

**A youth work practice case study on addressing the Health and Wellbeing challenges of children and young people who have recently arrived in the region.
Epicentre, Armagh**

Epicentre is a fulltime Youth Centre based in Armagh which operates 6 days a week. It is located quite centrally in Armagh City, close to the Southern Regional College.

It delivers a range of programmes such as: drop-in, targeting provision based on the needs of the young people; Inclusion programmes such as the YES programme which caters for young people with additional needs; and programmes for BAME participants. It delivers a weekly homework club with a particular focus on Maths and English. Some already existing members of the Youth Centre attend this programme in addition to some young people referred by local schools. The Staff have noticed that some young people who initially attended the Youth Centre for the homework club now attend drop-in sessions and other programmes. Epicentre identified a gap during weekend provision and therefore created a youth café drop-in to facilitate outreach delivery.

Armagh City has a high population of newcomers, therefore there is a need for youth work delivery for newcomer young people in particular those from the Bulgarian Roma community. Through links with the City of Armagh High School, Epicentre staff have been able to engage with these young people and invite them to the Youth Centre. They have positive links and partnerships with local schools, in particular the city of Armagh High School where Epicentre delivers OCN qualifications which are worth a grade B GCSE. This is designed to help ensure young people are gaining at least 5 GCSE qualifications.

The Education Authority Youth service within Epicentre has piloted a targeted programme for young people from newcomer communities which is delivered weekly. It is important that the challenges experienced by children and young people that have recently arrived in the region are respected, such as adapting to a new environment, culture and language. Therefore, the sessions are totally dedicated to young people from newcomer communities ensuring an inclusive and safe space to socialise and participate in youth work activities/programme. This environment also allows the young people to build relationships with the Staff Team and to get an understanding of what youth service is and the opportunities which it can offer to them. The aim is to integrate these young people into mainstream youth provision when they are ready. There are 35 young people from Bulgarian/Roma Backgrounds (majority male) attending Epicentre, age ranging from 8-18 years old. Some of the young people have already started to attend generic drop in alongside local young people and it is evident that this has helped to break down some of the barriers relating to prejudice and discrimination. Staff recognise whilst there is still a lot of work to be done, significant progress has been achieved.

The Centre has a range of different nationalities and ethnicities in the membership including Bulgarian, Polish, Lithuanian, Portuguese, British, Irish, Chinese, Irish Traveller Community and Bulgarian Roma. The local indigenous young people are the majority of the Centre's

membership, however, these other nationalities and ethnicities are well represented throughout different programmes etc. Quite a large number of Bulgarian Roma young people attend Epicentre however, not as many as would be desirable as there is a large population of Bulgarian Roma in Armagh.

Epicentre has worked alongside the Intercultural Education Service to try and get the membership information translated, however the challenge for this was that there were so many variants of the language and the Centre was unsure which language was the correct one that would be understood by the groups of young people and families represented. For example, one might assume to translate a document for a Bulgarian Roma young person into Bulgarian however in reality some communities within Bulgarian Roma speak Turkish. Within the Centre there is a young person that has recently arrived in the region who is Bulgarian Roma who has informed a staff member that they speak Portuguese as they have lived there from the age of 2. The language barrier is a significant challenge to both the inclusion, diversity and equality of opportunity as well as the health and wellbeing of children and young people who have recently arrived in the region.

One health and wellbeing challenge that has been identified with children and young people that have recently arrived in the region is that they are not registered with GPs and dentists. Epicentre staff are aware of clinics in Armagh which are set up through the council where GPs, teachers and other professions are present to offer support and guidance to those from newcomer communities. Staff regularly make children and young people belonging to newcomer communities aware of the clinics so that their families can avail of the support offered.

Epicentre was aware of the challenges to the health and wellbeing of newcomer children and young people during the lockdown periods. It delivered a wellbeing programme called 'Eat Well, Live Well' which enabled the Centre to create and deliver food parcels to young people in its membership. Staff speak of the evident joy on the faces of the children and young people when they saw youth workers arrive at their homes with a food package.

Alongside the food parcels which were through the 'Eat Well, Live Well' programme, the Centre also delivered a health and wellbeing programme which was delivered online and through the delivery of resources within the food packages. This ensured that young people could complete the health and wellbeing programme in their own time and ensured that those without access to the internet were not excluded as they were receiving the materials to complete the challenge or programme. They would then send photos of the completed work or challenge and in some cases return completed worksheets during the next food package delivery. There was a range of tasks included, such as arts and crafts, cooking and fitness challenges included in the programme.

To combat period poverty, they ensured that sanitary products were made available and delivered to those that needed them.

An ABC Council wide programme called 'Easy Fitness' was delivered in partnership with Epicentre. This programme included online sessions and workshops delivered by a fitness instructor and packs delivered to their homes. This provided children and young people the opportunity to engage in physical health training through fun exercises.

Keeping in contact throughout lockdown was positive for the mental health of the newcomer children and young people as they appreciated the programmes being offered to them, the messages being sent and the deliveries of the food parcels and sanitary products. Continuing to be as consistent as possible despite the disruption to delivery was important in maintaining the relationship and progress which had been made. In many ways, these relationships improved as the level of care and support which the staff had for the children and young people was evident through the food package deliveries and online programmes being facilitated.

Staff are aware that children and young people that have recently arrived in the region experience bullying and racism and have noticed this when working in the local schools. Isolation can occur due to bullying and through the lack of speaking English. These experiences can contribute to the mental health of children and young people which is a reason why having youth work staff engaging with them during and after school is important. Being a friendly face, asking questions and having fun are some ways to help interact with newcomer young people to help establish a relationship which can possibly lead to an invitation to join a programme at the Youth Centre. The Newcomer Youth Engagement programme (NYE) is specifically for newcomer young people, to ensure that they feel welcome and safe. This has been really important and successful in introducing youth provision and support to the newcomer communities. Although many newcomer children and young people also attend mainstream youth provision within the centre, there are still many that rely and only attend the NYE programme.

Recently, Epicentre has delivered a soccer programme on a weekly basis which included drills and tournaments which was great for the physical health and wellbeing of children and young people involved. Although this was open to everyone, around 40 Bulgarian Roma young people participated and Staff encouraged all young people to interact positively with each other. Staff were able to reflect on this and highlighted the fact that sport can provide a positive avenue of interaction and the importance of having a common goal when working with groups of young people from a range of nationalities, cultures and ethnicities. Particularly for the Bulgarian Roma young people, the Staff were not aware that any of them were attending or were part of any sports teams in the town. The soccer programme has opened the door for this potential to happen as some local coaches were involved in the delivery of the tournaments.

One Staff member spoke of the importance of educating young people of the different nationalities and cultures and the journey that some of the newcomer children and young people have been on. They often believe that racist and sectarian comments are due to fear

of the unknown, so by informing and educating young people on what it is like to be a Bulgarian or a Roma young person for example, can change their mindset and challenge their values, beliefs and behaviours. Epicentre has completed an Inclusion Champions programme with 6 young people, who are now volunteering and their knowledge and positive attitude towards inclusion and diversity is impacting others around them. It is the hope that through the increased understanding and awareness that behaviours and attitudes will be improved towards newcomer communities, therefore, improving the mental health of newcomer children and young people.

As poverty is a reality for many children and young people that have recently arrived in the region, it is important to provide for the basic needs of the participants. For programmes delivered within the youth centre, snacks are provided to ensure that children and young people are not hungry. Epicentre provides pot noodles during the Newcomer Youth Engagement programme and often participants bring some pot noodles home for siblings. The Life Skills programme includes cooking and preparing meals for a family which equips children and young people with the skills that can benefit themselves and help provide for their family. This is particularly beneficial for those newcomer young people that find themselves responsible for providing meals for younger siblings as their skills and confidence improves so that they are able to cook a hot meal instead of relying on making sandwiches.

Epicentre invites a range of agencies to deliver workshops within the youth centre to inform children and young people within their membership of important information and services. They recently had Youth Justice raise awareness of drugs and narcotics, PSNI delivering a workshop on drugs and alcohol and PCSP discussing living safely and risk taking behaviours. Having agencies deliver workshops on these topics is one way of addressing the health and wellbeing challenges as participants are informed of the risks and potential dangers