

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales
Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee
Ymchwiliad i Waith Ieuenctid | Inquiry into Youth Work

YW 09

Ymateb gan : Rheolwr Gwasanaeth Atal a Chefnogi, Cyngor Bwrdeistref Sirol Wrexham

Response from : Service Manager Prevention and Support, Wrexham County Borough Council

Question 1 – What are your views on young people’s access to youth work services, including, for example:

- levels of provision across Wales and any regional variation;
- issues relating to access for specific groups of young people e.g. language, disability, rurality, ethnicity.

The variation in the levels of provision across Wales is quite significant. In terms of statutory youth provision, local authorities decide themselves how much of the RSG to allocate. Although local discretion is important, the absence of at least an agreed baseline for provision means that for a few authorities, provision is less than recommended in the budget allocations. Each local authority youth service will consult with young people on provision and a range of issues, but there is no central portal that helps us to build a picture of what the needs and demands are of young people in Wales today. This means that each local authority responds to young people’s voice at a very local level, and this has led to such variation, although when you speak to colleagues e.g. at the Principal Youth Officer’s Group, many are identify the same needs and views. Youth Services are innovative out of necessity, responding to the changes in young people’s demographics and profile, although often change can be difficult to implement due to political pressure e.g. Elected Members and Community Councils whilst also trying to changes in guidance and legislation, e.g. Youth Engagement and Progression, Families First, Youth Service Strategy. All of these can often be distractions to actually addressing the needs of young people.

Recently there has been a significant shift across Wales towards more targeted youth services and this has been exacerbated by the significant savings required by local authorities. Whereas the argument for providing universal open-access youth services has been made, especially in relation to the longer-term outcomes, they are now being undermined due to the focus on short-term measurable outcomes e.g. numbers into education, employment and training. When Extending Entitlement was introduced by Welsh Government, it was the envy of many other countries and although it technically underpins Youth Services, its importance has sadly diminished. A whole-hearted revival of this, along with minimum provision expectations, would help to readdress the imbalance, and to support young people in their entirety, not just for their future economic value. In fact, it is likely that if young people have access to universal informal/non-formal education, they will be more likely to make a successful transition to adulthood.

The challenge for providing specific services for children with disabilities, who are ethnic minorities, live in rural areas and/or bilingual, is that therein lies the tension of providing universal open-access versus targeted youth work provision. The Youth Service, even when working with groups of young people, is always focused on the individual, starting from where they are, not the other way around. This means that children with any specific needs are often accommodated within the universal offer, and in fact that is the way things should be so that young people feel a part of everything, not different to their peers. There will always be a necessity to provide safe spaces for some individuals and groups e.g. with significant mental health issues or LGTB, but these should occur alongside open-access provision, so that young people have a choice of what they do and do not attend. For local authorities to have to choose one or the other due to guidance and funding means that young people's needs are no longer put first. There are too many examples, especially within Welsh Government, of one department abdicating responsibility for supporting an element of youth work provision because they do not see it as 'their' business, but make these decisions without any prior agreement of how gaps can be filled by

those departments whose business they think it is. This means that at a local level, significant time and effort by Officers is spent trying to balance all of these competing demands when the focus should be on the further development of services in response to the views of young people.

The Youth Service and its staff are incredibly adaptable and flexible. The range of services delivered to young people is impressive and the Youth Service has demonstrated that in addition to its delivery of open-access services, it excels in a range of settings, delivering services across health, youth justice, education (schools and colleges), Police, etc. Its approach is always the same, and this is why the added value it provides is recognised by other services and professions.

If you believe that there are particular problems, how do you think they could be resolved?

A refreshing and relaunching of Extending Entitlement. The recently developed Youth Charter and offer, developed by the Youth Work reference group had good intentions but its promotion has been weak.

It would be useful to use a similar approach to that used for the Engagement and Progression Framework, requiring local authorities to be more accountable regarding provision.

Consideration could be given to having a Youth Support Services sufficiency assessment, similar to the childcare sufficiency and play assessments.

Acknowledgement needs to be made of the long-term benefits experienced by young people who engage with Youth Services and a commitment to promoting the benefits of informal/non-formal education.

Welsh Government Departments to communicate better to ensure that they consider the seen and unforeseen consequences of changes to guidance and legislation.

Question 2 – How effective do you think the Welsh Government strategy and policy on youth work is?

In considering this question you may wish to think about:

- the Welsh Government’s specific youth work policy and strategy such as ‘The Youth Work offer’; The Wales Charter for Youth Work; The National Youth Work Strategy for Wales 2014 to 2018;
- Welsh Government departmental responsibilities and whether there is a cross-departmental and co-ordinated approach to support youth work provision.

As it currently stands, the strategy and policy on youth work is not being maximised. Welsh Government would be best placed to help build a consensus between local authority Youth Services and the Third Sector as during the past couple of years, this relationship has weakened. There is a sense in the field that despite best efforts e.g. establishment of the Youth Service Reference Group, there has been a lack of momentum, despite bringing together experts in the field. Despite the size, although currently reducing, of the Youth Support Services sector, leadership from Welsh Government seems to be minimal compared to other service areas such as Youth Justice, Families First, Youth Engagement and Progression and Play, which are comparable, and often much smaller ‘projects’. It is right that these other areas receive the current level of attention, but there seems to be difficulty in developing a comprehensive strategy for Youth Work, failing to gel it to other important policies in respect of formal education and health and wellbeing. On the ground, its contribution is acknowledged but this leads to a fragmented approach rather than an overall strategy. It would benefit everyone if Welsh Government could work with the field to strengthen the approach.

It would be helpful to Principal Youth Officers to feel that there is an overarching, meaningful strategy that still allows for local discretion, but with a minimum, but substantial framework that local authorities must be accountable for.

How do you think the Welsh Government could approach its youth work strategy and policy differently / to better effect?

- By being more visible
- By engaging with the Principal Youth Officer’s group as a

partnership

- By working in conjunction with the Third Sector and PYO group to build consensus on the future delivery of Youth Service
- By introducing some accountability for the delivery of local Youth Services
- By carrying out an All Wales Survey of young people to establish what their expectations are from Youth Work and wider Youth Support Services, but also what they hope to gain by participating. This would help to agree and establish a meaningful outcomes framework
- By facilitating access to research, peer mentoring and sharing opportunities, meaningful contributions to emerging policy, etc.

Question 3 – What are your views on the funding available for youth work, including through Local Authority, Welsh Government, European Union, and Third Sector.

The funding available for Youth Work is fragmented, but this is true for many service areas. In areas where the RSG is fully allocated this obviously helps but currently all Youth Service RSG is under pressure as local authorities seek savings across their whole portfolio. The RSG is useful in that it can support open-access universal provision and more traditional services such as DofE, whilst grants help fund the delivery of specialist projects such as mental health, drugs and alcohol, advocacy, etc. This does make everything very precarious though as whilst the RSG is under pressure, funding streams are often annual so planning for the future is difficult. As Principal Youth Officers, a lot of time is spent trying to forecast and adapt to planned and unplanned changes.

Welsh Government funding is welcomed but brings with it challenges. The Youth Service Revenue Grant is the most straightforward and allows Youth Services to provide additional services, although the annual application is not helpful and a three year plan would mean the monies could be maximised and tied to strategy. It also enables it to secure and fund Third Sector provision which helps with relationship building between sectors but also enables a wider range of young people to be reached. Sharing of staff, training and

expertise also contribute to this relationship building. Where it becomes more challenging is when funding is provided by funding streams that sit outside of youth work e.g. Families First. In some local authorities, Youth Services have been successful in obtaining funding, whereas in others, they have failed to do so and this is down to local interpretation of the guidance. It is difficult to know whether clearer stipulation of intended beneficiaries would be helpful or a hindrance. To stipulate might mean that there is no room for flexibility and this would not be helpful.

European funding has certainly helped to develop and support youth projects but there is no doubt that the bureaucracy attached to it, especially when Welsh Government is the third partner alongside WEFO and the local authority, can often be off-putting. It is also reliant on match-funding and when some match-funding is from Welsh Government annual grants, this means that local authorities are taking risks in committing to ESF funded projects, along with potential redundancy costs and little in the way of exit strategies. The ending of ESF funding, unless replaced by central government, will be sorely felt.

The funding for the Third Sector is also precarious, and it has become evident that the capacity for the sector to grow, especially for small to medium size organisations, is reducing. In order to help build capacity into the sector, time and effort is required by all partners to help each other, including Welsh Government, otherwise any further demise will undermine the great strides made in Wales when Extending Entitlement came into play. The Third Sector currently do not have a mechanism for accurately demonstrating how many young people they work with, what the outcomes are for young people and the added value they bring. Local Authorities across Wales use different Management Information Systems but the Youth Service Audit at least means that everyone is trying to measure the same things so that we can build a picture. It would be beneficial if Local authority Youth Services and the Third Sector were all contributing to the same MIS that would provide consistent monitoring.

Young people articulate time and time again that Youth Services mean so much to them. This form of pedagogy does much to support young people to find their way in life by offering them safe spaces to meet, new experiences, a voice and access to decision-making processes that they can influence.

If you believe there are problems in this area, how do you think they could be resolved?

- Grants need to be for longer than 1 year and linked to a comprehensive strategy.
- It needs to be clear which funds/strategies can be accessed by the Youth Service e.g. Pupil Deprivation Grant, 14–19, Curriculum for Wales, Engagement and Progression Framework, Families First, etc., to prevent ‘battles’ taking place.
- One MIS for all so that reports can be run in an instant and everyone is comparing like for like.
- Replacement for ESF needs to be identified sooner than later.
- Time and resources are required to build/re-build capacity into the Third Sector

Question 4 – Are there any other issues you consider relevant to the Inquiry that you think the Committee should be made aware of? (for example: workforce related issues; the Quality Mark for Youth Work in Wales; buildings and infrastructure; youth work in schools; transport issues; access to digital technology; Welsh Government’s consultation on proposals to register and inspect some out of school education settings).

Workforce

Due to the significant reductions in budgets for Youth Work across England and Wales, there is a risk that people begin to avoid pursuing Youth Work as a career, which would be a great loss, especially to young people. Youth Work has a long history and should be celebrated and maintained. The registration of Youth Workers from 1st April 2017 will help with acknowledging the role of Youth Work but it would benefit from being seen on a par with teaching, social work and other professions, especially in relation to pedagogy. In a number of European countries, it enjoys this status, and rightly so. Formal education, health services, the Police, etc., have much to learn from Youth Services and certainly over the past few years, have been

turning to Youth Services for help and provision. In Wrexham, we deliver the following which are examples of how youth work can contribute to or lead the work of other services/organisations:

Inspire Hospital Youth Work Project – based at the Maelor Hospital. An Award Winning Project that supports young people admitted to hospital with self-harming behaviours.

In2change Drug and Alcohol Service – LA led but working in partnership with Health, Youth Justice Service and the Third Sector.

Info Shop and Info Outreach (including Sexual Health Clinic) – delivered in partnership with Betsi Cadwaladr Health Board

School's Youth Work – working in partnership with secondary schools, a small number of Primary Schools, Education Social Work Service and Youth Justice Service Education Officer

Arson Reduction Projects – working in partnership with the Fire Service

Early Intervention – Working in partnership with the Police, Community Councils and Youth Justice Service

These are but a few.

In response to the fiscal pressures at WCBC, the Youth Service alongside all services in the Prevention and Support portfolio have been realigned to be more integrated, retain a range of services across prevention (universal), early intervention, targeted intervention and statutory intervention in order to adhere to the principles of the underpinning pedagogy shared across all professions.

A career in Youth Work must remain appealing if we are able to continue to deliver what makes youth work different to other professions. The risk is that professions will blur and as a consequence all that will be left is a bland offer for our young people. Different professions and different approaches create options for young people to choose to engage with, recognising that different things work for different people.

Youth Work in Schools

The pressure on young people to achieve academic excellence is high but for many they are unable to cope, and when this happens, the Youth Service plays a critical role in helping them to manage their anxieties, no matter how they manifest. There are schools who work very hard to support these young people via their pastoral systems but there are too many examples of young people who sit outside the perceived norm, who are left to their own devices, often absent or excluded. Many of these young people become enter the Youth Justice System, suffer mental health issues and/or become not engaged in education, training or employment. In a nutshell, their future is blighted. Schools Youth Work and its links to community based youth services provides the perfect conduit to appropriate support networks, ensuring young people are supported within and beyond the school gate.

Transport

This issue consistently arises in consultations with young people. One of the best things that could happen for young people is to provide them with access to free transport. By increasing their mobility, it opens up new horizons to them both for leisure and educational opportunities. The cost of even subsidised transport is prohibitive to many. Added to this, unless you reside along the main transport routes, there is often very limited access to transport. In such a rural land as Wales, this needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency, not just in respect of young people but for families and adults. Ongoing failure to address this as an infrastructure issue means that our young people (and adults) will be restricted to their locality and with no opportunity to travel, they will continue to find it difficult to travel for education, employment or leisure – which ultimately impacts on the economy.

Digital Technology

In this day and age, it is critical that Youth Services are able to provide access to the most up to date digital technology, but sadly this is not the case. Although great strides have been made to ensure there is access to Wi-Fi in Youth Centres, often there are blocks on

sites due to risk adverse policies being in place. Staff are attempting to utilise message texting, websites and social media as a way in which to interact with young people, but again, especially within local authorities, there are challenges. For the whole sector, technology can often be outdate and difficult to replace due to budget constraints. Many young people are themselves unable to afford the most up to date technology and rely on access to other's equipment to be able to apply for universal credit, carry out job searches, seeking housing, etc. In Wrexham we utilise the Info Shop to provide some of these services, but further investment in staff time and equipment would be beneficial and would enhance the service, but this is unlikely to happen in the near future.

Inspection

The Youth Service is no longer subject to its own inspection regime, rather it is a small part of the inspection of Local Authority Education Services for Children and Young People (LAESCYP) and in being so has diminished the role that the Youth Service plays. This has been an unfortunate development, and the Youth Service would welcome a refocus or a more significant acknowledgement in the LAESCYP regime in order to raise its importance in the overall education of young people in Wales.

Question 5 – If you had to make one recommendation to the Welsh Government from all the points you have made, what would that recommendation be?

Put young people first. Listen to them. And then develop joined up policies that are meaningful, appropriately funded and clear about the role that Youth Services will play to ensure that young people are able to be proud and fully contributing citizens of Wales. Young people are greater than their academic achievements and should be recognised as so.