

Youth Work in Wales.

I am writing to you in the confidence that you respect the values, principles, ethics and the history of working with young people in Wales. And further you recognise that those elements are under threat, and being eroded by thoughtless social policy. Many critics have identified this position, and I enclose a recent paper by Bernard Davies that will help you focus your thinking. The crux of Bernard's debate is that we, that is 'youth work' as a collective social provision, have been marginalised by social policy makers and others who do not understand the uniqueness of our approach and are prepared to reduce us to "bit players". A similar theme can be found in "Rapport", the Youth and Community Union's Journal of November 2005, in Doug Nichol's excellent paper.

Across Wales you will find similar expressions of despair. At a seminar workshop, lead by the Wales Youth Agency(Nov2005), focussing on "The changing face of Youth Work", delegates expressed anxieties about the future of their work once led by 'the needs of young people.'. They were reminiscent of a 'youth work' with a 150 year nurturing time frame, which was characterised by:

- young people volunteering to enter into relationships with youth workers.
- where the balance of power was in the favour of young people.
- in which young people entered as social equals, and were received as such.
- starting from the agenda set by young people.
- young people being treated as individuals, and having the opportunity to relate to others. —where the imposition of 'anything' was by consensus.
- finding ways to encourage them to explore themselves and the world around them.
- helping them to find their community identity.
- young people coming and going as they wished, safe in their understanding of what youth work could offer.

Much of this is changing through an imposed curriculum, and an obsession with measurement and accreditation; the focus on 'personal growth' as a person has lost its priority. The Archbishop of Canterbury, in April 2005 made a recorded speech in which he lamented the 'obsession with accreditation', and the neglect of the growing young person struggling with the transitions of "growing up."

In December 2004, the Pupil & Participation Unit of the WAG, heralded the beginnings of the process which resulted in the Wales Youth Agency being subsumed into Central Government on the 1st. January 2006. Reasons given were:

- the failure of the Agency to deliver the spectrum of activities, for which they were Funded.

- to significantly enhance the status of youth work in Wales
- to shift resources to professional support and front line delivery.
- to realise our ambition to create a world class youth support service in Wales.

Alongside this was the commitment to the Young People's Partnerships to enhance the 'world class service'. Rushed through without real planning, the YPPs lost the confidence of many youth workers in Wales: John Holmes in 2003 wrote a critique of the YPP's, pointing out that in over 75% of YPP's there was no 'Youth Service Reps: the Pupil & Participation Unit ignored the paper. As we enter the last months of 2006, the YPP's appear to be out of favour, and for some reason there has been a re-awakening in the corridors of WAG to the fact that 'youth work' does have a unique contribution to make. (Bernard explores this change, generally, in his paper). So that on the 18th. May 2006, Jane Davidson at the meeting of the Life Long Learning and Skills Committee on the WAG, announced the plans to write 'a new strategic plan for youth service' (there is some confusion in terms, I prefer 'youth work'..since my colleagues in 'social work' maintain their identity in their descriptive title, so should we!!)so what's it all about?

Bernard Davies reminds us that we have seen this 'flattering of youth work' across the years, and it raises false promises that youth work will 'finally move from the recreational margins of public provision for young people. Bernard's pessimism may have some grounding in Jane Davidson's recorded comment at the May meeting 2006, where she comments...." We want youth work to make a significant contribution to community-focussed schools." That is a rich comment when you discover that youth workers get a passing reference in Para 3.29, and are understated in the rest of the document. A paper that compliments the Community Focussed Schools, is "A Code of Practice for Out of School Hours Learning" published by Education Extra but endorsed by WAG, opens its report with the sentence :
 "Wales has a long and rich history of pupils learning outside school hours, both within the school and community, Chapels, the Urdd and Mudiad Ffermwyr Ieuanc, have also contributed greatly to the Arts, sporting and cultural activities and other diverse interests"

No mention of the maintained Youth Services involvement of thousands of young people in that range of activities between 1945 and well into the millennium.

I make no apology for expressing disappointment at seeing the youth work that was the envy of the UK being disregarded by the Youth Policy Unit. But what can we expect when the numbers of youth workers involved in leading Government documents since devolution have been abysmally few.

So now we are on the threshold of a new strategic plan for 'youth work in Wales', and at first it seems there is a new opportunity to resurrect the kind of youth work that is guided by our traditional values and principles. However there are indications that the policy will be a re-hash of a social policy driven agenda, reinforcing the concept of "Government aspirations for 11-25 year olds", aspirations driven by the competence and accreditation approach to young people. Gradually we will lose our uniqueness and become a sector of the formal education system, our traditions will be

' binned' and the liberated way that has defined our work with young people will fade. Bernard's paper alerts us to the danger that our place in working for the benefits of young people in our non-directive way, will be taken over by the ' colonisation' of social provision by non-youth work agencies.

I assume that you would want to make a comment on the future of youthwork, so I seek your voice and opinion. Within the next month or so, a consultation questionnaire on the new ' youth work strategy' should come your way.. I hope you will respond in a way that might help us get the kind of youth work we would want to see, in which young people are the owners of their decisions and we can give them a service that responds to ' their needs'. If you do not receive the questionnaire write directly to Jane Davidson, with a copy to your Assembly Member.

Thank you for reading this message.. .but most importantly read Bernard Davies' Manifesto, and share it with another youth worker.

Regards,

Bert Jones.