

Extending Entitlement – The Role of the Youth Service

There is a tendency for us all to forget the past, even the recent past, as we concentrate on the new initiatives and developments that cross our paths on a daily basis. As a consequence many of us have already started to forget the state of the Youth Service prior to the setting up of the Welsh Assembly in 1999.

It is generally recognised that the Youth Service in Wales had been in decline since Local Government Reorganisation in 1974 and had, as a result, been weakened to a point where it was unable to provide little collective resistance to the social and economic policies of the Conservative Party who were in power between 1979 and 1997. Both Alun Micheal as the First Secretary to the National Assembly for Wales and the writers of '*Extending Entitlement*' recognised this when they stated that the core Youth Service had been reduced significantly in real terms over the past decade. The result they concluded was a '*patchy service with great variation across Wales in both quality and coverage*'.

What then do we remember about the Youth Service pre National Assembly? There was a shortage of suitably qualified full-time staff with most face-to-face work with young people being carried out by part-time workers. Management structures were often weak with too many managers of the Youth Service also being responsible for other areas of work such as adult education, community development, leisure and play. There was over-dependence on short term funding related to specific policy objectives. Too many youth centres were run down both in terms of fabric and in terms of décor and equipment and inappropriately placed as a result of the youth service taking over redundant local authority buildings. The youth service was also too often characterised by low aspirations, uncertainty, disillusionment and apprehensive of becoming involved in the political process, which was seen to be unfriendly towards the very existence of a Youth Service struggling to maintain its young-people-first approach.

Looking back over the last three years what has changed for the Youth Service? How have the ideals of Extending Entitlement - unanimously agreed by the National Assembly for Wales in 2000 and welcomed by the Youth Service - been implemented?

Most significantly the Youth Service has become embedded in legislation albeit as a component part of a wider 'Youth Support Services'. Its specific role has also been enhanced by the comments in the Directions and Guidance for Extending Entitlement, which requires each local authority to:

provide and/or secure a high-quality Youth Service which adheres to the ethos and principles within the Youth Work Curriculum Statement for Wales

The document also confirmed the role of youth work as being:

- Concerned with young people's personal and social development through informal learning which can be both accredited and non-accredited

This would be achieved through an approach:

- underpinned by a voluntary relationship between young people and youth worker

In addition Chief Executives of local authorities are required under the new legislation to create a Young People's Partnerships whose responsibilities include:

- carrying out a local audit of need
- undertaking a local skills audit of those who work with young people
- identifying existing resources
- consulting with young people
- developing a strategic plan
- prioritising
- producing an annual delivery plan

A new Youth Policy Team of civil servants has also been created within the Welsh Assembly Government as the mechanism to:

- co-ordinate its policy for young people
- promote new ways of working

- share and disseminate effective practice
- monitor progress

Within this positive environment we should however recognise some frailties. The Youth Service will no longer be inspected by ESTYN but as part of the wider ‘Youth Support Services’. The New Burdens money allocated from the Welsh Assembly Government to regenerate the Youth Service ends in March 2004 with no indication yet of its continuance. The same position applies to the Staff College. This provides some challenges for us and for the Welsh Assembly Government as it enters its second 4-year term of office. **Can we obtain an unambiguous interpretation of what our statutory base means in practice? Can we use this to ensure the development of a National Youth Service delivered locally to the same standard with the same resources in every locality quality controlled by an independent** ESTYN inspection? Can the New Burdens money be secured and increased. We should not forget that when asked to ‘dream the dream’ the New Burdens working Party arrived at a figure in excess of £100 million pounds as being necessary to ensure a vibrant service. Will the resources be secured to build on the positive impact the Staff College has had on Youth Work training in Wales? Will the recommendations made in Extending Entitlement for an enhanced role for the Wales Youth Agency be realised? These are new challenges for us but their attainment will be built on a **significantly** stronger position than the one facing the Youth Service in 1999.

Even a superficial analysis would recognise our achievements of the Youth Service during the last three years. There has been a significant increase in the numbers of full-time workers in post. Opportunities for training have been enhanced through a threefold increase in the number of Youth and Community Work training programmes now being offered through NEWI, UWIC, and UWCN. The introduction of the Staff College funded by the Welsh Assembly Government has also brought new opportunities for locally delivered training as part of the ‘Coherent Route for Training’ which links programmes from OCN Level 1 to Postgraduate level. Many local authorities have used additional resources from the Welsh Assembly Government to both review and revise their Youth Service management structures to

ensure a more effective service to young people. Others have been able to re-grade senior youth workers and practitioners salaries to more appropriately reflect new responsibilities. New working arrangements have also been introduced involving a more co-operative approach with a wide range of organisations working with young people. As a consequence of these and other developments the Youth Service workforce has in most instances become re-energised and re-motivated.

It can be claimed with some justification that a generally positive start has been made by the Youth Service in the delivery of the Welsh Assembly Government's agenda for young people. However, in order to maintain this progress and move forward at an even quicker pace, a number of potential obstacles, both general to the creation of positive Young People's Partnerships and specific to the Youth Service, need to be identified and acted upon.

We must all strive to ensure that Young People's Partnerships do not become more important than their constituent parts. We must not forget that it is the constituent parts that actually deliver services to young people. To achieve this we must find the time to develop a culture of trust between ourselves as the Youth Service, the Youth Policy Team, Young People's Partnerships Co-ordinators and other organisations working with young people. Differences of opinion should be seen to be that, and not a declaration of enmity. Professional experience and expertise should be respected, as should the protection of organisational identity. All those involved in Young People's Partnerships have a passionate commitment to their area of work with young people. Their articulation of that commitment should not be misconstrued as criticisms of other ways of working. Young People's Partnerships should be a celebration of the synergy possible as a result of strong clearly identified organisations working together for a common purpose. Time and effort should be given to make sure that this happens.

The challenge for us in the Youth Service is to ensure that we are able to speak in a collective way about what the Youth Service is about and in doing so articulate in an unambiguous way what it is able to contribute to the vision of *Extending Entitlement*. From this position of greater organisational security we will also be able to articulate in a positive way what we are unable or unprepared to do. There are, however two

obvious obstacles to be overcome before we are in this powerful position. **First** the expansion of the youth service has resulted in the employment of significant numbers of inappropriately qualified full-time workers. There is in most instances little doubt about either their commitment or their enthusiasm for their work with young people. However too many have had neither the opportunity to examine the philosophical position of the youth service through professional training or to have been introduced to the purpose and values of youth work as a result of appropriate Induction Training. We have to address this issue with some urgency. If we do not, youth service identity (as it is described through purpose and values) will diminish as it becomes drawn into a type of work with young people that is not youth work. In too many instances parts of the youth service are being seduced by a perception of greater organisational security as a result of an enhanced involvement in government determined agendas driven by the attainment of measurable targets. To engage with these new, more specific funding streams, significant numbers of ‘youth workers’ have abandoned the philosophical position of youth work to become, for example, school assistants ‘cooling out’ disruptive pupils or a form of Education Welfare Officer collecting young people from home and delivering them to school.

Secondly there is pressure from within the youth service to change its identity to more adequately meet the requirements of government. Howard Williamson (Vice Chair Wales Youth Agency) recently suggested the abandonment of the voluntary relationship between youth worker and young people. Doug Nichols (CYWU) proclaims that the Youth Service needs to be more pragmatic in dealing with the requirements being placed on it by government and Tom Wylie (Chief Executive National Youth Agency) brands those defending the traditional Youth Service position as Utopians.

These issues need to be addressed with some alacrity. The first through appropriate training and by the development of a full-time qualified Youth Service with all workers being trained to JNC Level 2 National qualification. The second through a collective resistance to those who want the Youth Service to abandon its unique identity in favour of a position more closely aligned to the economic and social agenda of a particular political party. We should all remember in that debate that the

next elected government of the UK may want to take us even further down the road in controlling and measuring young people.

Extending Entitlement is still a new document; the role of the Youth Service is still evolving within it. It is a document which has the support of the Youth Service who are committed to its delivery in a way that recognises the specific role it is capable of making.

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