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# Down at *The Depot*

## By Emilia Forden

**M**y Dad always used to tell me stories of his younger years. Bonfires in the park, roaming the streets until dark, playing out with his mates. It's a pleasant feeling to look back and laugh at all the trouble you caused in your youth. Sure, times have changed, for better or for worse, is the argument. Concerns over screen time vs concerns for safety and behaviour on the street. It is natural for young people to stray from home as they find their independence and grow into young adults, it's a rite of passage. The age of experimentation.

The Depot is a youth Cafe based in Cardigan, with a central location, close to the college and school. The café is welcoming and friendly. The foyer hosts a great lounging space. Sofas watching the window, mature coffee tables stood over 'Pinterest mum'

rugs, and greenery lifting the corners of whitewashed walls. It seemed to me that the space was greatly maintained and respected by the young people despite the odd happy milkshake glass left about. It's the little things which really make the space inviting. Fairy lights draped in the windows, shelves stacked with games, instruments waiting patiently. Like a hot chocolate and a hug on a cold grey day, the depot aims to support young people to be their best selves. To celebrate the best of every individual but most importantly, it's clear, the Depot is there to pick up and encourage young people on their worst days.

The depot encourages a shared safe place for young people. The building is divided which allows social groups their own space, attracting a range of ages as this offers a level of privacy. Without places like this young people inevitably

are left to the streets. There have been numerous studies discussing the relationship of youth centres and the rate of crime. The overarching theme being, more youth resources, less crime. The depot provides a space for young people to interact outside of school or college, outside of their homes. A space away from adult pressures, yet still supervised with access to support. A place where they can be completely themselves. They can voice their concerns about home or school life in a neutral setting.

Young people's voices are central to the service. Services respond to the needs of local young people, as defined by them, offering accessible support wherever possible, with targeted support for those considered more at-risk, disadvantaged or with higher needs. The café has a suggestion box. 'Whatever the young people suggest we try our best to make it happen.'

Colour schemes, furniture and events were all chosen by the young people using the service. Whether it's a Mario Kart championship, FIFA tournament, or create your own pizza night, the depot aims to attract more young people and host fun, rewarding, and collaborative events. They even hosted a prom night!

Gemma, a senior support worker at The Depot, explained that the work they do here is important as there is nothing else in the area. I was amazed to discover the space, which seems to me such a great solution. However, the fact is there is little investment in youth services. Each staff member wearing a green

jumper is a support worker, training or working in youth services. They are there to offer help and advice. They support young people with documents and support them to find solutions to personal issues relating to their circumstances. Staff may support young people to tackle their challenges such as homework, or just to play a game or have a chat.

The job certainly doesn't come without its challenges: they don't know who's going to come through the door, or how they could react. Someone could come in having had a difficult day, upset or angry, Gemma explains. 'It is important to be aware of how one group's behaviour could impact another young person in the café.' The staff are always mindful of the young people's behaviour and language. They have a zero-tolerance policy towards racism and homophobia.

The staff are generous with their time, attention, and care. It is clear there is a mutual enjoyment amongst the young people and staff when they interact in the café. 'I always learn new things from the young people. All these new slang words, Tik Tok etc.' Gemma laughs.

What stands out to me is the good presentation of the food. Despite the prices being greatly subsidised, the café makes a great effort to present

meals nicely. Whether that's a humble jacket potato or filling cheese toastie, food is served like any other upmarket café. This demonstrates to young people a great level of respect and equality. Despite its financial pressures, The Depot is a place young people can visit to get a good filling meal, offering young people a lot of security and a boost to their self-esteem. 'You don't even need to buy anything to spend time and feel welcome in the café,' Gemma highlighted.

It warmed me to see these young people confidently heading in and out of the café. I wondered if they were conscious that they were safe, or if this would be an afterthought in their future. Maybe when they reminisce about their younger days, they'll reflect and realise the privilege of having access to a safe, supportive, and fun Youth Café.

I hope to see more spaces like The Depot café. The space is invaluable, offering young people a sense of ownership and a space for discovery, which will continue to support them to be confident, curious, and courteous people long into their future. A canvas for generations of young people to decorate with their aspirations, hopes, dreams, and sense of self. A check point on the treadmill of life, to which many may reflect on in the future with gratitude.

