

## **Speaking Notes: CWVYS AGM 7 July 2016**

I intend to talk about a small number of issues located within a complicated context in the hope that I can make some effective links between them. To help me do this I would like to start with a couple of position statements. The first part is an opinion, based on experience and reflection of that experience. The second is a statement of the obvious.

The opinion is based on 61 years involvement with the Youth Service and is concerned with its identity. I have come to the conclusion that our work is fundamentally concerned with what is currently being called the 'wellbeing' of young people. We are interested in young people as individuals, who we meet at a time in their lives when they are attempting to make sense of the world and their role within it. We are, and always have been, a 'can do' organisation with a real belief and a conviction that all young people are capable of positive change given the right circumstances.

Unfortunately, during recent years the Youth Service approach has been under threat from political and funding regimes to veer towards systemising the process of Youth Work rather than humanising it. Humanising the process is of course dependent on trusting individuals and building interventions and support from a philosophy of 'not doing things for people that people can do for themselves', an approach that requires relationship-building within communities and by improving the current system of education and learning to a more holistic process. This widening of education and learning experiences has always been - in my experience - an approach widely recognised and widely used by Youth Workers when of course they are given the opportunity,

From our earliest beginnings we have been driven to involve young people in a wide a range of positive activities. The outcomes of this approach, again identified by experience and reflection, are young people having supported opportunities to develop in ways that suit them personally. Youth Work is a process underpinned by a social and political education and learning approach concerned with the exploration of such ideas as 'who am I' 'how do I fit into my world' and what are 'my rights' and what are 'my responsibilities' to the civic society of which I am part.

Youth Work has always been important to the education and learning of young people, because it is a truism that schools do not have enough time to effectively manage all of the

responsibilities they are being given. Only 9 minutes of every waking hour of a young person of compulsory school age is spent in school. 51 minutes is spent in the community. Urgent consideration desperately needs to be given to maximising out of school time as part of an empowering and participative process involving young people in the lives of their communities. It is the responsibility of the Youth Service to articulate and promote the benefits of this approach in a clear and consistent way.

Youth Work has traditionally been an organisation within which young people develop interests and become passionate about them. From the more obvious passionate interests of young people, such as sport and music, other initiatives could be made available within the broad themes of social and political education as described previously. Initiatives would be concerned with the discovery of self and developing a commitment to the rules and values of society, counteracting racism, violence and vandalism, diminishing the gap between youth and adult society, creating a safe environment on public transport, working in schools to improve the social climate and managing occasions where large groups of young people meet such as at festivals, public beaches and recreational areas. Guiding young people into adulthood through a range of activities should continue to include them taking part in sports, camps, study visits, voluntary work and conversations on a range of issues. The role of the adult in these programmes is critical and it is clearly recognised that young people need to mix with adults in order to participate, contribute and to learn. This out of school approach to education and learning should be primarily concerned with supporting growth into citizenship and developing skills for active citizenship by:

1. promoting participation in the labour market, cultural life, education and public decision making;
2. creating opportunities for discussing topics such as identity, knowledge and moral issues;
3. practicing and developing participatory pedagogy;
4. developing participation skills in practice

The Youth Work approach would be built on simple but effective strategies always linked to young people's passions. For example, young-people-managed activities, sports clubs and music events are easily identified possibilities. This approach should not be about

discouraging individualism or the pursuit of dreams and aspirations but encouraging and enabling them.

A Youth Work approach is important because it was recognised by Rowan Williams when he was Archbishop of Canterbury that society often struggles to identify and respond to the concrete moral content society wants to see in the education of children and young people. In those environments where there is acute deprivation, including deprivation of everyday habits of mutuality and respect, school, Williams claims, have an impossible task of trying to create a 'culture' practically on its own, because the institutions that help individuals shape a story for their life are very often not available. Family continuity is rare; conventional religious practice is minimal; shared public activity is unusual; the pace of change continues to quicken. These are environments in which a school curriculum about 'values', however strongly believed, can yield disappointing results. Those who are taught often come from and go to a social environment in which common life, in the simplest sense, has often become problematic. Work and relationships tend to be equally transient. Williams puts it provocatively. We can no longer be confident of educating children in a tradition. Schools can't do the job of a whole society, sustaining a 'tradition' on behalf of the whole community, an accepted set of perspectives on human priorities and relationships, a feel for the conventions of common life; they can do a certain amount of damage limitation in the context of a rootless social environment, but cannot of themselves sustain a culture that can command loyalty outside the school gates. What they can manage by way of civic and moral education is for the most part, inevitably, at the formal level, the procedural level - encouraging general respect and tolerance. This is excellent, but doesn't help young people from a range of different social, religious and cultural backgrounds sufficient time and space to discover who they are and how they fit into an increasingly complex society. Within this environment the need for a Youth Service driven by its social and political education and learning approach is vital.

Now for the obvious. Each generation of young people is a product of their particular time. This is also true of the Youth Service, which is shaped consciously or not by the particular characteristics of Wales - as these are defined by social, political and economic forces. I would argue that understanding the complexities of these characteristics is a prerequisite for developing the strategic approach of the Youth Service in Wales. This requirement was certainly

supported during the early days of devolution when a new political framework was being promoted as a new style democracy. Politicians claimed that the Assembly would be for the people of Wales, it would be accountable to the people of Wales, and its priorities would be to ensure their economic and social well-being. From its very beginning, the National Assembly was keen to promote a new way of operating, described as 'Team Wales'. The history of this approach for me personally goes back further than 1997. In 1992 together with Bert Jones we set out to bring the Education and Training Standards function to Wales from England to be located within the Wales Youth Agency. Rather than the inappropriately-named National Youth Agency which had a responsibility for providing central service to the Youth Service in England. It was a tough fight with the Director of the NYA making all sorts of claims about a lack of competence and ability of the workers in Wales to carry out the task. We won the challenge and developed a process that tried to meet the specific requirements of our Youth Service. It was not perfect and it presented and still presents certain challenges. But it was a process developed and owned by the Youth Service in Wales and it was underpinned by a clear understanding of its nature as this has been developed over time. With this personal history of trying to develop a Youth Service in Wales that understands the particular characteristics of Wales I am saddened and alarmed at the growth in the use of advisers and experts from outside of Wales who have limited understanding of the essential elements that make up Welsh society within which our Youth Service is located. I am not advocating that we introduce an isolationist or elitist approach. We have much to learn from elsewhere but this should be for our advantage and we should choose the type of relationship that suits us best.

At this time of yet more change there are a number of key messages that I believe are vital to the survival of the Youth Service. I would advocate that we continue to fight to carry out our work in accordance with the National Youth Work strategy, a document approved by the Welsh Government but with limited impact on practice as it is diverted towards a mechanistic process concerned with making a contribution to achievement in school. We must persuade our elected members of the importance of a broader education and learning experience both inside and outside of school. For a range of fundamental reasons I would defend the voluntary relationship between the Youth Worker and young people and the universal approach. We should not be a rescue organisation working specifically with, for example, those identified as Not in Education Employment and Training or those involved in anti-social

or criminal activities. Although the positive impact of our work with young people on such issues should not be underestimated. I would also defend the idea of 'association'. The bringing together of young people in a range of collective activities where they could develop the personal skills and attributes identified in the National Youth Service Strategy.

This brings me to my last point, which relates to the equally important association necessary for those working with young people in both the voluntary and maintained sectors. There is little central or national Youth Service infrastructure left in Wales. As a consequence there is little opportunity to share practice, to exchange ideas and ambitions. There is little opportunity to bring workers together to discuss and debate contemporary practice and to provide support and encouragement to those who provide such a valuable service to young people. What is left of this central or national infrastructure is or could be provided by CWVYS, an organisation also under threat. The Wales Youth Agency did not survive because it could not persuade those who it served to support it. Once lost such support becomes very difficult to re-establish.

I want to end with a couple of suggestions about how the Youth Service in Wales could move forward:

1. Strategic stakeholders in the Youth Service in Wales need to claim ownership of it.
2. There is a need to get politicians to recognise what the Youth Service can contribute to their agenda. This will require clear and consistent messages that need to be carefully constructed and delivered.
3. The current funding stream for Youth Work between Welsh Government and local authority is ineffective and should be reviewed because it is clearly driven by competing political and managerial priorities.
4. A regional structure should be introduced to replace the local authority structure within which the priorities identified within the National Youth Service Strategy would be delivered;
5. We should celebrate our can-do approach. An approach that brings hope and optimism into the lives of all the young people of Wales who are lucky enough to find it.

John Rose