

I am pleased the Committee has decided to carry out an inquiry into the state of the youth work in Wales. I have been involved with the youth work profession in Wales for over 12 years; engaging as a service-user, as a practising youth worker, as a student (graduating with a 1<sup>st</sup> Class B.A. (Hons) in Youth and Community Work, 2013, and a M.A. (with Distinction) in Working for Children and Young People, 2016) and, finally, as an observer of youth work policy and practice. Throughout this time, both my personal and professional experience of youth work has been guided and informed by the obligations laid down in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).

With that in mind, I am obliged to declare an interest in respect of my current employment with the Children’s Commissioner for Wales and the Future Generations Commissioner for Wales. However, for the purposes of this response, the entire content only reflects my own individual perspective on youth work in Wales. It **does not** offer analysis or opinion on behalf of any organisation. The detail and evidence presented in this response has been drawn from my MA thesis undertaken at the University of South Wales in 2016. In drawing comparison with European social pedagogy, the research, entitled “*Learning to ‘Care’ Again*”, investigated the relationship between youth work policy and implementation – aiming to understand how this relationship has affected young people, youth work practice and the youth work workforce in Wales.

In summary, analysis of the quantitative and qualitative datasets shows that youth work in Wales and European social pedagogy share much of the same the philosophies, values and ethics when working with children and young people. Both professions, in their theoretical understanding, place a clear emphasis on positive, equal relationships between practitioners and young people. Considerable importance is given to caring about the individual young person and informal, social learning is recognised as the vehicle to nurture young people’s potential and drive forward their personal, social, emotional and civic development. Where the two professions depart, the research suggests, is in the realities of delivery and practice. In stark contrast to social pedagogy, the research identified a number of key areas of concern for youth work in Wales, namely:

- How a top-down, deficit-driven, targeted youth policy landscape in Wales is limiting youth work’s ability to forge genuine and equal relationships with young people;
- A fundamental disconnect between professional youth work values, the expectations of youth support policies and the implementation of contemporary ‘youth work’ practices;
- How diminished resources and inconsistent, short-term funding arrangements is affecting the availability of youth work – a sector in ‘survival’ mode;
- A confused and fundamentally disempowered workforce, with no professional voice and very little access to a professional infrastructure offering supervision, support, space for reflection or opportunities for leadership and practice development.

**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 e.g. language, disability, rurality, ethnicity.**

It is important to acknowledge that the research was not designed to conduct an audit of specific youth work programmes or provision in an area. Instead, the research aimed to determine which professional functions (as outlined in the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work<sup>1</sup>) have most relevance to the profession as a whole and what kind of professional activity has most weight in guiding contemporary practice in Wales.

In interest of clarity, I view youth work as informal education and accept the Assembly’s definition:

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*“a process of learning which involves the voluntary engagement of young people...in a wide range of experiences and activities that promote their personal and social development” (p.43)<sup>2</sup>.*

In presenting this definition in the context of *Extending Entitlement*, youth work is recognised as a distinct profession concerned with the universality of ‘youth’ and to making the most of associational learning experiences to promote rights, equality, democracy and social justice for all young people in Wales.

Almost unequivocally, the quantitative dataset shows that youth work respondents reported the highest level of practice relevance to creating positive, trusting and equal relationships with young people. This process is characterised by professional intentions to support young people to express and realise their goals. However, the qualitative data also identified that whilst practitioners hold on to this in principle, professional youth work practice in Wales has become disconnected from the social and community-based aspects of young people’s lives. Participants reported that the reduction of resources and an increasing emphasis given to target-driven youth policies (for example; focusing on young people ‘at risk’ or those not in education, employment or training) has restricted the universal, associational learning opportunities made available to young people and has enforced a paternalistic, focus of youth work delivery in Wales.

*“Youth work has changed completely...Gone are the days where you can grab a cup of coffee and have just an informal conversation...sharing conversation as a group...There is constantly targets over your shoulder. We need to get so many [young people] into education or some type of job...Is this the right thing for the young person or are we just boxing them up and pushing them on as soon as possible? (Participant B)*

Participants also reported that this narrowed perspective of youth work has limited the availability of holistic learning experiences designed to empower and make the most of young people’s individual talents, interests and abilities. Instead, participants reported, a delivery focus to intervene in the problem and problems of young people:

*“We focus on a very thin side of the wedge sometimes, more than we used to, so we are looking at unemployment-based outcomes, more than...‘what do you [young people] want to do, who do you want to be and how can we work together?” (Participant C)*

*“That concept of voluntary engagement I think is slowly dying, although, I think people are doing their best to mask that and bury that...A lot of rhetoric surrounds giving young people power and empowering youth workers...in the last 5 to 10 years that whole philosophy has shifted...that concept of empowerment is being lost” (Participant D)*

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

Interestingly, none of the research participants necessarily disagreed with youth work’s contribution to targeted youth support provision and recognition was paid to the wide range of support and skills youth work practice can offer to young people’s development:

*“It is the role of the youth worker to be flexible, responsive, dynamic and be able to adapt to the needs of young people” (Participant D)*

However, substantial concerns were expressed about the lack of understanding of youth work, as a distinct profession, and the over-emphasis of target-driven policy implementation has come at the expense and value of the profession’s universality:

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*“I don’t think a lot of people understand what we [youth workers] do. I think there is still a lot of confusion about what our role is” (Participant B)*

*“Quite often we get pushed into a partnership arrangement, which isn’t truly a partnership arrangement...that it is quite often unhealthy and with a lack of professional understanding of what we, as a practice, as a youth work practitioner, can be offer” (Participant C)*

Whilst I recognise Welsh Government and local authorities have to make increasingly difficult budget decisions, recognition must be paid to the preventative role that universal youth work provision can play in the lives of young people. Quality, universal youth work is inherently a rights-based practice and locates itself at the points where many other services cannot reach on a day-to-day basis. It’s a profession that makes use of trusting, caring relationships and maximises the use of new experiences and social learning to support young people’s resilience and overall development. In a recent report published by UNISON, the removal and loss of universal youth work services has negatively impacted on young people’s social experience, mental health and overall integration<sup>3</sup>. Put simply, it is sound economics to invest in celebrating and improving the universal experience of what it means to be young. It is my view that the commitment set out for youth work in *Extending Entitlement*, must be revisited and refreshed by Welsh Government. In doing so, considerable efforts should be made to by Welsh Government to protect and re-invest in the provision and status of universal youth work. This should be done as a matter of priority, paying recognition to the fact that every young person has the right to association (Article 15 of the UNCRC) and to learning experiences that makes the most of their talents and supports them to claim their place in an inclusive, just society (Article 29).

**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.**

Issued under Section 123 of the Learning and Skills Act 2000, *Extending Entitlement* set out the first statutory basis for youth work in Wales. This was a regarded as a positive time for youth work and the wider arena of youth support services in Wales. Counterparts from across the border looked on in envy as Wales sought to uphold its commitment to upholding youth work principles, values and universal practices. However, this commitment waned as Wales introduced new legislation and policy requirements in the years that followed. Little has been achieved to preserve, update or revise the statutory guidance which now stands at 12 years old. It seems as though the institutional memory and distinct understanding of the youth work profession has been lost to the passage of time. This may be symptomatic of Welsh Government’s decision to remove support from the Wales Youth Agency and to substantially reduce the resources allocated to the branch responsible for youth work. As a result, the strategic coordination, development and position of youth work in Wales became increasingly unclear and difficult to realise. This, coupled with the pressures of financial austerity, meant that the profession has come under increasing pressure to align its activity with wider youth support services and respond to a conflicted policy arena. Youth work became subject to increasing state scepticism. Ironically, if the Welsh Government branch and the Wales Youth Agency had survived they have been able to allay such fears and concern.

Despite it being a profession founded upon the principles of empowerment, participation and voice, participants reported that practitioners have little influence or ownership over youth work strategy and policy development:

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*"I don't feel like that [the Youth Engagement and Progression Framework] was directed by professionals" (Participant A)*

*"I don't think that we've been given a framework, nationally, which uses us to the best of our ability. I think that's still up for debate, I think that people, nationally, don't know where we fit and how we can fit" (Participant C)*

Indeed, the quantitative dataset shows that professional functions to develop youth work strategy and evaluate priorities received some of the lowest relevance to current practice. Concerns were raised about the extent to which youth work practice has moved away from the perspectives of young people as the result of top-down target-driven policy:

*"I think we've got a set of descriptors and indicators and outcomes which have been derived over time, and I'm not too sure at what point we are now subscribing to that or how we've been working with young people in our practice to inform that. I think that that line is quite blurred" (Participant C)*

*"I think that youth work autonomy, in terms of strategic level across Wales is spiralling out of control...I think that the appetite from Welsh Government...is diminishing by the day." (Participant D)*

Participants further reported a lack of infrastructure that allows the profession to lead in its own development and to independently reflect, articulate and exercise its own professional perspectives on emerging youth policy and decision-making:

*"A professional voice, to voice on our behalf, to actually speak out because there doesn't seem to be anybody...I feel like things have changed dramatically and things have moved on but there's nobody backing our corner" (Participant B)*

*"What we haven't got is a professional, or a unionised, platform to articulate our thoughts, concerns and ideas nationally. Or arguably locally...We've got the wholesale closures of services across the UK and, comparatively, you're not hearing anything...You need to be around the table but, at the moment, I don't think we're around the table" (Participant C)*

*"The Wales Youth Agency, whether you liked it or loathed it or somewhere in between, there was some sort of structure to youth work in Wales. Whether that was the registration of workers, whether it was the Curriculum Statement, it gave a structure, some parameters that youth workers could shape their delivery, shape their work and also have the autonomy to flourish" (Participant D)*

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

In contrast to the experiences of youth work in Wales, the perspective of social pedagogy expressed greater levels of freedom and practice autonomy. There is a clear commitment to ensuring that both the concept of care is integral to policy and practice:

*"A lot is about how we design that relationship and how we live that relationship...what is specific in social pedagogical understanding of 'care' is that we need to be very reflective of what, how we demonstrate care." (Participant E)*

There is strong emphasis upon developing a culture of trust in social pedagogy and practitioners are empowered to develop the social learning process with young people. Little emphasis is placed upon meeting predetermined policy targets and outcomes:

*They [social pedagogues] are less kind of tightly tied to particular outcomes and outcome measures...the evaluative dimension is more in terms of what are the quality indicators and finding ways of understanding the quality of the work and the impact it has on people's lives rather than kind of just taking the measures that are easiest to measure... 'x' number of young people have achieved, you know, accreditation for this, that and the other." (Participant E)*

In revising *Extending Entitlement*, it is my view that a greater level of autonomy should be afforded to youth work practitioners and managers. The youth work workforce must be given a greater voice in the development of policy and coordination of implementation. It is imperative that practitioners are enabled to co-develop the direction and methods that they will employ in practice. Rather than the prescription of targeted intervention, emphasis should be placed upon improving the quality and consistency of youth work across the country.

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

Despite Welsh Government's own recommendation highlighting the essential need for "*current levels of funding for the Youth Service are, as a minimum, maintained, notwithstanding the current economic climate*" (p.93)<sup>4</sup>, youth work in Wales has received substantial funding cuts at both local and national levels. The significant withdrawal of resources has brought to the fore a deepening crisis across the profession:

*"Funding, chasing funding, competition for funding...where youth work practitioners are competing with others for funding, they're competing with others for their jobs...everybody seems to be distracted by finance, restructure and survival" (Participant D)*

As funding requirements have become increasingly aligned to target-based outcomes, short-term funding and budget cycles, the profession has been forced to alter its practice and compromise its values in order to secure its immediate survival. This has resulted in substantial confusion and low workforce morale:

*"It [youth work] has lost its identity...I've spoken to other youth workers, we're quite confused about what our role is. Our role has changed significantly; recently, it's all about educational attainment. For me, youth work now is like what I would say is like an LSA [Learning Support Assistant] – working alongside schools to increase young people's academic achievement" (Participant B)*

*"We [youth workers] have lost our way" (Participant D)*

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

Welsh Government should give greater consideration to the implementation of children's rights and to protecting the universal youth work offer. A revision should maximise the capacity of the profession to offer informal associational learning opportunities to young people and to not concentrate so heavily upon target-driven outcomes.

Youth work must no longer be seen as the Cinderella Service of the education system in Wales. Its lifelong, social educational capacity and potential must be recognised as a core contributor to Welsh Government's commitment to education and curriculum reform. Welsh Government must also recognise youth work as a core contributor to prosperous, resilient and inclusive communities. Youth work in Wales must therefore be given the equal parity of professional status enjoyed by teachers and

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<sup>4</sup> Welsh Assembly Government (2010) Evaluation of the National Youth Service Strategy for Wales [.pdf] Available online at: <http://dera.ioe.ac.uk/3561/1/110519youthevaluationen.pdf> Accessed on: 09/09/2016

social workers and must be equally resourced and financed from Welsh Government's protected education budget.

**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 research highlighted substantial areas of concerns in relation to workforce identity, morale and infrastructure. Participants reported a significant areas of concern, in terms of, having little access to support mechanisms including continuous professional development, space to engage in critical reflective practice or supervision. Participants reported feelings of professional dissonance and abandonment:

*"There's a lack of support. That's the problem. I mean, there's not enough support, I've worked with some of the most dynamic, creative and amazing youth workers and we don't share enough...We all know that the best ways within youth work is conversation and communicating and sharing but we don't seem to do it as professionals, we don't do it as youth workers" (Participant B)*

*"Anything from philosophical enquiries to continual professional development to formalised supervision is extremely limited and is arguably, in my opinion, one of the downfalls of the profession...the space, the funding, the structure; it's just not there." (Participant C)*

Ultimately, participants reported an overall sense of powerlessness:

*"You feel very low and demotivated...you're being completely oppressed...people just give up, there's very much a glass ceiling. At the moment, there's nowhere really to go with it. You feel quite stagnant...you want to develop and you want to change and you want to improve and you want to better...but you're stuck in mud, there's nothing you can do, you feel quite restricted. It's very, very difficult...the structure or the system is not there for you." (Participant B)*

*"I think that the concept of reflective practice, in terms of, you know, taking time to sit outside of the relationship and look at power; where the power lies, where the empowerment lies, where it doesn't lie, is probably non-existent. And I think that is probably true more and more of the youth work sector across Wales" (Participant D)*

**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?**

As a matter of urgency, Welsh Government should commission an independent review into the state of youth work and the youth work workforce in Wales and draw comparisons with different experiences of social pedagogy across Europe. In doing so, it should maximise the learning identified to re-emphasize the importance of youth work in the social lives of young people. Welsh Government should establish an independent body/commission for youth work in Wales. Such an entity should seek to establish youth work as an educational science in Wales. It should be the professional voice of the youth work sector in Wales and enable practitioners to lead, research and develop innovations in pedagogical youth work practice within a self-improving system.

In delivering its commitment to education and curriculum reform, it will be necessary for Welsh Government introduce new legislation that repeals Part 7 of the Education Act 2002. Given the significant contribution that youth work can make to driving forward and realising education reform,

the introduction of this legislation should establish into law a statutory duty upon local education authorities to provide distinct youth work services. This statutory duty must make a direct commitment to protecting youth work and the delivery of informal education; taking steps that maximise children and young people's empowerment, democracy and participation in promoting social justice.