

DEVELOPING YOUTH WORK IN WALES

Tom Wylie, March 2016

The potential

Youth work has great potential to support and enrich the lives of young people in Wales. Its legislative basis is the Learning and Skills Act (2000), and the Welsh Government's strategy document on youth work (2014) builds on the previous 'Extending Entitlement' proposals and policy (2002). There is good practice in various parts of the country which demonstrates the potential for youth work to contribute to the Welsh Government's aspirations for young people, including those of the Wellbeing and Future Generations Act (2015) and the goals expressed in 'Qualified for Life' (2015) for their roles as learners, as creative citizens and as healthy and confident individuals. Effective youth work with young people can build their confidence and skills, extend horizons and contribute not just to their development as individuals but also to the economic and social regeneration of communities.

Current weaknesses

Access by young people across the country to activities and support services of high quality and to those opportunities which will empower them as individuals and citizens is not consistently good. In part, this variable access is due to rurality, the cost of transport and to family poverty but there are also other factors :

- The Learning and Skills Act is permissive and, given the absence of national expectations or defined standards, this has resulted in an inconsistency of youth provision in range, volume and quality. Many youth-oriented buildings are shabby and unattractive.
- The lack of clarity about desired outcomes for young people has meant that the evidence base for investment is weak. Good practice prototypes are rarely recognised and further developed. References in policy initiatives to the possible contribution of youth work towards achieving wider goals, for example with families or in communities, are rare.
- The outworking of the RSG in local authorities has resulted in wide differences in spending, well beyond what can be explained as reasonable discretion to meet local needs. The range of spending on youth work by local authorities is from 113% to 38% of the Revenue Support Grant (RSG) indicative figure and the recent audit (2014-15) shows that most local authorities had 'a core [Youth work] budget that was smaller' than their indicative figure.
- The overall funding base for the sector is too dependent on government sources (not entirely RSG). Some voluntary bodies

achieve only limited access to other funding and thus risk dependency on grant income. Others, however, are nimble in their positioning and successful at securing funds from business and foundations. Where relationships are good, they complement the role of local authorities and duplication is avoided. Local partnerships between authorities and voluntary sector are in some disrepair and thus not able to ensure a co-ordinated and consistent offer.

- Relationships with schools and colleges are patchy and some young people cannot afford to take up the extra-curricular opportunities available to their wealthier peers. In some places youth work plays an important role in the implementation of the engagement and progression framework. However, the potential for youth work's contribution to education is not fully realised. At present Estyn primarily focusses its work on schooling and is no longer providing an authoritative overview of youth work provision as the basis for accountability.
- The views of young people are not consistently sought nor acted on; this lack of systematic consultation means that existing services may no longer meet changing needs, nor are the young being helped to become active, democratic citizens.

Useful features on which to build

The Welsh Government has produced a clear Strategy document aimed at developing the work from 2014 -18. This document suggests a helpful balance between work which is open access and that which is targeted on particular groups, including through the deployment of 'lead workers'.

An overview of the work in local authorities is maintained through an annual audit (though this does not cover the activities of voluntary bodies which are substantial providers).

The government is encouraging the roll out of a (still embryonic) Quality Mark which will assist local authorities to judge their own performance. It has set out a clear Youth Engagement and Progression framework and a draft National Outcomes Framework. The government is firmly committed to the principles of the UNCRC.

The re-shaping of the school curriculum, notably through the concept of 'areas of experience' has the potential to engage youth work more fully in helping to embed and extend the formal curriculum, for example in PSE and in extracurricular activities in music, drama, and IT. The presence of youth workers on school and college sites could offer useful pastoral and learning support to students.

The plans of the Education Workforce Council to register qualified youth workers, including all school based youth workers, and contribute to their continued professional development could do much to support the sector.

There is disquiet in the sector about aspects of the current position of services for young people and therefore an openness to change.

The Youth Work Offer

The proposals in this paper are concerned principally with that range of provision, usually outside the classroom and often beyond the school gate, which supports young people and extends their life experiences. The primary goal of youth work is the promotion of personal and social development and this core task distinguishes it from other services more concerned, say, with their academic or vocational achievement. The paper does not deal with wider aspects of policies and services which have an impact on young people including health or employment (and in these arenas the 'Extending Entitlement' policy paper remains an influential guide).

Any offer needs to reflect youth work's values and approaches (for example as set out in the WLGA paper 'Youth Work in Wales: Principles and Purpose' in 2013). It has to be realistic, and take account of the capacity and skills of the people involved - fulltime, part-time and voluntary - and the broad level of resource likely to be available: at present, spending by local authorities is just over £2 per week per head of their population aged 11-19 years. Any offer must reflect the changing needs and interests of the young and enable them to choose those settings and activities which engage them as well as encouraging them to move beyond the sometimes limiting contours of their own neighbourhoods.

Since schooling is the universal service for the young, youth work should aspire to having a complementary role with schools, linking to the new 'pupil offer' of the curriculum, enriching what is offered in the classroom and also building resilience so as to help young people to deal with future personal and social crises. Such action however, would need to be matched by a willingness of schools and colleges to understand how to involve youth work as a partner.

The key task is to ensure the availability of skilled, knowledgeable and trusted adults in a range of settings, including intensive work for those with multiple needs requiring particular support and development. The relationships built with the young will lie at the heart of the effectiveness of a youth work offer: The Wales Charter for Youth Work. What is proposed below identifies a basic offer across Wales; to be fully effective it will need to be articulated and co-ordinated in each locality, ideally for each local authority, town and city.

The Wales Charter for Youth Work

All young people will be entitled to easy access through the medium of English or Welsh to:

- Safe, warm, well-equipped meeting places providing opportunities for sustained relationships, exciting leisure-time activities in arts and sport, and new experiences which widen their horizons.
- Opportunities to take part in outdoor adventure and in residential and international experiences.
- Opportunities to participate in decision-making via informal and formal structures for youth engagement locally and nationally (e.g. young mayors, youth councils and Senedd). Such arrangements to have clear references to participation standards; to be based on UNCRC principles; and seek to engage young people in shaping and scrutinising the services which affect them.
- Information, guidance and support on matters which concern them including employment, housing and mental well-being. The service can be accessed both through digital media and via trusted and trained adults.
- Encouragement to learn more about their own culture and the cultures of other people.
- Co-ordinated provision by youth workers in all secondary schools and colleges, extending the 'pupil offer' and thus enriching the formal curriculum and supporting personal and social development.
- Opportunities to be civic activists e.g. by volunteering.
- Recognition and /or accreditation for their achievements in personal and social development both in schools and colleges and in the community.