

DID WE DENT THE GLASS CEILING?

My work as Assistant County Further Education Officer to the County of Glamorgan was bounded by the structure of the service, by the perceptions of those involved, - policy makers, officers, workers, young people and even the public, - and by such ideas as I was able to bring to it, and I was given a good deal of scope to make an input.

The structure in place meant that I found myself the only female officer on a team of eleven – a District Officer for each of the eight areas, a second Assistant and a County Further Education Officer (CFEO). There were changes in the team from time to time, and vacancies, especially after the demise of Glamorgan and the coming of the eight counties, but it was years before a woman was appointed to one of the areas and then there were two of us!

To do justice to Glamorgan Education Authority, this situation was forward looking for the times. I stepped in after a hiatus of a year, I think my predecessor had been in post for about three years, and her predecessor had served at least long enough to owe her responsibilities, if not her post, to the Albermarle report, the landmark in the creation of the Youth Service. The County also responded to the report by opening Youth Centres staffed by a full-time warden and a Deputy. The plan was for each new Comprehensive School to have an integral Youth Wing. Although financial stringencies overtook the programme before it was fully implemented, every District soon had at least one such centre, and one even had four. In theory the CFEO was consulted about design at an early stage, but at least one Wing was ready for occupation before he heard about it. Several full-time Centres were housed in buildings converted from other use, usually Primary Schools. Which made for variety, diversity and often confusion.

For a number of years there was one female full-time Warden in the County. All the male Wardens had been seconded from their teaching posts for a five year term. As suggested in the Albermarle Report, they and their female Deputies were intended to be 'Youth Tutors', using their special Youth Work Skills in two sessions per week within the school. These skills were in the area known as 'Social Education', but there seemed to be a variety of definitions of what this meant, from what was once called Civics, to Sociology, Careers and 'minding the stropky pupils'. In several places, the youth workers just went on teaching their specialisms, which were often Physical Education, Crafts and Home Economics. Later some workers followed a 'Pastoral Care' course, and used the skills they had acquired.

Local centres usually in Primary Schools made up the complement of Youth Centres in the county, open three evenings a week. The minimum staffing was a Warden, Deputy and an Assistant Warden, at least one being male and at least one being female. In practice this most often meant a male Warden, a female Deputy, and a male Assistant. This pattern changed over the years, but the need for a female member of staff to be present was recognised, and I recall occasions of centres being closed for an evening because no female staff were available. Instructors who ran activities filled other posts in both full and part-time centres and there were Youth Workers who had a more roving brief. The preponderance of youth workers was female; most of them qualified through the county's 'Bessey' course, later to become the Part-Time Youth Leadership Course (PTYL). As time went on and teachers became busier and better paid and therefore less interested in 'overtime', there were more PTYL qualified staff in post. Evidence was produced from time to time that membership in the Service was three boys for every two girls. This reflected the pattern nationally throughout the UK.

In place already when I started was a system of Deputy Warden's meetings, one in each of the districts, for me to head up. They were intended to support the Deputy Wardens who often felt isolated, not having as many opportunities to meet colleagues as did their Wardens. No agendas from the time survive, and memory is a fickle thing. However, where there was a female Warden, whether full-time or part-time, she usually attended the meetings, so that they became all female events, and dealt with the interests of girls. These included the Hostess Competition, at the outset exclusively the province of girls, although later we did manage to encourage a few boys to take

part. We also arranged inter club activities and meetings all to do with what were then seen as the girls' activities.

This highlights the perceptions of the time. The signals about the status of girls interests which this must have given out did not strike us, although I remember making sporadic efforts to ensure the attendance of male deputies, which failed – another indication of the status of the meetings. Later, with the advent of 'Girls' Work', the meetings changed emphasis and took on responsibility for arranging Girls' Days and promoting Girls' issues.

Efforts were made to support schoolgirl mothers. I remember at least two centres holding afternoon meetings for groups, one of them in the face of opposition from the school. In the seventies, attitudes were less liberal than they were to become. Another centre invited a young mother to bring her baby and tell a group of girls about how it had affected her life. On many occasions I met an 'ex' member proudly showing off her baby to Staff and friends.

Another of my duties as the female Officer was choosing the curtains for the new Youth Wings! We never thought of consulting the workers let alone the members. It was quite exciting to visit the Aladdin's cave at County Supplies, and in the early days there was enough money in the coffers to provide good quality curtains, even if the furniture was standard issue black plastic 'easy' chairs, moulded upright chairs in red or grey and 'long john' coffee tables. Storage was always a problem in the part-time centres, and we provided steel cupboards which were inconvenient both to the Centres and to the host schools, and far too small for all the impedimenta. Open one and often an agglomeration of table tennis bats and balls, badminton sets, footballs, paints, craft materials, plastic cups, stationery, and assorted junk, which would surely come in useful some day, fell out. The members always kept staff busy, and life was just not long enough to tidy up.

I don't think we realised at the time how many factors could have influenced the absence of girls from the centres. We tended to blame the attitude of the boys and staff and the nature of the programme. These were influences, but also, there were many social attitudes against their presence. Many girls were expected to help out at home or to baby sit for younger siblings where boys could slip away; parents tended to be more protective of girls, older girls could find evening work in supermarkets or local shops. There were also the teenage pregnancies.

With a package of duties involving so many meetings, plus response to crises, attending special events such as the hostess (sic) competition (seen as a 'female' obligation, although male colleagues were not averse to turning up at tasting time), open evenings and presentation evenings; and representing the Authority at Voluntary Organisation functions; there were not many evenings left just to drop in on centres. So my impressions of the Youth Work which went on are distorted because there was always something special going on, as well as by the fact that I was an outsider, parachuted in for a short time. Even when I visited a Centre without prearrangement I had a particular purpose in mind, often recruiting members for a competition or residential course, or sorting out a complaint from a member of the public or a Primary School caretaker or head teacher. It always surprised me how soon ex-pupils of the school could become 'your hooligans at the Youth Centre'. The recruitment situation was often difficult. Members lacked the confidence to enrol without encouragement and Staff did not have the time to motivate apathetic members. Sometimes the information got lost in the flood of paperwork part-time Wardens in particular found little time to cope with.

At the outset of my time, members were expected to spend the first hour or so of the evening at an activity. Depending on the facilities available, the programme included the usual sports – football (boys!), netball (girls), and crafts – art, woodwork, needlework, cookery, and other less formal subjects from the school programme. As time went on, this was slackened somewhat to allow Youth Workers to take informal groups under obscure titles like 'group work', 'discussion group' or 'minor games'. This often meant playing pool or darts in the social area. The last half hour – an extensible timing – was for socialising. Discos in full-time centres were officially limited to two or three a week. I was always lucky in finding that I had turned up on a Disco evening.

On arrival, I would in courtesy announce my presence to the Warden. This often resulted in being swept into the office for a cup of coffee, while word went round that I was on the premises. On a tour of inspection I might find a group of boys in a motley collection of clothing and footwear, kicking a ball about in the gym, while a member of staff clung to the wall bars and blew a whistle from time to time. Or I might find immaculately clad and shod players being actively coached. The best Youth Work involved the tutors in making adult and helpful relationships with their members as well as achieving a high standard of work. Activity became more intense in the run up to the County Youth Eisteddfod and the Art and Craft Exhibition, both of which were highly competitive. This led to the demise of the Eisteddfod, when competition went out of fashion. The Exhibition became a non-competitive event too, and we did our best to encourage the 'triers' to participate as well as those with natural talent. I remember one exhibition where nearly all the paintings were in gloomy tones of black and purple, this being the 'in' thing for young people at the time. I was quite worried about their mental health.

The canteen area was always busy. Rarely were members trusted to take charge. I often stood at the 'bar' and chatted to the members as they came along. No doubt they wondered what the old so and so was doing there. It was noticeable that some members came back and back for 'pop', chocolate bars, crisps and packets of biscuits, and were often the same young people who pleaded poverty when asked for their 'subs'. Very few centres asked the members for much money, anyway, but it was felt that they should make a contribution to 'their' centres. Some centres charged too little for their coffee bar goods to make much profit.

One of the duties of Deputy Wardens was to take charge of the Centre in the absence of the Warden. There were often occasions when he (usually!) was out with a competing team, for a meeting, or called away in connection with the daytime job. I often was aware of a smoother atmosphere when there was a woman in charge, but this was not always appreciated. I found one Warden who was to be seconded away for a year in connection with his daytime post in the process of arranging for the male Assistant Warden to take over, not his female Deputy, 'because it needs a man in charge'. Needless to say this did not happen, neither did the disaster he feared!

The Youth Service was very male orientated. For example, at our Officer team meetings, my colleagues were in the habit of referring to Wardens as 'he' until after about a year of 'or she' reminders from me; they began to realise that there were some female Wardens in post. There was also a tendency at any meetings for one of the minority of females present to be asked to take the notes, which had to be countered.

The situation was similar at Wales level. For a long time there were just two of us at the Wales Officers' Association meetings. When I finally made it Chairman, several colleagues remarked that I was the first woman chairman. Many things have changed in the Youth Service and in the society it serves since I started, but I hope that what has not changed is the dedication and interest of the workers who made the Service what it was.