

Learning is for Everyone (LIFE)

Introduction

This paper gives the Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services' response to the Welsh Office Green Paper- "Learning is for Everyone" (LIFE).

The Council is a national umbrella organisation representing 30 national voluntary youth organisations in Wales. These organisations work with 25,000 volunteers and over 250,000 young people aged between 11-25 years old. Many of the organisations have consulted with their volunteer and youth constituents in preparing this response.

The growing emphasis on the voluntary sector in delivering elements of Government Social Policy underlines the important role that voluntary youth service has to play. Voluntary organisations make up 70% of the Youth Service in Wales increasing to 90% in rural areas.

This sector includes the networks of informal organisations, local boys and girls clubs, religious denominations, and church based provision, cultural and Welsh language movements, peer led initiatives, independent community based youth clubs, young farmers clubs, independent youth projects etc.

The Youth Service is already responding to major social imperatives:

- Building capability in young people: their skills in using language, in information technology, in flexibility and self-reliance, in creativity and enterprise;
- Encouraging active citizenship and awareness of rights and responsibilities so that young people can participate fully in the democratic process;
- Promoting social inclusion by providing programmes which meet the needs of disadvantaged and vulnerable groups, accrediting learning so as to enhance employability.

General

CWVYS welcomes the LIFE Green Paper and the ethos it promotes in aiming to create a learning culture in Wales. The strong recognition given to the important role the youth service has to play in this is also welcomed. The voluntary youth sector, which makes up the largest part of the youth service also recognises the further contribution it can make to retain many young people's connection with learning and help re-connect others who have failed in, or have been failed by, formal education.

The voluntary youth sector is well placed to help make this happen. The sector works closely with the community and it is flexible enough to respond to local needs. It is also well placed to reach out and involve the most excluded in society, thus widening participation and promoting equality. The voluntary youth service is also an experienced provider of training and learning opportunities for young people. It enables young people to use their skills, gain experience and build confidence whether for personal fulfilment or to improve their employment prospects. LIFE provides an excellent opportunity for the sector to develop this role further.

CWVYS believes that voluntary youth organisations are best placed to motivate young people to acquire the habit of lifelong learning through leading purposeful activity which will help develop the skills, confidence and experience required for life and work in all its forms.

The Learning Challenge

CWVYS welcomes the Seven Policy Principles that underpin the Governments thinking on lifelong learning for Wales. We are particularly supportive of the statements that standards, results and outcomes matter more than structures, and that policies will be designed to benefit the many not the few. Taking into account the vital contributions of the voluntary sector in relation to the distinct needs and realities of Wales is also welcomed. The work of nearly 10% of voluntary organisations in Wales relates directly to young people.

The statement that "Providers must deliver best value for money" is welcomed by a voluntary youth service effort that multiplies some eight times the financial contribution of the State. Nevertheless, the voluntary sector should not be considered as a cheap option for delivering lifelong learning related programmes.

The youth service has an important contribution to make towards the National Learning Strategy for Wales. The voluntary youth sector's role within that context will be an essential element of its success.

Extending the range of learning opportunities for communities in relation to young people should build on existing quality provision. Whilst long term planning in the form of a National Learning Strategy is very much needed, a degree of flexibility should also be accommodated within it. Funding structures which enable a flexible response to changing circumstances would also be welcomed.

CWVYS strongly supports the intention to develop a "professional, modern and collaborative approach based on the principles of equality of opportunity and good value for money".

The targets set for achievement in Wales by 2002 are based on quantitative outcomes. The National Learning Strategy for Wales, with the aim of achieving wider recognition of the importance of informal and incidental learning should also address less measurable qualitative outcomes. CWVYS looks forward to contributing to the setting of targets in relation to the youth services contribution to lifelong learning.

Information, Access and Opportunity

Poor self-esteem and low expectations are two evils that the youth service has long combated amongst young people.

As a result many voluntary youth organisations have developed accessible and highly efficient information services for young people which are quick to respond to their individual needs. These services are provided in informal settings and are well placed to contribute towards ensuring "quick and easy access to high quality independent information, advice and guidance about what to learn and how to do so". Information Shops and IT provision are but two examples of how this should be taken forward.

Voluntary Youth Organisations are already involved with other related initiatives such as New Deal. CWVYS along with Wales Council for Voluntary Action and the Wales Youth Agency will act as national deliverers for Millennium Volunteers in Wales. Other developments such as Learning Direct and Investing in Young People will assist in the lifelong learning crusade. The voluntary youth service not only looks forward to developing links with these other initiatives but also in further developing working links with employers, colleges, careers services and TEC's.

The statement that the voluntary sector organisations related to the youth service are "critically important in the drive towards a learning country" is greatly welcomed. The recognition given to the services continued efforts to attract and help "many young people who have failed in, or have been failed by formal education" is also warmly received. Initiatives such as various Further Education provision, IT centres, outreach work, partnerships in prisons etc underline this effort. The voluntary youth service provides valuable extra curricular experiences for all young people. Changemakers have identified twelve enterprise skills, promoted through youth work, which closely link to key life skills and which are valued by employers. The twelve Enterprise Skills are the ability to:

- Assess strengths and weaknesses
- Seek information and advice
- Plan - time, resources and availability of help
- Carry through an agreed responsibility
- Negotiate successfully
- Deal with people in power and authority
- Solve problems
- Resolve conflict
- Cope with stress and tension
- Evaluate performance
- Communicate (verbally and non-verbally)

With the above in mind working more closely with the Careers Service companies seems a natural progression. Nevertheless, any integrated approach will need to be based on a clearly defined agenda working towards identified goals.

In order, by 2002, for the youth service "to have a much higher profile and be better equipped to support young people into the next century" a baseline needs to be identified. CWVYS believes that an audit of the youth service should be conducted in Wales which would include both statutory and voluntary sectors. Such an exercise would assist in ensuring the best targeting of resources within the service. An audit would also lead to a more integrated and co-ordinated service. Such an exercise would additionally identify examples of excellence which could be promoted to a wider audience.

CWVYS welcomes the £300,000 increase in the budget of the Wales Youth Agency to tackle social exclusion, and looks forward to seeing voluntary youth organisations contributing substantially to the work. It is also hoped that a longer term programme will follow this funding in order to maximise the value of the initial investment.

CWVYS is keen to help develop "a straight -forward strategic plan to lift results, not least through better staff training". Many voluntary youth organisations offer training to their volunteers. CWVYS has developed an Initial Youth Work Training Course for Voluntary Youth Workers. Being offered this year to up to 100 students the course aims to provide youth workers (both paid and voluntary) within voluntary youth organisations in Wales with access to accredited training in Youth and Community Work which is appropriate to their needs. The possible development of this course should be considered within the strategic plan.

The proposed plan should not only take full account of the OHMCI report on "Standards and Quality of Youth Work in Local Authorities in Wales". It should also consider the companion study currently being undertaken relating to the voluntary sector.

Clarifying local authorities duty to secure a youth service is something CWVYS strongly supports. We repeat the call made by the United Kingdom Youth Work Alliance in its paper "Agenda for a Generation" (1996) that there should be an unequivocal statutory basis for youth work placing a duty on local authorities to secure sufficient youth services within their areas in partnership with voluntary organisations.

CWVYS believes that establishing Local Councils of Voluntary Youth Services (LCVYS), directly supported by local authorities, is the most effective way of forging a collaborative relationship between the two sectors. There are a number of LCVYS already in existence in Wales which form a focus for relationships between the voluntary sector and corresponding statutory bodies. This arrangement allows local authorities to engage in full consultation with the voluntary sector so that the youth service may be delivered in accordance with mutually agreed objectives. It also informs the strategic planning of the youth service within the authority area. CWVYS would welcome the opportunity to discuss with the Welsh Office and Welsh Local Government Association the further development of LCVYS.

Increasing young people's participation in community life and learning depends on being able to provide accessible services which meet their needs. A remarkable collaborative project involving nearly the whole of the youth service in Wales is being developed under the title New Century Youth Challenge. It's objectives include to

- Enable young people to participate in the design and delivery of their challenge within the concept of developing communities, of which they are a vital and integral part;
- Encourage young people to develop their life skills and acquire the learning habit.

Promoting such learning through community action reflects the aims promoted in LIFE. Encouraging local authorities to support initiatives such as the New Century Youth Challenge would be a positive step towards enabling and increasing young people's participation in community life and learning.

Giving guidance on the issues of "adequate provision" is an important and welcome commitment. CWVYS is eager to work closely with the Welsh Office, Wales Youth Agency and Welsh Local Government Association in this respect. It is not simply a question of more resources, it will involve formalising a number of requirements to ensure quality and encourage good practice. This could include development plans outlining formal procedures for resource allocation, wider support and training provision.

Tapping the potential of the local communities through Learning Development Plans further promotes the role of the voluntary youth service.

Voluntary action and volunteering in Wales forms an intrinsic part of local communities, underpinning much of the activity and organisation that binds communities together. In reaching out to all young people in their communities voluntary youth organisations will play a central role in producing and delivering local development plans.

Partnerships, Flexible Provision and New Technology

The Green Paper states that learning is no longer exclusively a classroom based activity and this recognition is greatly supported by CWVYS. Also welcomed is the emphasis on the need for effective and cohesive partnerships to maximise opportunities for lifelong learning. CWVYS, as a partnership in its essence, is keen to build on and extend the large number of partnerships that have been created relating to the youth service. Partnerships such as the New Century Youth Challenge are a glowing example of the importance and potential of this type of approach. The WCVA has, through its work identified a number of key features in partnership working with the voluntary and community sector which brings added value.

- Local intelligence - unless the community is involved in the conception of any local strategy including its learning strategy, it is unlikely to meet its needs.
- Legitimacy and ownership - local involvement creates a sense of ownership and commitment to success
- More services - an active voluntary and community sector will develop a wide range of responses to a multiplicity of learning needs and approaches in the community
- Sustainability - initiatives arising from the community are more likely to survive in the longer term than top down approaches
- Success - research in associated fields has shown that projects succeeded when they involved the community from conception, through implementation and evaluation.

Qualifications and Achievement for All

Ensuring that the qualifications structure is flexible enough to meet the needs of all learners is essential. A Single National Framework for Learners encompassing all existing post - 14 qualifications would therefore be welcomed. Voluntary youth organisations have a tradition of giving awards for achievement. The further development of National Records of Achievement would encourage a systematic yet less formal way of offering young people an opportunity to demonstrate and record their achievements and learning outcomes. Such a process encourages young people who may not always want to take part in schemes which they perceive to be formal and structural. A Single National Framework for Learners should also ensure that APL is recognised by education providers such as colleges as a route into more formal learning.

The enormous achievements of formal Welsh medium education need to be replicated in a community setting. The growing demand for Welsh language youth services is one that many voluntary youth organisations cannot respond to. The Youth Service, in partnership with the growing number of language initiatives (Mentrau Iaith) and the existing, established providers of Welsh medium youth services should draw up a strategy aimed at responding to this new demand for services.

Conclusion

The Council for Wales of Voluntary Youth Services welcomes the emphasis placed on the importance and value of informal, community based learning in the Green Paper. Such an emphasis can only promote the important contribution the Voluntary Youth Service has to make in the drive towards a learning country. LIFE sets out a framework for a coherent and strategic partnership that can take this concerted effort to another plane.

CWVYS looks forward to the challenge ahead and to working alongside its partners, including the Welsh Office and the National Assembly for Wales, to ensure better and more learning opportunities for young people in Wales.

CWVYS
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