

Response to “A vision for a new national youth work strategy for Wales 2103-2018”

Overview

I have been involved in Youth Work in Wales and in contact with young people for more than 50 years. During this time it has not been difficult to recognise the challenges many young people have had to face as they come to terms with becoming part of the adult world. As Youth Work enters a crucial stage in its evolution with the production of another government driven strategic plan it is possible to conclude that the challenges facing young people in 2013 are now significantly greater than they have been, perhaps since 1939. What is important for young people is that the strategic plan for Youth Work results in support of the sort that will enable them to face these challenges and, as a consequence, move into the adult world as confident and competent individuals capable of making choices about how they want to live their lives. The strategy must not become a document overly concerned with meeting short term political targets at the expense of meeting the real needs of young people.

Consultation Response

In general what has been produced is a conservative document that fails to inspire or to provide a platform on which a sound approach to a more holistic education strategy can be developed in Wales. In being this it ignores the ambition of the Welsh Assembly to be driven by a style of democracy concerned to promote a way of operating, described as ‘Team Wales’. This position was reinforced when it was claimed “*we aim to do things differently in Wales – through our ‘Made in Wales’ approach...as a means to create unique Welsh solutions to Welsh problems*”.

Within the vision paper it was important to have provided some discourse on the social and economic challenges being faced in Wales, their effects on young people and proposals for how Youth Work would play its part in addressing them. These challenges should have included for example the implications of the financial crisis of 2008, changes taking place in family life, youth unemployment, changes to housing benefit and welfare, levels of poverty and an over focus on a style of education that praises those who are successful within the formal education system and marginalises or demonizes those who are not. None of these or other challenges were mentioned and as a consequence no comment was made about how the delivery of a national Youth Work strategy

could contribute to providing Welsh solutions to existing Welsh problems. As a consequence, making an effective response to what has been provided in the vision paper is very difficult because of the lack of a starting point for its thinking and decision making. These shortcomings will need to be addressed in the final document, which will also need to recognise in a more detailed way the particular approach of Youth Work and the expertise of its workforce. This is far in excess of the subservience to formal education role alluded to in the vision paper and other strategic documents produced by the Welsh Government. The final strategy will also need to clearly recognise that Youth Work has always been concerned with the issue of transition, the moving from childhood to adult life. The responsibility of Youth Work in this process is to enable young people develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential. To achieve this Youth Work is concerned with the personal, social and educational development of young people. The strategy will also need to recognise that integration into adult life is dominated by employment. As such employment is a key aspiration for young people. However, embedded assumptions regarding society's traditional economic and social model and the role of education are being challenged in a fundamental way. This includes challenging such notions as:

- Education prepares for a job, that
- This job could last a lifetime, and that
- Life itself is largely divided into a period of education followed by a long period of work, and a period of retirement

Consideration therefore needs to be given in the national youth work strategy to the role of education and training within a reorganising working environment characterised by less certain employment patterns that make the concept of lifelong employment less possible. Individual life plans will need to be considered and will have to contain a combination of working and non-working time, improved management of leisure and a greater personal responsibility for the acquisition of both knowledge, skills and resilience appropriate for a changing society. This will require young people to develop such attributes as decision making, problem solving, and communication skills which could be used, in both working and non-working situations. In this context informal and non-formal education approaches need to be re-evaluated within a Welsh Government strategy for education and learning and included in the new Youth Work strategy.

There should be clear recognition of the real need to maximise out of school learning for the benefit of young people underpinned by informal and non-formal learning concerned with supporting growth into citizenship by;

1. promoting participation in the labour market, cultural life, education and public decision making;
2. creating opportunities for discussing topics such as identity, knowledge and moral issues;
3. practicing and developing participatory pedagogy;
4. developing participation skills in practice

Recommendations

To maintain at least parity with educational developments in many other countries consideration needs to be given to developing a complementary education approach involving formal, non-formal and informal methods. This approach would be concerned to achieve the above aims through simple but effective strategies linked to young people's passions. For example young-people-managed societies, sports clubs and music events are easily identified possibilities. It will require a political will to recognise the different but equal approaches of formal education and informal learning and the importance of bringing these together in a complementary way. There are some examples of this in practice through the approach of many elite public schools. Directing Youth Work practice towards a support role for schools reduces the education and learning opportunities for young people and maintains a traditional approach to the detriment of young people and Welsh society. It also fails to maximise the learning of young people and detracts from the development of lifelong learning so important in the new model of education and learning and employment.

I suggest that the new national Youth Work strategy for Wales leads to action that ensures;

1. A long term strategic approach with clear goals and outcomes linked to the promotion of active citizenship and the social empowerment of young people during their leisure time. Active citizenship would require a programme of real life activities through participation in economic, social, cultural and political life. This would need to be done in a way that not only increased the knowledge and understanding of young people but also created enthusiasm, motivation and skills as well as practical experiences in active citizenship.
2. The availability of a well qualified workforce committed to the delivery of the strategic plan
3. That a national system for the delivery of Youth Work is developed in a way that is not dependent on its organisation, management and delivery being within 22 local authorities,

where there is a potential to dilute its collective ability to adhere to a core philosophical position which can often be subsumed by competing political and managerial priorities.

4. That the national system develops a network of existing physical resources across Wales which become centres of excellence concerned to involve young people in a wide range of informal and non-formal community based learning through, for example, the performing arts, sport, outdoor activities and the visual arts.
5. That the work of the national system focuses on an agreed priority age range, of young people aged 13 to 19 years.
6. That a national structure ensures the continuation of local delivery of agreed programmes. Strategic management and the management of corporate activities such as training, quality standards and quality assurance systems, and programme development should, however, be carried out on a regional or national basis.
7. That the national system develops strategies to more appropriately meet the needs of young people by maximising the times their service is accessible to young people by opening more often at weekends and during school holidays.
8. That those working within the national system be directed to link the skills development of young people to a learning process that is voluntarily entered into, through a broad spectrum of activities that young people find enjoyable, challenging and appealing.

Dr John Rose 12th September 2013