



In Defence of Youth Work: campaigning in young people's interests

Cuts unlimited...

Since In Defence of Youth Work announced itself through its Open Letter in February 2009, the state has increasingly abandoned its responsibility for providing open access youth work. For example, the June 2011 House of Commons Select Committee report *Services for Young People* recorded survey findings showing that:

- local authority Youth Service cuts were by then averaging 28%, with some authorities cutting by 70%, 80% or even 100%;
- a total of more than £100 million was being cut from local authority youth budgets in England by March 2012, with open-access youth clubs and centres being most affected;
- 96% of 41 heads of youth services were saying that by April 2012 they would either be reducing this provision or stopping it altogether.

Since then *Children and Young People Now* has carried reports in just the past three months of major cuts largely affecting open access provision in Staffordshire, Nottingham, Croydon, Wandsworth, the Isle of Wight, York, Devon, Essex, Bradford and Wiltshire.

Economics – or ideology?

As IDYW has repeatedly stressed, though hidden behind references to 'deficit reduction' and the need for 'austerity', these policies have been driven by much more than economics. At least as important over the longer term – now, three decades-plus – has been an ideology (short-hand 'neo-liberalism') which UK governments, including the present Coalition, have continued to embrace even though it was a major trigger for the 2007-8 banking collapse and a financial crisis whose consequences we are still living with.

The links between this ideology and youth work's decimation over that period are not hard to trace:

⑤ On the (unevidenced) premise that 'the market' can self-regulate, the bottom line has been a determination to free the banks and other for-profit organisations to pursue their interests in largely uncontrolled ways.

⑤ State policy-makers' primary focus has therefore been on encouraging competition which in turn has embedded in everyday thinking the assumption that individualistic values – self-reliance and resilience, personal ambition, freedom of choice – are the ones to which all citizens should uncritically aspire.

⑤ A key corollary of this has been that, as forms of collective action are seen as getting in the way of the market's freedom to make its profits, over the past 30 years government policies have consistently undermined the values which support this and weakened, incorporated or even completely eradicated organisations which promote and support it. This has increasingly constrained the trade unions, severely damaged the independence of the voluntary sector and made community activism more broadly seem irrelevant or even subversive.

⑤ With the logic of competition has also been extended to public services, these have increasingly come to be seen as best run, not by the state, but on market principles by private businesses or by versions of 'voluntary organisations' redefined as 'social enterprises' and/or redesigned to mimic the corporate managerial structures and styles of the private sector.

⑤ Under New Labour and now even more rapidly and ruthlessly under the Coalition, this 'modernisation' of public services has been applied to local authority Youth Services. Judged by policy-makers as unable to deliver the outcomes which the dominant managerialism demands, where these have not been closed down they have been replaced by targeted work which

young people are required to attend – designated as ‘early intervention’, for ‘troubled families’ or for actual or potential offenders or ‘needs’.

Unpicking fifty years of development in four

This widespread abandonment of Youth Services, at least across England, has within four years reversed a fifty year commitment to the only state institution which has had an explicit mandate to provide open-access youth work. Albeit always in very weak terms, this has been spelled out in legislation since 1944. Even the present government has confirmed that the relevant sections of the 1996 and 2006 Education Acts still apply: that local authorities still have ‘a duty to secure sufficient leisure-time educational and recreational leisure-time activities for the improvement of the wellbeing of 13 to 19 year olds’ – though with the proviso ‘so far as (this) is reasonably practicable’.¹

One of the clearest rationales for the state making such provision still remains that of the 1960 Albemarle Report². Though responding as any such report does to the circumstances of its time, this nonetheless made the case in eloquent terms which are no less relevant today for what we now label open access youth work. For example:

The Service is not negative, a means of ‘keeping them off the streets’ or ‘out of trouble’. (Para 129)

There is a striking lack of logic in an arrangement which gives the benefits of social education to those who remain (in) full-time (higher) education, but gives only the most niggling provision to those whose need for such resources is so much greater. (Para 132)

The aim of the Youth Service is not to remove tensions so as to reach some hypothetical condition of ‘adjustment’ to individual or social life... If they feel the need, young people must have the liberty to question cherished ideas, attitudes and standards, and if necessary to reject them. (Paras 135, 142)

The consequence for young people

On the ground, the cumulative consequences of closing such provision has been discussed largely in terms on how it will affect ‘society’ – for example, as increased discomfort for adults because of the greater unsupervised public presence of young people. However, because largely hidden and, given that young people don’t have the vote, because it has no direct electoral consequences for the politicians responsible, what have gone largely unremarked have been the consequences for young people. Past evidence shows that local youth facilities – clubs and centres, detached work projects and other open access youth work provision – have been accessed by at least 20% of the 13-18 age group (that is, currently in England some 800,000) with some 60% saying they have used them at some point in their teens³. In one local authority after another, therefore, as state-funded facilities are closed down, more and more of these young people are now being told - starkly if only implicitly:

“In your leisure time, in your local communities, on boring evenings out with your mates - you’re on your own. We’ll hound and harass you if you stand on our street corners, hang around our shops, disturb our peace. Just don’t expect us to support or fund anything that you might choose to attend because it offers a safe environment, adult support and personal development and affirmation.”

Self-chosen open access facilities are still operating of course, not least in the faith sector. However, as under pressure from escalating Coalition cuts to local authority budgets, more and more of them disappear campaigning has on behalf of those young people for whom they can be still important sources of stimulus and support never been more needed.

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¹ HM Government, *Positive for Youth*, 2011, Para 5.7

² Ministry of Education, *The Youth Service in England and Wales*, 1960

³ Davies, B. [1999], *From Thatcherism to New Labour: A History of the Youth Service in England, 1979-1999*, Volume 2, Leicester, National Youth Agency, pp 75,145.