

Features

Making the case against the cuts

The youth service in Wales is facing another difficult year as local authorities strive to bring their budgets within strict spending limits.

The prospect of further cuts in government expenditure, and moves towards unitary local authorities, is further confusing the picture as to the likely state of the service in the new financial year, which starts in April.

The Wales Youth Agency continues to stress to decision-makers at local and national level the importance of youth work and its value to local communities. The Agency opposes cuts in provision.

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Some comfort can perhaps be taken from the experience last year when the actual cuts were less severe than those originally proposed. By a variety of means, the impact of the cuts were reduced.

However, the current atmosphere of rumour and uncertainty is clearly unsatisfactory and sapping morale.

Cuts in the youth service have an impact out of all proportion to the money saved — the maintained youth sector typically takes between 1% and 3% of education authority budgets. Crucially, they put at risk the vital link between the state-funded service and the voluntary sector.

Statistics from CWVYS, the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services, indicate that in return for grants of about £350,000, the voluntary youth sector in Wales provides some £60 million worth of work. Cuts in the maintained sector will inevitably have a knock-on effect on the voluntary sector, so jeopardising a very valuable but sensitive relationship.

John Rose, assistant director of the Wales Youth Agency, believes that what is happening in the youth service is not a product of deliberate policy — rather it is the unseen impact of decisions on much larger, centrally-funded, matters. In particular, it is the result of a 'contract culture' which seeks to put a monetary value on 'inputs' and 'outcomes', and talks of business plans and performance indicators.

He says that, given that it has to work in this environment, the youth service must become more proficient, more organised, in making its case to those who control the purse strings. It must use the language of the contract culture — even though it is alien to many in the youth service — to say: 'this is what we are attempting to do, this is how we're going to do it, this is what we expect the result to be, and it is effective.'

Part of the Wales Youth Agency's efforts to underline to decision-makers the positive value of the youth service takes place on December 3 at the

International Arena in Cardiff when the Agency holds a one-day conference on Youth Work in Wales.

Some 150 representatives are due to attend from local and district authorities, education, leisure and social services and voluntary and maintained youth organisations. The keynote address will be given by Sir Wyn Roberts, the Welsh Officer minister with responsibility for the youth service. Youth organisations throughout Wales have been invited to stage exhibitions of their work at the conference venue.

Youth Work Week, on November 22-28, also aimed to show to the public and politicians the effectiveness and diversity of modern youth work. A wide range of special events and open days were held, and the national and local media carried news and features about youth work.

