

Proposal for a developmental
programme addressing ethical issues in
youth and community work for the
Welsh Youth Service ¹

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Code of Ethics/Ethics training pack for Youth
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Proposal for a developmental programme addressing ethical issues in youth and community work for the Welsh Youth Service

The proposal is for a series of events aimed at addressing the importance for youth and community work, of a consideration of ethical issues that arise in everyday practice. These events will take place at both national and local level and will aim to involve both prominent figures in youth and community work and agency staff in a structured dialogue leading to a published *Code of Ethics for Youth and Community Work* and a training pack addressing ethical issues. The programme will be organised, presented and written up jointly by an outside facilitator/ethicist and colleagues from the Welsh Youth Service. Some events will involve enlisting the assistance of colleagues from outside Wales, in particular the initial conference/workshop at national level to which it is hoped major figures may be asked to contribute.

Rationale for the proposed programme

Like all members of the so-called 'people professions', youth and community workers face moral decisions everyday. For example, they must decide how to use their time. This is a moral issue because if they are spending time with one person or group they are not spending it with others who may be in more need of the services they provide; it is a moral issue because they are accountable to others for the services they offer, for the efficient use of resources and for meeting the needs of users of their services as well as they can; and it is a moral issue because personal integrity demands a job well done. Time is a scarce resource and its allocation, like the allocation of all scarce resources, is a matter of great moral significance.

For those who are unfamiliar with the world of ethics and morality in which I live and work, it might seem a little strange that I should choose to begin a brief discussion about ethics in youth and community work by talking about the allocation of time. They might have the idea that ethics is about much more serious stuff. And there are, of course, many important ethical issues of a very serious kind including, for example, the taboo against workers having intimate relationships with clients. Another significant ethical issue that is frequently recognised not only by youth and community workers but by colleagues in the other 'people professions', concerns the need to maintain confidentiality in relation to private information that is shared by users of services though interestingly many colleagues do not view gossiping about them as involving a breach of confidentiality. Finally let me mention a range of issues that are thrown up by the area of practice which, other than intimacy between users of services and staff is perhaps most likely to be recognised as raising issues of moral significance - those that revolve round equal opportunity and discrimination - round the need, that is, for practice to be conducted in a non-discriminatory or even anti-discriminatory way. Discussions of issues and dilemmas in this area are likely to be quite heated and they are certainly of moral significance.

Now of course, professional ethics is about obviously important aspects of practice and professional conduct such as those I have outlined in the last paragraph. But it is also about much less dramatic and apparently less serious issues - for example, the question of whether it is appropriate for workers to swear in front of the young people with whom they are working and the need to offer a good example to young people in all things. Like it or not, youth and community workers do serve as role models for young people and thus all aspects of one's behaviour carry both moral and professional significance whenever there are young people around.

It is my contention that in coming to age as a profession the youth and community work service must turn its corporate mind towards questions of ethics that arise in everyday practice. It needs to get to grips with the creation of a Code of Ethics, a code of conduct - call it what you will - we all know what is meant by the various titles that professions such as psychology, social work, medicine and nursing have chosen. But it needs also, to acknowledge the necessity of incorporating some element of moral education into the courses by which it trains its workers - both professional and voluntary. Of course by *moral education* I don't mean anything so banal as telling workers what's right and what's wrong so that they can pass on the truth about such things to young people and other service users with whom they work. Rather by moral education I mean work on the development of skills in moral reasoning that can both be turned on the ethical dilemmas of practice and used in helping clients to come to understand aspects of their experience that are only validly considered in terms of moral terms such as right and wrong, good and bad, respect care, responsibility, duty and obligation.

My professional background is as a teacher and social worker in child, adolescent and adult psychiatry, 'maladjustment' and learning disability. My academic background is in philosophy and in particular, in applied ethics. I thus have little direct experience of youth and community work. However, the contact I have had with colleagues in youth and community work over the years leads me to believe that I am right in guessing, as I said at the beginning, that youth and community workers face moral decisions every day.

Some people might want to object to my contention that youth and community workers must take the moral dimension of their work seriously. They may believe that morality is a personal matter which should not be allowed to contaminate the workplace, that since everyone has the right to their own moral views no-one has any right to attempt to impose moral standards on anyone else and in particular that as workers they have no right to impose their own moral views ('prejudices') on the young people with whom they work. They may think of morality and ethics as having to do with one lot of people - usually those in power, telling another lot of people - those who have little power, what they should and shouldn't do. The vogue in recent years for political parties and other powerful bodies such as the churches, to broadcast the need for moral regeneration - engaging, for example, in discussions about the need, to 'get back to basics', certainly lends some support to this idea. However, the truth is that moral issues surround us in our everyday lives; and they certainly arise in all areas of professional life.

If you are inclined to believe that you don't face moral issues in your work try asking yourself what it is that upsets and worries and grieves you most in your workplace - what makes you most likely to come home depressed, stressed-out or angry; then think carefully about the issues you come up with. If in relation to any of these you find yourself using words like care, respect, trust, fair/unfair, right, wrong, good, bad, rights, duties, obligation, truth and honesty, there is little doubt that you are concerned about issues of a moral kind. Whatever the media seem to suggest, morality is not just about people like bishops and politicians berating us all with the need to avoid actions that are wrong in an obvious sense, but about the need to treat one another decently. And for those with responsibility for helping to shape the lives and values of others, it is about the need to help those others to see both the need and the value of treating others decently.

There are several ways in which youth and community workers like colleagues in the other 'people professions' can deal with the moral dilemmas they face. First of all they can acknowledge that an issue with which they are faced is a moral one

and as such is difficult to solve - even in cases where we believe something to be morally wrong it can be difficult to decide what the morally best course of action is. But facing up to the fact that issues are moral ones can be a source of great anxiety and so a range of other strategies may be adopted to avoid doing so. For example, a group of workers may choose to ignore moral issues in the hope that they will go away (they won't). More cleverly, they can reconstrue the moral issues that trouble them in such a way that they appear to be issues of another kind. Consider, for example, a situation in which the staff of a club have to decide what to do about the fact that some of the young people in their club are dabbling in drugs - perhaps even, in a very minor way (whatever that means) dealing in them - buying enough so that they can supply a few of their friends. This seems uncontentiously to me to raise moral issues. However, in an attempt to avoid reflecting on the morality of condoning (even encouraging) drug taking among young people, and the anxiety this might cause, this team of workers might construe their dilemma simply as an issue about the best way to maintain the fragile relationship they have developed with this group of young people. And thus they might attempt to justify non-intervention to themselves on the grounds, for example, that to express disapproval would jeopardise the hard won and important relationship they have been working for many months at forming.

So, as an outsider whose only knowledge of youth and community work comes from contact with colleagues in the HE sector who are involved in the training and education of student youth and community workers, but who believes in the importance of a consideration of the ethical dimension of practice, I want to suggest a plan of action.

Firstly, I want to suggest that the youth service in Wales should spearhead a movement towards raising the awareness of youth and community workers that moral issues are to be found in almost every encounter that they have with the users of their services. I want to suggest that such moral issues can be a source of stress for workers who may know what they could do but be worried about whether they should do it - in other words I want to draw attention to the stress that can arise from having to worry about whether it is right to act in certain ways. And I want to suggest that if it is to fulfil its role in helping to shape young people into confident, well adjusted and responsible citizens - aware not only of their own needs and aspirations but of those of others, youth and community work must take seriously the need to offer a moral lead to the young people with whom it engages.

Secondly, I want to suggest that the youth service in Wales should set about the production of a *Code of Ethics for Youth and Community Work* - one that is owned by its practitioners in the sense that they have both been invited and given opportunities to contribute to its creation.

Finally I want to suggest that the youth service in Wales should take seriously the need to incorporate into its ongoing training programmes opportunities for workers and students to reflect upon and work with the moral problems they encounter, acknowledging the effects that such problems may have on practice if they are allowed to go unremarked and untreated.

Proposal for a developmental programme addressing ethical issues in youth and community work for the Welsh Youth Service

Aim of the programme

To stimulate and provide a focus for thinking about ethics in youth and community work, in Wales.

To provide a developmental programme aimed at the production both of a *Code of Ethics for Youth and Community Work* and a training pack about ethics.

To raise awareness of the need to consider ethical issues in the initial and ongoing training of youth and community workers. In so doing, to raise awareness among programme participants of the ethical dilemmas that they experience in practice.

To give programme participants some experience in thinking about and working with ethical dilemmas in youth and community work, using both issues that they have experienced in practice and hypothetical issues provided in training materials written by the outside facilitator/ethicist.

Outline of the proposal

A series of events is proposed beginning with a residential workshop/conference at national level. This initial event will be attended by invited representatives from all areas of Wales along with a number of identified figures from other areas who will be invited to contribute both formally and informally to debate.

Following the national conference/workshop there will be a series of more local workshops staffed jointly by the outside facilitator/ethicist or another colleague with experience in professional ethics, and colleagues from the local area who will hopefully have had the opportunity to attend the national event.

Finally, a series of meetings will be organised with representatives from all levels in the Youth Service in Wales during which work will be carried out in drafting a code of ethics for the profession, which will be circulated for comment to colleagues both in Wales and elsewhere, before a final redrafting and publication.

One purpose of both the national event and the more local events, will be to gather information (in the form of shared stories and accounts) of the ways in which ethical dilemmas have affected and are affecting, practice.

As part of the work carried out by the facilitator/ethicist, and drawing on the expertise and experience of colleagues, a training pack for use in both in-service and initial training contexts will be produced for publication.

1. National level residential conference/workshop

A two day event aimed at introducing a representative group of senior workers, managers and trainers, to ways of thinking about and working with ethical issues. It will include formal input from the outside facilitator/ethicist and others, and both plenary and small group workshop sessions during which colleagues will be given the opportunity to share experiences of moral dilemmas and also to work with carefully constructed real and imagined stories in which ethical issues are

presented, under the guidance of a facilitator who is experienced in working with ethical dilemmas in professional practice. The support of those who contribute to this workshop/conference will be acknowledged in any published Code of Ethics and in any training pack that emerges from the development programme.

2. Local workshops

These will be organised in collaboration with colleagues from different areas in Wales who will be asked both to provide a suitable venue and to undertake recruitment for the event. Local workshops will be similar to those which have taken place during the national event; in these colleagues will be given the opportunity both to share their own experiences of moral dilemmas and to work with real and imagined stories in which ethical issues are presented, under the guidance of a facilitator who is experienced in working with ethical dilemmas in professional practice. The support of those who contribute to this workshop/conference will be acknowledged in any published Code of Ethics and in any training pack that emerges from the development programme.

3. Developing a Code of Ethics and a training pack

Following the national event and local workshops a number of structured meetings will be held at which invited colleagues will be given the opportunity to contribute to the development of a *Code of Ethics for Youth and Community Work*. For those who accept the invitation to contribute, this will involve a certain amount of work away from the meetings, in studying codes of ethics from other professional groups (including social work, counselling and psychology) and in drafting proposals for inclusion in the code. All colleagues who contribute to this series of meetings will be credited with their contribution to the development of the Code of Ethics and any training pack that emerges from the development programme.

Use of material gathered during the national conference/workshop and local workshops

During workshop sessions at both a national and local level colleagues will be invited to share experiences of moral dilemmas with which they have been faced during their practice in the field. Such personal stories and accounts can obviously be a rich source of material for teaching and training purposes and it would be an expectation of the outside facilitator /ethicist that given appropriate measures to protect confidentiality, reference to such material might be incorporated both as exemplars in a guide to ethical thinking which will accompany the Code of Ethics, and into the proposed training pack.

Expected outcomes of the developmental programme

- Colleagues in the Youth Service in Wales will have had raised their awareness of the significance of the moral dimension of practice.
- A *Code of Ethics for Youth and Community Work* will have been written with input from colleagues both in practice and in training/educational contexts. This will have been published along with a guide to ethical thinking including exemplars of moral issues drawn from the shared experience of colleagues.

- A training pack addressing ethics in youth and community work will have been written and published for use in the Welsh Youth Service.
- Steps will have been taken to introduce both the Code of Ethics and the ethics training pack to youth and community work practitioners and educators in other parts of the UK and overseas with a view to sharing the Welsh experience and generating income.

Brief Curriculum Vitae of the proposed outside facilitator/ethicist

Dr Gavin Fairbairn is Reader in Education at the North East Wales Institute of Higher Education having formerly worked in child, adolescent and adult psychiatry, in 'maladjustment' and in learning disability as both a social worker and teacher. He is an experienced group worker and has published widely on the ethics of the professions including nursing, medicine, psychology, special education and social work. His books include *Contemplating Suicide: the language and ethics of self harm* (Routledge, 1995) and (with Denis Rowley and Maggie Bowen) *Sexuality, learning difficulties and doing what's right* (David Fulton, 1995). *Contemplating Suicide* is currently being translated into both Portuguese and Hebrew and he has recently been approached by the Ministry of Education in Poland to ask for permission to translate *Integrating Special Children: some ethical issues* (Avebury, 1992) which he edited with Susan Fairbairn, into Polish. He is frequently invited to contribute to both professional and academic conferences addressing ethical issues.