

# Is there a problem with the Youth Service in Wales?

---

There are a number of ideas explored in this short paper – squeeze, capacity, drift, managerialism, organisational learning, leadership, vision and ultimately organisational resilience.

Both Youth Work and the Youth Service are under pressure to adapt, powerful actors seeking to influence this unique and principled form of work. Youth Work in Wales has traditionally had distinct characteristics, relying on young people engaging of their own free will, being age specific, being open to all young people, being based on a non-formal education approach and an approach which declares it puts the young people of Wales first (WAG, 2007). It is this wanting to help, to support, to give something back to young people which is commonly motivates adults to become involved in Youth and Community Work. One of the results of this commitment is that the Youth Service, the structure established to deliver this unique form of work has culturally been keen to contribute to achieving social value. There has also culturally been a keenness to keep up, to be current, to modernise, and, it is widely recognised this has resulted in mission drift as a response to whatever social agenda is prepared to fund it. This has squeezed the unique characteristics til in some cases they have become invisible. Since the turn of the century this willingness to flex has increasingly resulted in the organisation delivering work which is outside of the characteristics which make it unique and so valuable to the wellbeing of young people and communities. For a service which purports to put young people first how is this strategic aim being achieved?

The Youth Service is a disparate collection of organisations in the maintained and voluntary sector and as such there are difficulties when devising a clear vision for how it wants to contribute to the future wellbeing of young people across Wales.

Tom Wylie, former Chief Executive of the National Youth Agency has suggested that arguments for the continuation of the Youth Service can be based around three main ideas: romanticism, technocentrism or principled pragmatism (Wylie, 2010). Wylie's proposition was that principled pragmatism is required and that the Youth Service needs to live in and perhaps more importantly understand the real world while maintaining an approach based on principle. Arguably the stakeholders influencing the Youth Service want it to continue to achieve social benefits which it is capable of but also wants the Youth Service to move on from what is sometimes regarded as an unhelpful preoccupation with principles and values. This is an unhelpful irony and one which must be avoided, unless the baby is thrown out with the bath water.

New Public Management is an agenda which has its origins in the early nineties, but is one which still influences the work of the Youth Service today. If as Peter Drucker has noted what gets measured gets managed and what gets managed gets done the relentless chase within the Youth Service to measure young people's progress is having an unhelpful influence upon the work. Results based accountability is one of the current measures in vogue as society aims to get to grips with the real impact of social programmes.

**Who is really standing back and questioning what the Youth Service is trying to achieve, what is it for, how it can achieve this vision and how should success really be judged?**

There is a risk that rather unhelpfully the measurement can become as important as (if not more important than) the work itself. Where is the critical debate happening about the Welsh vision for young people and where and how the Youth Service can contribute to achieving that vision. The Youth Service remains overly concerned with itself and could arguably contribute more effectively to achieving for the young people of Wales if it had greater capacity to better understand their needs in a rapidly changing European and global context and as a result to put young people first.

Young people in Wales are in a crisis, Wales is in the midst of a widespread recession which is unprecedented in more than a generation. As a nation and as a Youth Work sector devoted to improving the condition of the young, we are living once more in wintry and troubled times (Wylie, 2010). Of all age groups young people arguably continue to be hit hardest by the recession. 50,200 (22%) of young people aged 16-24 who are available to work are estimated to be unemployed in Wales. Over a third of Welsh Job Seeker's Allowance claimants are aged 18-24 (ONS, no date).

Recent research by the Prince's Trust has shown that thousands of unemployed young people are concerned about their future prospects, nearly half of the young people who are not in education employment or training fear they will never have enough money to provide for themselves or their children, more than one in five of these young people feel they will never amount to anything and more than two out of five young people who are not in education, training or employment don't have enough money to buy smart clothes to wear to an interview (Prince's Trust, 2010). Among 16 to 24 year olds, unemployment is highest for those with no qualifications. 43.2% of 16 to 24 year olds with no qualifications were unemployed in Autumn 2009 which was an 11% increase in one year and youth unemployment in Wales is the fourth highest level across the regions of the UK (IPPR, 2009).

**What is the Youth Service vision for young people in Wales who are looking for work, how is it responding to this agenda – who is it linking with and how is this work being funded? What are the projections for youth unemployment in the next 3-5 years, how is the Youth Service positioning itself? Is anyone daring to ask the questions about the impact of changes in funding of Higher Education in Wales, who is imagining the implications of this change and what if any role the Youth Service has in enabling young people to cope with these changes?**

This issue of being without work is not solely a problem isolated to young people with low level qualifications or even to the young people of the United Kingdom but one which is evident across the European Union. The European Youth Forum have noted that 'young people have not been adequately provided for and despite being more educated and driven than previous generations, they face structural hurdles in accessing the labour market' (European Youth Forum, 2011).

**How are young people being prepared for a full life but one which might involve part time employment and periodic unemployment? Does the Youth Service have a role to play? If so what linkages can be made?**

Even if we look at the outcomes of formal education young people in Wales are not in a strong position in comparison to young people across the developed world. The PISA results from 2009 confirm that just three countries within the 34 countries of the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) had lower reading scores than Wales and these countries were Turkey, Chile and Mexico (Bradshaw, Ager, Burge and Wheeler, 2010). In relation to mathematics young people in Wales compare even less favourably, compared to the OECD and other developing countries there are 35 countries with scores which are statistically significantly higher than Wales. The study also found that pupils in Wales spend more time chatting online and reading emails than the OECD average but also acknowledge that a high proportion only read if they have to. Having said that pupils in Wales are reportedly better able to overcome disadvantage and achieve scores higher than predicted by their background when compared to some other OECD countries (Bradshaw et. al., 2010). So we can see that young people in Wales are not achieving the outcomes from formal education which will enable the country to radically improve its position in the league of the OECD, the results of which could include continued stagnation in job opportunities for young people and the general population.

**How can the Youth Service contribute to the education of young people in Wales, complementing formal education, not competing or replacing? What does the best practice look like – how is it measured and shared?**

Worklessness, unemployment, economic inactivity, however it is called the condition of being without regular purposeful activity has a significant impact upon well-being, illustrated by mental health issues including anxiety, depression, eating disorders and self-harm (World Health Organisation, 2009).

**What is the Youth Service doing about counteracting the effects of physical inactivity? What is the Youth Service doing about improving young people's well-being? How well does the Youth Service understand its role in well-being? Enabling young people to connect with others, to be active, to take notice, to keep learning and to give something back to society. Who is it connecting with to maximise impact?**

So in Wales the effects of recession among the young are many and varied, the literature suggests these effects are physical and social as well as psychological. So these areas are all central to individual and general well-being.

***Question - does the Youth Service have a role in contributing to combating these deficits? If it does who decides how these contributions can be made – who seeks collective resources to make such a contribution. Who lobbies for the maintained Youth Service and for the young people of Wales?***

What can be learned from Youth Services elsewhere about the role and contribution of the Youth Service to the achievements of social policy objectives. For example Finland – their Youth

Service is taken seriously, it is clear it is a preventative service, it is well resourced, politically well regarded and makes a successful, visible contribution to the national life.

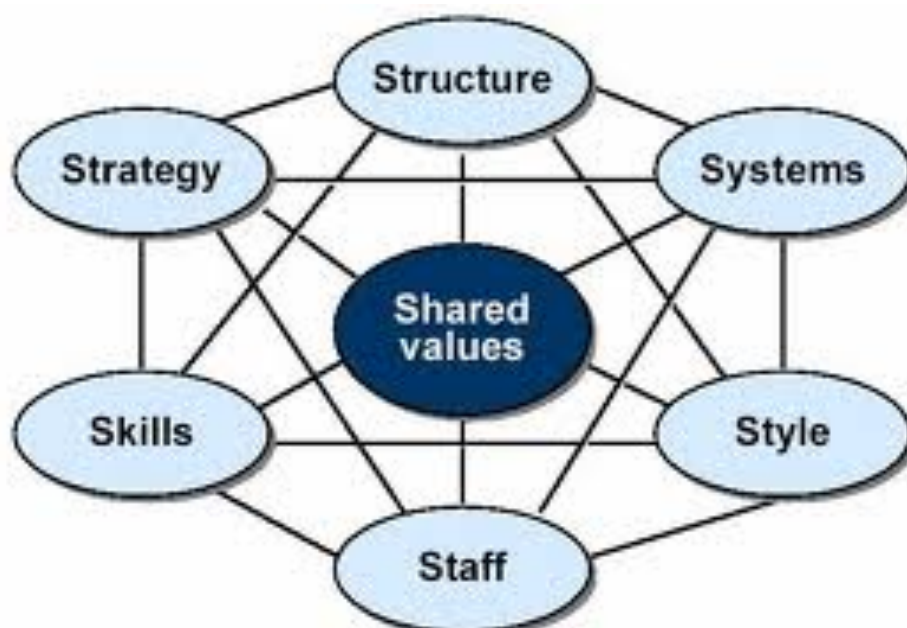
The Youth Service in Wales on the other hand appears unclear about its role in social life, appears to be almost apologetic and lacking in self-confidence and perhaps also a sense of identity. The Youth Service at a strategic level needs to better understand the political context and to develop a planned approach to increase its resilience. The Youth Service needs to develop character, capacity and clarity. Resilience is the organisational capability to anticipate key events from emerging trends, constantly adapt to change, and rapidly bounce back from disaster (Marcos and Macauley, 2008).

Some strategies for increasing resilience include conducting scenario planning, enhancing linkages both internally and externally, facilitating the scanning of the environment in search of valuable external information, deconstructing and assimilating it, and exploiting it, and then designing strategies and systems to fit the context, further strengthening mechanisms for integration is also important and an area where consortium working is making progress.

- What vision does the PYOG hold and share for young people in Wales?
- What scenarios is the PYOG planning for?
- How is the PYOG being proactive in making linkages – and why?
- How does the PYOG proactively scan the environment, and exploit its findings?
- How does the PYOG design strategies and systems (and structures, style, skills, staffing) to deliver its vision?

It can be seen from Figure 1 that changing one aspect of an organisation such as its strategy may for example necessitate change in systems and structure.

**Figure 1.** Interrelations between aspects of organisations which need to be considered when making strategic change.



Time to pose a few questions about the capacity of the Youth Service to be resilient. The literature suggests there are five characteristics of resilient organisations, these being leadership, culture, people, systems and settings. Strategic leadership in the Youth Service has long been an area which could be strengthened as evidenced by numerous Estyn reports – strategically, what has the PYOG learned from this, what if any changes have been made?

### **Reflections for leaders – the present**

- What can be done to develop strategic leadership capacity, within the executive but also politically? Who at a political level champions the Youth Service?
- What can be done to explore the capacity for change within the Youth Service locally and nationally? What capacity do PYOs have to contribute to strategic change? Who provides leadership locally and nationally?
- What has been the effect of the last major change in the Youth Service? What did PYOs learn about this change?
- To what extent is the PYOG a learning organisation?
- What are the key factors that help PYOs learn? Are these factors primarily internal or external?
- What is the capacity of the Youth Service to look out for emergent relevant changes in the environment, using alliances, partnerships and joint-ventures? Are there alternative opportunities with e.g. Welsh Government, Children’s Commissioners office, Public Health Wales, other national organisations.

### **Reflections for leaders - the future**

- How can the Youth Service develop future leadership capacity both within the workforce and in developing the capacity of other stakeholders to step in to bat for the Youth Service in the political context?
- How can PYOs and the Youth Service become more forward thinking?
- What are the key factors that are likely to affect the Youth Service in the next 3 – 5 years?
- What proactive mechanisms has the Youth Service in place to identify and analyse emerging trends and how effectively are these trends acted upon?

Darrel Williams  
April 2013.