Preamble
What follows is a write-up of an input made at the Birmingham University/IDYW practitioner seminar, ‘Creating a vision of “public money” and youth work’, held last month in Manchester. Its aim was to offer a critical look at the development of the local authority Youth Service since its creation, as context for the debate which Ian McGimpsey prompted at the event on ‘public money’, what exactly this might mean and whether and how it might act as an alternative route to funding for open access youth work.

Whatever happened to the Youth Service?
A brief and critical look at its development – and demise

Though this is a hard reality for many of us to accept, the implications of accumulating evidence has to be faced: we are now at the end of the era which has taken for granted the existence of a state structure called ‘the local authority Youth Service’ whose brief is to provide a practice known as ‘youth work’. Detailed evidence pointing to this conclusion emerged in mid-2014 out of a Unison survey of 168 local authorities across the UK. This showed that ‘youth services lost at least £60 million of funding between 2012 and 2014’ with the result that:

1. More than 2000 jobs have been lost in that period
2. Around 350 youth centres have closed as a result of the cuts
3. 41,000 youth service places for young people have been cut
4. At least 35,000 hours of outreach work by youth workers have been removed.¹

On the back of these and other statistics, a few month later no less an establishment organisation than the National Youth Agency concluded that, at least across England, ‘there is no longer a common form of youth service’.²

It is true of course that throughout that era how much those Services spent on their youth work and how they spent it varied enormously. So too did how creative they were in attracting and then holding onto a wide range of young people – especially young women, young people who were black, gay and disabled, and the older teenager. Indeed what Services did in the name of youth work was often extremely variable within and between them, with the concept itself often being sharply contested.³

Nonetheless, as the only public body with an explicit mandate to allocate money raised through local and national taxes to the provision of youth work, Youth Services have existed in some form within every local authority jurisdiction for some 75 years. Throughout this period, their legislative underpinnings have remained weak, leading to repeated efforts and indeed (as today) campaigns to clarify and strengthen them. Though they were first named (as a ‘Service of Youth’) in a 1939 Board of Education circular, their legislative origins lie in a duty imposed on local authorities by the 1944 Education Act. This however did not require them to provide directly. Rather councils had ‘to secure the provision … of adequate facilities for … leisure-time occupation … for persons over compulsory school age’.

¹ Unison: The Damage, August 2014, p 5
² NYA, ‘Youth Services in England: Changes and trends in the provision of services’, November 2014, p 2
Nor were these facilities defined explicitly as youth work. The term never appeared in the 1944 Act nor in any subsequent legislation, with the expected provision being described as ‘organised cultural training and recreative activities’ and ‘recreation and social and physical training’. Only in 2006, following organised pressure from the field, was youth work finally named - in New Labour’s Statutory Guidance on a 1996 Education Act. Crucially, however, this also made clear that the relevant duties need only be implemented ‘so far is reasonably practicable’ – a let-out clause which in the ‘austerity’ climate of the past five years has allowed (even perhaps encouraged) one local authority after another to close down its Youth Service.

The extent and shape of these Services up to 2010 has thus depended little on what the law said. Most influential here, at least in England, has been the legacy of the 1960 Albemarle Report. In effect if rather belatedly, this incorporated youth work provision into the wider post-1945 ‘welfare settlement’ via over forty detailed recommendations. These - all accepted by the then (Conservative) government on the day it appeared - included:

- Setting central government clear strategic tasks, including ensuring youth work was better and more consistently funded.
- Requiring local authorities to be much more proactive in developing their own youth work provision by establishing dedicated decision-making and administrative machinery and funding arrangements, and appointing front-line workers and managers.
- Creating national structures for youth worker recruitment, training and qualifications and for negotiating salaries and conditions of service.
- Funding a major youth centre building programme.

The Committee was also keen that within these structures the voluntary youth organisations which had long assumed youth work was their exclusive preserve should retain a ‘partnership’ role. Nonetheless, the overall effect of the Albemarle recommendations was very quickly and permanently to shift the balance of power in providing youth work in favour of the state, both local and eventually national.

Post-Albemarle, local authority provision for youth work thus expanded substantially, in the process developing a number of common features. Some of these seem particularly significant for our present debates.

- Though some variations occurred over the years – for example when it was occasionally located in a leisure department – youth work has normally been treated as part of the local authority’s wider educational provision and structures and so seen as having broad (albeit informal) educational purposes.
- Much – probably the majority - of the funding available has been committed to running open access youth centres and other building-based provision.
- With the aim of meeting and engaging with young people unable or unwilling to use these buildings, more funding was eventually allocated to detached, outreach and mobile approaches and projects.
- Though volunteers may have found a role in some of these Services, overwhelmingly it has been assumed that overall responsibility for face-to-face practice and its management would lie with local authority employees. Key selection criteria here have been training and qualifications with full-time and later part-time staff being contracted in accordance with nationally agreed salary scales and conditions of service.
Over time the provision offered by local authority Youth Services did change - indeed in some ways improve - often as a result of sustained and organised pressure from below. For example, efforts were made, some more systematic and successful than others:

- to engage more young women and ‘BME’, gay and disabled young people and specifically address key issues arising from these identities;
- to employ more women and black youth workers;
- to integrate detached and outreach work approaches into routine provision rather than seeing them as ‘experimental’;
- to work with young people outside their own localities – through day trips and residential and international work;
- to retain some older young people, particularly through young volunteer initiatives;
- to give young people more say in what was to be provided.

However, not only were these developments often implemented in piecemeal and even token ways which could not be sustained, especially when (as they repeatedly were) budgets were cut. For a practice requiring responsiveness both to young people’s immediate and often rapidly changing relationships and interests and also to the wider societal changes affecting them, limitations in local authority Youth Service provision persisted and seem to have been endemic. Nor can these be seen as just failures of face-to-face practice by individuals or teams of workers. Importantly for what is happening currently, they need to be considered as possible systemic flaws in the structures and procedures and in the strategies these made possible.

For, in common with other public services established within the dominant post-war model of welfare state provision, local authority youth workers increasingly found themselves operating within, and often being constrained by, a number of that model’s embedded features. Far from seeking to adopt earlier labour movement traditions of, for example, grass roots and even co-operative forms of organising, the structures adopted were usually highly centralised, with power balances tipped heavily in favour of managers such as civil servants and local government officers and of professional experts, and away from front-line workers and service users – that is, young people.

As early as 1980 I thus found myself pointing to limiting organisational features affecting youth work which included:

- A trend ‘to incorporate youth work even more tightly into the burgeoning local government structures’ which, ‘far from releasing (its) imagination, flair and dynamism, ensured that it was even more subject to the often stifling controls of local bureaucracy and corporate management’.
- ‘Staff (who) were being cast in the role of local authority officials’.
- ‘… a greater stress on accountability – not just for money but also for philosophies, purposes and methods’ – with the result that youth work was in danger of being ‘set in a rigid pattern of quite formalised programmes’.
- ‘… expensive buildings requiring maintenance, protection and heating as well as staffing’ which not only ate up substantial amounts of the (often reducing) funding available but limited youth work’s capacity to move with young people as they changed their ‘territory’ or to develop alternative approaches and methodologies as their needs and expectations changed.
- Even then, policy shifts which, if they were to get financial support, left voluntary organisations ‘dependent on a number of restrictive conditions’.

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Pressure was also building for central government to take a stronger lead in influencing if not actually setting youth work’s aims and approaches. As early as 1975 for example – when, significantly, one Margaret Thatcher was Secretary of State for Education - the civil servant who had drafted the 1939 Service of Youth circular was suggesting that the Service was still ‘searching for an identity’ because, as ‘the Government have never had a coherent youth policy … there is no clear ministerial leadership and no central guidelines’.\(^5\) Once the Thatcherite governments of the 1980s began to impose their neo-liberal policies on the public sector generally, ‘leadership’ and ‘guidelines’ came to mean for local authority Youth Services, first, sustained pressure to target the unemployed and other ‘at risk’ groups; and then, by the early 1990s, determined ministerial attempts to impose a ‘core curriculum’.\(^6\)

Some sections of the youth work field did seek to resist these expectations and in particular the demand for a core curriculum. Nonetheless, they sharply pre-figured the Service’s future direction of travel. New Labour governments, particularly through the 2002 paper *Resourcing Excellent Youth Services (REYS)*, laid down targets for youth work and the outcomes by which it was to be ‘measured’. By 2005 New Labour was also prescribing the methodologies by which these were to be achieved, insisting for example that youth work was ‘primarily about (positive) activities rather than informal education’\(^8\) and requiring it to provide programmes designed to reduce young people’s ‘anti-social behaviour’ at weekends. New funding procedures were also used to further incorporate voluntary youth organisations – now part of the significantly re-titled ‘third sector’ – into these top-down policy expectations. Though all this greatly reduced local authority Services’ room manoeuvre, many – workers and managers as well as councillors - embraced the new managerialist regimes with enthusiasm, even refusing to give up the REYS targets when the government dropped them as measures of local councils’ performance.

None of this is of course to dismiss local authority Youth Services as total failures. Close examination of youth work’s situation immediately pre-Albermarle has shown that without the Committee’s often, for its time, imaginative and relatively radical prescriptions, state-sponsored youth work could easily have withered away altogether. In part at least Ministry civil servants were prompted to set up the Committee by their conclusion that leisure-time provision for young people which was wholly or largely dependent on the voluntary sector as then constituted was unlikely to appeal to the ‘new’ 1960s teenage generation\(^9\) - a view which, in its own typically tactful way, Albermarle itself confirmed.\(^10\) Moreover, given the ‘social democratic consensus’ that existed at the time, it was taken as a given across the political spectrum that, if youth work was not just to survive but to develop further, the state needed to intervene in decisive ways.\(^11\)

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\(^5\) Kenneth Lindsay, ‘What went wrong with the Youth Service?, *Youth in Society*, September/October 1975

\(^6\) See for example Bernard Davies, *Threatening Youth: Towards a national youth policy*, Open University Press, 1986, Chapter 5

\(^7\) DES, *Transforming Youth Work: Resourcing Excellent Youth Services*, December 2002


What such arguments do not consider however is the appropriateness for this somewhat maverick field of practice of the form of statutory intervention which came out of Albemarle and the structures it generated. In the context of the growing vacuum opened up by the Coalition’s destructive policies, questions for youth work specifically which in the past have been missed or even avoided need now therefore to be faced head on. Such as:

- How and where have local authority Youth Service structures impeded rather than supported and liberated what is distinctive about the way youth workers practise?
- How can those structures be rethought and redesigned so that in particular more bottom-up influences (from both young people and front-line workers) can help shape what happens, and how?
- How can and should funding be made available and distributed for that distinctive practice?
- What processes can be devised to account for the use of these resources which are congruent with that practice?

This is very far from an exhaustive list – so please add your own questions to it.

Postscript

In the present crisis, criticising what we don’t like about what has happened and what’s happening now is much the easiest part of the struggle to defend youth work. The much harder task is to focus on possible positive strategies (however long-term) for creating alternatives. This is certainly why I hope the debate on the notion of ‘public’ funding for youth work introduced by Ian McGimpsey at the Manchester event will continue.

I have to admit however that, pie-in-the-sky though it may seem at this dire neo-liberal, anti-statist moment which has all but killed off the Youth Service, I’m not yet ready to give up completely on the notion of state funding for youth work. I see it as important at least to explore whether different forms of and routes to this which ‘fit’ with the practice can be re-imagined. This is a search in which I hope IDYW will be involved in the coming months - and to which I will try to contribute.

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