

UNITED KINGDOM YOUTH WORK ALLIANCE

Youth work and government policies towards young people **Supporting young people's transitions to adult life**

Research on young people tells us three key things. First, transitions from childhood to adulthood have become much longer. Second, they have become much more complex. Third, they have become much more risky. Young people have to negotiate their individual paths through school and naming and into the labour market. They have to work out how best to move from the home of their childhood to independent living. And to choose how they want to deal with personal relationships and family life. Moreover, these processes no longer 'naturally' take a linear form (work, housing, family formation): they are combined in different ways and they can be reversed - if young people experience difficulties in sustaining employment, living independently or maintaining relationships.

Policy towards young people aims to make such processes more clear and secure. The government has already put in place a range of initiatives to encourage participation in education, training, and employment. A variety of Initiatives have been established to support active citizenship, recognise achievement within a framework of lifelong learning, promote social inclusion, and develop personal and community safety.

These demand practice with young people which strengthens their capacity to manage their lives in ways which allow them to make the most of the opportunities available to them. Yet the sheer complexity of pathways to adulthood (In education, training, employment, health, housing and criminal justice) means that practice has to be well-honed in order to be aligned effectively to the government's policy agenda and to be relevant to the needs and aspirations of young people. Advice, guidance, support and information has to be *meaningful* to the young if they are to act on it in creative and constructive ways. Young people have to be involved in such processes if they are to feel a sense of ownership of the directions in which they are moving. Otherwise, there is a real danger of than opting out, which produces a range of negative personal and social consequences. In short, institutional provision for young people has to be harnessed to individual motivation and support.

Youth work

Youth work has always used working methods based on principles of participation and empowerment. It addresses many social issues (such as health and relationships). It uses a range of methods. But the fundamentals of its work with individuals and groups stem from mutual agreement between practitioners and young people. This basis of negotiation and contract serves as the foundation for learning within which young people can make informed decisions about the direction of their lives. This is a universal entitlement for all young people engaged by the youth service, although - increasingly - youth work has also sought to target such interventions at those young people most in need of advice, guidance, personal support and opportunity. And although youth work is constructed on voluntary relationships, its principles and working methods present a real possibility of ensuring that practice within wider social policies yields optimum and **desirable outcomes. It represents a process for enabling more young people to navigate their routes to adult life and achieve their aspirations.**

Supporting Young People

Support for young people does, of course, come from many sources. They have the private support of families, neighbours and peers. They have the public support of, *inter alia*, schools, the careers service, training providers and the employment service. For young people facing specific difficulties in making their transitions, more specialist support is available through education welfare, social services, child psychology, and housing and health services. All such provision is, however, guided to some extent at least by its own agendas and imperatives. There are public and social targets to be met. Youth work is more focused on the individual, and the groups of young people to which the individual is attached. So whereas wider policy is properly pulling from the front, youth work is pushing -from behind - both a safety net for young people who experience institutional rejection and a springboard for their re-engagement and development. In this respect, youth work *complements* the efforts of wider public policy directed at young people.

Youth Policy

That wider policy now encapsulates many initiatives:

* In education, there is renewed emphasis on maintaining young people's motivation towards learning', and to re-integrate those already 'disaffected'. This will be essential to the success of a broader lifelong learning agenda.

There are also new directions in education for citizenship, as exemplified, by the recent Crick report.

* In training the New Deal is directed at enhancing employability and promoting social inclusion.

* In leisure, attention is now being directed at greater community involvement and in volunteering, particularly through Millennium Volunteers.

* In health, there is concern about minimising health risk behaviour by young people and enabling them to make more informed decisions in the interests of good health. The ten-year drugs strategy prioritises education and prevention initiatives with young people as one of its four strategic priorities.

* In criminal justice, the Crime and Disorder Act recognises the need to enable young people to desist from offending behaviour and to take responsibility for their actions.

All these initiatives aimed towards young people and seeking 10 support effective transitions to adult life have been, framed around two key requirements under the new Labour administration; partnerships and planning Effective intervention in the lives of young people can only take place within inter-disciplinary thinking and subsequent clear planning. Such 'Holistic' approaches, at both strategic and operational levels, is to be welcomed. Yet there is, equally, the need for young people to make sense of the new framework, of opportunity available to them. Youth work is well placed to facilitate that process.

The contribution of youth work

Youth work contributes to the government's new agenda, for young people in four ways. First, it assists personal and social development through informal education. Secondly, it supports other agencies in developing styles of work which are credible and effective with young people. Thirdly, it reflects the concerns of young people about the wider policy developments established on their behalf- Most crucially, however, it operates at the interface between the private worlds of young people and the aspirations of public policy. It does this both through generic activity accessible to all and through practice focused on specific groups of young people around specific issues. Indeed, there is already recognition of the potential of youth work in supporting the re-integration of young people who have become 'disaffected' from education and training.

Youth work cannot, however, fulfil such potential simply through the goodwill and commitment of its army of part-time workers and volunteers. Nor can it do so simply by its policies and practice being re-focused on young people who are 'social problems'. Young people are a resource to be managed and developed, not a problem to be solved. The effective management of that resource rests on having a sufficient infrastructure for establishing and carrying through agreed work. This demands attention to the training of youth workers, an appropriate 'compact' between government and the youth service, and a resultant commitment to ensuring suitable numbers of professionally qualified practitioners.

The 1998 Audit of the maintained youth service in England points to the patchy nature of provision. It notes that, despite numerous examples of innovative practice, infrastructure is often so weak that such innovation struggles to be sustained. Youth work requires a 'critical mass' of activity, offering a diverse menu, of provision relevant to the multiple needs of the young people with whom it works. It is successful in meeting the needs of young people through an eclectic mix of individual and group interventions. It builds from the experiences and aspirations of young people, and presents them with new challenges and opportunities. Through participative practices, professional guidance and the provision of accurate information, it enables young people to take responsibility for their behaviour and to make informed choices.

The UK Youth Work Alliance therefore particularly welcomes the government's commitment to strengthening the statutory base of the Youth Service. It should do this by requiring each local authority to secure sufficient youth services in partnership with the voluntary sector. It considers that increased funding to the core of youth work provision through each local authority Youth Service will secure cost-effective integration of policies and enhanced quality of educational intervention with young people. In order to sustain this commitment, the Alliance would further welcome the introduction of a requirement upon local authorities to produce an annual Youth Service development plan which accounts also for its partnership arrangements with the voluntary youth work sector.

Conclusion

The United Kingdom Youth Work Alliance - comprising representatives of maintained and voluntary youth services in the four nations of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland - wishes to endorse the constructive approach being taken by the government to supporting the effective transitions of young people. This is reflected in many new programmes and policy developments such as New Deal, New Start and Millennium Volunteers. It also believes that youth work has a role to play in supporting new initiatives within schooling, the drugs strategy and recent legislation affecting young offenders.

The Alliance believes that the effective implementation of coherent, constructive and developmental youth work will help the government realise its wider policy objectives in education, training, the labour market, health, housing and criminal justice.

Qualified and experienced youth work practitioners can - and do - make a difference: they can support young people in making sense of, and moving forwards on, the complex pathways of adolescence. Of course, not all young people need that support, and others can access it from elsewhere. But many young people feel increasingly dislocated from society. The evidence lies in a range of psycho-social disorders which are increasingly prevalent amongst the young. Recent research suggests that some drug and alcohol misuse by young people is a form of self-medication against the uncertainties of the present and the anxieties of the future. The democratic deficit and lack of community participation by young people is a source of significant political and social concern. New opportunities being made available by the government will only yield dividends if young people are connected to them by consent, not by coercion. A re-engineered youth service, with a faith and confidence in itself and with the confidence of those it works alongside, is well placed to assist those connections. It has a *key* role to play in supporting young people in their transition to adult life. But, in turn, youth work itself needs to have a more secure framework in policy and resources.

'Agenda for a Generation'

In September 1996, the United Kingdom Youth Work Alliance produced 'Agenda for a Generation'. At its heart was the conviction that youth work was engaged in addressing three major social imperatives:

- * building the capacity of young people, through promoting their skills, creativity and enterprise
- * promoting social inclusion through supporting more disadvantaged young people, re engaging them in learning and thereby enhancing their employability
- * encouraging active citizenship and developing in young people an awareness of their rights and their responsibilities to the wider community

The extent to which this programme of action resonates with the government's current strategy for young people is striking. The United Kingdom Youth Work Alliance wishes to restate and thereby reinforce the contribution which youth work, within local delivery partnerships and with appropriate resourcing, training and quality assurance can support that strategy.

* The United Kingdom Youth Work Alliance comprises:

The British Youth Council (BYC), Community and Youth Workers' Union (CYWU), Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services (CWVYS), representatives of the Directors of Education for Wales, National Association of Youth and Community Education Officers (NAYCBO), National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS), National Youth Agency (NYA), Northern Ireland Youth Forum, Principal Community Education Officers' Group Scotland, Scottish Community Education Council (SCEC), Scottish Youth Work Forum, Standing Conference of Principal Youth and Community Officers (England and Wales) (SCPACO), Voluntary Youth Network for Northern Ireland (YouthNet), Wales Youth Agency (WYA), Youth Council for Northern Ireland, Youthlink (Scotland), Youth Exchange Centre (YEC).

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