

**End Youth
Homelessness Cymru**



**Baker
McKenzie.**

THE JOURNEY SO FAR:

Youth Experiential Learning Simulation



Two core tenets of EYHC's work are advocating for preventative measures at the earliest possible opportunity and championing innovative approaches that have proven to be effective. Through our coalition partners, over the past few years EYHC has been involved in the establishment of a number of promising interventions, frequently based on learning from abroad. It is perhaps fitting then, that the Youth Experiential Learning Simulation (YExLS), an intervention we hope can revolutionise our understanding of young people's experiences of navigating the 'system', came about through our links with North American friends from the Canadian Observatory on Homelessness and A Way Home Canada (thanks again to Dr. Stephan Gaetz, Melanie Redman and team!).

Through an out of the blue email, we were put in contact with Angela Vigil, Executive Director of BakerMckenzie's ProBono Practice, and Brian Blalock from the Youth Law Center, who were headed to Brussels, to run their 'Youth Justice Simulation' at the UN's World Justice Forum, the largest gathering of human rights advocates in the world. Angela and Brian said that they were aware that we were doing some innovative work around prevention, and we were offered the opportunity to run the simulation here in Wales. Following a back and forth over email, and a number of Zoom meetings, which allowed us to have a better understanding of both what the simulation was, and what it hoped to achieve, a date was decided for the first ever YExLS simulation to take place in Europe and work began to make this a reality.

So what exactly is the simulation? The YExLS attempts to imitate young people's experiences when they try to access help from systems, such as social services, youth justice and housing services. Key to its effectiveness is that it was developed by professionals who have worked in youth serving systems for decades in partnership with young people with lived experience of the justice, care and homelessness systems. The YExLS seeks to help participants get a better sense of what it is like to be a young person navigating the myriad of public systems while also pursuing their own dreams, following their own interests, and surviving their own traumas. Despite the fact we only had a few weeks to pull the event together, the May simulation was a great success, with over 50 attendees experiencing the simulation, from a number of sectors, such as housing, social services and youth work, and importantly there was a good mix of individuals from both front-line and strategic roles. We were also really pleased that a number of Welsh Government officials were able to attend as well as

one member of the Senedd. One of the key elements of the session is the opportunity to debrief following the simulation, discuss both how it made attendees feel, whether they thought it accurately replicated young people's experiences and also allow for a space for solutions to young people's current experiences to be discussed. It's fantastic to have been able to facilitate honest and frank discussions between different sectors and individuals performing very different roles within the 'system'.

Because of the reaction to and feedback from the May simulation, it was of paramount importance to EYHC that we did everything we could to convince our North American partners to come back to Wales to not only run the simulation again for a larger number of attendees but also, ambitiously, we hoped they would be happy to train a team of us, led by EYHC, so that we'd be able to facilitate the YExLS independently.

Such is the power of the simulation, the request to 'share' the simulation has been made to Angela and Brian after nearly every simulation they'd facilitated, however they had always been hesitant to do so. Remember, the YExLS has been developed so carefully and sensitively with young people who have lived experience, and it is critical to honour their stories and contributions. That was until they came to Wales. From the reaction to the May simulation, and the extent to which the attendees 'bought in' to both the methods and aims of the simulation, as well as the obvious passion the attendees had for trying to improve the situation for the young people they supported in their respective roles, it was clear that quite the impression had been left on Angela and Brian. Subsequently, in conversations outlining our hopes to be trained as accredited facilitators of the YExLS, so that we could continue the legacy of the simulation in Wales in a sustainable way, we found ourselves to be pushing at a relatively open door. Thus, a date for the 'simulation week' was agreed, in which a team, recruited and coordinated by EYHC, would be brought together to be trained as facilitators, before running a simulation on a bigger scale than back in May. This was the first time in the world that they had agreed to share the gift of the simulation, and I would just like to once again thank Angela and Brian for putting their trust in us to make this happen. We know that we are being entrusted with an incredibly precious gift and we have to do all we can to maintain its integrity, stay true to the young people who helped to create it, and ensure it has the maximum positive impact.

Given the breadth of the simulation and the themes covered, it was important to us that we recruited a team of future YExLS facilitators that

reflected this breadth, and that as EYHC, we looked beyond those from just a housing or homelessness background, which is obviously where the majority of our networks are. Through our contacts, and primarily through individuals and organisations in our steering group, who I would like to thank again for all their help, we were able to recruit a team of twenty individuals from a variety of backgrounds covering: housing, youth work, health, community engagement, justice, academia, education and psychology. As we were asking people for their time voluntarily, on top of what their current jobs require, which frequently go beyond a normal 9-5, we are really pleased with the team we've managed to pull together.

So, on November 14th the 'Simulation week' began, with our team meeting Angela and Brian for two intense training days that explored the origins of the simulation, how it was created and what gaps in our current understanding of young people's experiences of the 'system' the simulation hoped to fill. We also discussed what the current 'system' looks like for young people in Wales, and the fragility of connections between a number of inter-connected parts of the 'system' that young people have to navigate; with barriers arising from the 'system' not listening to the young people themselves, eligibility criteria and often both a lack of flexibility within and between services and a lack of clarity around responsibility. Alongside discussions around the 'system' we were also trained in the practicalities of running the simulation, including how we should set up the room, what resources we would need, how we should act as facilitators, and how to make it a safe space for participants.

After a very intense two days, we were all really looking forward to putting everything that we'd learnt into practice and helping to run the simulation, under the leadership of Angela and Brian. Rather than having a few weeks to organise the event, as we had back in May, this time we had a few months, and we were delighted to have over 110 participants attend the simulation at the City Hall in Cardiff. Again, we were pleased to see such a diverse mix of attendees, from a range of backgrounds and sectors covering:

- Welsh Government Officials
- NHS Wales
- The Wellbeing of Future Generations Office
- The Cardiff City Foundation
- Local Authority Team's covering: Housing, Youth Work and Social Services
- Housing Associations
- Parc Prison and the Youth Justice Board
- WISERD
- A number of third sector organisations including Shelter Cymru, Cymorth Cymru and Llamau – GISDA, Shelter Cymru, Cymorth Cymru and Llamau

Again there was a real mix of individuals from front-line and strategic roles. Following the simulation, and before beginning the in-depth verbal debrief, attendees fill out a reflection form, below are a series of the responses against some of the question prompts:

MOST REAL?

- The lack of being listened to. Our young people always say they don't get listened to by other professionals.
- Organisations dealing with one aspect only and not interested in anything else.
- The feeling of being in all of this completely alone.

WHAT LESSONS WILL YOU TAKE BACK?

- Day one of us meeting a youth is frequently not day one for that young person trying to access a service.
- Remember every interaction counts, hold space. Remember the feeling of confusion and rejection.
- Understand all sectors need to work as one towards the same outcome.

FURTHER COMMENTS?

- At time when people need support most and are vulnerable it feels like the systems aren't joined up. It's exhausting.
- Very engaging and cleverly put together.
- This was transformative.

The afternoon session flipped the focus, and instead of exploring the system as it is in its current state, allowed attendees to focus on solutions, both at a practical level but also at a strategic/policy level as well. **Attendees were able to choose their focus area from the below list of four options:**

- Trauma informed systems
- Systems that play to young people's strengths
- Systems that work together coherently
- Systems that don't make youth feel isolated and picked on.

After an emotionally draining and intense morning session, the energy and passion in the room throughout the afternoon was really inspiring, with individuals from across backgrounds and sectors working together collectively to envisage a better system for the young people of Wales was inspiring. A plethora of commitments were made from the 9 different working groups, including practical steps that participants would take the very next day, to longer term, strategic change. We will be monitoring the developments of these plans and sharing these in the near future. Across all 9 groups there were shared themes around services being young person led both in design and delivery, compassion and empathy throughout the 'system' and the importance of the role of advocates for young people.

To be the first country in the world to have been entrusted to run the YExLS independently, is a huge honour for us and one that we are very grateful for. We also feel a huge responsibility to ensure that we deliver it in line with everything we were taught by Angela and Brian, maintaining its integrity and respecting the young people who helped to shape the simulation. We are so excited to take this forward, as we truly believe this has the power to be transformative in how we support young people across Wales, ensuring that the different parts of the 'system' work together coherently, whilst being more youth-led and flexible to each young person's situation and their own strengths and life ambitions. We have been so enthused by attendees' reactions to both simulations thus far, and we are currently underway in formulating plans for simulations throughout 2023, and importantly this will be across different parts of Wales, as we are conscious that the first two have been held in Cardiff. Please watch this space for future plans, and don't hesitate to get in contact if you have any questions or queries about the simulation or EYHC's broader work.

Diolch.

Bill Rowlands (EYHC Project Manager)
billrowlands@llamau.org.uk