

Preventing a Lost Generation:

Why Youth Work Must Be Central to Wales' Response

By Nick Hudd

The recently published Young People and Work: Interim Report should serve as a wake-up call across all UK governments, public services and civil society. The report paints a stark picture of a generation increasingly detached from education, employment and training, warning that the UK is at risk of creating a 'lost generation'.

For those of us working in youth services across Wales, the findings are unfortunately not surprising. They reflect what youth workers, homelessness practitioners and community organisations have been witnessing for many years: growing anxiety amongst young people, declining confidence, increasing complexity of need, and in some cases systems that continue to respond too late rather than intervene early.

Importantly, the report moves beyond simplistic narratives that portray young people as lacking aspiration or motivation and instead challenges the tendency to place responsibility for these issues solely upon them. Instead, it highlights structural barriers including the decline in accessible entry-level opportunities, reduced apprenticeships, increasingly impersonal recruitment systems and fragmented public services that struggle to work around the realities of young people's lives.

As someone who has spent more than two decades working alongside vulnerable young people, including those experiencing homelessness, care experience, exclusion from education and involvement in the justice system, I, like so many other practitioners, see a direct connection between this report and the realities facing youth work in Wales today.

Too often, by the time a young person becomes 'NEET', the warning signs have existed for many years. We see it in declining school attendance, deteriorating mental health, family conflict, social isolation and growing distrust in formal systems. Many young people disengage long before any formal intervention takes place.

This is where high-quality youth work has a critical role to play.

Youth work in Wales is uniquely positioned because it operates relationally, voluntarily and within communities. Trusted youth workers are often the professionals young people speak to before anyone else. We work in the spaces between systems, bridging gaps between education, housing, health, youth justice and employability support.

Importantly, youth work is not simply about responding to crisis. At its best, it is about prevention, participation and trusted relationships that help young people remain connected to their communities and futures before problems escalate.

This aligns closely with the principles underpinning Wales' Youth Engagement and Progression Framework (YEPF), which recognised the importance of early identification, coordinated support and sustained engagement with young people at risk of disengagement.

It is also important to acknowledge that within the youth work sector itself there have long been differing views about the focus on the 'NEET' agenda and the language used to categorise young people in these terms. Some practitioners and academics have rightly challenged the risks associated with defining young people by what they are not engaged in, arguing that labels such as 'NEET' can unintentionally reduce complex lived experiences into deficit-based categories. Others have raised concerns that an overly narrow focus on economic participation risks pulling youth work away from its broader educational, relational and rights-based foundations.

These are important debates.

However, whichever side of this argument people align themselves to, it is increasingly difficult to ignore the seriousness of the issues highlighted within this report. What is being described extends far beyond employment or education alone. The growing numbers of young people disconnected from education, training and work are also deeply connected to worsening mental health, poverty, social isolation, housing insecurity and long-term wellbeing.

The reality is that prolonged disengagement during adolescence and early adulthood can have consequences that shape confidence, health, relationships, housing stability and economic participation across the whole course of a person's life and potentially affect the generations that follow.

This is precisely why youth work matters within this conversation. Not because young people should be reduced to labour market outcomes, but rather because

youth work has always been concerned with supporting young people to navigate transition, build resilience, strengthen relationships and remain connected to opportunity and hope.

For years, the youth work sector across Wales has contributed significantly to addressing the NEET agenda through outreach work, employability support, youth justice interventions and community-based provision.

But if we are honest as a sector, we must also recognise that we can go further.

Youth work should not only become involved after disengagement has occurred; it should be positioned as a central preventative partner within wider public service reform.

The difficulty is that while the policy ambition in Wales has often been progressive, implementation has become increasingly difficult within the context of austerity, workforce pressures and short-term funding arrangements. Too many youth services and organisations are being asked to manage growing levels of complexity whilst continually justifying their existence through shrinking budgets and short-term outcomes.

At the same time, thresholds for statutory intervention seemingly continue to rise. Increasingly, youth work finds itself trying to hold young people safely within the gap between universal and specialist services.

There is also another uncomfortable truth that requires far greater attention: rising levels of disengagement from education, employment and training will inevitably increase youth homelessness.

In my own work in a youth homelessness prevention agenda, the relationship between being NEET and housing instability is impossible to ignore. Young people disconnected from education or employment are significantly more vulnerable to poverty, family breakdown, poor mental health and insecure housing.

Too often, the first time services respond to a young person's housing instability is after relationships at home have already broken down, education has collapsed and crisis has escalated. By then, intervention becomes significantly more difficult, more expensive and far more traumatic for the young person involved. Which reinforces the importance of the early identification approach embedded into the YEPF.

We cannot separate the NEET agenda from homelessness prevention, mental health or wellbeing. These issues are deeply interconnected.

Wales already has strong foundations through its youth work strategy, rights-based approaches and the preventative ambitions embedded within the Well-being of Future Generations agenda. Through the ongoing development of the legislative framework for youth work in Wales, there is also a significant opportunity to strengthen how youth work contributes to early intervention, progression and prevention at both local and national levels.

These plans could provide a stronger foundation for long-term collaboration between youth work, education, housing, health, employability and other public services, helping to ensure that youth work is positioned not simply as a reactive service, but as a strategic preventative partner within wider public service reform.

Importantly, these plans also create an opportunity to move beyond fragmented short-term delivery models towards a more coherent and sustainable approach to supporting young people across Wales. They could strengthen accountability, improve strategic planning and provide clearer recognition of the role youth work plays in supporting young people who are at risk of disengagement, exclusion and homelessness.

It means recognising youth workers as skilled professionals capable of delivering early intervention and relational practice with some of the most marginalised young people in our communities.

Most importantly, it means listening to young people themselves.

The report recognises that young people are not lacking ambition; many are struggling to access systems that increasingly feel inaccessible and disconnected from their lived realities.

In youth work, we see every day the creativity, resilience and potential that exists within young people, even when formal systems have failed to recognise it.

The question now is whether we choose to invest early, relationally and preventatively, or continue paying a far greater social and economic price later.

The cost of failing to act is not only economic, but also measured in lost confidence, fractured futures, worsening mental health and rising homelessness. Youth work cannot solve this crisis alone. But without youth work, I do not believe we will solve it at all.

References

Department for Work and Pensions (2026) Young People and Work: Interim Report. London: UK Government. Available at:
<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/young-people-and-work-interim-report/young-people-and-work-interim-report> (Accessed: 28 May 2026).