

'LEARNING COUNTRY: LEARNING PATHWAYS 14 - 19'
A consultation response by the Wales Youth Agency

The Wales Youth Agency welcomes the publication of 'Learning Country: Learning Pathways 14-19' and the opportunity to respond to its content because it is another significant Welsh Assembly Government document recognising, as it does, the importance of all young people within the wider economic and social agenda of Wales.

It is a document with a grand vision concerned with the development of one of the best education and lifelong learning systems in the world (page 5). The Wales Youth Agency shares that vision along with the Youth Service in Wales. The Agency believes the Service has a role to play in its achievement through the provision of non-formal community-based learning opportunities for young people delivered in partnership with formal and work-based education and learning.

The philosophical base of the document will be familiar to those involved in the Youth Service because it finds much of its own purpose, principles and values articulated within it. Participation and empowerment (page 3/23) equality of opportunity (page 7) personal and social education (page 21) are concepts familiar to the Youth Service as is the importance of the transition that takes place in the lives of young people between the ages of 14 and 19. The document is also driven by a concept of education and learning which recognises the need to introduce an element of choice for young people underpinned by the belief that a one-size-fits-all approach is not appropriate (page 8). This is a crucial approach and one supported by the Youth Service when it allows for more creative and relevant education and learning experiences for young people. This is of particular importance when related to a key aim in the document of the improvement of educational opportunity for the most disadvantaged socio-economic groups in Wales (page 7). Appropriately motivated individuals from these groups could benefit most from the right mix of vocational, academic, occupational (page 8) and - in the Youth Service context - community-based education and learning opportunities.

There is some concern that the document does not describe clearly enough the potential breadth of education and learning opportunities available for young people. Comment is made, quite rightly, of the importance of formal school based education and learning which is central to the lives of all young people. Comment is also made, again quite rightly, about the importance of academic attainment measured against a variety of academic benchmarks. To a lesser extent recognition is given in the document to education and learning in the workplace and the importance of vocational training (page 17). The document suggests, for example, a minimum of one week of work experience as a minimum entitlement and one additional activity for all 16-19 year olds. There is also the suggestion of an integrated approach between practical and applied elements of programmes being related to a specific career path through work based experiences (page 18).

However, little mention is made about the education and learning opportunities afforded to young people through their involvement in non-formal community based learning (page 21). This is a significant omission of the document because it does not recognise, in any significant way, the potential education and learning opportunities available to young people through their active involvement in community based organisations such as the Youth Service. Of particular concern is the lack of recognition given to the Youth Service for its level of expertise in providing imaginative programmes for many young people who have failed in, or have been failed by formal education (Learning is for Everyone)

Education and learning opportunities for young people through the Youth Service include involvement in a wide range of activities, which lead to recognised and validated qualifications such as OCN's and NVQ's in a variety of subjects. Many become involved in the attainment of awards through such organisations as Scouts and Girlguiding and through the Duke of Edinburgh's Award, and the WAYC Youth Achievement Award. These attainments are widely valued by industry and business. Education and learning opportunities are also offered to young people through a wide range of other activities, which would not otherwise lead to a recognised qualification. In 2001/02 more than 400 young people from Wales left on International Youth Exchanges through their involvement with the Youth Service. A similar number of young people from a wide range of European countries returned to enhance the education and learning opportunities for significant numbers of young people. The analysis of the Youth Work in Wales Excellence Awards since 1997 provides further evidence of the involvement of young people in Health Projects, Community Development Initiatives, Crime Reduction Projects and strategies to return young people to learning. The successful Youth Work and Schools Programme provides further evidence of the achievements that can be gained by using youth workers or youth work methodology to tackle poor attendance and low education attainment.

The Youth Service has therefore, a long tradition of involving young people in processes leading to the attainment of both 'hard' and 'soft' skills (page 5). It is however an organisation predominantly concerned with the personal and social skill development of young people (page 21). In developing and delivering programmes to achieve this, it is recognised that in an environment driven by a desire for quantifiable outcomes, those produced by youth work have seemingly limited currency. This must change if the key statement in the Foreword by Jane Davidson that sets out "to place young people at the centre of learning and to give them a greater say in what should be provided" is to be attained. Community-based non-formal learning must be promoted as having a valid and valued place alongside formal learning and work related vocational learning.

Therefore it is vital that the ever-increasing opportunities taken to accredit young people's learning through their contact with youth organisations or other voluntary community settings, be regarded as a key element in young people's learning accumulation. The Welsh Baccalaureate, clearly sets out to embrace this community-based concept.

The Youth Service in Wales has led the way in securing accreditation for education and achievement in all these settings and future proposals must recognise the need to capitalise on this element of learning for all young people, from the most to least able achievers.

In considering both the title and contents of Chapter 5 it is felt to be a key omission not to include and provide for the widest information needs of young people. It is inconceivable that future proposals in the area of advice, support and guidance should omit to recognise the importance of information services to young people, particularly as the Welsh Assembly Government keenly supports the notion of providing a wide range of information services to young people and actually funds a key feature of that for all 16 year olds in Wales through the Canllaw Online Initiative. The word information should in future appear in any chapter heading that relates to the support services to young people's choices and direction.

Additionally and disappointingly the proposal relating to a learning coach appears to create a new professional role likely to be perceived in the image of a Connexions Adviser in England. This is arguably against the baseline spirit of Extending Entitlement which sets out to build on existing structures and not to create new ones. Critically the role of youth workers and other professionals working with young people will need to embrace the aspects of support provided by such a learning coach and the Agency welcomes the recognition of the importance of the support role as opposed to a creation of a new professional to deliver it. Furthermore the concept of allocation of such a coach to a young person would not reflect the ethos or values of youth work where the young person's voluntary relationship is seen as paramount, and has proven to be the most valuable form of relationship in supporting young people.

Finally, the Agency welcomes the notion that young people should be involved in the development and evaluation of their learning opportunities at a local level. This is reflected in a range of Welsh Assembly Government developments that secure a greater involvement and participation by young people in the delivery of the services to them. The Youth Service already provides significant training opportunities for young people to be upskilled in the processes that can best place them to make an impact on the design and delivery of such services. This really is a learning-for-life measure.

In all, the Wales Youth Agency welcomes the document and the argument and questions it raises. The key question is can these policy changes make a real difference for all young people in all parts of Wales? Access is therefore central and the equality of opportunity for all young people must be paramount if we are truly to improve the learning pathways for our 14-19 year olds.

Wales Youth Agency
February 2003