

# Issues for the 90s

policy and practice issues affecting youth workers

## Unitary authorities and the Youth Service

Make yourselves seen and heard - that's the advice to youth workers in Wales as the local government reform juggernaut rolls near.

The existing two-tier structure of county and district councils is set to disappear, to be replaced by a single tier of unitary authorities. The present eight county councils and 37 district councils will give way to around 22 of the new authorities under the Government's proposals, which are likely to become law this month (June).

This means a major operation to decide how the functions of the old councils will be carried out by the new - and poses the question: "How will the youth service be affected?"

The Government's 1993 White Paper on the reform plan made a brief mention of youth work under the section 'Education', referring to the Further and Higher Education Act 1992 and saying that the new authorities will "work with voluntary organisations in the development of the youth service". Determined efforts initiated by the Wales Youth Agency, are going on to make sure that the youth service is not forgotten in the upheaval.

The Wales Youth Agency is well placed to offer support and in response has formed an advisory group which, says agency executive director Brian Williams, aims to give the youth work issue a high profile.

"The new authorities can only make good decisions with regard to youth work if they are given good information to act upon. We aim to inform the new authorities what they should be doing as regards planning, management, funding and delivery of youth services".

The advisory group includes representatives of both voluntary and maintained sectors and their objective is:

*"to prepare a strategic plan that will secure the future of the youth service in Wales, ensure its high profile and its promotion, and create an environment in which the service will be safeguarded and can flourish".*

The members know there is no time to lose if they are not to be overtaken by events - the timescale is tight and talks have begun already within and between the existing councils.

Doug Jones, the group chairman, says that despite the time scale, efforts will be made to consult as widely as

possible before the final plan is produced.

The Bill calls for the setting up of transitional committees in June and the agency's strategic plan should be ready to present to them by the autumn of this year, said Doug, who recently retired as County Community Education Officer for Mid Glamorgan.

Meanwhile, what can youth workers themselves be doing to help? It has already been said that the youth service gives £80 million worth of work but costs the taxpayer a mere £12.5 million. Doug Jones urged workers to demonstrate the value to the community of their work. "Youth workers have been described as the unsung heroes of our time - they don't sing their own praises"

"We now have an opportunity to put youth work very clearly on the map - and it should be the responsibility of those involved in youth work to advocate their work at local level. Publicise what you are doing, and help the young people to make their case as well."

Where will the new authorities place responsibility for the youth service? Members of the advisory group say it is an education service rather than a leisure committee matter.

Doug Jones himself argues for a new style "department for community cultural, recreational and educational development" embracing youth affairs as well as recreation, adult education, schools support and strategic planning, heritage and culture.

Will funding of the youth service be affected? Doug believes the present level of funding will be safeguarded. "The present county councils should declare their current spending and the new councils would have no excuse for spending less," he said.

Will reorganisation mean fewer jobs in the youth service? "A commission is being set up to ensure that staff are fairly treated," he said. "I don't anticipate a large number of redundancies in the short term. In the long term it depends on how the new authorities deliver youth services - I think councils will increasingly become commissioners rather than providers of services. Youth work organisations will need to get themselves in position in the event of that happening."

On the whole, Doug Jones views the changes with optimism. "It is an opportunity to do things better," he said. "I think the future could be much brighter than the past if the opportunity is taken."

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