

## **A youth sector response to the homelessness agenda in Wales.**

By Nick Hudd

Ever since the Welsh Government announced its bold ambition to end youth homelessness in Wales by 2027, allocating an additional £3.7 million of funding for youth work to support the goal, the youth work sector, arguably caught off guard by its unexpected prescribed prominent role, has been playing catch up. It is taking time to define the specific purpose; understand where this new agenda fits in to other established work programmes; assess resources and recruit staff. Whilst there are those critical of the level of engagement between government and the sector prior to it, emphasis on these elements rather than the task in hand only act as an unnecessary distraction and are prolonging a transition from being reactive to proactive in addressing the associated issues. This article focuses on the positive role the sector can play in helping address the issue and looks at some of the challenges that are acting as major obstacles. However, before moving on, I feel it important to declare an interest; having been a professionally qualified youth and community practitioner for the past 16 years, I have recently made the transition to a newly established Youth Homelessness Team, part of the same local authority Youth Service. Having now worked in this role for the past 5 months I feel informed enough to contribute to a wider discussion relating to this specific agenda and experienced enough to reflect on a wider perspective. It is for this reason I unashamedly use the terms like 'we', 'us', 'our approach' throughout this article.

There are those both in youth work and from other professional fields who may be questioning why the youth sector have been afforded such a prominent role in helping to address this specific agenda. With local authority housing departments, housing associations and specific homelessness charities employing qualified practitioners with vast experience of the related issues and relevant legislation, why has the Welsh Government not just allocated all the additional money to these organisations? To answer this it perhaps proves beneficial to explore what the youth work sector offers that others do not, contextualised first though with a precursor; the additional funding does not come at a cost to these organisations or the services they provide. *Llmau* (2019) prescribe a range of reasons that can potentially lead to a young person becoming homeless including; disadvantaged childhoods or Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACES); the individual being in care; family relationship breakdown; mental health issues; youth offending, LGBTQ+ young people; exclusion from school and lack of employment opportunities. The youth sector are well adept in providing support to young people experiencing such issues. This is a key component; as the reasons for homelessness are complex, interconnected and often begin in early life, it makes sense to adopt a long-term early intervention and prevention strategy. This is just one element that the youth sector bring to the table; long-term engagement that is available to young people aged 11-25, supporting them to make the transition into adulthood. All of which is based on the establishment of a trusting relationship between worker and young person. Those in the sector who hold concerns about a move away from more traditional forms of youth work, will recognise this approach as a continuum of the methodology we have always employed;

developing and using our trusting relationships with young people, offering informed advice support and guidance, signposting to other agencies where appropriate, acting as a gateway service to others. It is therefore not a case of either or; those agencies, organisations and services referred to previously, who do possess specific expertise in housing and homelessness issues remain at the forefront. Working collaboratively though, using the relationships youth workers have with young people to increase engagement, understanding and capacity, can only improve the outcomes for young people.

Closer examination of the causes of youth homelessness, mentioned earlier, suggest the solutions require the involvement of a host of individuals, agencies, organisations and services, a whole community response; sentiments and terminology echoed by *Homeless.org.uk* (2019) when prescribing effective action to end homelessness. As youth and community workers, practitioners are again well adept in both mapping and utilising community assets; addressing deficits, promoting collaborative working. *In Defence of Youth Work* (2019) expand on these points and reflects on the fact that despite low financial input the youth sector generated at least £10's worth of voluntary time in local community delivery for every £1 of sector expenditure. The document also reflects on the additional cost benefit felt by other services whether in mental health or criminal justice. This could also potentially include the housing sector too. The youth work sector should both acknowledge and promote the fact that we have skills, experience and social capital that, if utilised effectively, will ensure the £3.7 million of additional money buys more by employing our community development methodology.

Returning to the concerns of those in the sector who sense a departure from more traditional forms of youth work, I would suggest that this agenda allows us, youth work practitioners, to exercise our skills and experience in a way that can have a real impact. *Youth Work in Wales: Principles and Purposes* (YWWRG: 2018) states youth work:

...provides a powerful mechanism for engaging with and listening to young people. In Wales, the 'Rights of Children and Young Persons Measure, 2011' strengthens and builds on the rights-based approach of the Welsh Government to making policy for children and young people in Wales. Welsh Ministers must have due regard to the rights in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) when making decisions about proposed new policies or legislation or about reviewing or changing existing policies.

Whether concerning the political establishment, or the agencies, organisations and individuals referred to above; the youth work sector have an important role to play in ensuring young people are not only aware and informed about their rights, but also have the opportunities, mechanisms and skills needed to exercise them. We also have a role to play in ensuring these stakeholder partners are aware of such rights. Until all parties are at a sufficient level of knowledge and understanding, the youth work sector can employ another key element of our work; advocating on behalf of those we aim to support.

There are clearly those who feel trepidation about moving into an area of practice that seems new; appears to break away from traditional forms of youth work; warrants a level of expertise that goes beyond established skills set. To these I would remind them that youth work is an approach, a methodology, an ethos. Our approach remains the same based on the relationships between workers and young people. Whilst the problems and issues young people face may change, the ways we the sector address them remains the same. We need to resist the temptation to reinvent ourselves and challenge the misnomer that this is a 'new' agenda. If the political establishment can entrust the sector with this additional money it would suggest they believe we can have a real impact in helping to address the issue. For a sector that helps young people to increase their self-efficacy, perhaps we need to have belief in our own abilities ourselves.

## References

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