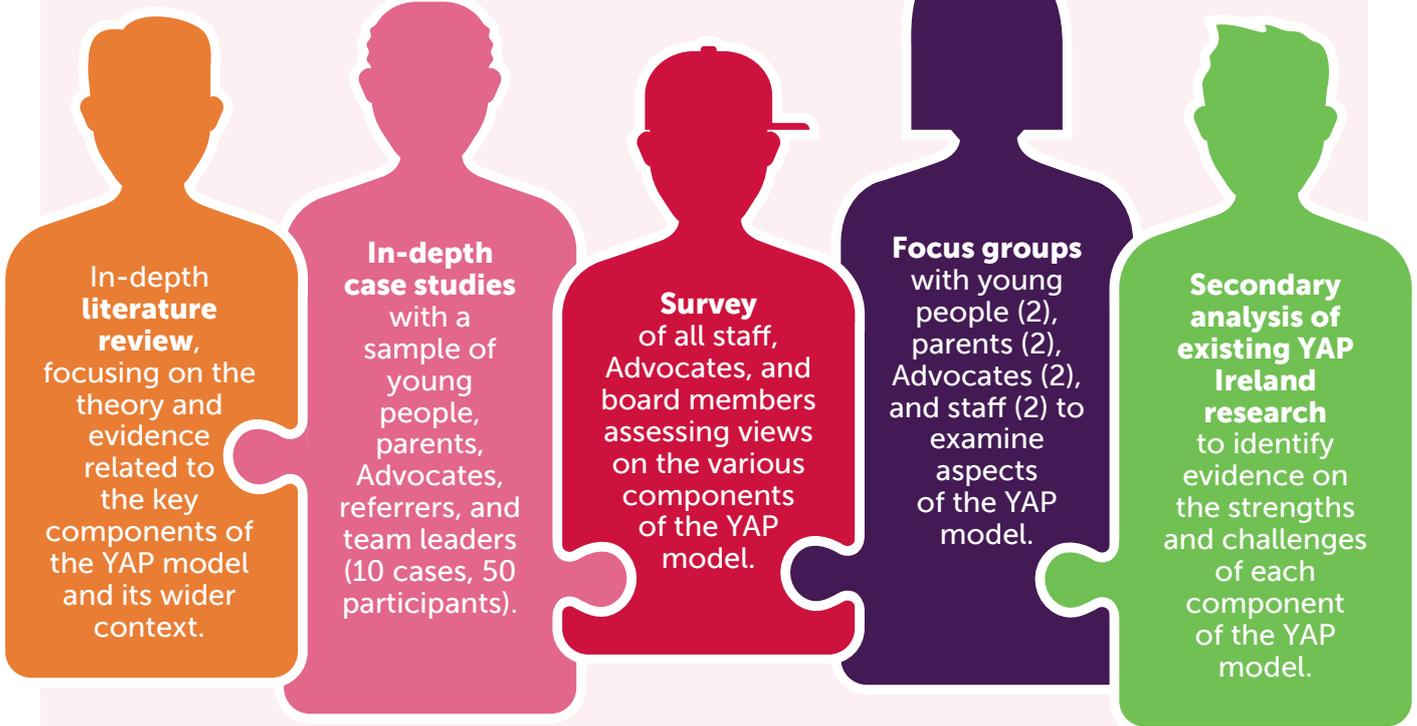
Scoping of YAP literature to identify key components of the CBA model (70 documents)

Key informant interviews (3)

Agree the key components of the YAP model

**2. EXAMINING THE KEY COMPONENTS OF THE YAP MODEL**

*Five strands*



**3. INTEGRATED ANALYSIS**

Analysis of the strengths and challenges associated with each component of the model

Analysis of the strengths and challenges of the overall model

Recommendations

Table 2: Youth Advocate Programme – Key Components of the Model

Component	Description
<b>Supportive relationship between Young Person and Advocate</b>	The programme facilitates the development of a relationship between an Advocate and a young person. The match is based on personality, interests, and location of both young person and Advocate.
<b>Advocates chosen for their ability to relate to young people</b>	Advocates are not required to have professional qualifications but must be suited to working with young people in the community.
<b>Strengths-based support</b>	<p>YAP Ireland focuses on the positives and strengths of the young person and their family. It highlights the talents and abilities of the young person.</p> <p>YAP Ireland encourages the development of resilience and self-esteem and operates a 'no reject, no eject' policy.</p>
<b>Needs-led wraparound support</b>	Services are tailored to the needs of the young person and their family, are personalised and flexible. An intensive service is offered to respond to these needs as required (emergency line 24/7).
<b>Social and community integration</b>	Local advocates facilitate the young persons' integration into the community and access to social outlets and opportunities.
<b>Youth and parent participation</b>	<p>Emphasis on listening to the voice of service users.</p> <p>Participation groups, youth forums, parent forums, and youth-led research.</p>
<b>Focus on quality, outcomes, and evidence</b>	<p>There is an organisational emphasis on quality assurance and monitoring.</p> <p>Case-by-case outcomes evaluation.</p> <p>Emphasis on monitoring, fidelity to the model, and continuous training for all staff.</p>
<b>Time-limited intervention</b>	This is a six-month programme (with an option to apply for extension depending on the needs of the young person).

## 2.2 Phase Two: Examining the Key Components of the YAP Ireland model

Five specific research strands were then undertaken to critically examine the eight components of the programme that had been identified and to explore the strengths and challenges of the programme overall. These strands were staff survey, case studies, focus groups, secondary analysis of existing YAP Ireland research, and literature review. Individual reports were written for each. The findings from all strands of the research are integrated in this final report.

**Literature Review:** A detailed review was undertaken to examine theory and research in relation to each of the eight components identified.

**Secondary Analysis:** A secondary analysis of existing YAP Ireland research was conducted. Specifically, this analysis reviewed existing research for evidence in relation to the eight key components of the model. It also reviewed evidence from previous studies in relation to the strengths and challenges of the model.

**Case Studies:** Ten YAP Ireland cases were selected for in-depth analysis. The first ten cases closing to the programme during a defined 2-week period in May 2019 were selected for inclusion in the study and approached to ask if they wished to take part. Where young people or their families declined to participate in the research, the next case that was due to close was approached until a quota of ten cases was reached. This approach ensured that the sample of cases studied was mixed in terms of gender, geographical location, age, etc. and was not biased towards cases with positive outcomes.

One-to-one interviews were then conducted with the young person, parent, Advocate, Team Leader, and referrer for each of the ten cases, resulting in a total of 50 interviews.

Each respondent was asked about their experience of engagement with the YAP Ireland programme, perceived outcomes, if any, and their views on the various components of the programme. All interviews were transcribed in full and analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006).

**Focus Groups:** A series of focus groups were conducted to establish stakeholders' views on their experiences of the model and their perceptions of its strengths, challenges, limitations, and unique features. In total, eight focus groups were conducted: two young people's groups, two parent groups, two Advocate groups, and two groups made up of YAP Ireland staff and board members, involving a total of eighty-five people. Participatory techniques were used in the young people's focus groups to ensure their views were heard (see Appendix B for examples of participatory techniques and accessible description of the components used to guide the focus group).

**Staff Survey:** An online survey was sent to YAP Ireland staff, Advocates, and board members to establish their views on the various components of the model. Respondents were also asked to give their views on what they perceived to be the strengths, challenges, and unique features of the model and to indicate if they felt it should be changed in any way.

A total of 185 staff members, board members, and Advocates were invited to complete the survey. The response rate was 89%, with 163 people completing the survey. Table 3 provides a numerical breakdown of invitations and completions for each role type. Advocates represented the largest category, accounting for two thirds of survey respondents, followed by team leaders (11%), support services and finance (5%), senior management team (5%), and board members (5%).

**Table 3: Profile of staff survey participants**

Role	Total number	Number completed	% of role	% of respondents
Advocate	140	107	76%	66%
Team Leader	19	18	95%	11%
Support services and finance	8	8	100%	5%
Senior management team	8	8	100%	5%
Board members	9	8	89%	5%
No role indicated		14		9%
<b>Total</b>	<b>184</b>	<b>163</b>	<b>89%</b>	

## 2.3 Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the study was granted by the NUI Galway Research Ethics Committee and by the Tusla Research Ethics Committee. Ethical safeguards implemented included participant consent, right to withdraw without consequence, anonymity, and duty of care. Attention was paid by the research team to the care and support needs of the young people and family members participating in the study. The NUI Galway *Distressed Person's Protocol* was followed when necessary.

All data collected through the research study was immediately anonymised and stored on password-protected, office-based personal computers. All personal computers are located in locked offices in NUI Galway. All members of the research team were Garda-vetted, were trained in Children's First National Guidelines (2017), and followed the NUI Galway Child Protection protocol. All processes associated with contacting research participants to obtain and use their personal data was compliant with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR).



## **Integrated Analysis of the Key Components of the YAP Ireland Model**

In this section, we focus in detail on stakeholder perspectives in relation to the critical components of the YAP Ireland programme model, integrating findings from all strands of the research.

### 3.1 Supportive relationship between Young Person and Advocate

The YAP Ireland programme aims to facilitate the development of a supportive relationship between an Advocate and a young person. The YAP Ireland model can be described as relationship-based practice; the relationship between the Advocate and young person is 'the medium through which the practitioner can engage with the complexity of an individual's internal and external worlds and intervene' (Ruch, 2005, p.113). Relationship-based practice is a social work approach which recognises the uniqueness of each individual's circumstances and the importance of reflective and holistic responses to unpredictable situations (Ruch, 2005). Relationship-based practice requires sensitive handling, realistic timescales, and the existence of support structures to sustain the relationship. To increase the likelihood of a close relationship developing, Advocates are 'matched' with young people based on shared interests and compatibility.

While a broad ranges of theories underpins this approach to practice, one that is particularly relevant is relational cultural theory (RCT), which focuses on the power of positive social relationships for psychological health and well-being. Meaningful relationships with others are seen to lead to a greater sense of energy and of being active in the world, increased self-worth, and a desire to seek out further social connections (Miller, 2008; Jordan, 2013; Horn and Spencer, 2018). It can be argued that young people at risk who had experienced disconnections in their relationships with others are given the opportunity through the Community-Based Advocate Model to re-establish meaningful connections with others, thus helping them to feel understood and less isolated (Jordan, 2013).

In this study, the one-to-one, needs-led, intensive relationship-based approach of the YAP Ireland model was seen as its most critical feature. YAP Ireland was seen as unique in providing this dedicated relationship to a young

person, something that many other services are unable to provide.

“

**“I think the one-to-one is fantastic; I think it's something that not many services offer. The fact that that young person can be taken out and they can, I suppose, focus on something that's very individual and personal to themselves.”**

*(Referrer, case study 3)*

**“The Advocate gets to spend important one-to-one time with the young person that other support structures and agencies do not get.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 5)*

**“It's a unique model providing wraparound support for an intensive period. This can create a bond with the young person and Advocate where the young person knows the Advocate will stay with them until the end of the programme. There's a level of commitment there which they might not have had before.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 71)*

Referrers described difficult family contexts that meant that parents or guardians had conflictual relationships with the young person or were unable to give them the support they needed. In these cases, the young people were felt to have benefited from receiving focused attention from a caring adult. Referrers in many of the case studies noted the strong, trusting relationships that developed between young people and Advocates, and the sense in which young people were energised by the relationship, reflecting the core premises of relational cultural theory mentioned above.



**"I think a lot of the one-to-one worked actually really well; he wasn't getting that. He wasn't getting that at home. He has quite a stressful relationship with his mum and obviously stepdad; he had quite a lot of death within his family. So the one-to-one work was really useful for him. [It has] given him even just simply a break from everything that's happening. So I think that was really, really good."**

*(Referrer, case study 6)*

**"He needed somebody on this side, to keep an eye on him and encourage him and help his mum to parent. Also to take him out of what he was used to. He loved all the youth participation thing and he was really good. He got lots of positive experience of how life can be and how you can actually impact on your own life. He was open to looking at himself, at his future. Gained in confidence and self-esteem."**

*(Referrer, case study 2)*

**"The relationship that they had with the Advocate was one that I probably haven't seen before, that they had built up such strong bonds and a real trust where they felt like they could actually confide in her."**

*(Referrer, case study 9)*

Young people said that their Advocates listen attentively, understand them, and are relaxed and able to have fun. They described themselves as being in better form and feeling more happy and hopeful because of their relationship with their Advocate.



**"Because it just feels that they're interested in what you want to say, and like it just makes you want to tell them. ... She's funny and like just listens to you when you need to say something."**

*(Young person, case study 6)*

**"Well like, I do come home and like I don't get in arguments. Because like I'm really happy when I come home."**

*(Young person, case study 5)*

**"Well to be honest I didn't think I'd actually be as good friends with [Advocate name] as much as I was. Like, I thought it would be more kind of serious ... it was better than I thought it would be, to be honest."**

*(Young person, case study 7)*

In the case study interviews, many respondents spoke of how young people benefited significantly from having a one-to-one relationship with an Advocate. The outcomes that were reported included increased confidence on the part of the young person, reduced anxiety or social anxiety, improved anger management, greater sociability, enhanced social skills, greater involvement in local community activities, reduced drug or alcohol use, and better school engagement.



**"YAP Ireland get young people to go out, to talk to about things; they are there if you have problems and help you have ways to handle these. ... They listen to you and show you ways how to handle it. Because normally I would lash out and everything, but now I don't really do that anymore"**

*(Young person, case study 8)*

**“This was all about him, how he can handle situations. Before, he couldn’t handle situations. Now he’s able to handle situations.”**

*(Parent, case study 1)*

**“Before this started, my daughter was very withdrawn and she’d no self-esteem, and sometimes she wouldn’t feel comfortable around people or whatever. It’s helped her through it, like. I thought it was brilliant, now. She seems more confident now, I think.”**

*(Parent, case study 3)*

**“Their confidence has grown and they’re able to deal with situations in a different way, like in a more mature way”**

*(Parent, case study 6)*

Advocates, team leaders, and referrers also referred to positive changes that occurred for the young person as a consequence of the relationship with an Advocate.

**“YP<sup>2</sup> had a lot of issues around drug use, smoking weed, things like that, drinking and that, as far as I’m concerned, had ceased really. He had really turned it around for himself and he had put the head down and applied himself in school. He got a part-time job and just focused a little bit more. So that was great to see as well.”**

*(Advocate, case study 2)*

**“This case particularly, it was a complete turnaround for the young person. I suppose the difference with her, she was open to help, she was open to change, not initially but then she became very open to how different things could be. And when you’ve a young person who becomes that open, then everything is a possibility with them.”**

*(Team leader, case study 7)*

**“I felt like he really came out of himself when he was working with the service. The YAP Ireland Advocate would have said that he just absolutely got involved in everything; he’s linking in with your groups, and he’s part of A, B, and C groups. She said that he’s getting on great. So I think that was just fantastic and I felt he was able to find his own role within the community. So I think he was really able to come into himself and see himself as a valued person, which was really nice for him to experience.”**

*(Referrer, case study 5)*

Two social workers participating in case study interviews indicated that the young person’s case was closed to child protection as a result of their participation in the YAP Ireland programme. In one of these cases, the parent feels that the young person would be in care if he had not taken part in YAP Ireland. Better relationships between social work services and the family were also reported in some cases.

<sup>2</sup> YP is used to refer to the young person when the respondent used their name.

“

**“We got that safety network, and we were able to return the child home. I suppose as part of that safety network YAP Ireland were key. In these instances we need as many eyes on these kids as we can possibly get. So the more services, obviously they have to be needed, but the more eyes that are on these kids, the better it is for the kid and the more chance they have of staying at home.”**

*(Referrer, case study 1)*

**“If you hadn’t got that person, we wouldn’t be here today. He’d be in a foster care home.”**

*(Parent, case study 1)*

**“This case is like a poster example of how good things can be – that it actually worked. This is a very good case.”**

*(Referrer, case study 2)*

Related to this point, some staff and board members spoke about the invaluable knowledge that Advocates have on the needs and views of young people and their families as a consequence of the significant time they spend with them. This in-depth knowledge is seen as a valuable resource to other professionals involved in a particular case.

“

**“Professional meetings, review meetings, anything that’s coming up, we one hundred per cent would encourage the Advocates to attend. They’d only be happy to attend to make sure the young person is being heard. You can see when you get around the table the level of professionals that will literally zone in on the Advocate to hear what they’re saying, because fifteen hours a week and that kind of relationship, it’s invaluable.”**

*(Staff and board focus group 2)*

According to the YAP Ireland model, matches between young people and Advocates are made based on personality, interests, and location. The literature has emphasised the importance of ensuring that young people and adults share similar interests and are ‘well matched’ in interventions of this nature, with similarity of characteristics between adults and young people predicting better relationship quality and youth academic outcomes (Campbell and Campbell, 2007). Indeed, the available evidence suggests that optimal matching of young people with adult supporters goes beyond demographic characteristics to encompass deeper and more nuanced considerations of compatibility (DuBois et al., 2011, p.78).

There was a broad consensus among respondents in this study that creating a good match between an Advocate and young person is of critical importance to the YAP Ireland model. Compatibility is important because having similar personalities and interests helps the young person to feel comfortable and to engage better. Some people said that young people at risk can have a lot of adults involved in their lives, so matching them with someone with similar interests can help to ‘get them on board’.



A number of people mentioned the importance of the Advocate being able to empathise with and understand the young person, with some referring to social class backgrounds as a factor to be considered to ensure this can occur.



**“Compatibility helps to build trust and is a key building block to helping the young person through the difficulties they are experiencing”**

*(Staff survey respondent 39)*

**“The matching process is crucial in any case, because the relationship and trust between the person at risk is the foundation to working on achieving the goals throughout the case”**

*(Staff survey respondent 146)*

Advocates drew attention to having things in common with their young person, which greatly aided the process of relationship building, as reflected in the following quotes.



**“I’m big into sports, and in school he’s like a great little athlete; he does all the cross-country and the running and basketball. We were able to talk, not like buddies but we were able to talk ... I think that’s very important, you know. If you are matched to someone that you find is completely different to you, to get that common ground where you have something of interest I think sometimes it can be hard if you’re not.”**

*(Advocate, case study 5)*



**“I found this particularly helpful, you know, because we would have similar interests in terms of he’s very into musicals and stuff ... so we had great conversations, great rapport. We’d have the CD in the car and stuff, you know, kind of built that relationship as well. ... I do think it’s a great starting point in allowing the young person to grow as well.”**

*(Advocate, case study 1)*

**“I’m big into nature, so we go for a lot of forest walks; we love going out to the animal welfare shelter. YP loves swimming, so we go swimming ... So I think the biggest thing was nature for the two of us. One day we went for a walk and she just kept saying, I love being in the trees, I love nature, and I was like, Yeah, I do too. So we point out different trees and different plants and flowers. Because of that connection, you know, trying to get her set up with scouts, because I’d been in scouts before and I really feel like she would enjoy it. It is important, yeah.”**

*(Advocate, case study 3)*

Team leaders and referrers also highlighted the importance of good matching. As well as having shared interests and hobbies, team leaders and referrers noted the importance of personality, disposition, and gender in making a good match.



**“Her whole aura is very much ‘no need to panic’ and that was something that YP really needed. When he was taken into foster placement, there was a lot of chaos around that. Then the transition of coming home. There was a lot of kind of chaos and then the Advocate just came with calmness. Everything was like, don’t panic, no problem.”**

*(Team leader, case study 1)*

**“I think YAP Ireland has been really good at that [matching], actually. I haven’t had a case where they haven’t matched, where the match has been unsuccessful. It’s always worked really well, and I think they do spend some time around thinking about that, thinking about I suppose personalities, and if it’s a young lad that only wants to work with a male, things like that.”**

*(Referrer, case study 3)*

The findings of this study reflect those of Devlin et al. (2014), whose findings on the YAP Ireland matching process were predominantly positive, with young people, parents/guardians, Advocates, and case managers generally reporting positive perceptions of the young people–Advocate relationship.

In terms of challenges faced with this component of the YAP Ireland model, some Advocates said that lack of engagement or challenging behaviour from young people or families can make it difficult to form a relationship and to make progress in meeting the young person’s needs. Staff members made the point that a large pool of Advocates is required to ensure a compatible match can be made.

## 3.2 Advocates chosen for their ability to relate to Young People

The YAP Ireland model recognises that many young people relate more easily to ‘helpers’ whom they perceive to be authentic and informal (Dolan and Brady, 2012). For a close relationship to develop between the Advocate and young person, Advocates are carefully chosen for their aptitude and ability to work with young people in the community. While many Advocates have academic qualifications in social care or youth work, this is not essential. The Devlin et al. (2014) study of YAP Ireland found that while Advocates were recruited from a broad range of backgrounds, the majority were highly educated, with previous experience working in the community or youth work or social services sectors.

In this study, the majority of respondents, who felt that the qualities of the Advocate were more important than their qualifications, supported this emphasis on suitability for working with young people. The qualities seen as important in an Advocate were life experience, common sense, and the ability to relate to a young person. An Advocate was seen as someone who enjoys being around young people and is ‘good’ with them, understands their communities, and is able to link young people with supports. The view was expressed that Advocates need to be seen as ‘normal people’ by young people and families.

**“Many people working voluntarily with children’s groups in the community don’t have qualifications but are very good at it.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 17)*

**“The best man I know has changed the course of thousands of young people’s lives in a very profound, productive and personal way. He left school at fourteen. Compassion, care, understanding has to be in a person, they don’t just learn it, I believe.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 104)*

**“I’ve a little bit of life experience. I mean, I’m here because I want to help, and I think the young people know that. It’s very different from sitting across a desk and someone telling you that all these things are wrong with you ... You’re a wingman, and that’s what they need ... They don’t need someone to sort their life out; they just need someone to be around.”**

*(Advocates focus group)*

Some respondents said that having a degree or qualifications does not mean you are ‘good with people’ and that having professional qualifications may lead to Advocates adopting a more professional type of approach. Not having a requirement for professional qualifications means that priority can be given to the informal, flexible, and creative interpersonal relationship between the young person and Advocate, which is seen to set Advocates apart from social work or social care professionals involved in their lives.

**“Non-professional Advocates bring a non-judgemental aspect to the work. They have no preconceived ideas of how they should work or are less likely to ‘diagnose’ and are more open to adapting to the model.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 129)*

**“It is the personal skills and the awareness of the model with support from the team leader that is critical – I don’t think that young people want professionals being all professional with them. That changes the relationship dynamic (and the cost model).”**

*(Staff survey respondent 117)*

Some parents taking part in focus groups were of the view that Advocates being ‘normal’ people as opposed to what they called ‘professionals’ was a positive thing. In fact, many described the Advocates as ‘very good people’ who are ‘just like friends’. Some participants spoke about the ability of Advocates to connect with them and their young people in a way that they felt was free from power imbalances:

**“Yes, that they are just very good people. They don’t take that job as power. They’re just like their friends. They’re friends.”**

*(Parents focus group 2)*

Many young people, parents, and referrers made reference to this aspect of the model during case study interviews. Advocates and their interactions with young people and families were frequently described as ‘normal’, ‘relaxed’, ‘informal’, and ‘natural’, which made it easier for the young person and their family

to relate to them. Many of the respondents contrasted the Advocates' approach with that of social workers, noting that Advocates can engage with young people in a less formal way and share their own personalities and experiences with them.

**“It is good that they can listen to you and share their experiences with you. If you’ve gone through something, they could say, ‘Well, I’ve gone through something like this.’”**  
*(Young person, case study 5)*

**“I’ve had many a young person say to me, ‘I didn’t think YAP Ireland was going to be what it is’. They said, ‘But you’re just like me; you’re just like everybody around’. So it was the normalisation of somebody in the community that spoke like them, maybe, acted like them, had normal conversations with them; it wasn’t always about issues that was going on.”**  
*(Advocate, case study 9)*

**“For the kids, I think the impact is huge, because with a social worker it’s a notepad, it’s sit down, and it’s a notepad and its questions. It’s not very relaxed, where with YAP Ireland they go out and they have food and they can go on a walk and they can just relax. It’s a huge difference.”**  
*(Parent, case study 6)*

Many of the referrers interviewed spoke of how comfortable parents were with the Advocates. Parents found it easy to relate to the more informal approach of the Advocate and were willing to seek support and advice from them.

**“I think the informality works because the family doesn’t feel intimidated by you, especially when they’re so used to social workers coming in and out. ... It’s quite natural, it’s quite a natural approach with [Advocate name], and I think they see the benefits in how the young person is getting on and some of the changes, some of the positive changes that she has made over the last number of months. So they’re very open to asking, talking to [Advocate name] and listening to what she says. Like I said earlier, I think the match has been spot on here with this case for the young person but also for the family as well. I don’t think they feel threatened by her. I think they feel very comfortable with her.”**  
*(Referrer, case study 3)*

The fact that Advocates have local community knowledge was seen as a strength in some of the cases. In a number of cases, the young person’s goals were related to social integration, so the Advocate’s local knowledge proved invaluable in connecting them with relevant supports.

**“The need in these cases really was around community integration and getting both young people settled in their community and connected to support services within their community. So I suppose using a community-based Advocate who had such knowledge of the area was really, really beneficial then for that.”**  
*(Team leader, case study 6)*

**“I do know her community, I do know the areas, and I suppose there is certain negativities attached to her community as well, so there are certain places I keep her away from, which sounds a bit extreme; it’s not as extreme as it sounds, but it’s just to know where to bring her and where not to bring her ... It makes her aware as well that there are positive peers there but there are also peers that you don’t really need to be identifying with. And that works. And I think anybody outside the community would not see that.”**

*(Advocate, case study 9)*

Some respondents noted that while qualifications are not essential for Advocates, a professional approach to the role is important and YAP Ireland provides that training for Advocates. Devlin et al. (2014) noted that all recruited Advocates undergo an intensive training procedure prior to being considered for a match, where Advocates are informed about the model and trained to apply the model in practice. In this study, many respondents also commented positively on the training that Advocates receive as part of the programme.

**“They may not have a professional degree, but they are highly trained and there is continuous training in addition to having the right personality and ability to work with young people and their families as well as with other service providers.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 78)*

A minority of respondents felt that, while life experience and suitability are important, Advocates should also have professional qualifications. Such qualifications would give them the theoretical grounding and practice

skills to enhance their effectiveness in their role and ensure that they are equipped to handle uncomfortable or difficult situations. Some felt that other professionals do not take Advocates seriously because they are ‘just Advocates’.

**“I think there would be a more effective approach for the young person if the Advocate had qualifications, especially if foster care etc. is involved.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 87)*

**“There needs to be both qualifications, experience, and suitability.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 46)*

**“Advocates need qualifications to be able to deal with family support, domestic abuse, and have a say, i.e. not feel inadequate because of lack of qualifications and only be seen as an Advocate by team leaders and social workers.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 76)*

It was acknowledged by some that the issue of professional qualifications is ‘tricky’ and has led to funding issues for the organisation.

**“A tricky one, as some of the most qualified people may not be well suited to engaging directly with young people, while those well suited to such engagements may lack some of the skills/knowledge to best assist the young people they are working with. I believe one cannot generalize on this point and it is case by case, in that in ensuring the best match it may be necessary to look at the skills and indeed professional qualifications of an Advocate.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 39)*

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**“This is a tricky one. Advocates not having professional qualifications has gone against us from a funding perspective in the past, as it wasn’t seen as good enough. But at the same time it brings a different experience for the young person, who may feel less like they are being ‘treated’ and more like this person is here just for them. The Advocate being suited to working with young people in the community is a no-brainer. If they don’t bring that, they shouldn’t be an Advocate!”**

*(Staff survey respondent 74)*

In relation to the emphasis on the Advocates being from the local community, some of the Advocates were of the view that this element of the programme can sometimes make things awkward for them if they meet their young person in other settings.

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**“I just think it’s probably better for everybody that you don’t run into each other every day going down to the shop ... My issue is my children go to the same school as that person and ... I see her coming, she sees me coming, my kids are in the car, she knows who I am. I think that’s far too close.”**

*(Advocates focus group 2)*

YAP Ireland staff acknowledged the awkwardness identified by some of the Advocates of being in the same community as their young people and board members, whereby having someone local may not always work. However, this is dealt with at the time of assessment with the family if required. In addition, it was noted that the Advocates do get training on professional boundaries:

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**“Even if it is an Advocate from your local community, there is that professional boundary, that training they get ... So even if you do know your local community, there is still – even though there’s that friendliness, the informal-ness, there is still that professionalism as well.”**

*(Staff and board focus group 1)*

### 3.3 Strengths-based support

A strengths perspective seeks to assess the strengths and resources that are present in an individual, family, and community and to build on these strengths and resources in order to prevent or resolve problems or difficulties (Teater and Baldwin, 2012, p.16). Moving away from the traditional perspective of engaging

young people with a problem orientation and risk focus, a strengths-based approach to practice seeks to transform the lives of people in positive ways. This perspective acknowledges that all individuals, families, and communities have strengths and have the capacity to overcome adversity. Practitioners should avoid

preconceptions and stereotypes, instead collaborating with individuals and families to define themselves and their aspirations and to work with them to achieve these (Saleebey, 2009; Teater and Baldwin, 2012). Strengths-based interventions have been found to enhance individual well-being by encouraging greater awareness and understanding of strengths and capabilities and the development of hope (Park and Peterson, 2006; Smock et al., 2008).

A core element of the YAP Ireland model is that there is a focus on the positives and strengths of the young person and their family. The talents and abilities of the young person and their family are identified and built upon, and the development of resilience and self-esteem is prioritised. Linked to this, the organisation operates a 'No reject, no eject' policy, whereby they do not give up on the young person and family in any circumstance.

In the study of the YAP Ireland programme by Devlin et al. (2014), both parents and young people maintained that they felt the programme focused on their strengths. Notably, the programme's avoidance of judgement and its focus on the strengths of the young person emerged as a major theme in interviews with young people. A number of young people were found to report feeling 'completely no judgement' from their Advocates and suggested that they talk 'about positive things'. In addition, Advocates were found to concentrate on strengths when discussing the young person in their qualitative interviews.

In all strands of the research undertaken as part of this study, respondents indicated very strong support for this component of the model. A strengths perspective was seen to build trust between young people, families, and YAP Ireland, and to inspire confidence among young people and families that they had the capacity to move forward in a positive way. Many referred to the fact that young people and their families can have had a lot of negativity in their lives and 'are used to blame and judgement'. Young people in particular can

receive a lot of negative feedback about their behaviour. The strengths-based focus, which 'celebrates what is working and what will work better for them', is seen as critical to the YAP Ireland approach.



**"Young people open up very quickly when we use this strategy. Even things they consider their negatives we show them as strengths. Young people trust you quicker when they feel you are on their side and that you are not judging them."**

*(Staff survey respondent 25)*

**"Focusing on strengths lights up a young person. They receive so much negativity at times that they cannot see their own strengths. An Advocate can take the time to do this."**

*(Staff survey respondent 26)*

**"The focus on strengths is key, as it changes the dynamic of the relationship from the beginning. It also means that we do not give up, but continue to frame issues with a 'Well, that was a mistake, or a bad thing happened, but let's pick ourselves up and learn and get on with the goals we have'. There are no magic wands, but it is important to have a strengths-based perspective so that we can model how even when things are hard or do not work out, you can control how you respond to situations and can take something positive out of it. Hope is very important."**

*(Staff survey respondent 105)*

In the course of case study interviews, a number of Advocates, team leaders, and referrers spoke about why a strengths-based approach is important for YAP Ireland.

**“What you find is that families have all these supports around them, professional supports around them, and everybody is focusing on the negatives. So it’s really refreshing for somebody like us to come in and just focus on positives. And there are positives, but they can’t see them; they’re in such a dark place that they just need someone to kind of bring them out of that.”**

*(Advocate, case study 9)*

**“This young person would have been told, ‘You’re crap in school, you’re crap in the community; everybody doesn’t like you, the Guards are after you’, you know. For him to have somebody that actually believed in him and believed that okay, I can turn this around, and I can be good at something, and I can be a leader in some level, you know, don’t have to be a genius in school, but I could be really good at hurling, you know.”**

*(Team leader, case study 2)*

**“I do think it’s really important. So much of families that I’ve referred in to YAP Ireland, you know, there is serious stuff going on there. There is a lot of worries, and, you know, it’s important to focus on strengths because we know that that will actually give probably a better outcome, and it would last longer, and they’ll have more positive and meaningful relationships with people.”**

*(Referrer, case study 5)*

Advocates and team leaders provided examples of how the strengths-based approach was put into practice with young people.

**“She had a lot of negativity, talking a lot about her family in negative ways, and I just had to remind her, you know, about the love that was surrounding her and all the good things she had in her life, whether it was her connection with animals, her skills in terms of her drawing and painting, being aware of everything around her, you know. She was focusing so much on the negativity; we really had to say, ‘Right, let’s list out the positive things you have in your life.’ I remind her of them on a weekly basis.”**

*(Advocate, case study 3)*

**“YP would abscond; she would stay out late. So where someone else might say, ‘Right, that’s a negative’, because that child is putting themselves at risk, when we train our Advocates we say, ‘Look for the strengths; you’ll always find strengths, even in the oddest of places’. So for us we thought to ourselves, Right yeah, she’s placing herself at risk, but there’s obviously a level of streetwise maturity there, so that’s a strength; go for that strength. So rather than going in and treating her like, I suppose, a child, we went in and we respected the fact that she wanted all this freedom. We opened her eyes to the risks that were attached to it, and we showed her a better place to, I suppose, use that maturity and use that kind of streetwise, you know. ... She completely finished interacting with any of those peers, and when she was attending school more, built a whole new peer group, and that was because we’d seen a strength where someone else had seen a negative.”**

*(Team leader, case study 7)*

### 3.4 Needs-led wraparound support

A key component of the YAP Ireland model is that services are tailored to the needs of the young person and their family, and are personalised and flexible. An intensive service is offered to respond to these needs as required, including an emergency line that is open 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

A needs-led approach recognises the role and strengths of the young person and family in identifying and meeting their needs, and recognises the importance of flexibility in tailoring supports to their particular circumstances (Dolan and Holt, 2002; Devaney, Canavan et al., 2013). The term 'wraparound' refers to a defined, team-based process for developing and implementing individualised care plans to meet the needs of young people and their families. The evidence base for wraparound has grown commensurately with its adoption in the field, with research showing significant effects on four key outcome domains: the young person's living situation, behaviour, functioning, and community adjustment (Bruns and Suter, 2010).

The Devlin et al. (2014) study provides support for the utility of the needs-led wraparound approach. Parents and young people reported feeling supported by their Advocates in their interviews. Advocates and case managers both highlighted a focus in the training received on implementing the wraparound model. The majority of Advocates who were interviewed also showed awareness of the complex needs of the young people with whom they were working. Advocates reflected on how the YAP Ireland model and activities they engaged in aimed to address the specific needs of the young person. In their survey responses, Advocates identified this one-to-one, needs-focused model as an aspect which was working well.

In this study there was strong agreement among staff, Advocates, and management on the importance of having services tailored

to the needs of the young person and their family. In their comments, many respondents said that 'one size does not fit all' and that there is a need for a personalised and flexible approach to meet people's needs. Placing the young person and their family at the centre of the planning and review process and listening to their needs, experiences, and goals is seen as critical to the YAP Ireland model. There was also awareness that plans will not always work out and there is a need for flexibility and adaptation.



**"YAP Ireland is a needs-led service. The young people are the ones who decide what they'd like to do and when they'd like to do it. We as Advocates can make suggestions around activities etc. but ultimately the decision lies with the young person and their families."**

*(Staff survey respondent, 107)*

**"This is important because it's a key element of the model. It's what is unique about it. No two children or set of problems are the same, and no two same sets of services will help different people. Children need and deserve to have their individual situations taken into account and reflected in the approach. It needs to be flexible given the nature of the young mind and the flux they might be going through."**

*(Staff survey respondent 74)*

As part of the needs-led approach, the young person is placed at the centre of the planning process and supported to articulate what they want and need. The fact that meetings take place in the family home was seen as making it easier for the family.



**"I thought it was just going to be someone coming down and talking, and that's it, like. But it was all about what you wanted to do. Like what you'd prefer to do, or if you wanted to go somewhere to talk about something, you could do that. If you wanted to stay at home, you could do that, like. It all revolved around you."**

*(Young person, case study 2)*

**"Looking at his needs and going by his strengths. When we came in initially on this case, no more than with the school, they were telling us what they need from YP. It wasn't what YP's needs were; it was what they need from YP and what they suspect was happening."**

*(Team leader, case study 1)*

**"He did have a lot of needs, so YAP Ireland were able to identify services that would fit with the family and bits like that. So that was definitely within the family that this needs led was."**

*(Referrer, case study 6)*

**"I suppose the fact that we are willing to meet them in their homes is important to them. They're not getting two buses to get to the social work department; they're not trying to get lifts, you know. Everything comes to them."**

*(Team leader, case study 4)*

Many alluded to the fact that families have often had negative experiences with services, as what is on offer may not be what they need. One respondent said that YAP Ireland 'is not about fitting our young people into the programme but rather fitting the programme to suit the child'. Respondents said that, in their experience, families greatly valued having support tailored to their specific needs and the

scope for creativity and flexibility offered by the YAP Ireland approach.



**"We have a blank canvass on every case and can do anything (that is safe) with the young person and family. The fact that we can do homework, play pool, make a kite, or bring a mother and child to an appointment shows the range. It's different for each family, but we respond to where the need is. No point having a programme if the family needs are totally different, then the programme becomes irrelevant. Getting the family involved to make their own goals and review their progress is a big component."**

*(Staff survey respondent 92)*

**"It's always important to remain flexible and adaptable as we claim. I recall meeting a mother of a young person with autism, and when she heard how adaptable we could be she looked to the sky and said, 'There is a God, thank you so much.'"**

*(Staff survey respondent 112)*

In addition to the overall intervention process being needs led, the feedback suggests that a needs-led approach is adapted in day-to-day interactions with young people, as reflected in the following quotes.



**"She [Advocate] knows that I have Asperger's, and she says she doesn't know what really it is, so I sometimes explain to her and now she understands what it's all about. So every time when there's like loud noises or crowds of people, she knows if I get anxious I have to go out."**

*(Young person, case study 1)*

**“I’ve had, like YP might have a crap day at school and he’d be like, ‘Can we just go for a spin?’ We might have planned to go to the library and study for his driver theory or do this, do that, but it’s like, ‘Okay, we’ll get a coffee and we’ll go for a spin and a chat.’ And that’s what he needs on that day. ... I suppose that then could mean that maybe he’ll go home much more relaxed and chilled out and maybe not go and meet friends and go drinking or do this or do that; go home and chill out for the evening. If I pushed my plans on him he’d just think, ‘Feck this.’”**

*(Advocate, case study 2)*

As part of the wraparound approach, Advocates and team leaders took a proactive role in ensuring that the required supports were coordinated around the young person and family where relevant.

**“YP is linked in with a JLO [Juvenile Liaison Officer] and youth worker. Made sure all professionals involved were on the same page. It was efficient because no one was doubling up on the work.”**

*(Advocate, case study 2)*

In the wraparound approach, there was also evidence of a strong emphasis on support for parents and families to support them directly and to build their capacity to support their young person. The literature highlights the importance of supporting parents as a way of improving children and young people’s outcomes (Okafor et al., 2014; DCYA, 2015; Devaney, 2017). Dunst and Trivette (2009) identified that having a family focus, and not just focusing on the child as the unit of

intervention, enables parents to acquire the knowledge and skills to be able to cope with daily living and improve their sense of mastery and control. Advocates gave many examples in this study of the ways in which this parental support was provided in the course of their work with the family:

**“Mum is a single parent in the house and there were four small, you know, kind of one teenager and then three small kids. She was very busy; there was a lot going on. At times for her to be able to just have a bit of support. She might ask me if there was something going on; there were issues around his drug use and anti-social behaviour, and at times she did ask me, like we had a chat, the three of us together, where I could support Mum in addressing those things. And then I suppose that she could do it then with me; she could then go on and do it herself.”**

*(Advocate, case study 2)*

**“You may get a phone call on the Monday morning saying that this happened over the weekend, could you take out YP because she’s really low, you know, or I can’t cope with this, I think I might need to see a doctor, or Mam, I’d bring her to psychological visits and stuff. ... Just literally depends on the needs of the family. So you’re as present as they need you to be.”**

*(Advocate, case study 8)*

Parents taking part in this study recounted how the emotional and practical support they received from Advocates and team leaders helped them to cope and to parent more effectively. All parents felt that it had made a positive difference to their family life.

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**“We were able to communicate very well. It was really good, you know. Like, I needed help with a situation, [Advocate name] was very helpful, to be honest, her and [team leader name], you know. So it was absolutely very good, that. We’d good communication skills between us, which was good.”**

*(Parent, case study 2)*

**“We’ve a great relationship with [Advocate name] as well. So if stuff was to happen in the home, I could talk to her about it. She could approach the boys about it then if she had to, which I’ve found helpful. It’s great they have an outside agency, sort of. When the kids just see you as constantly giving out ... when you have someone from the outside saying they care about you, and this is why they worry, it changes their outlook on stuff. So it makes the relationship a lot better, I think anyway.”**

*(Parent, case study 5)*

**“I find there is less pressure on the outer family, you know what I mean? You get relieved of a lot of pressure.”**

*(Parents focus group 2)*

In the case study interviews, respondents referred to outcomes such as better relationships in the family (including parent–child relationships and sibling relationships), including reduced conflict and improved communication. Many of the cases reported increased parental empowerment and enhanced parenting capacity. A number of parents were supported to access education. There were also some reports of improved family help-seeking behaviour. The quotes below illustrate some of the ways in which young people and parents described their improved family relationships.

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**“It helped us out, like, because before YP wouldn’t, didn’t talk to you, like. Now he sits down, he can talk to you, and he can listen to you and that.”**

*(Parent, case study 1)*

**“We [family] just like don’t fight as much now, because we’re doing the same stuff together.”**

*(Young person, case study 6)*

Similarly, Advocates, referrers, and team leaders spoke of the benefits that had arisen from the intensive work undertaken with parents and young people to improve relationships.

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**“A lot of work needed to be done around improving the relationship between Dad and the young person, and the Advocate was a key figure in terms of doing that, offering support to Dad round maybe doing something nice with the young person. And that’s happened, you know.”**

*(Referrer, case study 3)*

**“You could see the relationship with her mother develop right the way through as well. And the relationship with her brother; that had completely broken down previously, but as we went on, you could see that getting stronger as well. So we did a family day; we did two different family days actually just to bring them altogether. One was ice-skating and another was just a meal out one day, and it was lovely. You could see them interacting much, much better.”**

*(Advocate, case study 7)*

**“It was quite a perfect model for the family in terms of the level of support that it offered. I would consider the family to have been a little bit isolated, lacking a support structure around them ... but probably in areas of social development and support structures.”**

*(Referrer, case study 10)*

A number of respondents spoke about the importance of the ‘No reject, no eject’ policy, which is also a component of the wraparound approach. This means that YAP Ireland does not give up on a young person and will seek to find ways to engage them no matter how difficult this proves to be.

**“The great thing about YAP Ireland is they’re so flexible ... If a teen is being difficult, they won’t just walk away, they’re happy to meet the teenager wherever they want to meet, you know.”**

*(Referrer, case study 1)*

**“ A lot of people come from other organisations, and a system of like, ‘Oh well, they didn’t meet their appointment, so, like...’. That’s not our approach. We’re just going to keep calling. We’re going to keep knocking on the door. We’re going to send you a letter. We’re going to make contact some way with you. You have to be very flexible.”**

*(Team leader, case study 4)*

**“That never-give-up approach ... if we had a young person who wasn’t engaging, it’s that fact that you keep showing up, you’re showing that young person, ‘I’m here, I care, I want to support you.’ I think it’s allowing them have their voice. So like that, we’re not coming in as the teacher, the parent, and giving out and saying, ‘Why aren’t you going to school?’ It’s about understanding what’s the reason behind that. I think that’s key, because they’ve already too much authority, people telling them what to do; that it’s this one person that will actually sit with me and hear me for me.”**

*(Team leader, case study 8)*

While YAP Ireland endeavours to access the required support for families to meet their needs, there are cases where the required supports are not available. For example, one team leader expressed frustration at the slow response from services to meet the family’s assessed needs.

**“I suppose one thing that comes up straight away is frustration just with the household situation and I suppose other professionals within the system. So I personally think YAP Ireland are doing all they can with this family, but I feel like the family are still being let down by other services. Now we have become very vocal about this, and I suppose services are stepping up, but I feel like, one feeling I have is frustration around the system when it comes to this family, if that makes sense.”**

*(Team leader, case Study 9)*

While Advocates acknowledge the autonomy that they have in some areas, such as how to engage with the young person, some Advocates spoke of feeling limited by the rigidity of social work expectations in following a specific plan, which they may or may not agree with:



**“They [social workers] have these kinds of instant magic-wand type of situations: if this happens, this will be perfect. So on the one hand you have autonomy; you’ve flexibility in terms of how you engage and everything, but on the other hand you’ve this rigidity of the other side of it, that whether you agree with it, you mightn’t think it’s the right thing, but you have to comply with it.”**

*(Advocates focus group 1)*

### 3.5 Social and community integration

A significant body of evidence indicates that interacting well with others matters for physical, psychological, emotional, and economic well-being (Radey, 2018). The presence of supportive and caring relationships with adults is considered essential in facilitating young people’s passage into adulthood (Nesmith and Christophersen, 2014). As well as being a protective factor, it can improve outcomes for vulnerable children and young people (Smith et al., 2015). Strong personal relationships between adults and young people result in greater socialisation and integration into mainstream society, which fosters further personal and emotional development (Rodriguez-Planas, 2014). The concept of social capital, particularly bonding and bridging social capital, refers to the benefits that accrue from social connections (Jack and Jordan, 1999). Programmes such as YAP Ireland aim to stimulate social capital by bolstering the young person’s engagement in social networks and relationships, which can be a source of support and resources for them.

Facilitating young people to access local community resources is a key component of the YAP Ireland model. Improving young people’s social skills and facilitating greater integration into the community was

consistently identified as a central focus of the YAP Ireland programme in the Devlin et al. study (2014, pp. 119, 148). The types of activities that young people and Advocates engaged in were seen as crucial for helping young people establish sustainable links with their community.

In this study, engaging young people with community supports was also perceived to be a successful and important aspect of the intervention. Such supports were described by some young people as helping them to build confidence, improve sociability, and develop and maintain friendships. Advocates, referrers, and parents spoke of witnessing enhanced confidence, sense of purpose and family pride as a result of these connections.



**“When I had my YAP Ireland worker, we did do like stuff with our community and stuff like, with dancing and Zumba dancing and stuff, but most of our thing was based with the community. It was helping me to like build my confidence.”**

*(Young people’s focus group 2)*

**“Since I’ve started YAP Ireland I’ve met loads of new people, and I came a long way since I started YAP Ireland and I’m much more confident.”**

*(Young people’s focus group 2)*

**“His confidence is flying, because my thing was to get him into a football club because he’s a brilliant footballer. So for him alone that was a great achievement, and he’s actually very proud of himself and the family are very proud of him.”**

*(Advocate, case study 6)*

**“I think a huge strength was the group work with him; introducing him to kids in the area, and it got him out of the comfort zone in some ways. I suppose that would probably be a huge strength; he was really able to find himself and his role and purpose and being a valued person.”**

*(Referrer, case study 5)*

**“Before I would have started, linked in with the young person, his ability to handle youth clubs or anything was severely lacking. In this case, I went down to the local youth club. I made an appointment with one of the local youth workers. I just wanted to get an indication of what was holding him back from it, and she was quite good in her assessment of, telling me, you know, issues there would have been going on down there. We had an informal discussion of where to go forward from there, because, you know, I was thinking ahead of when I finish up with the young person, you know. I didn’t want him to retreat back into himself. I wanted him to link into his community as well, and that’s the whole point of engaging with YAP Ireland: give the young person self-confidence to go back in their own community and mix with their own peer group.”**

*(Advocate, case study 1)*

Some Advocates and referrers described in detail the actions that were taken in this regard. They were proactive in identifying the barriers and challenges to the young people’s social participation. An important task also was making links with relevant people in the community, such as youth workers or sports coaches, who could support them to integrate into community activities and look out for the young person on an ongoing basis. This can be seen as an example of bridging social capital, whereby the young person is introduced to key people who could be a resource to them in the future. In the example below, an Advocate describes how she supported the family to identify and nurture social outlets and connections for their daughter, who had been socially isolated.





**“[Advocate name] has worked really hard in terms of identifying supports, not supports but like services in the community for the young person, horse riding, art classes, supports that can continue when the Advocate has stepped back. And that’s really important for this young person, because she’s quiet, loves art, loves activities like that but wasn’t involved in anything like this before YAP Ireland got involved. Like she has worked with the father as well to try and promote this, she set up horse riding, but now the family are taking her on a Saturday. ... As well as that, the Advocate has offered some support to the family in terms of trying to set up peer interaction, peer play dates between that young person and some other school friends, something that that young person’s Dad hadn’t maybe hadn’t done before. ... So again like, trying to set up those very natural supports. Sometimes they’re there for every child, but it’s just about how to go around doing it and keeping it. So that seems really, really good.”**

*(Referrer, case study 3)*

In the staff survey undertaken as part of this study, respondents referred to the importance of social and community integration for young people, which can provide them with support, a positive social outlet, and a sense of belonging. Such social engagement was seen to reduce isolation, build confidence, and promote better mental health. Because YAP Ireland is a time-limited intervention, community engagement can be a means of ensuring that the young person has access to sustainable supports after they finish with the programme.

Some respondents said that it is beneficial that the Advocate knows about the young person’s community so that they can connect them to suitable contacts and opportunities.



**“This is really important for when people move on. The young person needs to be involved in community events and groups. It gives them a sense of well-being and inclusion. We all want to be wanted.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 38)*

**“Many young people often feel isolated within their own communities and don’t actively participate in sports or know where to access services within their areas. So it is important that Advocates help with this and encourage young people to link in with their own peer groups, which helps boost confidence and encourages young people to learn a new set of skills that they perhaps never contemplated doing before they came on the YAP Ireland programme.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 77)*

YAP Ireland staff and board members noted that the knowledge of community Advocates is helping to use existing resources, thereby making engagement easier and enhancing the prospects that the positive effects of the intervention will be sustainable in the longer term.



**“You’re using resources that are already readily available within the community, so you’re not going outside of that or you don’t have to go too far. And then I suppose for the parents and the families, it’s easier [to] engage them because it’s not really fear of the unknown. They know these supports are in the community; it’s just supporting them to access it. Sustainability so that when we leave, it’s sustainable. It’s about making sure we’re not creating a dependency. We’re not part of the family; they don’t need us there, so it’s important.”**

*(Staff and board members focus group 1)*

A minority of respondents said that, while this is the ideal in theory, they have found it challenging to support young people to become involved in their communities for a range of reasons, including lack of interest, mental health issues, or perceptions that their communities are unsafe or unwelcoming.

Some young people may already be integrated into their communities and require a different type of support. Some respondents, particularly Advocates, said that there may not be facilities in the young person’s community or there may be logistical challenges, such as lack of transport, which make social and community integration challenging in the longer term.



**“This is indeed a very important component of the YAP Ireland model. However, some young people do not want and are not inclined to integrate into their communities. We need to always adapt to the young people.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 112)*

**“It’s a nice idea, but the two young people I have worked with can’t wait to grow up and get out of their areas. Also, some communities are unsafe for YP to walk around in.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 25)*

**“Hard for young people to integrate into a rural community with no facilities or services in the community.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 13)*

### 3.6 Youth and parent participation

Youth participation is actively involving young people in decision-making. Children’s involvement in decision-making has been defined as a permanent and non-negotiable human right, but children need to be facilitated to express their views (Lundy, 2007). Involving the young person in decision-making offers a range of benefits for children and young people, such as ensuring that decisions taken are responsive to their needs (Heimer et al., 2018), positive psychosocial development and increased self-esteem (Thomas and

Percy-Smith, 2012), and a greater sense of agency in their lives (Pölkki et al., 2012). Research in this area suggests that assisting children’s participation in practice requires having a variety of options available that can accommodate their individual preferences and abilities (Kennan et al., 2018).

YAP Ireland has a strong commitment to participation and listening to the voice of service users throughout the organisation. This commitment is realised in a range of ways.

Firstly, the organisation listens attentively to young people and families as part of case planning and review. Secondly, in their daily interactions, Advocates support young people and parents to articulate their needs and opinions and to have the confidence to share them with relevant others. Thirdly, the organisation operates a range of participation groups, youth forums, parent forums, and youth-led research to hear the voice of service users on their experiences of YAP Ireland programmes and other issues affecting their lives. These groups also allow participants to come together for peer support, social interaction, and confidence building. The organisation also facilitates youth input into practices such as staff and Advocate selection and planning, and supports advocacy on issues affecting young people and parents identified through participation activities. There was positive feedback on all aspects of this work throughout this study.

The feedback from the research indicates that the views of young people and parents were heard in planning and review meetings. This also reflects the needs-led component of the model discussed earlier.

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**“They [team leaders] would come down every month or every two months, and meet and ask them [young people] how things were going and was there anything I needed, anything extra that could have been more helpful with them basically, you know. We used to talk and it was grand. They did work, in fairness, and it was good, you know. They used to ask, all right, and we used to have a meeting, and the social worker used to be heard too, you know. We’d all sit down and saying this could be more helpful. And it was good to be able to talk about it.”**

*(Parent, case study 2)*

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**“I think even like children are involved in their own reviews as well. It’s not just the parent, it’s not just the YAP Ireland workers, it’s not the team leader, it’s not the referrer. It’s about the child as well: what do they want, where do they think things are at, and what do they need over the next number of months coming as well. I think it’s quite child-focused as well. That’s important, you know.”**

*(Referrer, case study 3)*

**“That gives them a sense of ease and control as well; power, because they probably feel powerless in every other aspect of their lives. Somebody else is determining how things are going be. With YAP Ireland it’s their programme, it’s their plan; they make their own plan of what they see as their goals. Once I enter the home and say like, I’m here to work for you; you’re the boss, like; we’re here to work for you. They’re kind of like, for me? I’m in charge? This is all very strange, I have a voice, I’m not being told.”**

*(Team leader, case study 4)*

As highlighted above, Advocates also work closely with young people to support them to formulate and voice their feelings and opinions, often about difficult and painful family matters that they may not have had the confidence or capacity to raise previously. There is a body of research demonstrating that the use of Advocates is an effective means of supporting children’s participation (Kennan et al., 2018). Advocates have been found to give young people the confidence and opportunity to have their voices heard (Chase et al., 2006) and can help to redress the power imbalances that can occur between adults and young people (Dalrymple, 2003).

In this study, interviewees noted the increased capacity of young people to have their voices heard within their families and other settings.



**"I think yeah, because he was actually like more able to talk up about wanting to spend more time with his Dad and things like that. ... He was actually telling Mum things and what he wants that he didn't do before."**

*(Referrer, case study 4)*

There was very positive feedback from young people involved in this study with regard to the benefits of attending participation groups. Participation in the groups was seen to relieve stress, build social skills, and increase young people's confidence in interacting with others. Many young people expressed surprise that the groups were as good as they were.



**"My anxiety really. They helped me with this whole group thing that they're doing now, the participation thing and talking to people is easier."**

*(Young person, case study 10)*

**"I didn't think it would be as good as it was. I thought it'd be just, you just go to a place and get something to eat, but like I didn't know there was groups like football and participation and CEO groups. I like them as well."**

*(Young person, case study 5)*

**"I thought it would be mainly just a place to sit down and talk. I didn't think it would be like going out and doing fun stuff... Sometimes I do be stressed, and then when I go here it's like just forget your other stress. And just meeting people."**

*(Young person, case study 6)*



**"Kind of gave me a chance to get comfortable talking to people I didn't know more. Because before I joined YAP Ireland I just knew the few friends I had in my youth group, the other one I went to, and I wouldn't really talk to new people that often. But YAP Ireland gave me that chance to come into a new setting, new people, just gave me a chance to be a bit more comfortable, because there could be a new person every week you came. So just to make them feel welcome and stuff as well, was a nice chance to be able to do that."**

*(Young person, case study 9)*

**"I love the way like all the kids are confident to say what they want, and I love the workers and stuff because they're like, they're always there if you have a worry or you just want to talk to somebody. Like after my six months are up, I feel like I can still come here, I feel like I can just say everything in here because it's quiet, it's safe."**

*(Young people's focus group 1)*

Young people taking part in focus groups maintained that YAP Ireland listening to young people was an important component of the model, because being listened to reduces worry and is seen by some to be reciprocal:



**"Just because they [young people] have a voice; they speak out and all. And it's important for them to listen as we listen to them."**

*(Young people's focus group 2)*

Parents described feeling less stressed and isolated as a result of having the opportunity to meet other parents in participation groups and get ideas from them for moving forward. The social aspect of the group was also seen as valuable.

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**“They have a thing on a Wednesday now for parents which is brilliant as well. You’re not on your own, you know. I know most people think, ‘Well, this is only happening to me’, but it’s not. Like it’s a great thing that they have this on a Wednesday, because when you go to it, you go, ‘It’s not only me’, and you can listen to the problems that they have and you can relate to them and then get ideas about going ahead.”**

*(Parent, case study 10)*

**“I know my mam has enjoyed that a lot, and it’s nice to see the parents can have something to look forward to as well each week, because I know a lot of them probably wouldn’t work. So it’s nice to see that they can have that each week.”**

*(Young person, case study 9)*

A range of benefits associated with participation groups and forums were also highlighted by the YAP Ireland staff and board members. Some respondents referred to the benefits for individuals that are associated with taking part in these groups. Participants benefit from hearing the stories of others, which can ‘help people to see that they are not alone in their daily struggles’. Young people and parents develop new skills and learn from each other as well as from the service.

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**“When young people get involved in participation and their parents get involved, it often has better outcomes, as they are buying into the programme and embracing the changes within their lives. They are growing as individuals as they are acquiring new skills within these groups to carry on with them into new situations.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 128)*

**“Participation is an important part of the YAP Ireland model, as it encourages the young person’s voice to be heard. Young people get a lot out of meeting others who may have similar life circumstances as them. Participation encourages social interaction, group commitment, responsibility, and team dynamics. It can also be escapism for young people who have turbulent family lives.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 131)*

Among staff, an important rationale for supporting this aspect of practice is to provide an opportunity for the young people’s and parents’ voices to be heard. Feedback is used to shape how services are delivered.

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**“Hearing the voice of the young person and families is a brilliant way to improve YAP Ireland. It is very powerful for the young person and parents to get together for peer support and to give their feedback on YAP Ireland and what it has done for them and if any improvements can be made.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 88)*

**“The voice of the young person is at the core of YAP Ireland model, and so the input from service users and their families is key to ensuring that the organisation continues to be placed in a position to meet these needs by listening on an ongoing basis.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 105)*

Staff and Advocates referred to the commitment to participation at all levels of the

organisation, via youth participation groups, parent participation groups, and the Youth CEO group. YAP Ireland is assessed for the Investing in Children award every year, and a number of people alluded to the fact that YAP Ireland includes a young person in the interview process for staff and Advocates. Specific training is provided for young people who are involved in conducting interviews.

In terms of challenges in participation, some research participants mentioned that participation groups are not run in their areas due to lack of funding.

### 3.7 Focus on quality, outcomes, and evidence

The YAP Ireland model implements a number of quality assurance policies, with a view to assessing the effectiveness of its involvement with each young person and their family. These include outcomes measurement tools, such as the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (Goodman, 1997), to measure the impact of the YAP Ireland model for each case. Overall, this study found that there is a strong focus on outcomes in the model. Specific goals are set for each case, and progress is monitored continuously. Outcomes data is also gathered across the organisation as a whole. There is an emphasis on fidelity to the model and continuous training for all staff. This is an important finding, as policy and practice are currently predisposed towards outcomes as evidence of best practice, promoting the effectiveness of services, and evidence of accountability for funders and the public (Devaney, Gillen et al., 2013; Brady et al., 2017). It situates the model firmly in a family support orientation, which advocates a focus on children and young people’s outcomes and working with families who need help in their efforts to ensure that their children achieve the best outcomes possible (Devaney, 2017).

YAP Ireland staff, Advocates, and board members indicated strong support for the

organisation’s focus on outcomes, quality assurance, monitoring, and evidence-based practice. The comments focused mostly on the importance of knowing if the service is making a positive difference for young people and families. Evaluation and monitoring are seen as critical to ensuring that the service is of a high quality.

**“The strong focus on outcomes and quality of the service allows YAP Ireland to keep improving on the work we are doing.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 68)*

**“Standing over a quality service for the young person highlights how much they matter to people. Their needs are priority, to validate this for a young person by asking them how are they getting on, what would they change, what do they like/dislike – and for this to be changed based on the answer is very powerful for a young person. Their voice, their family’s voice matters and is heard.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 132)*

Respondents also referred to YAP Ireland's need to be accountable for the funds it receives, while the role of monitoring in safeguarding young people was also highlighted.

Advocates also made the point that an outcomes focus helps to structure their approach and helps them to have confidence in their practice.

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**“YAP Ireland take their monitoring and governance very seriously. Firstly, we are a fully funded model, and most of our funds through Tusla come from public money. It is crucial that we can show how we put our funding to use and how our services operate. Secondly, the safeguarding of our children and the protection of our staff is extremely important. Through monitoring and quality assurance, we can watch our cases closely and know exactly how YAP Ireland is working for them and how we can work better for our clients.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 136)*

The majority of stakeholders highlighted the helpfulness of an outcomes-focused orientation in the model, emphasising how it helps to keep the overall approach structured and planned. For example, a number of parents appreciated having goals to work towards and regular reviews of progress.

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**“Every week in our paperwork it says, ‘What are your goals for the week?’ So it keeps you on track, because the weeks slip away. ... With that outcomes focus, it draws you back in, ‘Okay, what are my focuses for this week? What can we get done in a week?’”**

*(Advocate, case study 3)*

**“And YAP Ireland are good at reviewing in general, but even just on a one-to-one it's very important that we see how far we come and remind her how far she's come. She forgets how far she's come from that little kid who wouldn't speak, not go out with her friends, not go down town, to this girl who sat here in front of you and spoke freely.”**

*(Advocate, case study 8)*

Referrers also appreciated the structured approach to planning and review and good multi-agency relationships.

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**“We'd sit down with the boys and say, Well, did we make it to the goals, what changed, what happened, will we do this. That was huge, like. It was very helpful to have stuff like that.”**

*(Parent, Case study 6)*

**“There was a goal, not just week by week. They actually did achieve those. It helped YP with the sleep and with opening up more as well. It did work and it was very good.”**

*(Parent, case study 4)*

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**“YAP Ireland are always on the ball; they always submit a report every couple of months in respect of any young lads that they're working with. And then they do an individual plan at some stage with them and obviously I attend that as well.”**

*(Referrer, case study 1)*

**“When they meet up and they go through everything, they actually send us the individualised service plans, and then they send us the reviews of all their meetings, which outlines the work that they have done. And for us that we’re able to actually see what the young person has done and how it’s helping them. ... it means then when we’re going to case conference or if we’re going in to network meetings that we have that information with us as well, which is great.”**

*(Referrer, case study 8)*

In terms of stakeholders’ experiences of working with YAP Ireland staff, the feedback was very positive. Parents taking part in focus groups spoke of having had very positive experiences of the programme. Some of the terms used to describe their experiences were ‘amazing’, ‘very good’, ‘lovely’, and ‘like a second family’. In general, parents are happy to be involved in the programme.

**“They understand. They don’t look down on you. They’re very supportive, they’re not only supportive on the job, but they’re supportive of me.”**

*(Parent focus group 1)*

**“I just love YAP Ireland staff. Everyone who I met from YAP Ireland, I just love them, seriously, they are so friendly, so, you know, so open ... I am very happy that I’m involved, definitely.”**

*(Parent focus group 2)*

The view was echoed by referrers, who spoke very positively of their interactions with staff working for YAP Ireland.

**“I’ve worked with the Youth Advocate Programme in my own role for a number of years now, I suppose, not just with this case but with other ones in the past. I suppose I’ve always found the managers and the Advocates very engaged and very open. I’d say we have a very good relationship here locally with the programme, the referral process, very quick response time in terms of setting up the referral, targeted instructions, keeping myself updated around anything significant or anything that I suppose the manager and the Advocate would feel that I would need to know as part of my own role. So overall I suppose my experience has always been very positive.”**

*(Referrer, case study 3)*

**“I think they’re fantastic. They’re really open. They really understand what’s going on. They take their initiative. They’re great and they’re always, I suppose they’re very conscious of child protection anyway, which is quite useful for us. So they would go out of their way for a family, and that’s important.”**

*(Referrer, case study 5)*



Overall, staff and Advocates also had positive views of working in the organisation. While it was identified as different from the norm in terms of the approach to working with young people, the level of professionalism throughout the implementation of the programme and indeed the organisation is seen as high, with an open-door policy throughout:



**“There is still a lot of structure in place ... There’s nothing really left to chance, I don’t think. ... Definitely a professional service, but with a personal touch ... It’s the whole way down, like ... down from the CEO it’s very much like open-door policy.”**

*(Staff and board focus group 1)*

### 3.8 Time-limited Intervention

YAP Ireland offers a six-month programme to young people, with an option to apply for extension towards the end of that period if the outcomes have not been achieved. This approach broadly reflects current policy and practice on supporting young people and families, which is heavily focused upon working with family members in the short term (Roberts, 2017).

In this study, mixed views were expressed on the time-limited nature of the programme. On the one hand, many respondents emphasised the benefit of time limits in ensuring a focus on outcomes and preventing the Advocate and young person from becoming too attached or dependent. The option to extend the six-month period was rated positively by many.



**“Long-term sometimes isn’t the answer, because it becomes repetitive, it becomes essentially very familiar; it becomes: I’m just calling for a cup of tea, and we’re just checking in, and it goes on and on. I feel like it goes on too long. It’s not goal-specific then, and things just, I don’t know, they get a little bit fuzzy, whereas when it’s a time-limited intervention you have the ability to push and challenge people a little bit more.”**

*(Team leader, case study 4)*

**“Quite often an extension is needed, particularly if the circumstances are bad. The model is time-sensitive, which works. It puts a little pressure on the Advocate, for me it drives me to get as much done as potentially possible.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 58)*

Many Advocates and referrers who took part in case study interviews felt that the six-month timeframe was adequate. For example, case study 7 naturally ended at the six-month stage, with the timing appearing to be just right.



All involved agreed that the time had come to close this case and that there was no need for an extension. Others felt that the boundaries can become blurred and momentum can slacken if the YAP Ireland worker is involved for too long.

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**“It had, like I said, naturally kind of fizzled out anyway, and she didn’t need me there as much as she did at the beginning, which is also fantastic, because I could see myself then that this definitely was working and it definitely was of huge benefit to her as well.”**

*(Advocate, case study 7)*

**“I would feel from doing a few cases that six months is ideal. I think it is enough time to be able to link a young person in a group setting, and because we would have met twice a week he would have got a lot of hours there over the six months, and I would feel any more you kind of go into the friend zone a bit as well. They get sick of listening to the same voice as well. So I think six months is a good timeframe.”**

*(Advocate, case study 1)*

**“Meeting the family, they got on so well, and they were so disappointed that you know it did reach its end. So I would be rooting for them to do it longer, but I absolutely think it’s realistic that that is a significant amount of time. I think that family would link with them for the rest of their lives if they could, which isn’t realistic either. And it’s not [to] be too reliant on it either. So I do think that time is fine.”**

*(Referrer, case study 5)*

On the other hand, most parents and some young people felt that a longer intervention would be preferable. Some expressed a concern that vulnerable young people who have developed a close and trusting relationship with their Advocate would experience a sense of loss after the programme ended for them. Some respondents said that these young people have already experienced loss in their lives and may view this as another person who ‘walks out on them’.

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**“You can’t just start a relationship that fast; I mean you’ve got to start slow, that’s why duration is important. I think we should have at least a year.”**

*(Young People focus group 1)*

**“The six months, like, it goes so quickly and it takes a few weeks to settle and get to know people and to get to trust the staff and their leader. It takes a while, and then when they settle, all of a sudden it’s coming to the end.”**

*(Parent, case study 5)*

**“The only thing is what happens at the end of the six months, you’re there and the next thing, boom, they’re gone, and the child is left high and dry and still facing the same problems, you know?”**

*(Parents focus group 2)*

This view was also shared by some referrers and Advocates who felt that the programme should have a longer intervention period. One referrer said that it takes time for relationships to develop and that sometimes the need of the young person has not been met after the six months. The view was also expressed that older teenagers adapt to YAP Ireland more quickly, whereas the younger age group are felt to take longer to adjust to working with an Advocate.

Similarly, some took the view that longer time may be needed with young people with specific needs, for example in cases where young people are slow to engage or where referrals for specialised services are required, which may not be in place by the time the intervention finishes.

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**“Sometimes it can take six months for a child to open up and start talking to you, to trust you, because they’ve had so many services come into their lives and go as quick. And then they’re left again on their own. How quickly six months can go, it’s unbelievable. Because when you’re trying to get a young person into any other programme, I mean especially if it’s counselling or psychiatry or something like that, they might not even get it before you’re gone. They mightn’t even be on the list before you’re gone.”**

*(Advocate, case study 8)*

Concern about the young people after the six-month time limit has passed was a prevalent theme in this study. While some were positive in terms of the additional supports in place for families at this stage, the view was widely expressed that it would be helpful to have some type of a step-down or to check in following the end of the intervention period.

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**“I do fear like, you know, this six-month model is one thing I do kind of fear, like ... I think possibly there should be tie-in afterwards. I know that’s not the model, but I think that, like you’re just leaving the person. There’s nothing wrong with checking in or something, I don’t know. A follow-up or something, not totally taken away.”**

*(Advocates focus group 2)*

**“I think it would be beneficial if there was a step-down programme where he could continue to develop his social skills within his community through, I don’t know, maybe group work or less hours or some sort of step-down programme maybe to just kind of keep him on track.”**

*(Referrer, case study 10)*

Programme staff pointed out that requests for extensions are often based on fear that the young person and family will have difficulty coping when YAP Ireland is finished. They argue that, while many young people and families will continue to have difficulties in their lives after the YAP Ireland intervention, it does not mean that YAP Ireland is the appropriate service for them on a long-term basis, as it may lead to dependency and undermine the strengths-based principles of the organisation. A policy and guidelines are in place to decide on extension requests, with extensions frequently granted where it is deemed appropriate.

**“We are there to empower young people and their families, to leave them in a position to be more capable of looking after themselves when we leave. If we were with them for an unlimited amount of time, they may become too reliant on us and therefore unable to cope themselves.”**

*(Staff survey respondent 106)*

In the Devlin et al. (2014) study, concerns about the length of the programme were also raised throughout the qualitative research. In particular, some parents expressed concerns over the disengagement process, fearing that the young people’s challenging behaviour would return or worrying about managing once services were withdrawn. The concerns raised about programme duration essentially relate to questions about how or whether progress made during the initial intervention period can or will be sustained. Some studies have found that positive influences arising from relationship-based interventions can dissipate once relationships have ended (DuBois et al., 2011; Silke et al., 2019). Some take the view that relationships should be continued in order for the full potential benefits of the intervention to be realised (Erdem et al., 2016). A key objective of this programme is that sustainable outcomes are fostered through building social connections and support for young people in the community. While this appears to work well in many cases, we saw in a previous section that there is a cohort of young people for whom such engagement is more challenging, due to the nature of their community circumstances or individual or family context. For these young people, a longer intervention may be required.

Bruner (2006) reminds us that families are ‘messy units of analysis’ whose ‘change and growth is not linear’; what works for one family in a certain timeframe will not necessarily work for the next (p.246). McKeown (2001) highlighted the fact that the key indicators of family well-being are highly stable and not amenable to rapid change. For some families, repeated short periods of ‘task-centred’ help with repeated referrals and assessments may be counterproductive (Thoburn et al., 2000), and more sustained interventions over a longer period are required. Roberts (2017) notes how in this era of time-limited interventions, there is little acknowledgement of the relationships that develop through support services for families, except to negatively label them as ‘dependency’.



# 4

## Conclusion



## 4.1 Conclusion

This research study consisted of an in-depth examination of the unique aspects of the YAP Ireland programme – namely the use of community-based Advocates to improve the lives of young people and their families. Specifically it identified the key components of the Community-Based Advocate Model and explored the strengths and challenges associated with each component of the model and the programme overall. This study used a phased mixed-method research design using a range of qualitative and quantitative research methods. The preliminary phase involved one-to-one expert interviews with senior YAP Ireland staff members and content analysis of published YAP Ireland research and literature in order to identify eight critical components of the YAP Ireland model. Five research strands were then undertaken to critically examine these components and to explore the strengths and challenges of the programme overall. These strands included a staff survey, ten in-depth case studies, focus groups, and secondary analysis of existing YAP Ireland research and literature review. The findings from all strands of the research have informed this research report.

Previous YAP Ireland research has indicated the programme results in significant positive outcomes for the young people involved. This research has highlighted the significance of the individual components of the YAP Ireland model as critical features that are integral to the programme's positive outcomes. At an overall level, it is evident that YAP Ireland is committed to ensuring that all aspects of the model are implemented as intended. YAP Ireland is also committed to conducting regular process and outcomes evaluations to ensure a robust evidence base to inform its practice. This study has provided an in-depth and detailed examination of the key components of the programme that inform the implementation of the model.

The findings of the study are very positive overall, indicating that young people, parents, Advocates, staff, board members, and referrers believe strongly in the YAP Ireland model and

are enthusiastic about its unique strengths as an approach to working with vulnerable young people and their families. A summary of the strengths and challenges of each component of the model is outlined in Table 4.

The development of a supportive relationship between the Advocate and the young person is an essential part of the YAP Ireland process. It acts as a basis from which change can occur and progress can be made in meeting the identified needs of the young person. Careful matching of a young person with a compatible Advocate is necessary to support this relationship. As Sanders and Munford (2006) emphasise, the helping alliance, which is forged through a supportive relationship, is critical in the change process. Brady et al. (2004) suggest that children and families can tell if a practitioner is genuinely interested in them, and this is likely to affect their relationship, and ultimately the outcome of the intervention. Advocates investing time to develop a trusting relationship with the young people and their parents is noted as a unique aspect and foundation of the programme and as such needs to be resourced and continued.

Related to this careful matching is that Advocates are chosen for their ability to relate to young people and their families. The literature highlights the importance of paying significant attention to the compatibility of the Advocate and young person (Dubois et al., 2011). Careful selection of Advocates who have the aptitude to work with young people experiencing high levels of risk and adversity in the communities where they live is a challenging aspect of the YAP Ireland model. It requires YAP Ireland to maintain a pool of available Advocates ready to work with a young person when a request for a service is received. There are a number of operational issues associated with ensuring that an adequate supply of suitable Advocates is available on a continuous basis, and YAP Ireland is commended for managing to meet this challenge. This aspect of the model is identified as a key contributor to programme success and one that must be maintained.

**Table 4: Strengths and Challenges of Each Programme Component**

Component	Strengths	Challenges
<p><b>Supportive relationship between Young Person and Advocate</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• YAP Ireland is unique in providing a dedicated one-to-one relationship to young people.</li> <li>• Strong trusting relationships have developed between Advocates and young people, from which positive changes occurred.</li> <li>• Some cases closed to child protection.</li> <li>• Matching based on similar interests helps young people to engage.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some young people can be slow to engage.</li> <li>• A large pool of Advocates is required to ensure a compatible match can be made.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Advocates chosen for their ability to relate to young people</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Broad support for selection criteria for Advocates.</li> <li>• Advocates are seen as ‘normal people’ by families, which makes it easier for young people and families to relate.</li> <li>• Role brings capacity to be informal, flexible, and creative.</li> <li>• Local community knowledge valuable.</li> <li>• Intensive training provided to Advocates.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some felt that Advocates should have professional qualifications to deal with difficult situations.</li> <li>• Some felt that Advocates are not taken seriously by other professionals.</li> <li>• Boundary issues for Advocates from the same community as young person.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Strengths-based support</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Viewed by stakeholders as the most important component of the model.</li> <li>• Young people and families respond very well to shift from focus on the negative to positive.</li> <li>• Helps to build trust and move forward in a positive way.</li> <li>• Facilitates new and creative ways of approaching difficult situations.</li> </ul>	

Component	Strengths	Challenges
<b>Needs-led wraparound support</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Places the child and family at the centre of planning and service delivery.</li> <li>• Children and families value having support tailored to their needs, rather than having to fit into services that may not work for them.</li> <li>• Parents and family reported better coping, capacity and family relationships.</li> <li>• 'No reject, no eject' policy means YAP Ireland does not give up on young person.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Services required as part of wraparound support may not be available.</li> <li>• Expectations from referrers can be rigid, potentially undermining the child-centred process.</li> </ul>
<b>Social and community integration</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Engaging young people with community supports helped to build confidence, improve sociability, and develop and maintain friendships.</li> <li>• Advocates identified barriers to young people's participation and took steps to address them.</li> <li>• In some cases, process facilitated by Advocates' own local knowledge and contacts.</li> <li>• Provides access to sustainable support after intervention ends.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Some young people may not be interested or able to engage or may already be engaged.</li> <li>• Some communities have few amenities or groups or are not perceived as safe or attractive.</li> </ul>
<b>Youth and parent participation</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Voices of young people and parents heard as part of the planning and review process.</li> <li>• Advocates support young people to articulate their needs and opinions and to share them as appropriate.</li> <li>• Participation groups very positive in encouraging social interaction and peer support among young people and parents. Groups helped to relieve stress, build social skills, and provide feedback to shape service delivery.</li> <li>• Youth and parent input into decision-making at all levels of the organisation.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Feasibility of ensuring participation groups are consistently available in all YAP Ireland areas.</li> </ul>

Component	Strengths	Challenges
<p><b>Focus on quality, outcomes, and evidence</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evaluation and monitoring seen as critical in ensuring services are of a high quality.</li> <li>• Parents, Advocates, and referrers valued the outcomes focus, which kept the work structured and focused.</li> <li>• Positive feedback on working with organisation from all stakeholders.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Time-limited intervention</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A six-month time limit is seen as ensuring focus on outcomes and avoiding dependency.</li> <li>• Many cases have achieved their objectives after this time.</li> <li>• Boundaries can become blurred and momentum can slacken if intervention proceeds for an indefinite period.</li> <li>• Extensions may be granted based on the needs of the young person.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Concerns that young people will have difficulty coping when relationship with Advocate finishes.</li> <li>• Some young people are felt to be slower to engage, including younger teenagers and those with specific needs.</li> <li>• Ensuring that young people have sustainable support beyond their involvement with YAP Ireland.</li> </ul>

This study found the focus on the positive aspects and strengths of the young person and their family to be an essential characteristic of the YAP Ireland model. This involves an acceptance that all young people have strengths and that there is a need to create opportunities for competencies to be displayed or practised. A strengths perspective is seen as fundamental to building a trusting relationship and inspiring confidence for young people to move forward in a positive way. Linked with the participatory nature of the YAP Ireland model, Smith and Davis (2010) describe how a strengths-based perspective fosters choice and participation and employs approaches that put people’s own solutions at the centre of service provision. Many examples were given by respondents of applying a strengths-based

approach in practice with the positive effect this has on both the engagement of young people and their family and on the outcomes achieved.

From an operational perspective, it is also recognised that particular skills are needed by Advocates to confidently work with young people and families in this way and that YAP Ireland is required to provide regular training in this regard. Of note, this study finds a culture of continuous training for all staff in the YAP Ireland model.

Strongly aligned with a strengths-based approach is a focus on individual need as identified by the young person and their family members, as opposed to relying on practitioners to assess needs and issues of

concern. This study found strong evidence that the Advocates and team leaders use a needs-led approach and that the young person is placed at the centre of the planning process and supported to articulate what they want and need. Ensuring this principle is fully adhered to, these identified needs then determine the extent and nature of services provided to the young people and their family. A needs-led response also crucially allows the Advocate to be flexible in tailoring their response to the particular circumstances of the young person, their family, and communities in which they are based. Facilitating young people to access local community resources is a key component of the YAP Ireland model, and this study has emphasised its centrality to the success of the intervention. The types of activities that young people and Advocates engaged in are crucial for helping young people to establish sustainable links with their community. These connections are particularly significant due to the time-limited nature of the YAP Ireland intervention. Community engagement is a means of ensuring that the young person has access to sustainable supports after they complete their involvement with the programme.

This study found that listening to the voices of the young person and their family and ensuring their centrality in deciding on an appropriate supportive response is a key element of the YAP Ireland model, which is achieved in a range of ways. Again, this is a considerable operational challenge to the YAP Ireland organisation, as assisting children's participation in practice requires having a variety of available options that can accommodate their individual preferences and abilities (Kennan et al., 2018). The complexities of providing a needs-led and flexible approach that acts on the views of the young people in a meaningful way require skilled, well-trained practitioners who are resourced and supported to provide a broad-based, tailored response. YAP Ireland is also committed to participation of young people throughout the organisation, facilitating

youth input into practices such as staff and Advocate selection and strategic planning. Such processes require an organisational culture supportive of devolved power and a commitment to resourcing the necessary structures and supports to ensure meaningful engagement.

The YAP Ireland model implements a number of quality-assurance policies, with a view to assessing the effectiveness of its involvement with each young person and their family. Similar to previous research on the model, this study found that there is a strong focus on outcomes within the YAP Ireland organisation. This includes specific outcomes measurement tools to assess the impact of the YAP Ireland model for each case, and the gathering of outcomes data across the organisation as a whole.

This study found a mixed response to the time-limited nature of the model. YAP Ireland offers a six-month programme with an option to apply for extension towards the end of that period if the outcomes have not been achieved. This is viewed as both a strength and a challenge to the practice of the programme. On a positive note, this time limit is found to keep the intervention focused on achieving its goals, while concerns were expressed about the adequacy of the time allowed to build relationships, assess need, and respond adequately to such needs. This aspect of the model would benefit from further consideration.

In sum, the YAP Ireland model is based on a number of core and essential service and practice components or principles. This study finds that the eight central components of the model as identified in this research are the 'critical ingredients' (Whittaker, 2009) in determining the success of the programme. These components are the essence of how the programme operates. They are not optional extras; they are the YAP Ireland model.

YAP



## References and Appendices

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## Appendix A: Frequency of Themes Identified

THEME	DEFINITION	NUMBER OF SOURCES <sup>3</sup>	NUMBER OF CODING REFERENCES <sup>4</sup>
Crisis intervention	Description of YAP Ireland service	1	1
Multi-agency	Coordinated services	1	1
Out-of-Hours service	Description of YAP Ireland service	1	1
Youth justice	Description of YAP Ireland service	1	1
Self-efficacy	Increase self-efficacy in YP	1	2
Team work / team support	Team support Supervision	1	4
Rights-based	Human rights	2	3
Research	Organisational support for research Engage in research projects	1	3
Integrity	Corporate and clinical integrity		3
Citizenship	Enhancing YP as a active citizen Events	2	4
Committed/ trained staff	Staff believe in the model Opinion survey Enjoy work, feel supported	3	4
Governance	Corporate governance	3	4
Mentoring	Mentoring model Mentoring relationships	1	4
Equality	Equality for YP	4	5
Honesty	Honesty		5
Respect	Respect for YP	4	5
Individualised	Individualised service planning		6
Negative aspects for Advocates	Paid by the hour No permanent contracts Difficulties with young person/families	2	8
Matching	Poor match Relationship with Advocate Matching process Trust	3	11

<sup>3</sup> The number of sources represents the number of documents where this information was available.

<sup>4</sup> The number of coding references represents all the themes coded, across and within all different sources.

<b>THEME</b>	<b>DEFINITION</b>	<b>NUMBER OF SOURCES<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>NUMBER OF CODING REFERENCES<sup>4</sup></b>
Non-judgemental	'No reject, no eject' policy Cultural competence Avoid judgement Unconditional care	5	<b>12</b>
Economic benefits (government)	Instead of direct provision of state institutions and out-of-home care Cost-effective	13	<b>13</b>
Partnership	Working in partnership with: HSE, Tusla, Disability Services, Youth Justice, families, schools, parents, social workers, family support workers	4	<b>17</b>
Benefits for Advocates	Employment Fixed contracts Further education and training Empowering Advocates Felt supported and confident	3	<b>19</b>
Empowerment	Empowering YP Self-esteem Ownership Control	7	<b>20</b>
Confident	Increase confidence in YP YP achieve goals	7	<b>22</b>
Evidence-based	Research Evaluation Practice	26	<b>27</b>
Advocate service	Employ community-based Advocates Independent Advocacy Service Induction Job description	22	<b>33</b>
Resilience	Increase resilience	29	<b>46</b>
Wraparound/ Intensive	Wraparound correct services Wraparound intensive support service Wraparound meeting	42	<b>77</b>
Connected to the community	YP connected to the community Interest in the community Community links Reduce isolation Live positive lives in community Community ownership Community engagement	42	<b>79</b>

<b>THEME</b>	<b>DEFINITION</b>	<b>NUMBER OF SOURCES<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>NUMBER OF CODING REFERENCES<sup>4</sup></b>
Strengths-based and needs-led	Strengths of YP and families Based on needs of YP and families	47	<b>119</b>
Education	Improvements in education Education status Education briefing Outcomes in education	59	<b>128</b>
Family focused	Support families Improve family domain Strengthen families	61	<b>150</b>
Voice and Participation	Investing in Children award Voice concerns Influence services Service users' participation Child questionnaires Youth forums Decision-making Consultation Youth CEO group	64	<b>201</b>
Mental health and well-being	Improved mental health and well-being Improved self-esteem/self-worth YP with mental health difficulties Self-domain Emotional well-being Improved offending behaviour domain Risky behaviour Offending Anti-social/criminal behaviour Conduct problems Emotional problems Social supports (peers/friends) Psychological needs	59	<b>307</b>
Outcomes-focused	Outcomes reports Monitoring Effectiveness Quality Implementation Changes and improvement Evaluation Referrers monitoring	61	<b>382</b>

## Appendix B: Examples of participatory techniques

### Young People – Focus Group Plan

**Total time: 1 hour**

#### Activity 1: Introductions (10–15 minutes)

##### Objective

Ice-breaker  
Introduce the researchers to the group

##### Materials

Pens, colours,  
sticky name tags

##### Instructions

Everyone can create their own name tag, using any materials they want

Introduce yourself (name + age)

1. Tell the group something about you that the group might not know
2. Tell the group about something you have learnt in the last few days
3. If you have a million euro, what would you invest it in?



## Activity 2: YAP Ireland Slogans: Social Media Campaign (15–20 minutes)

### Objective

Explore perceptions of YAP Ireland  
Identify the aspects of the model that young people highlight

### Materials

Pens, colours,  
sticky name tags,  
white sheets of  
paper

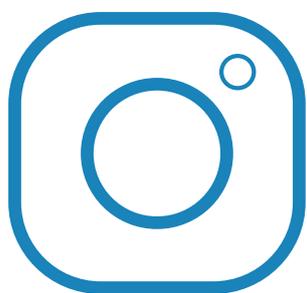
### Instructions

Everyone will create a slogan for YAP Ireland, as if you were involved in a social media campaign to tell people about YAP Ireland. You can use words, pictures, cartoons, anything you want. Be as creative as you want to be!

You can include:

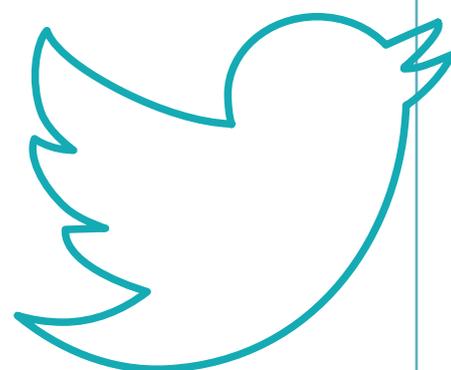
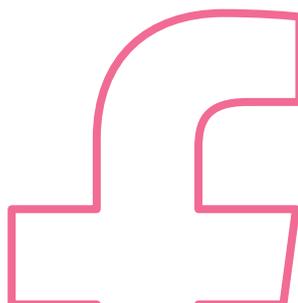
1. What YAP Ireland is for you
2. Your experience of YAP Ireland
3. What you like the most about YAP Ireland
4. What is the most important part of YAP Ireland for you
5. What has YAP Ireland helped you with
6. What has YAP Ireland not helped you with

Everyone has to show the group their slogan and explain the story behind it



INSTAGRAM!

FACEBOOK!



TWITTER!

### Activity 3: Values Walk (25 to 30 minutes)

#### Objective

Identify young people's views on the principal components of the YAP Ireland model

#### Materials

Pens, post-it notes, big numbers from 1 to 8 to stick on the wall, tape, copies of the principal components list.

#### Instructions

The Values Walk is where young people physically walk to different corners of the room to indicate whether they agree/disagree with a statement.

Every young person will get a set of the principal components of the YAP Ireland model. They can write the name of the component and stick it on the wall where they consider the component should go.

Once all the post-it notes are up, open up the discussion in the group as to why they gave each component that value.



## Youth-Friendly Description of the Components

The most important parts of YAP Ireland are:

### 1. Relationship with my Advocate

Having a supportive Advocate that understands me and my needs. We have similar likes and personalities, so we can get along very well.

### 2. Talents and abilities of Advocates

YAP Ireland Advocates can have a wide variety of talents and skills, but they have in common that they must be part of my community and they must have experience with young people.

### 3. Access to supports in my community

As Advocates come from the same communities as young people, they know about services and networks in the community. They are able to link young people within their communities.

### 4. Focus on the good

YAP Ireland focuses on the good and positive things that young people and their families have. YAP Ireland does not exclude or discriminate against anybody – everybody is welcome.

### 5. Respond to my needs

YAP Ireland pays a lot of attention to the needs of young people and their families and provides the correct help to help with those unique needs. YAP Ireland are available 24/7.

### 6. YAP Ireland provides the best possible service

YAP Ireland worries about the quality of its service. Young people complete questionnaires over time to show improvements or any problems that may be happening to be able to fix them.

### 7. YAP Ireland listens to young people

YAP Ireland listens to the voice of young people. They have groups and forums with young people to make sure their opinions are heard.

### 8. Duration

YAP Ireland is a short programme that lasts for six months, but if young people need more time, this is allowed also.

## Notes





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Cultural Organization



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# Youth Advocate

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YAP Ireland is funded by Tusla, and the HSE in partnership with Investing in Children

