

"The More Things Change, the More They Stay the Same."

Planning, Policies and Participation?

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The Public Image of the Youth Service.

There is strong evidence of a lack of knowledge and appreciation by the general public, and by decision makers, of the achievements of the youth service and the contribution it makes to society. Sadly, impressions of "keeping young people of the streets", which may have been appropriate to the era of the 1960s and the Albemarle Report still persist. Media coverage of the activities of young people and of the youth service is too often negative. It neglects the many examples of good work by and for young people in favour of the "shock, horror" coverage which appears to attract the attention of the general public. For example, letters in the press in 1993 gave reasons for juvenile delinquency as the absence of something for the young people to do, ignoring the positive involvement of many of them in the voluntary and maintained youth service. Sir Wyn Roberts, the then Secretary of State for Wales, indicated the scale of this involvement for Wales: there is evidence that this amounts to 90% of the 11 - 25 year age group at some time in their lives (HMI Survey 1990 quoted in Ymlaen 1994, p 9. Ymlaen is the official publication of the Wales Youth Agency). Similarly, the Duke of Edinburgh's Award Scheme has caught the imagination of the public, but is susceptible to the adverse effects of the attention paid by the media to the rare occasions when an expedition has run into trouble.

As a result of such poor perceptions the youth service has been vulnerable when financial cuts and organisational changes are in prospect. Whatever the reasons for such a poor public image, and they may be many and complicated, it is vitally important at the present time that youth workers and young people should involve themselves positively in redressing the balance, if the long standing traditions of the service are not to be lost. Such traditions are exemplified in the focal points of the Duke of Edinburgh's Award scheme -

*service by young people, opportunity,
challenge and achievement the development
of lasting interests and skills self awareness,
enterprise and effort.*

The Importance of Aims and Objectives.

The maintained youth service has been criticised for a lack of purpose and for poorly defined aims and objectives. For example, in an analysis of review documents supplied to the then National Youth Bureau, by local authorities, Smith, (1987) found that "services and workers were confused and unclear about their aims and objectives. Policies and priorities were non-existent, unclear, confused or made irrelevant by the passage of time or changing circumstances" (p 8). However, one of the major strengths of the youth service is its flexibility, which is consciously nurtured in order to cater for the divergent needs of young people in different locations and with different backgrounds. Unfortunately, the resulting diversity lends itself to the polarisation of views of the service as an amorphous muddle, or as a healthy and comprehensive response specifically designed for the totality of local divergences. The fact that examples of both extremes can be found should not obscure the real value of the total range of provision.

Major voluntary organisations such as the Guides Association, the Young Farmers or Urdd Gobaith Cymru, have long had stated aims, documents of policy, organisation and rules, and structures leading to public events such as Eisteddfodau and Rallies and Festivals, but even they are subject to distorted public image and stereotyping. For example, the St John Ambulance Brigade is, rightly, well known for its first aid activities, but little for its programme of adventurous activities such as camping, canoeing and hill walking.

In recent years, more and more organisations and local education authority youth services have been responding positively to criticisms such as those quoted above and the negative image resulting from the "man bites dog" focus of the media and local gossip by developing their own statements of policy. These have been the result of analysis of the needs of young people in the communities in Wales and the nature of the response which ought to be made by the youth service, together with the implications for resourcing. This is a healthy development, but it is essential that it should be followed up by ensuring that such aims and objectives are communicated to the general public and to policy makers. This will encourage a more realistic and up to date appreciation of the circumstances in which the youth service works and the benefits it offers to the young people who participate. This is particularly important in view of changing attitudes towards the justification of public expenditure, and the lack of a firm definition of what is "adequate" provision, although local authorities have a duty under the Further and Higher Education Act of 1992 to secure such provision.

Curriculum.

In 1991/92 there were national consultations, inspired by the (then) Department of Education and Science and the Welsh Office, which became known as Ministerial Conferences. These led to discussions about an official curriculum for the youth service which, at the time of writing, have remained inconclusive. However, a Youth Work Curriculum Statement for Wales was produced in 1992. Although this was the product of extensive consultation, both formal and informal - for example, both the Youth Workers and the Youth Officers professional Associations presented their views, and the Wales Youth Forum and the Council for Wales for Voluntary Organisations responded - and appears to have attained much informal acceptance and recognition by a number of influential bodies such as WJEC, WYA, it still lacks a mandatory basis. Consultation must not only take place, it must, like justice, be seen (or perceived) to have taken place.

It is not universally agreed that a standard curriculum is appropriate for the youth service. "The word 'curriculum' is a particularly inappropriate way of approaching what youth workers do". (Smith 1991, p 20.) However, the Statement for Wales specifically states that it is NOT intended to "lead to a single, prescriptive and inflexible curriculum which would restrain diversity or restrict initiative." (WYA 1992, Introduction.)

The curriculum debate, influenced by the concurrent debate about the curriculum in schools, has involved such factors as performance indicators, training for response to industrial needs, and competence based education. This has produced a perception that curriculum is mainly concerned with content and product or output. The youth service, with its stress on long term personal development, examination of values and attitudes, and response to community needs is more concerned with process. There is evidence of misunderstanding of the concept of curriculum as a definition relevant to youth work in a Working Party Survey (Williamson et al 1993.) It is, however, not the purpose here to delve into the history or nature of the search for definition nor to join the curriculum debate. The issues have been raised in order to:

- Set in context the difficulty of achieving a consensus, even within the maintained sector of the youth service, let alone the voluntary organisations, as to what youth work is or should be.
- Support the long held belief that diversity is an essential part of the youth service.

It is difficult for both policy makers and face to face youth workers and their managers to achieve and maintain change or development in a social climate which favours conformity and the measurement of outcomes. As will be explained further, this is all the more important because the present time is one of rapid political and social change which will impinge upon the youth service from outside unless the youth service pre-empts this by its own research, planning, and participative consultation processes.

Communication.

The Wales Youth Agency was established in 1992, the successor to the Wales Youth Work Partnership, as a co-ordinating body for the youth service in Wales. One of its objectives is to facilitate communication systems. It is greatly to the credit of the youth service, strongly supported by the WYA that attention is now being paid to the formulation, internal communication and implementation of policies, via briefing papers, working documents, occasional papers and information bases. However, the general public still appears little more aware of the strengths and success of the service than it ever was. It is crucially important for the health and well being of the youth service that the community should be in sympathy with its aims, objectives and styles of work. The converse is also true. Those aims, objectives and styles of work have to be consonant with the values of society, but that is another argument for another time. It is important that youth workers, concentrating as they rightly do, on their professional preoccupations with the young people also accept the less inviting but active and necessary responsibility of taking time to reflect upon, analyse and explain their work so that their philosophies and achievements reach the public ear. It is important also that their line managers, through job descriptions and support mechanisms, build in the time and the opportunities to do this (Ruby, 1994). There is also a need for constant debate among youth workers and with the young people. Such debate must be firmly based on current practice rather than withdrawn to a rarefied conference or seminar atmosphere which does not encourage such forms of exchange, but is often reduced to well-worn rhetoric. Debate, if it is universally accepted, must take account of the changing world in which young people live. It must be living and lively and followed by planned action. As such, it can only be a positive contribution to the development of the service. However, it is also crucial that structures, all too often neglected are negotiated and put in place for enabling such action and development. Without these structures workers who are, theoretically, in a position to initiate development appear ineffectual and are certainly susceptible to feelings of frustration. The role of officials and policy makers is important - to become better users of information, which means identifying and communicating constraints, identifying the data which is needed and the contexts for application and monitoring, and updating data systems. "Too often senior officials are unaware of the data that is available which notwithstanding its limitations, could inform policy problems" (Ruby, 1994, p 15). In the absence of debate and action based within the service, the danger is that policies will be generated from outside and with insufficient basis of experience and informed analysis.

Change can be stressful and threatening. It is often easier to continue in established ways than to analyse and justify action and to make decisions which can have uncomfortable results. In an era of financial constraints, excuses on the grounds of lack of resources - many of them justifiable - can be tempting. It is greatly to the credit of the service that so much good work continues to be done. All too often this is at personal cost to the workers.

Change is not necessarily always for the better, and unless it is planned, analysed and evaluated, it will not be possible to discern whether it has achieved the desired effect. Since change will occur, whether intended or not, it should be deliberate and considered rather than left to the winds of chance.

The Implementation of Change in the Youth Service.

A policy which remains on paper is worthless. "The crucial factor is whether or not the policy can be implemented" (Cattermole et al 1987, p 20). Moreover, because of different priorities, the agendas of those involved in policy making are bound to be different from each other. Currently, governments seem to be primarily concerned with notions of value for money, accountability and market forces; youth workers with the social conditions of young people and the difficulties of responding adequately to their needs; and young people with the exigencies of day to day living in a climate which stresses tangible outcomes such as examination result and marketable skills as well as curricular uniformity, and, most recently, team sports.

National policies tend to concentrate - understandably - on national needs rather than those of young people (Davies, 1985). Stead (op cit) noted that there are currently fears that decisions affecting youth service policies are being taken, whether through pressures of time, or in the stated interest of "objectivity" by people who have little real perception of the nature of youth work. "Those at the 'centre' do not always want to know what is really happening on the ground", (Harris in Smith, ed 1991, p 43) and, "There is an almost total lack of awareness by people outside the (youth) work as to what it entails." (op cit p 46.) This is a circular argument. Where there are coherent, stated, implemented policies, then these are in place to explain the youth service to these "outsiders."

Decisions made in other arenas often impinge on youth work activities without intent or are made without the realisation of possible consequences. Thus, for example, the implementation of national policies on the Local Management of schools and the Opting Out of schools, are likely to have unpredicted, and presumably unintended effects on the availability and cost of premises for youth work. Cost conscious schools might try to recoup real costs, or generate income from use by youth groups. They might even, in the case of management whose priorities are unsympathetic to youth work, use the system as a lever to push out an undervalued provision or one which is, rightly or wrongly, perceived to be a nuisance. One response to such negative action could be a forced move to a different form of youth work, for example, one which is not building based, regardless of whether building based work is the best response to local need. In times of insecurity such events can lead to unfounded interpretations of innocent and unrelated actions as being of malevolent intent.

There is a dynamic relationship between the existence of defined policies and the planning of change and development. Without a policy, change can only be haphazard, yet no policy should be static and immutable. There is a danger, in the youth service as everywhere else, that people become personally involved with policies in which they feel they have an investment, and will defend an outdated status quo for emotional reasons, or for ones which no longer hold force. It may be that this is better than swinging with every wind that blows, but neither matches up to real informed planning and decision making.

All these factors are promoting unplanned change in youth work on the one hand, and prompting managers and policy makers on the other hand to reconsider their approaches and strategies. County youth services have developed statements of policy and, for Wales, the WYA has been instrumental in promoting opportunities for consultation. However, there are a number of factors which militate against the transmission of planned change to "grass roots" level - "policy is not practice. It rarely, if ever, decides precisely

what will happen when a worker meets a client..."(Davies, 1985, p 2) and, "on close examination of either a whole service, organisation or unit, it is often possible to discover disparity between the work going on and the written statement of policy" (Cattermole et al 1987,p13).

Value systems both within and without the service are changing, with the response to market forces and consequent stress on practical evidence of value for money, which would be less out of keeping with the traditions of youth work if they were not to the detriment of notions of helping each other.

Consultation with Young People.

The way in which policies are developed will affect the way in which they are implemented and the ways in which they can be changed. Since philosophies of empowerment, and participation by young people in decision making underlie much current youth work, it seems only logical that young people should be integrally involved in the development of policies for the service which supposedly responds to their needs. However, as Stead (1992) pointed out, the structures for consultation are often time consuming, cumbersome or ineffective, and the pressures for policy change are often for immediate action sometimes even as panic or "knee jerk" reactions. As a result, official, written policies at all levels, from those of individuals or groups of workers in various situations right through to national decisions are in danger of being developed "top down". It is not suggested that policies developed thus lack good intentions, or even that they would necessarily be substantially different from those developed by young people themselves or in consultation with them. These are questions for exploration in other contexts. However, development through consultative processes is likely to ensure the commitment and ownership factors on the part of those who are genuinely involved. This will make such policies more likely to be accepted and implemented. Failure to address effective consultative processes can hinder major organisational change. Mason (1993) found that formal methods of change, for example staff meetings, conducted by senior staff denied any sense of ownership. Without commitment to real participative consultation, it has been pointed out that, "the most effective change is unlikely to occur" (Bradford and Day, 1991, p 66).

The youth service has long been aware of the importance of equal opportunities, and has developed and implemented formal policies. The "Changing Attitudes" project, which is based on opening the youth service to young people with disabilities is a recent example of the way in which the focus has been extended, to include disability awareness as well as the issues of sexism, racism and the empowerment of young people. However, such projects and policies have resourcing implications, and these will be returned to later in this paper. In Wales there is a particular need for equalising opportunities when the concentration often appears to be on the anglicised South East corner to the detriment of the rural and Welsh speaking heartlands.

Changing Roles of Youth Workers.

There are changes in the delivery of youth work, resulting from both external and internal pressures which have opened some new doors to young people and closed others. An important manifestation of this is in the functions performed by full time and part time workers. Because of financial constraints, which are exacerbated by the lack of political will to "ring fence" funding for the youth service and to define "adequacy", the number of full time workers has declined and their roles have changed so that they are becoming more and more managers with responsibilities for geographic areas or of multiple provision. The voluntary sector has not been immune from this. Reductions in Grant Aid, for example, have resulted in the loss of full time workers to the YMCAs and the young

people have consequently lost a source of information and help. An example of this related to drugs and addiction was mentioned in "The Guardian" (6/6/94). Therefore, the bulk of face to face youth work is being delivered by part time workers, possibly as it always was. The difference is that there is now diminished support and personal intervention from full time workers. This is not to say that the work of part time staff is any less valuable. Indeed, there is evidence that they bring a large range of skills into the service. (Howells, 1993.)

The balance, however, has changed. By the very nature of their work, part time staff are likely to be excluded from decision making processes, which tend to take place in the daytime when part time workers are otherwise engaged. Many part time workers, particularly those from voluntary organisations might say that they want to work with young people and not to attend meetings. They are thus also excluded from gaining "ownership" of any changes, or, often, awareness of what is in prospect. Their full time colleagues, perhaps now lacking the face to face contact with young people that they once had might be in danger of basing opinions on outdated perceptions. Because of the diverse and dispersed nature of the youth service, and because their time is limited, and expectations of them have grown, full time workers lack the opportunity to meet together in any substantial way, particularly outside their immediate geographic areas. In such a situation, it could well be that, "what often occurs when they get together is a sharing of frustrations rather than a deep attention to purpose and practice." (Smith, 1988, p. 83.) Even less do part time workers have the opportunity to interact positively and develop new styles of working,

Many organisations now possess the machinery for offering support to staff, and encouraging their participation in policy development at times of change, and such machinery must be used to the full. "During periods of management re-organisation Staff Development Policies should be fully utilised to ensure that full and part time staff are offered equal consultation, and training to understand the way in which change is taking place" (Mason, 1993, p 104).

In the absence of understanding, support and motivation to implement change, and perhaps the confidence to take action; and in the face of a weight of tradition and attitudes on the part of young people, colleagues, and the community, it is not surprising if staff working directly with young people, in their contacts with them, tend to sustain existing patterns of "the way things are done here". (Smith 1988, p. 63.) Patterns are likely to persist also in building based work, since buildings impose their own constraints and these often preclude innovation. Such patterns may be the best, but they should be continually analysed, evaluated and justified, and this can only happen when the space to do so is positively created. There are many examples of this happening, but little acknowledgement is given to them, rather the concentration is on deficiencies.

Training and Change.

Training is an important tool in bringing about change. Workers must be provided with the knowledge, skills and attitudes for implementing newly developed policies. However, in order to use training as an effective tool, it must be shaped by information based on indicators which allow comparison across diverse contexts and which show developments over time. (Ruby, 1994). Although this might seem to present difficulty in view of the already mentioned divergences and diversities in the youth service and in Wales as a whole, if there is to be progress, the effort must be made.

Many attitudes towards youth work are laid down in the course of initial training and often youth workers, both full and part time, lack the opportunity for up-dating, mainly because of the demands of the work. Response to in-service training opportunities can be

disappointing, notwithstanding important training provision and response in some localities and organisations. Indeed, should all workers with young people demand training, the system would lack the resources to provide adequately. There can be many valid reasons for the lack of demand. For example, many voluntary workers who are in full time employment elsewhere are only available in the evenings, and this is when they are "on duty". Alternatively, this may indicate the persistence of an attitude on the part of both some providers of training and of some workers, that initial training answers the need, once and for all.

Perceptions of the nature of youth work can grow their own persistence and become mismatched with developing policies and with actualities. One result may be that, within the confines of direct contact with young people, the work delivered is recognisably the same as that delivered in the period immediately following the Albemarle report in the 1960s. The question has to be asked as to how far this is appropriate to the needs of young people in the approach to the twenty first century.

Resources for Policy.

Policy changes need the resources which rarely seem to follow them. Instead, in the current climate, the youth service experiences continual or recurrent cuts. Moreover, even in the case of stated policies, especially national ones, priorities are as rarely allocated. The absence of specifically allocated funding has already been mentioned. This is unfair to those who operate the service day to day and at face to face level as well as to the local decision makers. Incomplete information may render their own prioritisation inappropriate both to their own situations and to the policy as a whole. Alternatively, there is danger in trying to implement everything with the inevitable risks of failure, or of doing everything less well.

For voluntary organisations in particular, there are dilemmas in finding resourcing for their activities. More and more charities are seeking support from sources whose funds are finite, so less money is available. Sometimes there is a danger that, in order to meet the criteria of a funding body, an organisation may have to modify its own objectives and risk distorting its work. This has become more pressing since the Charities Act of 1992 has, rightly, tightened up the regulations. There is a tendency for funding bodies, and this includes official bodies such as the Welsh Office, to supply "pump priming" resources in the expectation that providers will be able to undertake the continuation of the work in other ways. When they are not able to do so, because they are already financially overstretched, new initiatives are lost, and the final situation can be worse than if there had been no project.

These are not new difficulties, and there is much to be learned from elsewhere. Reactions to underfunding and to the concentration on "pump priming" grants have been experienced in the non formal education sector in many different countries. This has a detrimental effect on the continuation of long standing programmes. Funds may be redirected from capital grants to meet recurrent expenditure and new projects may be created to gain access to this essential finance (Donald, 1981). Short term projects with uncertain futures can fail to attract, motivate or retain staff of high quality. One solution adopted in some cases has been the appointment of officials whose primary purpose is to raise funds, and this has demanded a whole range of new skills. If service level agreements are to be the way forward, it is important that these shall be formed in such a way as to allow for continuity of the services provided for young people.

An Opportunity for Positive Action?

The present time is an apposite one for a consideration of the inter-relationship of policies and practices and strategies for implementing change and for ensuring that the public is well informed about the youth service. There has been a well-documented cycle of reports on the youth service at approximately ten year intervals, which have signalled the need for development. The latest of the series, initiated by the Ministerial conferences fitted neatly into this pattern, but now seems to have lost impetus and focus, for unexplained reasons. Whether the youth service likes it or not, a sweeping organisational change is on the way in Wales. The coming of the Unitary Authorities is already causing anxieties among youth workers at all levels. There are fears about employment, access to premises, resourcing, the status and understanding of future decision makers, (who may come from a background of District Authorities with their knowledge and experience of leisure provision rather than of the educational focus of youth work) and, indeed, fears about the very existence of the youth service in its present form. It is not at all likely that the youth service will be high on the agendas of the Unitary Authorities. They will have too many other preoccupations. Uncertainties undermine morale, and inhibit action. But the situation must be seen as presenting an opportunity. There is merit in a fresh appraisal. Perhaps there is too much perpetuation of the outmoded. There are questions which should be asked. Among them are:

- *Is there such a thing as generic youth work and, if so, what is it? Is it still needed?*
- *How far should youth work be building based? Are schools the best places to use, and are they located in the most appropriate places? What are the alternatives?*
- *Is the legacy of the 1960s which remains in some face to face work still appropriate?*
- *How can young people, the voters of the near future, really influence what goes on, and not only in the youth service?*
- *What are the roles for youth workers in the approach to the twenty first century, and what training and support do they need to enable them to fit them?*
- *What are the best methods of financing and resourcing the work so that quality and continuity are assured?*
- *What are the special needs of Wales, and how can these best be catered for?*
- *Are these the right questions to ask? If not, what are?*

The dominant question should not be, "What does it all cost?"

There are no easy answers, and this paper is not setting out to provide any. It is, however, strongly suggested that no time must be lost in Wales in engaging in debate at all levels, among youth workers and young people and with present and future policy makers so that decisions are purposeful and driven by "the field". Perhaps the seeds are there, but they need separating from the tares and they need nurturing and cultivating if the plant is to succeed in spite of a hostile climate.

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