How to revive youth services

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These are hard times for the young. Many individuals continue to flourish but the gulf is widening, in financial, human and social capital, between those who are doing well and those left behind. Employment in secure jobs for young people and young adults has fallen sharply, often offering only minimum wages in a casualised labour force. Social mobility has stalled; the constraining contours of wealth and privilege are evident. The recession of 2008-14 was particularly brutal for people without qualifications in those regions which had already suffered long-term economic decline; reduced social security benefits (with added sanctions) have helped drive many deeper into poverty and despair. Unequal societies make the more vulnerable young prey to extremism or tempt them into acquisitive crime or alcohol or drug misuse. Personal debt and family poverty leave limited opportunities for imaginative cultural experiences outside the neighbourhood. Anxiety about educational achievement and precarious future employment mean that, for many young people, this is not a good time to grow up. For some, their natural exuberance and aspiration may morph into sullen depression; for others, their peer loyalties can imprison them in anti-social gang cultures.

Youth services cannot remedy all these social ills but, over the last 75 years, they have provided support and development opportunities for young people in diverse settings: neighbourhood youth clubs; street-based youth workers engaging with young people in public spaces where they gather, sometimes in gangs; specialist projects for young adults who are homeless or unemployed or attending A&E as a result of

alcohol or drugs overdoses; information and counselling centres; a whole array of national voluntary organisations, including the deeply rooted Scouts and Guides as well as those which are locally created, sometimes by faith communities.

Such diverse services with their indistinct boundaries, multiple approaches and weak statutory base have always been vulnerable during times of economic difficulty. But the scale of cuts to local authority funding since 2010 has been devastating: Leeds has reduced its spending on youthwork by 50 per cent, Sheffield by 57 per cent, Doncaster by 73 per cent while local authority youth provision has virtually disappeared from Manchester, Newcastle, Birmingham and many shires. Over half of all youth service work has disappeared in the past five years. Across the country, you will find youth centres shuttered or sold, specialist projects completely closed or open only infrequently with minimal staffing, hundreds of professional youth workers made redundant and their specialist skills lost. David Cameron's government has closed more youth centres than Harold Macmillan's government built.

The Conservative-led coalition has emphasised three underpinning themes in its approach to young people. First, encouragement of high levels of individual (and family) responsibility. The government sees deep-rooted social problems, including poverty, as an expression of individual dysfunction, rather than vice versa. Second, as a matter of principle not just of financial stringency, the coalition aimed to reduce the role of the state in providing opportunities for the personal and social development of the young. Instead, it emphasised local decision-making rather than offering national direction or setting standards for local practice. Third, within a rather nebulous concept of the 'big society', it expected the private, philanthropic and voluntary sectors to fill the gap left by the state's withdrawal. Even before the coalition came to power, some local authorities commissioned private and voluntary organisations to offer cheap provision for targeted groups and to draw them into a form of 'payment by results' based on specious outcomes which could not be easily demonstrated in the short term. But the voluntary sector rarely has the capacity to scale up and, in any case, local authorities no longer have enough money to sustain them.

In the summer of 2013, policy responsibility for youth work was transferred from the Department for Education to the Cabinet Office: for the first time since direct state intervention began in 1939, youth services were no longer rooted in educational policy nor expected to support young people's achievements beyond the classroom. In many places, they have returned to the vestigial position they held in the 1950s, lacking, now as then, both national policy direction and investment.

The popular perception of the adolescent years frequently focuses on the deviants, the deficits and on intermittent moral panics whether of alcoholism, teenage pregnancy or the dangers of a pervasive digital world. In fact, adolescence remains a dynamic developmental phase in the life cycle and offers a chance to build on its physical and neurological changes, to help some young people over the emotional roadblocks of disorderly homes or insecure environments, to build their social and employment skills, and to change the trajectory of their lives for the better. Effective educational practice can use the assets of the adolescent years, not least their concern for others, their friendships and their personal drive for agency and responsibility. Young people often see schools and colleges as purely instrumental and controlling. In any case, they spend over 80 per cent of their time outside educational institutions, which rarely concern themselves with young people's needs (or 'character') in the round.

The strength of youth services lies in the fine grain of trusted adults building voluntary relationships with individuals and groups. They can offer young people space for reflection about the direction of their lives or their current anxieties and can help to alter their behaviour with their peers or in the wider society. Being concerned with young people's lives in the present and not just with what kind of adults they may become, youth services can provide new experiences, even moments of joy. Youth workers often stick by troubled youngsters who may have few continuing, supportive relationships with adults. As well as helping individuals seek employment, resist sexual exploitation, violent extremism or brushes with the justice system, they can encourage groups to go to theatres, galleries and other cultural outlets and thus

strengthen young people's skills and confidence to try new experiences in new surroundings or take up new interests.

Local youth forums or councils enable young people, individually and collectively, to give their own testimony about their needs, to be involved in local budget-setting and to support their peers. They also learn how to make decisions by creating and running projects such as Integrate, Bristol's successful campaign on female genital mutilation; or Brighton YMCA's training of GPs so that they can make their surgeries more friendly towards adolescents; or Mac-UK's street work on the neglected mental health needs of the young. Through such activities, young people learn what democracy is about, and how it should work, an even more vital task if the franchise is extended to 16 year olds.

At its best, youth work has been a service shaped by local imperatives. Services for young people need to adapt quickly to reflect social change and meet immediate crises as well as offering routine provision, such as the often maligned youth club, which is always there as young people grow up. Many needs are complex and that is why bodies such as Centrepoint or the Foyer movement which link hostels for homeless young adults with enabling them to acquire the skills for employment are so valuable.

The years of austerity have shredded local youth services and these will take decades to rebuild. As well as re-investment, we need to rethink the role of the state and how it can better empower young people and their communities. We need to re-make the roles not only of national and local government but also of the voluntary sector which, though it can often take risks to road-test new approaches, lacks a democratic mandate and, in most instances, the capacity to take bright ideas to scale especially in disadvantaged neighbourhoods. All these tasks need local and national leadership and efficient co-ordination.

Action for the next government

- Require the Secretary of State for Education to promote and secure sufficient youth services focused on the personal and social development of young people.
- Build on this core national duty by placing explicit responsibilities on local authorities, setting national standards for local provision and using powers of intervention where Ofsted reports that these standards are not met.
- Provide adequate investment, for example by diverting the money currently spent on the short-term, age-limited scheme of 'National Citizen Service' into year-round funding.
- Secure a skilled professional workforce which should focus particularly on the needs of the disadvantaged young and on supporting volunteers.
- Encourage the development of local and national processes for young people's engagement in decision-making.

Tom Wylie was chief executive of the National Youth Agency, 1996-2007.