

## Challenges and opportunities for Youth Workers in Wales?

A fundamental challenge for the Youth Service in Wales is to consolidate its corporate identity and approach (WG 2014) and then to promote its ability to make a specialised contribution to current and developing social and economic agendas of the Welsh Government.

Some attempt was made at developing this corporate identity and approach during the writing of the National Youth Service Strategy for Wales in 2007 (WAG 2007). The priority in the process was to describe, in an unambiguous way, what was meant by the 'Youth Service' and what was meant by 'Youth Work' (WAG 2007:3). This was considered important at that time because of the confusion caused by the National Assembly Plenary debate relating to the Youth Support Services Directions<sup>1</sup> (Wales) (NAfW 2002) and because of the subsequent use civil servants and some individuals in the Youth Service with personal or organisation ambitions, made of that confusion. During this critical debate for the Youth Service in Wales, the Minister for Education and Lifelong Learning (Jane Davidson) talked about the Directions providing "*for the first time in Wales a statutory basis for youth support services*". Shortly afterward, Helen Mary Jones (Plaid Cymru AM) supported the motion and claimed, "*Giving the Youth Service a statutory foundation once again in Wales is a positive step*". Christine Chapman (Labour AM) welcomed the intention of Extending Entitlement "*to place a statutory requirement on all local authorities in Wales to secure a youth service as described in the Curriculum Statement for Youth Work in Wales*". Eleanor Burnham (Welsh Liberal Democrats) contributed to the debate by giving her party's support to these directions as "*we support youth services to aid the development of our young people*". Later in the debate the Minister added further ambiguity to the efficacy of the debate by introducing another description when she stated, "*The Assembly is taking an impressive step today, namely to make youth work statutory in Wales*". The interchanging of descriptions within the debate was continued by the contribution of Assembly Members who used similar ambiguous terms, with the most often used being '*youth support services*'. However, there was some acceptance in the debate of the intent to secure a statutory base for the Youth Service through these Directions. This intent was neither achieved or attempted because of a lack of understanding of the existing legislation related to the Youth Service and because of a complete lack of understanding of how its work had developed since the 1944 Education Act (HMSO 1944).

Following the debate, the strategic delivery of the Extending Entitlement process became the responsibility of the Youth Policy Team which had been formed in October 2001 and became the Youth and Pupil Participation Division (YAPP) in November 2003. This Division was responsible for implementing the Extending Entitlement agenda by focusing on the Assembly's cross cutting programme for 11-25-year olds. This would be through the

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<sup>1</sup> These Directions were made in exercise of the powers conferred by section 123 of the *Learning and Skills Act 2000*, which were developed in the policy document *Extending Entitlement: supporting young people in Wales* (WAG 2000) and included with additional guidance in *Extending Entitlement: support for 11-25 year olds in Wales Directions and Guidance* (WAG 2002)

development of a Young People's Partnership in each local authority, bringing together all relevant partners to develop a network of support services and opportunities for young people to achieve their entitlements. There were three significant outcomes arising from this, all underpinned by the weak and ill-informed political debate described at the beginning of this paper. First, Young People's Partnerships became the priority for the Civil Servants in the new division, with the individual elements of each partnership becoming subservient to the framework within which they were expected to operate. The Youth Service faced the greatest threat in this process and its non-formal education and informal learning approach was devalued in favour of an educational approach that emphasised quantifiable outcomes in the form of accredited learning, even in non-school settings. Youth Workers were under constant pressure to provide hard evidence of the distance travelled by young people because of their involvement in Youth Work activities. Second, Civil Servants within YAPP extended their role regarding the Youth Service from one concerned with involvement in policy development - setting priorities and monitoring and evaluating the outcomes - to a role that interfered in the direct delivery of Youth Work. Because of these actions, the Youth Service in Wales has, in many instances, lost its core identity because it has been bullied, threatened and directed into ways of working with young people that have little resonance with what it is intended to do. Third, this loss of core identity has been exacerbated by the reality that financial resources for the Youth Service allocated by the Welsh Government are not a hypothecated (ring fenced) budget. Welsh Government funding is passed to 22 Local Authorities through an agreed funding formula where its use is determined locally. The consequence of this has been a reduction of Local Authority spending on the Youth Service. In addition, money allocated for the Youth Service is being spent on young people but not in a way identified in the National Youth Work Strategy. (WG 2014)

To move forward, the Youth Service in Wales needs to re-establish its philosophical position as an organisation underpinned by the key principles described in the second National Youth Work Strategy 2014-18 (WG 2014). From this position it needs to convince the Welsh Government of the significant contribution principled Youth Work can make to its social and economic agenda. Re-establishing this position should not necessarily mean returning to former structures for working with young people. What it should mean is that current practice would be built on the characteristics identified in the Strategy (ibid). There is also a need for the Youth Service in Wales to persuade the Welsh Government to solve the problem of un-hypothecated funding. Currently 22 separate decisions are made about Youth Service funding, using what appears to be a multitude of unrelated criteria under the banner of local democracy. There is also a need for the Welsh Government to recognise their impotence in the current funding environment. They have no power or authority about how their allocated funding is spent. Neither do they have any means whereby they can convince, influence or instruct individual Local Authorities to follow, consider or adhere to any decisions they make about the local authority Youth Service through standing committees or through the policy documents they produce. This is exacerbated by a lack of scrutiny as Estyn no longer inspects the Youth Service.

Despite some recent Welsh Government interest in the Youth Service there should be no optimism about Government-inspired policy for young people being the catalyst for the improvement of young people's services in general and for the Youth Service in particular. Because it rarely if ever has been. As one example, Davidson (2002) claimed that Extending Entitlement - the Welsh Government's flagship document of its day "*is taking an impressive step.... namely to make youth work statutory in Wales*". The implementation of Extending Entitlement Davidson claimed would result in Wales "*once again leading the way in how our services for young people are being developed*". From those overstated promises made in 2002 the 2018 position regarding community based services for young people is at a critical point. The Youth Service in many local authorities has ceased to exist either because of financial cut backs or because Youth Work has been arbitrarily redefined to meet more quantifiable or single-issue outcomes for young people. It would seem the more extravagant the claims made by politicians about their commitment to community based provision for young people the greater the disappointment experienced by front line Youth Workers and the young people they work with.

Despite the current challenges two significant opportunities have become available for the Youth Service in Wales. The first is the new evidence emerging on adolescent brain development, which is seen to be at least as strong as that related to early childhood development and the impact of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). The research will have implications for education, rehabilitation and intervention for young people up to the age of 25. Scientific evidence is showing that the brain systems involved in decision-making, planning, social understanding and risk-taking are developing in adolescence. Adolescence is now more widely seen as a time of opportunity for learning new skills and forging an adult identity. How teenagers spend their time is crucial to brain development. So, it's worth thinking about the range of activities and experiences adolescents become involved in – performing arts, sports, adventurous activities, exchanges and positive association were all traditionally offered by the Youth Service. A return to this way of working should not be difficult as it fits comfortably with both the content and approach described within the National Youth Work Strategy (ibid). Involvement in these and other positive activities shape the sort of brain adolescents take into adulthood. Negative experiences have the opposite effect and can develop in young people a range of long term adverse behaviors. Unfortunately, community based opportunities for adolescence - particularly those from economically poor neighborhoods - are generally ignored as is the potential of an effective Youth Service to respond to the new knowledge and understanding of adolescent brain development. The Youth Service needs to remedy this in a strategic way by providing information on the current research findings and the way a Youth Work approach can help young people's development.

The second opportunity is linked to what has historically been a catalyst for the development of the Youth Service, namely the moral panics focused on young people which are often responded to by politicians. Moral panics have, on a number of occasions, energised the Youth Service, which has been bought out of hibernation to deal with such issues as Teddy Boys, Immigration, Nuclear Disarmament, Mods and Rockers, Punks and Hoodies. In more recent times Youth Work has been funded to become involved in drug and alcohol misuse, smoking cessation projects, homelessness, crime and anti-social behavior and the safe use of social media. There is an opportunity now to provide a Youth Service

response to a series of moral panics involving young people which are coming to the attention of government through the concerns of the public. Sexual exploitation of young people, knife crime, and violent gang culture is being linked to the closure of Youth Clubs as safe places for young people to go, with the London Mayor making a direct financial contribution to London Youth Projects. There is growing concern about poor emotional and mental health and wellbeing, obesity, drug and alcohol misuse, all which continue to blight the lives of children and young people, as does crime, anti-social behavior and radicalisation.

Responding to these and other emerging issues will bring another set of challenges. What is the current ability of the Youth Service to respond effectively to any future directive from the Welsh Government to deliver a programme of positive opportunities for young people as a means of responding to both the new evidence emerging from adolescent brain research and to combat the current set of moral panics in a way that met the purpose, principles, values and outcomes identified in its strategy document for Youth Work (WG 2014)? Would the Youth Service be capable of delivering such an agenda? Does the Youth Service have managers in place with the knowledge, vision and commitment to deliver a young-people-first provision, concerned to respond to young people's passions and challenges? Are there Youth Workers in place who have not been conditioned to managing, measuring and controlling young people? Can training agencies promote an agenda of liberalising education and learning for young people that reflect the evidence emerging from the research on adolescent brain development and which provides a positive alternative to the challenges they face? I am not sure if they are but it would of course be so good to have the opportunity to try.

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