

WALES YOUTH FORUM

An initiative to form a Welsh Youth Forum has been in existence since March 1986. It arose from a meeting at the Welsh Office between young people, representatives of the British Youth Council and a number of employees of the statutory youth service. The meeting began by looking at how the BYC could assist the formation of local youth forums in Wales. It quickly turned to discuss the absence of an all-Wales Youth Forum. Since March a group of young people have met several times to pursue the initiative.

This report is not intended as a statement of the Steering Group's intent. It is merely my own personal view of how I would like to see the Youth Forum developing.

Volunteerism

The future Welsh Youth Forum will be an integral part of the Welsh Youth Sector. Without it the youth scene is missing a limb. Such an initiative should not have depended upon the voluntary actions of a group of young people, none of whom can claim expenses for attending meetings. Since the Steering Group first met it has learnt that there have been a number of previous attempts to launch a Youth Forum. All have obviously been unsuccessful. This attempt is also in danger of imminent collapse. Enough people in positions of authority now know about it to do something other than just watch. Too many assumptions have been made about the role of the young people on the steering Group and the principle of volunteering has become blurred. If the various agencies, statutory and voluntary, of the youth

sector had wished, a Youth Forum could have been launched years ago. It could still have been steered by a Youth Committee.

Representation

No Youth Forum actually represents young people. Some could be described as representative but even this lesser claim is questionable. There will be no elections. No mandate will be given or accepted. The Youth Forum will be self-maintaining. If it was to state that it represented the young people of Wales this would be both presumptuous and undemocratic. The only reason that Youth Forums are allowed to claim such representation is because the power they wield is negligible. If at a later stage of the Youth Forum's development members of the existing youth organisations are invited to join, they will do so only as individuals not as representatives.

What a good Youth Forum should do and be clear to itself about is represent an idea; a point of view. It should represent a series of ideas, some connected, some not. It should represent experience and knowledge. An unemployed person from Merthyr or Deeside will be able to add his or her experience to the collective. A member who is a Scout will not represent the Scouts but will be able to add the experience of what it is to be a Scout. Similarly for young people working on the Youth Training Scheme and Community Programme; in sixth form or college

Together as the Forum they will represent a simple point of view; that young people should be allowed a greater say in the decisions that affect their lives. Almost a cliché now but it has not lost its force or importance.

Youth Forum - Youth Organisations

At some future date It is a certainty that the Youth Forum will ask for members of the existing youth organisations to join. As has already been said although they will not actually represent their respective organisations how they become part of the Youth Forum is important. It must not be the personal selection of the National Secretary or Chairperson of the youth organisation. A system must be set in motion so that the young person who finally sits on the Forum can be said to have met some form of criteria. The Youth Forum will be justified in suggesting guidelines for what these should be. The final method, however/ will differ for each organisation. It will probably entail many of them having to look closely at youth participation at a national level in their own hierarchy. This will only happen if the youth organisation feels that the Welsh Youth Forum is important and active enough to justify making changes.

Youth Forum - External Agencies

This section is the focal point of this report. It provides the principal reason for launching a Youth Forum. Without it any Forum will be at best an ineffectual talking shop.

Power is, a word that is not used much in Youth Sector circles. Participation, Democracy, Development and Leadership (don't leaders have power?) are heard for more often. But the formation of the Forum does imply a transfer of power albeit a small one.

The Forum should seek to place members on the decision-making

committees of as many government agencies, quangos and user councils as possible. Any body whose work touches the lives of young people is ripe for this approach.

Organisations such as the Department of Health and Social Security (DHSS), Manpower Services Commission (MSC), Welsh Development Agency (WDA), and the Department of Employment (DOE). The user councils of the BBC, HTV, British Gas, Central Electricity Generating Board, and British Nuclear Fuels, among others are also suitable. To take it further if individual members of the Youth Forum express an interest in the environment then the Countryside Commission, the Forestry Commission and other relevant agencies could be approached. The same applies for all other topics where agencies exist.

This will serve two purposes:

- 1) Give young people an opportunity to express opinions to these organisations.
- 2) Provide a bridge between the youth sector and the outside world. This bridge is non-existent at the moment.

Neutrality

Although this is generally accepted it should occasionally be forcefully restated. The Youth Forum must always be neutral in respect to party politics. Only by monitoring this neutrality can a constant respected position be achieved. A difficulty arises if the Forum wishes to express an opinion similar to one of the political parties. On each occasion it must be stated that the Youth Forum's opinion is independent and reached through its own consultative process. If as some observers have said (and I believe to be true) the party political system in the UK is breaking down probably to be replaced by issue-based politics, the Youth Forum will be well placed to take advantage of this in future years.

Positive Discrimination

When young people gather to form an organised group and the discussion turns to how the group can be extended, two provisos are often put forward:

- 1) It must reflect every group in society.
- 2) It must be open to everybody.

These are usually proposed together, i.e. (1) can only be achieved by insisting on (2). This insistence on (2) however, then makes (1) impossible. The Youth Forum should adopt a policy of positive discrimination. The objective should be to provide the Forum with a semblance of a representative sample. The practical and philosophical challenges of this are awesome, it would, in effect, involve selecting people to join the Forum. It seems elitist. People already spend their lives being selected: in schools, colleges, youth clubs, offices and the services; by racial prejudice, by social discrimination, by height, by who their parents are, by who they know, by where they have been, by where they live, by how much money they have, by the books they can talk about, by the buzzwords they know, by the books they can talk about, by the number of sheets of paper they have - lives hinged on percentage points.

Does the Youth Forum want it to add to all of this? The Youth Forum needs a broad base. It needs people from all backgrounds. This does not happen by accident. It has to be contrived and then maintained. It will have to be flexible to reflect the needs of the organisation. Members will have to look at themselves and ask "Do we have enough people who are unemployed or on YTS or undergraduates." If not then the positive discrimination process will have to be swung in the direction of wherever it is needed. This is the weak

point. it is blatant manipulation. But it will work if carried out consistently and for all groups. It will also require constant and vigilant monitoring.

Transition

For this argument I will assume that the Youth Forum will have a rolling membership of about 50 and a Project Officer will be employed by it. Also that the Forum will be proactive. It will publish articles and magazines. It will issue press releases. It will hold participatory weekends. It will promote itself.

Older members must not hang on and on. They will have to be taught themselves to accept responsibility. To accept not being responsible is a harder lesson. As the older founder members age they become aware that they are taking part in a hoax. They silently question their credentials. Authorities look with increasing scepticism at a youth organisation where all the members are over 20. The hoax becomes pervasive.

Every time the organisation gathers the call goes out that "we must have more younger members." It is stressed that unless this happens, and quickly the once dynamic Youth Forum will turn into a stale group of people who stick around because of inertia.

When a person joins the Scouts they are offering a life-long commitment. Not many fulfil it but the implication is there. It is those people who fulfil the commitment who hold everything in trust for the younger members. They sit on committees, often for years. Emphasis is placed on individual success against a collective background. Badges, decorations and uniforms become part

of the tradition. Soon management lines are set up and stasis sets in.

The statutory youth organisations and the voluntary youth groups teach people to lead and compete. People are shown how to accept responsibility but not how to release it - positively and constructively. Doing something other than resigning one sunny May morning never to be seen again. The Youth Forum in tandem with its age limits must learn how to transfer responsibility and participation. The formation of a Youth Forum implies a transfer of power albeit a small one and that never happens without a struggle. The Youth Forum should concentrate on removing that struggle involved in a transfer of power. More thought should be given to turnover. How is continuity maintained in an organisation where the membership can potentially change completely over five years.

Where it will fit in

I envisage that the Youth Forum should be as close as possible to being a free agent. The key factor in this independence will be management control of the Youth Forum's Project Officer. The Project Officer should work independently and be answerable only to the Executive Committee of the Forum itself.

The Forum should be the first and last choice of any organisations that require a young person's voice.

The Youth Forum should rekindle attempts to create a Youth Office in Wales. This would house CWVYS, the Wales Youth Work Partnership, the CWVYS Drugs Project and Youthlink, On Line and the Wales Youth Forum as an inherent part of the structure.

Funding

The following areas of funding should be examined closely.

- 1) **Publicity.** Much of what is said concerning the importance of publicity in the article 'Youthlink-Publicity' could be reproduced here

The Youth Forum must have a sizeable budget for publicity. It must have the cash to use the services of professional graphic designers and be able to have the cash flow necessary to support a range of saleable promotional material. It should be able to afford to issue frequent Welsh National and occasional UK National press releases. It should be able to afford coloured attractive posters and bilingual leaflets. It should be able to afford fully bilingual bi-monthly, two-colour newsletters. It should be able to afford to use the services of a professional translator.

- 2) Project Officer - utility money

The Project Officer should have the budget necessary to cover incidental costs such as the hiring of a mini-bus or rooms for meetings.

The Youth Forum should never find itself in the position of having to raise money to cover the cost of its meetings.

- 3) Volunteer Expenses

Members who have the time to work voluntarily for the Forum should be fully reimbursed their expenses.

4) Commercial Sponsorship

Commercial sponsorship should be considered for all aspects of funding but with emphasis on special one-off promotional events or publications. It could never be depended on for full sponsorship.

That's all I got time for folks.

Eric Sheppard 17
August 1986

WELSH YOUTH PORUM

AIMS

- 1) To encourage young people to take an active role in the development of society in Wales
- 2) To encourage organisations outside the youth sector whose work touches the lives of young people to adopt youth participatory systems within their structures.
- 3) To encourage greater, involvement of young people in the management and decision-making systems of the youth sector, statutory and voluntary.
- 4) To act as a clearing-house for young people for the purposes of points 2) and 3) above.
- 5) To highlight the challenges faced by young people and to act as a vehicle for the expression of young peoples' opinions and needs.
- 6) To adopt a high-profile public stance using public relations, marketing, promotional and other relevant techniques .
- 7) To investigate and pursue commercial sponsorship of the Youth Forum and its projects .
- 8) To adopt a public stance of equal opportunity and encourage the elimination of racist, sexist and all other discriminatory prejudice within itself and the youth sector. This policy will include techniques of positive discrimination.
- 11) To remain politically neutral.

12) To involve itself in any projects or initiatives inside or outside of the youth sector that will further the aims 1-13.

13) To work with any organisation or individual in the furtherance of the 12 points above.

Membership

1) Members of the Youth Forum will sit as individuals not as representatives of external agencies of any kind.

2) The Youth Forum will invite other organisations to send young people but again it will be made clear that they will sit as individuals not as representatives

3) The Youth Forum will encourage young people from outside the youth sector to join. Young people who are not members of any organisation will still be eligible to join the Welsh Youth Forum.

4) Approaches will be made to young people outside of the youth sector. for example; YTS trainees, students, youth branches of trade unions, youth branches of business organisations and any other official or informal gathering of young people.

5) The Youth Forum will allow itself the right to exclude any young person from membership on grounds of

a) non-attendance of meetings

b) political bias while acting on behalf of the Forum.

c) Racial, Religious, sexual or any other form of discrimination while acting on behalf of the Forum.