



## **Is the tide turning?**

### **Policy proposals for youth work: A discussion paper.**

In Defence of Youth Work, Summer 2017

#### **Summary**

It is likely that local authority youth services will have disappeared by 2020. Yet in the aftermath of the 2017 general election, there are renewed possibilities for state-supported open youth work. This discussion paper will argue that progressive, political parties, focused on the common good rather than private interest, should make an explicit commitment to open, universal, all year round youth work. In order to put this commitment into practice, the following questions need further discussion:

- Should local authority youth services be reopened, or are there different ways that state-supported youth work can be organised?
- What principles should underpin the revival of open youth work?
- How can these changes be made feasible in terms of funding, infrastructure and staffing?

We encourage you to discuss these questions informally and in organised groups, with young people, colleagues, students, friends, policy makers, decision makers, campaigners and activists. We are conscious that our thinking relates most directly to youth work in England and Wales, but hope that its argument will have resonance for practitioners in Scotland and Northern Ireland. All feedback will be greatly valued.

#### **Introduction and context**

This paper is offered as a contribution to an emerging post-election debate, subsequently sharpened by the evidence of how the abdication of the state, locally and nationally, had allowed the Grenfell Tower tragedy to happen. Does the success of the Corbyn-led campaign, the result and its aftermath signal a shift away from neoliberal ideas and practices? If so, does it open up a possibility of reviving more social democratic policies and a renewed commitment to public services? What might this mean for youth work?

Of course, it is far too early to assume that there will be a shift to a post- austerity period shaped by social democratic rather than neoliberal ideas. Even if such a shift were to happen, youth

services are marginal to mainstream education and social services, and are therefore likely to remain vulnerable. Nevertheless, there is a feeling amongst youth workers that this is a productive time to reimagine youth work provision. As expressed by one youth worker at a recent IDYW seminar:

*‘This is the first time in my life that for me there has been a possible choice.’*

At this political moment - without resorting to naïve over-optimism – we believe that the youth sector should press for renewed dedicated state funding for the practice we know as open access youth work, to be made available through re-imagined forms of state institutions alongside voluntary and community groups.

### **A vision for youth work**

IDYW sets out six cornerstones of youth work:

***The primacy of the voluntary relationship, from which the young person can withdraw without compulsion or sanction***

***A commitment to a critical dialogue, to the creation of informal educational opportunities starting from young people’s agendas***

***The need to work with and encourage the growth of young people’s own autonomous networks, recognising the significance of class, gender, race, sexuality, disability and faith in shaping their choices and opportunities***

***The importance of valuing and attending to their here-and-now as well as to their ‘transitions’***

***The nurturing of a self-conscious democratic practice, tipping balances of power in young people’s favour***

***The significance of the worker themselves, their room for autonomy, their ability to fashion an improvised, yet rehearsed practice.***

Offered as a definition of a distinctive way of working face-to-face with young people, this vision of practice is rooted in a wider and long-standing tradition of informal education, which has expressed itself through a variety of forms of adult and further education. It has also identified itself closely at times and in places with forms of community work and community development. Any efforts to gain political support for a revival of open access youth work as a state provision will need to locate it in these wider educational and practice contexts.

## **State provision – past and present**

Since the seminal Albemarle Report's recommendations took effect in the 1960s, the local authority Youth Service has been the main state institution for directly providing open access youth work in England, albeit in 'partnership' with the voluntary youth sector. Since 2010, large swathes of those Services have gone; while some services are continuing to provide open access youth work (often in areas where young people and youth workers have fought against their closure), it is possible that by 2020 youth services may well have disappeared altogether.

Where open youth work is surviving it has become increasingly dependent on 'the voluntary sector' – a complex and contradictory amalgam of civic society groups, projects and organisations. A few community-based organisations have managed to go on operating, usually with minimal resources, on the basis of their first-hand understanding of what young people and their communities need. At the other end of the spectrum, relatively well resourced regional and national bodies (including profit-making companies) operate top-down to fulfil contracts and deliver programmes for governments and multinational businesses. Some of these also attract high levels of philanthropy – with its embedded power relations and assumptions of entitlement and 'charity'. These changes undermine voluntary organisations' traditional roles as independent innovators, able to challenge those in power and stand alongside groups that are marginalised from decision-making.

## **How should the state support youth work?**

What is urgently needed is an explicit commitment to support open, universal, all year round youth work.

However, simply demanding that local authority Youth Services be reinstated would be an opportunity missed. Youth Services undoubtedly brought significant benefits for open access youth work, providing young people - as of right - with significant resources: purpose-built buildings, innovative projects, trained volunteers and quality paid staff. These were open to all, and often located in areas where they were most needed.

However, youth services often emulated the centralising and bureaucratic tendencies of local authorities. Neoliberal policy-makers used their managerialist structures to fit youth work into their policy and programme requirements, and their ways of 'measuring' how well these were being met.

Therefore, it is essential to consider some broader questions:

- What kind of state institution should support, fund and (potentially) 'deliver' youth work? How might we move beyond the past demolition of local authority Youth Services towards re-imagined state-sponsored institutions?
- What underpinning principles should be embedded into state institutions designed

specifically to provide year-round open youth work, to ensure that those institutions are structured in ways that are fully congruent with democratic anti-oppressive practice?

- Is it at all feasible to build such a renewal of youth work, from and out of the current nationally funded forms of ‘work with young people’?

### **What kind of state institution?**

Nationally given youth work’s location in a wider informal education tradition, a crucial basis for any state-sponsored revival must be its relocation from where it purportedly sits currently - within a department for ‘digital, culture media and sport’ - to a department and ministers with responsibility for education policy and provision. In the search for political support for such a move, the Labour Party should be pressed to recognise open youth work as one of the forms of provision to be included in its proposed National Education Service, with parallel demands being made of other progressive parties. While most funding should be devolved to local areas, consideration should be given to groups and communities that may need to develop regional provision, or to be responsive across geographical areas (for example: LGBT youth work; youth work with Gypsies, Traveller and Roma communities; online youth work).

Locally it does not need to be assumed that the traditional ‘Youth Service’ is the only form that local state provision of youth work can take. On the other hand, the commissioning out of entire youth services has left communities bereft of democratic accountability, area support workers, free training and locally owned buildings. There is a role for local democratic institutions, even if their resources are shared with local community groups. However, further discussion is needed as to where precisely in local state structures youth provision might be located. Perhaps there could be a role for lower local authority tiers such as town councils. A central principle must be that any state organisation must be democratic and participative in its dealings with young people, youth workers, and volunteers, able to respond to local needs and contexts, and encouraging of cooperation and support rather than competition between different providers.

### **What principles should underpin youth work funding and provision?**

The following bottom-up principles should underpin policy related to youth work:

- Young people should be recognised as not just ‘in transition to adulthood’ but as citizens now, with all the democratic rights that come with that status.
- As one of those rights, youth work provision should be based on universal access for all young people who choose to use it.
- As another such right, power should be shared as far as possible with the young people using or wishing to use youth work provision, particularly young people from groups usually marginalised from the decision making process. This can be done by:

– embracing the power-sharing which is embedded in their voluntary engagement in and with the practice;

– including young people in strategic as well as operational decision-making; – seeking to develop the collective power available in and through young people’s valued peer relationships;

– providing opportunities for support and training to enable young people to use their power effectively and in ways they define, including in adult-dominated arenas.

- The aims and educational ‘programme’ of the provision should be defined in holistic ways, starting from the perspectives of the young people who engage or may wish to engage, and taking into account their wider identities.
- A plurality of appropriately trained and supported front-line staff should be available which recognises and actively embraces the potential alternative contributions of full-time and part-time paid and volunteer workers.
- Organisational structures should be as flat as possible and provide high levels of internal communication which allow for and actively encourage an upward flow of information and ideas from both young people and front-line staff.

Accountability and the evaluation of the provision and its practice should:

- explicitly endorse and actively seek to develop and embed qualitative methods;
- be rooted in long-term perspectives;
- embrace broad and holistic understandings of ‘success’, including those which cannot be measured statistically;
- take into account the overall interpersonal culture as well as the formal governance of the organisation;
- recognise the in-built unpredictability of much of open youth work practice and allow for and indeed encourage the controlled risk-taking which this often requires;
- focus explicitly on the processes of the practice – on how it is carried out – as well as on its outcomes;
- enable young people, community members and youth workers to see how money is spent and decisions made, and to input into these decisions.

### **Is it feasible?**

A move to provision shaped by these principles cannot be instantaneous. Some often difficult questions therefore have to be posed and explored – not least around funding and staffing.

New funding is undoubtedly needed. However, there is a need for some pragmatism. Perhaps there are areas of current work with young people that could be redirected into renewed forms of open youth work provision.

- For example, with the National Citizens Service’s recruitment target to 2020-21 now

reduced by nearly a third - from 360,000 to 247,000 - could this include the redirection to open youth work of this proportion of the £1.26 billion allocated to it for that period?

- Or could the entire budget of NCS be devolved to local areas to decide how it should be spent?
- Could the practice priorities of NCS as well as other current high profile neo-liberal-oriented youth programmes be reshaped so that open youth work becomes their core dedicated practice?
- Is it possible to call an immediate halt to the sale or redevelopment of state-owned youth work buildings, and to think about underused buildings that could be used for the purposes of youth work?

In addition to funding deficits, the years of cuts have impoverished the field: in terms of professionally qualified and highly experienced youth workers who have been made redundant or taken early retirement, and in terms of the closure of successful youth and community work courses, shut down by business-minded universities as numbers began to fall.

- To underpin a revival of youth work practice, how can a committed and trained workforce be (re)assembled?
- How can the necessary training structures and resources be reassembled?
- How can the field use the skills of highly qualified and experienced youth workers who have now retired or moved into other roles, but who still want to support youth work?

## **Conclusion**

There is an urgent need for a renewed commitment for state funding for community-based, all-year-round, open youth work. Rather than simply reproduce the local authority youth services of the past, we have a chance to reimagine how the state can support youth work: in ways that are democratic, participative, youth-centred and anti-oppressive, and that value and support practitioners. We need to debate and discuss what forms state-supported youth work might take, what principles should underpin it, and how such a renewal of youth work can be made possible in practice. Most urgently, we need to campaign for political support for the principle of funding and valuing open youth work that is young people's by right.

In seeking to put youth work on the political agenda we need to beware making a blanket appeal to all the main parties, regardless of their policies across at least the last two decades. The Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democratic parties in power all embraced a neoliberal agenda, which has sought to regulate what is perceived as an unruly youth work practice, out of their control. After the 2017 General Election the Conservatives continue to attack local authorities, offering no protection to youth services, whilst the Liberal Democrats remain silent. Labour seems to be shifting, pledging to halt further cuts to youth services, but failing to mention youth work within its proposal for a National Education Service. Outside of the Big Three the Green

Party and Plaid Cymru have shown themselves to be sympathetic to youth work. Against this background and the political turmoil created by Labour's unexpected surge in support we are explicitly directing our call to the parties looking to break from the stranglehold of neoliberalism. As to whether Labour, the likely leader of any would-be progressive, anti-austerity alliance, will live up to the promise and hope implicit in its manifesto, remains to be seen. For now we believe we should seize the moment and make afresh the argument for young-person-centred, process-led open youth work.

### **Get involved!**

These proposals are informed by discussions and debates amongst practitioners and between practitioners and young people over the eight years of In Defence of Youth Work's existence. IDYW will organise a number of opportunities to discuss the proposals put forward here with youth workers, with young people, and with other interested groups, in order to work towards a concise policy briefing. We strongly encourage you to have your own organised and informal discussions – in person and online - with young people, students, colleagues, and others, and do feed back any thoughts, ideas and proposals to us through Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/groups/90307668820/> or by e-mail to [isthetideturning@gmail.com](mailto:isthetideturning@gmail.com). In addition we are exploring alternative ways of collecting feedback - watch out for further detail.