

# The Training Needs of Principal Youth Officers in Wales

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## **1. Purpose of the Report**

- 1.1 This report details the results of an audit of training needs relating to Local Authority Principal Youth Officers in Wales. It draws on needs identified by Officers themselves and a consideration of the policy context of current services that frames the developmental needs of those services.
- 1.2 The research and concluding report were commissioned by the Wales Youth Agency.

## **2. Introduction**

- 2.2 The Audit came about as result of discussions between representatives of the Wales Youth Agency and members of the Principal Youth Officers Group convened by the Association of Directors of Education in Wales. It has involved detailed consultation with the PYO group as a whole and with individual Officers.
- 2.3 In addition, staff of the Wales Youth Agency and the Staff College contributed particularly in relation to the policy framework and the Agency's Operational Plan.
- 2.4 Work on the Audit began in December 2001.
- 2.5 The methods of data collection included an initial survey of all Officers; attendance at Principal Officers' meetings; individual in-depth interviews against a planned schedule; telephone conversations and review of relevant documentation.

## **3. The Training Needs of Principal Officers**

- 3.1 The initial survey revealed a diversity of Principal Officer posts within the Local Authority Youth Service in Wales. It appears that no two posts are the same. Youth services are located in different sections and/or departments within each Authority, although the most common location is still within Education departments. Responsibilities, however vary, with some Officers responsible specifically for youth work, others carrying responsibility for a range of services to young people. There are considerable differences in management structures, varying between traditional hierarchies and 'flatter' more functionally organised authorities. The position of Principal Officers within these structures varies too.
- 3.2 Despite the diversity, the study shows a number of commonalities, specifically around, Role; Core Skills; the Context in which people work and the Policy Direction for work with young people emerging from Extending Entitlement.

- 3.3 Officers commonly described their roles as;
- Providing leadership for the Service and its staff
  - Operational Management
  - Policy development
  - Promoting the Service
  - Developing the Service
- 3.4 All the officers taking part in the study manage some form of budget. Although these vary in size and breadth, financial management skills are seen to be essential. So too are personnel management skills, planning skills, enabling skills, the ability to communicate well with a cross section of colleagues, staff, members of other agencies and other officers and negotiating skills.
- 3.5 Although not an uncommon list of 'management' skills in itself, the context of change in which these skills are required is a critical factor in understanding training needs. A major feature of recent years is the reorganisation of many authorities. Officers frequently reported changes in departmental structures, changes in the function and focus of services, widening of services to embrace other young people's services and the need to develop new networks and partnerships. These changes impact at all levels of the service and Officers need to be able to manage change both for themselves and for their staff.
- 3.6 In addition, the emergence of Extending Entitlement, linked to the 'Framework' document has given new definition to the described roles. There is the opportunity for services to occupy a more strategic position within their authorities, but it hinges on demonstrating effectiveness, either to meet new sets of expectations, or as one Officer put it, 'to fight one's corner'. There are critical judgements to be made about the quality, maintenance, development and sustainability of services. Officers are required to develop policies within a much wider framework, which requires a wider field of knowledge. The increased emphasis on partnership arrangements means the management of a more complex set of interfaces and the Service's operational staff need to be enabled to meet fresh challenges, requiring an awareness of training needs.

#### **4. Emerging themes**

- 4.1 Several themes emerged in the course of discussions with Youth Officers that were clearly linked to these considerations. The provision of quality services for young people was undoubtedly the most common concern expressed by Officers during this audit and the challenges of quality assurance, sustainable development and measurable achievement are not taken lightly.
- 4.2 Despite initial disappointment at the impact of the Extending Entitlement document, there is still an optimism that within the Assembly's policy directives there is a real opportunity for the Youth

Service to play an important part in shaping services for children and young people. Youth Officers see the need to be pro-active; e.g. to help develop standards and measurements that do not compromise the essential ethos of the work and to actively contribute to the assessment of services.

- 4.3 The proposals for training in Quality Assurance and of Associate Peer Assessors contained in the WYA Operational Plan should enable these things to happen.
- 4.4 Following on from this concern, other themes to emerge were:
  - the need for adequate induction;
  - management training;
  - sharing practice;
  - accurate information
  - opportunity to see and discuss new developments.
- 4.5 Irrespective of the diversity of Youth Officer posts and duties, the strategic position of the Youth Service as a whole suggests the need for all Youth Officers to share an understanding of the policy context of the work, a knowledge of key agencies and personnel nationally, which would not be covered in a local induction. Given the small number of Officers as a whole in Wales, an induction course would be impractical. However, other methods such as a pack, guide, or mentor could be offered to those individuals new in post. The Youth Officers group in conjunction with WYA are well placed to take on this function.
- 4.6 Officers generally feel that the current opportunities for senior management training are limited. Those offered by individual authorities tend to focus on corporate procedures rather than the development of management and decision making skills. The level of management training available elsewhere is mixed. Allocating time for training at Officer level is not easy and to make it worthwhile, training needs to be pitched and focussed correctly and sufficiently promoted. The quality of the programme and the trainers is deemed crucial. Several Officers cited specific training programmes run by external trainers as the most valuable.
- 4.7 The areas of management training that were mentioned most frequently were: Managing Change, Performance Management, Personnel Management, Supervision and Appraisal, Time Management and Financial Management. These could usefully define the curriculum for a Senior Managers Programme, but Officers felt that if any programme is offered it needs to be informed by their experiences.
- 4.8 Notwithstanding the moves to professionalize the service, it should be acknowledged that Officers' primary concern is for training that equips them to cope with the challenges facing them rather than attaining a management qualification per se. However, there is no reason why

these needs cannot be accommodated within WYA's current intentions to promote further professional development as a continuation of the Coherent Route already established for initial training.

- 4.9 How training is structured and at whom it is pitched will be crucial factors to relevance and take-up. Although there were varying preferences expressed with regard to length and frequency of training inputs, it is unlikely that Officers will want to spend too long away from their offices. Blocks, half days and using existing meeting structures were all options mentioned, but perhaps a variety of options organised into a modular accredited system, which could lead to qualification if required, would be the most suitable format for a training programme.
- 4.10 There could also be some value in undertaking training with other officers at similar levels who have strategic links e.g. Children and Youth Partnership Officers.
- 4.11 Similar but separate opportunities should exist for second tier Youth officers.
- 4.12 As part of its professional ethos the Youth Service upholds a practice of reflective supervision. However, the majority of Youth Officers' managers are not youth work trained and the opportunity for critical reflection offered through supervision is limited. On the whole, Officers have developed their own opportunities to reflect with the help of their staff teams, colleagues etc., but there is little formal support for them in the development of a vision for their services.
- 4.13 Individually and in different ways, each service in Wales faces new challenges and there is a great deal of innovation across the Service as a whole. The Principal Officers Group is valued as a potentially useful professional network and as such could help inform service development. The audit identified two possible functions it could take on:
- As a forum for sharing good practice, e.g. in raising standards; benchmarking; information and data collection; effective and appropriate monitoring and evaluating systems; developing qualitative indicators; policy writing; strategic planning etc. and in specific approaches such as Rural youth work; International work; the Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme; Sports Development and Youth Access. There are obvious links to be made with the WYA proposals to produce six Good Practice Guides - 'Newslines'.
- As a conduit for disseminating and clarifying information, for example: on avenues of funding; national trends; new developments and policy guidelines. The Group is willing to take on this role but would need additional support and resources to do it.

4.14 A number of Officers indicated a growing awareness of the political context of their work and the need to develop a national and international perspective for their services. A high value was placed on seeing and discussing new ideas, policies and practices with other managers of youth provisions, within Wales, the UK and the rest of Europe. Some of this could be facilitated through the PYO group but it would be beneficial if funding could be identified to create bursaries or organise group study visits specifically for Youth Officers to look at policy and service development across a wider area.

## **5. Conclusions**

- 5.1 The training needs of Principal Officers are defined by two factors: first the level of management and the role they fulfil, secondly, by the policy context in which services are now framed. For the former, training needs can be equated to other managers at this level, but the issues presented by the second factor suggest a specificity that may change over time.
- 5.2 Training should seek to meet the specific and current practice needs of Principal Officers and be included within a coherent structure of professional development that is now being considered in Wales. This should also include separate training for second tier and prospective managers.
- 5.3 Some but not all training needs may be met within WYA's operational objectives but consideration needs to be given to how unmet needs are best addressed.
- 5.4 A range of provision should be considered, making full use of existing structures such as the PYO group and drawing not only on the resources of the Staff College, but a mix of other external trainers and providers.
- 5.5 The quality of the provision is paramount and training opportunities should reflect real time constraints, wherever possible maximising existing opportunities.
- 5.6 The Principal Officers themselves should be closely consulted and involved in decisions on training provision.
- 5.7 A system for meeting the induction needs of new Officers should be developed.
- 5.8 The individual experiences and knowledge of existing Principal Officers is a major training resource in itself that can be used to benefit the development of the service and its quality of performance.
- 5.9 Opportunities for exchange of ideas through discussion and visits should be encouraged.

## **6. Recommendations**

It is recommended that:

- 6.1 WYA staff meet with the Principal Officers Group to discuss the development of its training support potential;
- 6.2 Support and resources be found to assist the group in responding to the specific initiatives identified in this audit, i.e. developing an induction system, a structure for sharing good practice and information dissemination;
- 6.3 WYA dedicate a specific number of 'Newslines' per year to management practice;
- 6.4 The PYO representatives on the Staff College be consulted in developing a Management Training programme that meets the expressed needs of Principal and second tier Officers and fits into a coherent overall structure of training and professional development;
- 6.5 Funding be sought to support individual and group study visits on Youth policy and Youth Work practice in other countries.