

Cynulliad Cenedlaethol Cymru | National Assembly for Wales

Y Pwyllgor Plant, Pobl Ifanc ac Addysg | Children, Young People and Education Committee

Ymchwiliad i Waith Ieuenctid | Inquiry into Youth Work

YW 01

Ymateb gan : Dr Howard Williamson CVO CBE, Athro Polisi Ieuenctid Ewropeaidd, Prifysgol De Cymru

Response from : Dr Howard Williamson CVO CBE, Professor of European Youth Policy, University of South Wales

**Question 1** – What are your views on young people’s access to youth work services, including, for example:

- levels of provision across Wales and any regional variation;
- issues relating to access for specific groups of young people eg language, disability, rurality, ethnicity.

The aspirations of Welsh Government, for all young people to be able access a ‘youth offer’, provided either by local authorities or voluntary sector youth work activity, fall dreadfully short in the context of public sector cuts and intensified competition within the voluntary sector for available funds. This is **not** to blame local government, where services to do with child protection, vulnerable adults, social care for the elderly, amongst other things, have to take priority. But given what we know about good youth work, in terms of promoting learning and development in young people, and social inclusion and ‘citizenship’, especially for more marginalised, excluded and minority groups, the erosion of youth work opportunities is a false economy. Claims made by some senior officers in local authorities that, despite draconian economic reductions in budget, they have managed to maintain effective ‘youth services’, are patently false. They may have maintained key services around the re-engagement of young people who are ‘NEET’ (Not in Education, Training or Employment) – a core strategic aim of the current Welsh Government youth work strategy – but that is not exclusively what youth work is about. Youth work needs to provide a much broader-based set of practices (beyond bolstering the goals of formal education) if it is to genuinely provide non-formal experiential learning opportunities for the diversity of young people and to engage and include those from specific contexts and backgrounds.

If you believe that there are particular problems, how do you think they could be resolved?

It is easy to write a 'youth offer' and when Tom Wylie originally produced one (when he retired, a decade ago, from England's National Youth Agency), it was an important thing to say in order to advocate for the retention of 'open' youth work. But today, in Wales (and it is even worse in Wales), it is empty rhetoric completely disconnected from reality. In Rhondda Cynnon Taf, where I live, there was once an impressive youth service, providing a range of access points to youth work, from local fixed youth work projects, to detached and outreach work, and dedicated programmes of work focused on particular issues and groups. That is what youth work needs to make available: the possibility of a journey for a young person within changing social groups, across different contexts, in connection with different issues, and through the experience of different methods. That requires a 'mixed economy' of youth work – street-based work, arts projects, clubs, voluntary sector provision (such as Boys and Girls' clubs or the Young Farmers), specialist projects for girls and young women, or young people on the autism spectrum..... I am sure that if we surveyed young people in Wales, many would be unaware of what was available, and most who were aware would point to the limitations of that 'offer'. That is why strategic oversight is important. A few places are still relatively well equipped in terms of youth work provision (though even Cardiff's retreat into 'activity centres' is a pale shadow of what it previously offered), but some areas are almost devoid of provision (beyond rather vacuous 'participation' initiatives, which used to be integrally attached to youth work provision and practice). Proactive incentivisation to provide some kind of 'baseline' youth work activity is clearly required. [I did this on a modest scale when I once chaired the National Voluntary Youth Organisation grant scheme for Wales]

**Question 2** – How effective do you think the Welsh Government strategy and policy on youth work is?

In considering this question you may wish to think about:

- the Welsh Government’s specific youth work policy and strategy such as ‘The Youth Work offer’; The Wales Charter for Youth Work; The National Youth Work Strategy for Wales 2014 to 2018;
- Welsh Government departmental responsibilities and whether there is a cross-departmental and co-ordinated approach to support youth work provision.

Youth work has always suffered from being some kind of ‘all singing, all dancing’ entity, apparently capable of doing everything but often perceived as doing almost nothing for young people. There are grounds for making arguments in both directions, but the pendulum should not swing too far either way. Youth work can make a difference in relation both to individual needs and aspirations and to societal imperatives and expectations. It does not prevent crime or insert young people into the labour market, but it can help young people appraise their behaviour and circumstances and then move in more positive and purposeful directions. This distinction has been well researched: youth work produces *personal* change that is a pre-requisite for *positional* change.

Youth work has been under pressure to make unrealistic claims, in relation to policy agendas around education, employment, health, crime and other things. I have been supportive of the current Welsh youth work strategy that places clear emphasis on connecting youth work to formal educational priorities of Welsh Government (attendance, achievement and progression). However, the strategy does not point to youth work becoming enslaved by the formal educational agenda, but this is how it has become, or is perceived to have become. This is the problem with policy/strategy interpretation and rationalisation. Effective youth work would almost certainly organically support the retention and reengagement of young people who are (at risk of or already) ‘NEET’ in formal education; it actually becomes less effective if it is too closely harnessed to schools (that was some of the evidence of the Youth Work and Schools Partnership Programme, which Wales pioneered in the late 1990s). Disengaged young people become as cynical/sceptical of youth work, as they are of schooling! So there needs to be some autonomy for youth work, and authentic partnership with schooling, not subordination to it.

How do you think the Welsh Government could approach its youth work strategy and policy differently / to better effect?

The leadership, prioritisation and direction from the centre is very poor. Changes of civil service personnel and ministerial responsibility for youth work (even during the development of the latest strategy) have not helped. Welsh Government's established and agreed relationship with local government also makes more centralised determination rather problematic. The result, witnessed over many years, is that youth work stagnates between weak local championship and prevarication and shifting sands at national level. Organisations and institutions in the middle (youth work organisation headquarters and umbrella bodies) consequently suffer from indecision as to how to 'lobby' local government without a clear sense of national priority (even if they might oppose national priorities if they did exist). The current strategic framework – weakly executed at local level, largely because of resource cutbacks and constraints – may not be popular with some within the youth work sector, but in fact it is more clear than it has been since the days of Extending Entitlement (2000), though the latter anticipated a broader 'package' of youth work practice.

The issue therefore is not the strategy per se, but its interpretation, articulation and resource allocation. Different models are nigh on useless if there are few resources to do anything. The idea of a national agency for youth work has been mooted, but the Wales Youth Agency (1992–2006), of which I was Vice–Chairman throughout, was de facto that, and ultimately ended on account of differences of philosophy and clashes of personality with Welsh Government. [I had always wanted it to be an agency concerned with 'working with young people', including youth work, but I lost that 'fight'] The structures are less important, than what needs to be done:

- An oversight of youth worker training
- Support for the development of youth work practice
- Facilitation of youth participation and youth information
- International connections and exchanges (and resources)
- Strengthen bonds between maintained and voluntary sectors
- Other

There seems to be a terrible vacuum that, currently, nobody is prepared, or allowed to fill

**Question 3** – What are your views on the funding available for youth work, including through Local Authority, Welsh Government, European Union, and Third Sector.

I do not know enough about Welsh Government funding of local authorities and subsequent funding of youth work. I do understand that few local authorities spend up to the recommended levels of the Revenue Support Grant on youth work.

Welsh Government has reneged on old promises to strengthen and extend support for voluntary sector youth work, though – in the current funding climate – there has to be some sympathy for that position. However, there was a time when Ministers promised an increase in the national voluntary sector grant scheme towards one million pounds. It remains much less than that, and fewer youth organisations are recipients than ever before.

European funds for youth work are generously placed. The Erasmus + Youth in Action budget is 40% greater for this round than the previous one. The extent to which Wales is making use of this opportunity is unclear, though it is no substitute for more secure, grounded funding (in that European funding requires a strong shift of focus to international partnerships and projects, when local accessibility and experience has to remain paramount) and it is not clear what implications Brexit will have for the UK's access to these EU funds.

Research suggests that voluntary youth organisations now have more like a 1:7 to 1:5 chance of securing funds from charitable and business sources when, in the past, it was more like 1:3. More time than ever before is spent trying to secure and sustain organisational and project funding than on youth work delivery.

All this, together, puts the funding of youth work in a very precarious position. Provision increasingly becomes project-based, depending on resources available, whereas the whole raison-d'être of youth work is premised up the establishment of relationships that can stand the test of time. There is a serious risk of a downward circle or spiral where youth work compromises its own philosophy and value-base in ways that allow managers and funders to justify further criticism and cuts. In the current climate, it is difficult to see how such a cycle can be reversed, especially when some opportunist organisations step into the breach proclaiming their capacity to 'deliver' and advocating forms of 'youth work' that are nothing of

the sort, but are more to do with counselling, social work, guidance, direction and instruction – all anathema to established youth work principles and practice.

If you believe there are problems in this area, how do you think they could be resolved?

The pot pourri of funding sources and funding allocations demands two forms of strategic oversight. Where does/could the money come from? Where does it go? Wales has classically missed out on its share of European youth work funding, available through the UK National Agency now in Birmingham but formerly with the British Council, for example. We need to think about how to maximise it. Private sector business rarely has its HQ in Wales, even if a company may have significant operations here. We may need to think about how to tap into that. [The Youth Work Excellence Awards came about through a conversation I had in 1994 with the Lloyds TSB Foundation – which said it did not know how to fund activity in Wales; I made sure it did. Even earlier, I had a conversation with the Rank Foundation, which led to it funding its first three youth work students in Wales through the YMCA, now George Williams, national college.]

There also needs to be some really professional scrutiny of those who proclaim to deliver ‘youth work’. What I once called the new social inclusion youth work organisations are slick at presenting their credentials and achievements but often fail to stand up to scrutiny when their work is closely inspected. Youth work is a marathon, not a sprint. It should not cherry pick ‘quick wins’, but the current funding climate and insistence on speedy outcomes does not lend itself to measured and deliberative youth work practice. When I gave the keynote address to the launch of the Children and Young People’s Unit in London in 2002, my concluding words were that ‘politicians and funders need to learn the art of patience’. If some of our more challenging and challenged young people are to benefit from youth work opportunities and experiences (the driving ideas behind Extending Entitlement), then some will need time to traverse the stepping stones. This critique goes well beyond youth work. But we live in an age of Emperor’s New Clothes. It is easy for spurious youth work to turn young people around – immediately and temporarily: but where are they in two years’ time? More measured, steady, effective youth work carries an influence on young people for the rest of their lives, contributing to their employability, civic engagement and personal responsibility.

**Question 4** – Are there any other issues you consider relevant to the Inquiry that you think the Committee should be made aware of?

(for example: workforce related issues; the Quality Mark for Youth Work in Wales; buildings and infrastructure; youth work in schools; transport issues; access to digital technology; Welsh Government’s consultation on proposals to register and inspect some out of school education settings).

The phrase that comes to mind, time and again, is Nero fiddling while Rome burns. There is little point in having a Quality Mark if there is nothing to accredit! Charters are meant to imply some level of commitment; otherwise they are hardly worth the paper they are written on. How can Wales build a youth work workforce if there is no youth work work to be done?

There are issues that need attention – how youth work connects, in different ways, with social media and new technology; how youth work tackles issues to do with increasing multiculturalism; the ways in which youth work can or should connect with schools, youth offending services, or health policy initiatives. How does youth work address, integrally or separately, key challenges around specific groups of young people – whether refugees or young people with physical or learning disabilities, young people who are ‘NEET’ or young people at risk of ‘radicalisation’?

But when so much effort is currently being put, on the ground, into self-preservation, attention to wider, more long-term issues is inevitably pushed to one side.

Wales has some serious expertise and experience in youth work, yet one might not know it given recent contracts and commissions to advise and consult, from elsewhere.

Youth work is always ‘pulled’ in different directions, especially between educational and social work agendas. Preserving its distinctive character and contribution is always a struggle. That struggle is a massive one in contemporary Wales. It need not be and should not be – if we want to draw from, as well as give to, the prevailing debates about youth work elsewhere in Europe. Some countries are just discovering youth work; others – like Lithuania and Portugal – are celebrating and consolidating it; and those with similar traditions to the UK, like Belgium and Finland, are generally re-shaping but not reducing the ways in which youth work contributes to the lives of young people and to the societies in which they live.

**Question 5** – If you had to make one recommendation to the Welsh Government from all the points you have made, what would that recommendation be?

To have some authoritative strategic oversight of youth work policy and practice across Wales, with Ministerial championship, through a carefully composed professional advisory group. A group that could set the direction, timetable and funding requirements for a youth work offer that commanded resources that represented 2% of what is spent on formal education.



## Annex

I have been involved in 'youth work' all of my life, as a practitioner, researcher and policy adviser. I ran an 'open' youth centre for 25 years, have studied why young people engage in youth work and what they get out of it, and have sat on a range of governmental and non-governmental committees and bodies concerned with youth work. I was general rapporteur for both European Youth Work Conventions (2010 and 2015), have co-edited five volumes on the history of youth work in Europe (with volume 6 in preparation) and I am currently a member of the drafting group preparing a Recommendation on Youth Work for consideration within the structures of the Council of Europe. Over the past twenty years, I have co-ordinated youth policy reviews of 21 countries across the wider Europe. Those reviews have routinely considered the place of youth work within youth policy aspirations and implementation.

In Wales, since international youth year 1985, I have had both local and national involvement in youth work, as a director of Grassroots, the Cardiff City Centre Youth Project, as Chair of the Wales Youth Work Partnership and then Vice-Chair of the Wales Youth Agency (1989 to 2006), and most recently as a member of Welsh Government's Youth Work Reference Group. A few weeks ago. I was elected a Vice-President of the Council of Wales Voluntary Youth Services (CWWYS).

I have often described *Extending Entitlement: supporting young people in Wales* (2000), produced by the National Assembly for Wales, as a pioneering, flagship youth policy document, an exemplar for the world and indeed a model for a Council of Europe youth policy framework composed in 2002. In both documents, youth work – as a form of non-formal education and learning – is an integral part of broader 'youth policy'. It plays its part both as an independent domain and as a contributor and collaborator in wider policy agendas concerned with, for example, school inclusion, vocational preparation, health promotion and crime prevention. In our European history work, we have found that the 'common ground' of many forms of youth work is enshrined within an apparent tension: both providing associational 'space' for young people to be themselves and 'be young', and an advice and support transitional 'bridge' for young people to move to the next steps in their lives as they 'become adult'. Youth work projects and programmes have been depicted as both forums and transit zones. In my paper prepared for the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Youth Work Convention (summarised along with the 2<sup>nd</sup> European Youth Work Declaration in [https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Source/Resources/Documents/2015\\_2nd\\_European\\_Youth\\_Work\\_Convention.pdf](https://www.coe.int/t/dg4/youth/Source/Resources/Documents/2015_2nd_European_Youth_Work_Convention.pdf)), I also defined youth work as 'facilitating agency' and contributing to the acquisition of 'navigational capacities' (developing the competence and confidence of young people to be 'actors' in their own lives and to exercise 'life management'). Of course, not all youth work necessarily does this (it can be little more than 'adolescent child-minding') and youth work that does produce these outcomes struggles to demonstrate that impact and effect. Hence the political doubt that often prevails about its efficacy and the value of investing in youth work. Yet youth work should neither stand apart from wider political concerns (from citizenship to offending) nor be attached too closely to those agendas.

That is a brief summary of the general context for youth work at a European level. [There are more global considerations around youth work, often more focused on inequalities, citizenship and environmental issues.] In Wales, the optimism that was once fomented through the publication of *Extending Entitlement* has steadily dissipated and diminished. At that time, the rest of the UK (and beyond) looked with some envy at the vision and commitment of Wales in advocating an opportunity-focused (rather than problem-oriented) policy environment for children and young people, anchored within the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child but extending appropriate support to young people up to the age of 25. But the place of youth work in that vision was never really achieved and slowly its provision and practice has ossified, unsupported by any effective central strategic guidance and direction.