

Youth work in a changing policy landscape: the view from England¹

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Abstract

Since the Coalition came to power in 2010, a stream of influential policy initiatives focused on young people and 'services for young people' has left democratic and emancipatory forms of youth work practice increasingly vulnerable. In the process, the institutional and funding landscape within which this practice has been delivered for at least seventy years has, at best, been radically reshaped and, at worst, wholly erased. In tracing these developments, this article offers an analysis of the key underlying assumptions of the policy documents through which they have been implemented. Though focused only on England, hopefully this will also have some relevance for youth work and youth policy in the other UK nations.

Key words: Youth policy; Neo-liberalism; In Defence of Youth Work campaign; Public service cuts

IN ATTEMPTING its analysis of the Coalition government's youth policies, this article looks critically at two areas in particular:

At the macro level, it examines the government's overriding ideological assumption, now widely and unquestioningly taken as a given by key public bodies and many major voluntary organisations, that the state needs to be removed from public service provision as comprehensively and as quickly as possible, to be replaced by a 'market' in which the voluntary as well as the for-profit sector will compete. These 'providers', it is then further assumed, will be supported and supplemented by 21st century versions of philanthropic noblesse oblige catering for the deserving poor; by a 'big society' pool of previously untapped volunteers; and by newly 'resilient', up-by-their-bootstraps 'individuals, families and communities'.

At the level of practice, the article then examines the increasingly dominant presumption that youth work in England no longer requires dedicated statutory youth service provision and support. Instead, it is assumed, whatever contribution its trained and qualified practitioners are capable of making will be harnessed through generic forms of 'work with young people', shaped by state-prioritised 'targets', focused on the 'at risk' and the 'risky' and located in multi-disciplinary teams within 'integrated' services for young people.

Following discussion of these two areas, the article addresses the question: *how, within these new policy and practice conditions in England, can the key features of youth work be protected and preserved?*

The starting point for the analysis will be the definition of youth work as a distinctive way of working with young people offered in 2009 by the In Defence of Youth Work campaign (IDYW) at a time when, as we shall see below, New Labour policies were already putting this distinctiveness at serious risk. The IDYW definition assumed as a minimum that young people would choose to be involved in open-access facilities and settings which would:

- offer informal educational opportunities starting from their concerns and interests;
- work with and through their peer networks and wider shared identities;
- give value and attention to their here-and-now as well as to their ‘transitions’; and
- be rooted in mutually respectful and trusting personal relationships amongst young people and between young person and adult (IDYW, 2009).

Reshaping the youth policy landscape

The New Labour legacy

As in other areas of policy, New Labour set some very firm foundations for the Coalition’s children and youth policies with, in the English context, some of the core features of its *Every Child Matters* (ECM) reforms having substantial carry-over effects (HM Treasury, 2003). Indeed, six months before the Coalition government came to power, the then shadow and future children’s minister, Tim Loughton, told the annual convention of the Confederation of Heads of Young People’s Services (CHYPS), ‘The last thing that we want to see is yet another major overhaul of the system and structural changes just for the sake of it’ (Hillier, 2009).

This commitment did not stop the Coalition instantly eradicating from its policy discourses both the overall ECM ‘branding’ and its constantly regurgitated mantra of ‘the five outcomes’. Though versions of ‘being healthy’ did continue to get official nods, references to ‘enjoying and achieving’ and ‘economic well-being’ simply disappeared – judged perhaps as too provocative for (or undeliverable in) a new age of austerity. Meanwhile, ‘making a positive contribution’, relabelled ‘youth voice’ (see for example HM Government, 2011: *Ministerial Foreword*), reverted to its former largely rhetorical status once the new government stopped ring-fencing the money allocated to New Labour’s *Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Funds* (HM Treasury, 2010: paras 1.4 – 1.5).

What Coalition policies did do, however, was to sustain and indeed reinforce the institutional

structures introduced by New Labour and the ‘staying safe’ ‘outcome’ as their dominant rationale. As the Jimmy Saville scandal was to demonstrate all too starkly (and darkly), the latter clearly justified continued dedicated high-priority attention. However, within New Labour’s broadly conceived ‘children and youth’ policy frameworks, the already low standing of youth work as a distinct *educational* practice was – whether intentionally or not – further undermined by its preoccupation with ‘protection’ and ‘safeguarding’. Increasingly this led to its top-down ‘managerialist’ insistence that youth workers focus on ‘prevention’, targeting groups pre-labelled by their deficits, and demonstrate pre-defined ‘impacts’ that could be measured statistically.

Closely linked to these changes was New Labour’s radical institutional restructuring of children’s services. Across the country this led to many specifically designated local authority Youth Services being ‘merged’ into generic children and young people’s departments, with youth workers then being ‘integrated’ into multi-disciplinary teams. (See Davies and Merton, 2010: 28-38). This too left the way clear for Coalition ministers to act on their often radical critiques of youth work and Youth Services, with Loughton for example declaring only weeks before he came into office that ‘... the quality of youth services through local authorities leaves a lot to be desired. There are too many youth services ... (which) are rather set in their ways (Chandiramani, 2010).

Finally, without consultation, New Labour shepherded organisations previously known as ‘voluntary’ into a sector rebadged ‘third’, in the process propelling them into often uneasy ‘partnerships’ with the state and the for-profit sector. (Davies and Merton, 2010: 32-3; 39-44). In doing this it embedded at the heart of the funding of youth provision neo-liberal notions of competitive contracting which the Coalition was to embrace even more single-mindedly after 2010. Here too, while still shadow minister, Loughton unashamedly flagged up the policy overlaps between government and opposition when, rhetorically, he asked, ‘Why would the world fall in if a local authority contracted out the youth services department?’ and when he argued that charities were far better placed to recruit what he called ‘homegrown’ youth workers (Chandiramani, 2010).

The ground was thus well laid, not just for the forms of provision for young people which the Coalition adopted, but also for the ideological rationale and motivations driving these policies and the practice priorities these imposed.

The Coalition’s youth policy paper trail

The most high profile of the Coalition’s youth policies was set out in *Positive for Youth* (HM Government, 2011) – increasingly and routinely referred to by ‘stakeholder’ organisations as the revealed truth on what needs to be said about and done for and with young people. Within months of its appearance, however, the realities behind its official rhetoric became clearer when the Department for Education (DfE) released its revised *Statutory Guidance for Local Authorities*

(DfE, 2012). Intended to refocus councils on ‘services and activities to improve young people’s well-being’, this was quickly dismissed as ‘too vague’ even by relatively government-friendly organisations like CHYPS and the National Youth Agency (NYA) (See Puffett, 2012a). Yet what these reservations did not acknowledge was that the vagueness, far from being accidental, was integral to one of the document’s prime purposes: to play down, if not actually write out, the state’s direct role in providing or even funding these services.

The House of Commons Education Select Committee report *Services for young people* offered some searching criticisms of these, then still emerging, official policies – particularly, while standing by as local Youth Services were demolished, the government’s choice to invest heavily in a National Citizen Service (NCS) (House of Commons, 2011a: para 131). Some of these and other strictures were in due course repeated and expanded when the Committee took the unusual step of publishing a riposte to the government’s anodyne comments on its original report (House of Commons, 2011b).

Other heavyweight initiatives, however, explicitly or implicitly, endorsed many of the Coalition’s underpinning policy messages. One was the publication by the Young Foundation (‘brings together insight, innovation and entrepreneurship to meet social needs’) of *A framework of outcomes for young people* (McNeil et al, 2012). This was produced in collaboration with Social Enterprise UK (‘creating a fertile policy environment where social enterprise can thrive’), the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS – ‘the independent voice of the voluntary youth sector’) and NYA. Both the Young Foundation and Social Enterprise UK were also partners in a second significant initiative – the ‘Catalyst consortium’s’ proposal for an Institute for Youth Work (IYW). (By then NCVYS had also struck up an alliance with the libertarian think tank Respublica – ‘changing the terms of the debate’ – to launch a ‘commission’ on ‘youth engagement’). Finally in May 2012 the first interim evaluation of the National Citizen Service (NCS) was published, part-authored by New Philanthropy Capital (‘dedicated to helping funders and charities to achieve a greater impact’) (NatCen, 2012). These organisations were thus prime movers in a burgeoning web of ‘voluntary sector’, ‘social enterprise’ and ‘market’ relationships which, though claiming to be independent, were all to varying degrees steeped in the Coalition’s anti-state assumptions about who should run public services and how they should be funded.

The contributions made to these debates by more ostensibly left-leaning bodies were also, at best, ambiguous. A Compass Youth policy statement, *Plan B for Youth* (Nandy, 2012), while taking a critical stand on some key past New Labour policy positions, nonetheless came out strongly in favour of a ‘national service’ for young people. Though labelled ‘modern’ this seemed destined to be indistinguishable from Cameron’s NCS while also further diverting resources from local open access youth provision. Meanwhile, in order to be ‘doing more with less’, the most original idea for youth work emerging from the Labour Party’s own policy review ‘Services for Young People’

was to locate it in the very institutions – schools – which left many of the young people using youth work facilities feeling, at best, grudgingly compliant or, at worst, deeply alienated. (Labour Party, 2012). The Party, still apparently trapped in the consumerist/ commodification approach to provision which led to its failed attempt in government to introduce a Connexions ‘reward card’ for young people, also suggested that it would, ‘... examine schemes which offer young people points, in return for participation, which they can then exchange for services or activities’ (Labour Party, 2012: 7).

Breaking the youth contract: blaming the survivors

The starting point for any analysis of these policies has to be ‘the condition of youth’ and in particular the one million 16-24 year olds (over 20% of the age group) who were unemployed throughout 2012 and into 2013 largely as a result of the post-2008 financial crises. As well as the serious damage this was doing in the present to so many young people, their families and their communities, the long-term effects of prolonged unemployment were certain also to leave painful individual scars well into the future.

However, the unemployment statistics could be read as evidence of something with much wider and no less damaging implications: a breakdown in the post-1945 social democratic consensus and its explicit promise of no return to pre-war mass unemployment. For young people in particular, this breakdown meant, amongst many other things, a major rupture in the contract between the generations. At least since secondary education was opened up to all by the 1944 Education Act, young people had been told by their elders, often in as many words: work hard at school, stay compliant and uncomplaining, delay gratification and get the right pieces of paper. In return, the promise had been, you’ll get a job of some sort, the wage or salary that goes with it, some degree of security and even perhaps prospects of ‘moving up in the world’ and owning your own home. For many, especially as the recessions of the 1980s and 1990s left behind a pool of ‘excluded’ young people (crudely re-badged as ‘neets’), the reality of that promise, where it wasn’t actually illusory, was often barely within grasp. By the end of 2012, however, that one million-plus young people, including many graduates who had stuck to their side of the bargain into their early twenties, knew through hard experience that their society had reneged on its side of the bargain, leaving even those with jobs or a university place doubting (at best) whether it could be delivered.

Unsurprisingly, government policy statements never properly addressed or even acknowledged these deep structural origins of the ‘lost generation crisis’ – least of all its embedded inequalities of class, gender and ethnicity and the poverty, injustices and discrimination which these generate and which social democratic policy-making had never addressed. *Positive for Youth* labelled as ‘the current financial difficulties’ (HM Government, 2011: *Ministerial Foreword*) what was in reality a fundamental crisis of a capitalist system repeatedly failing one of its ultimate tests: facilitating

lending and borrowing in trustworthy and reliable ways. Comments that young people contributed to the *Positive for Youth* consultations on the resultant growing divide between the rich and the rest ('the 1 per cent' and 'the 99 per cent') were similarly glossed merely as concerns 'about those who are materially well off and those who aren't' (Para 2.14).

Moreover when it moved from analysis to prescription, *Positive for Youth* never confronted or even referred in any substantive way to what was at bottom a failure of the economy to generate enough jobs. As governments have at least since the recession of the late 1970s, it instead treated the problem of youth unemployment as at root an educational one on the premise that the huge gaps in the labour market could be magicked away by getting young people to 'achieve' at school or college (Paras 4.28 – 4.55). By comparison, and as a clear signal of how concentrated the government was on individualistic rather than political responses to young people's condition, this major state paper seemed far more concerned with how the adolescent brain develops, devoting the whole of one of its consultation papers to the subject (DfE, 2011a) and three paragraphs in *Positive for Youth* itself (Paras 2.19 – 2.21).

At this point the official 'blaming the survivors' principle kicked in – particularly vividly and crudely illustrated by the evaluation of National Citizen Service's first year programmes. One of the measures used to assess the *positive* impact of the Scheme on participants was the statement: 'If someone is not a success in their own life it's their own fault' (NatCen, 2012: 37). In her penetrating critique of the evaluation, Tania da St Croix noted in its finding that '... the proportion of young people agreeing with the statement ... increased by a few percentage points after they had taken part in NCS (an increase seen by the evaluators as 'encouraging')(de St Croix, 2012: 2). From this she drew the conclusion that being 'successful' according to the NCS rubric not only required more young people to blame others for their own failures. It also apparently was achievable only through '... individualistic choice-making supported by a 'compassionate' market and unaffected by political, social and economic inequalities' (de St Croix, 2012: 4).

This position was further reinforced by *Positive for Youth*'s constant rebalancing of responsibility for dealing with the problems facing young people away from government and the state and to parents, families and their 'communities'.

The neo-liberal obsession continued: markets, competition, contracts

Responses such as these to what was a fundamental shift in the life chances of the current generation of young people demonstrated the Coalition's continuing commitment to the very policies which had brought about the economic traumas of the previous five years. New Labour's damaging commitment to these policies was at least acknowledged in Compass's *Plan B for Youth* which accepted that, 'This generation of young people have grown up witnessing social democratic

parties subscribe to flexible labour markets, financialisation and austerity ... which (have) led to greater inequality of wealth' (Nandy, 2012: 7).

The 'steely' 'inner ideologically core' (Toynbee and Walker, 2012) of the government's neo-liberal obsession continued to assert that the state simply could not deliver and so must be taken out of the provision of public services to an extent and at a speed which were unprecedented. Figures from the International Monetary Fund published in October 2012, for example, showed that on existing plans UK government spending would fall from 45 per cent of GDP in 2012 to 39 per cent in 2017. This would be the largest reduction for any developed country other than Greece and Ireland. It would also move the UK from fifteenth in the IMF list in 2000 to twenty-fifth by 2017 – the biggest drop of any major economy (*Guardian Datablog*, 2012).

The corollary of this dogma was that value-for-money effectiveness for public services could only be achieved through 'the market', through competition, through commissioning-out services to 'any qualified provider' – volunteer, philanthropic or profit-making. How taken-for-granted this assumption had become in government circles was illustrated by the consultations on which *Positive for Youth* drew. Though great play was made with how wide these had been, including with young people, at no point did they allow for any debate on key, bottom-line ideological position. Rather, consultation papers simply stated as fact the need, for example, for '... a greater sense of responsibility in communities, including business communities, for ... the sustainability of local provision' and '... a more contestable market for publicly funded services, with a greater role for the voluntary and community sector' (DfE, 2011b: Para 59).

The papers talked too of 'a significant supporting role' for 'business, philanthropists and social investors' (DfE, 2011c: para 30) and, to drive home these immovable parameters, devoted single consultation papers to *Growing the Role of Voluntary and Community Sector Organisations*, *Business brokerage with the Youth Sector* and *Commissioning Services for Young People*.

Again unsurprisingly, these remained as absolutes within the *Positive for Youth* document itself. Even beyond families and communities, everyone but the government, it was clear, was now expected to take responsibility for implementing the policy: young people themselves (in the name, of course, of 'youth voice', 'young people driving decisions' and 'youth proofing'); '... volunteers and other adults'; the media and advertisers; 'business leaders, employers and individual professionals'; professionals in education, health and care services and (notwithstanding the massive cuts in their budgets) local authorities (para 3.5 – 3.15). The only roles the government saw itself as taking on were to facilitate, to support, to monitor, to audit – and to 'set direction and promote new and positive (ie. market-driven) ways of thinking and working'. (Para 3.16).

Parallel themes also dominated the DfE's 'statutory guidance' to local authorities which laid down

that they ‘...should take the lead to ... determine which services and facilities can be delivered by third parties so that the local authority delivers directly only what it is clearly best placed to do so’ and ‘...plan how to best support and grow the role of voluntary, community and faith organisations including through a transparent commissioning process’ (DfE , 2012, para 4).

In its evidence to the Select Committee on youth services, the DfE was even more up-front:

... we want to stimulate a fundamental shift in the role of local authorities in services for young people to enable a radical re-engineering of provision so more is delivered by voluntary and community organisations, greater private sector involvement leads to greater leverage for public funding, and local authorities themselves become strategic commissioners. (House of Commons, 2011: Para 73).

These expectations also appeared constantly as conventional wisdom in papers from other influential sources. The Young Foundation report on outcomes for example seemed largely to be addressed to ‘funders, commissioners and investors’ (McNeil et al, 2012: 7). In pursuit of ‘doing more with less’, the Labour Party, without debate, conceded that, as good youth work and good youth services could be delivered by a range of providers including the ‘privately funded’ sector, it was ‘interested in how (to) ... maximise the benefit of private and corporate investment....’ (Labour Party, 2012: 3; 7) – while committing itself to put ‘youth services’ on a statutory footing by giving local authorities a legal duty to make a minimum level of provision (Puffett, 2012h). Particularly revealing in this context was the NYA/Local Government Association’s guide to ‘involving young people in commissioning’. Amidst all its practical advice, this never entertained the possibility that crucial to any youth work process might be to encourage young people to ask some critical questions – such as ‘Why commissioning?’ or ‘Is this always the best way to go?’ (NYA/LGA, 2012).

Whatever happened to the ‘independent’ voluntary youth sector?

In response to this radically new funding landscape, many of youth work’s historic national voluntary youth organisations not only became willing collaborators but in effect stretched its frontiers even wider by establishing ‘partnerships’ with major global corporations. Moreover, this clearly was often done with little if any prior ethical risk assessment. UK Youth for example linked up with Barclays Bank (UK Youth, 2012) whose manipulation of key lending rates in pursuit of bigger profits and bigger employee bonuses subsequently left it and its staff facing international investigations, large fines and possible criminal charges. To run some NCS schemes UK Youth, with the National Youth Agency, also allied with Serco (Puffett, 2012b), one of whose training manuals encouraged its Australian staff to treat refugees in detention centres as children and to apply deliberately painful control techniques (Corporate Watch, 2012).

NCVYS's incorporation into these dominant government agendas was evidence of the much wider, and often willing, colonisation of the voluntary youth sector by the state, its ideology and its policy priorities which posed a serious threat to its much-prized independence (Higgs, 2013). At local level, as authorities made their plans to 'outsource' youth facilities, not only were major often multi-national for-profit companies liable to appear on the scene but empire-building national voluntary organisations such as Barnardos and Catch 22 also hovered expectantly, ready to use their dedicated and sophisticated contracting expertise to win bidding wars in areas where they may have had no previous track record. This risked putting out of business long-established local organisations and projects with limited capacity to bid on their own behalf. The subsequent sub-contracting of some of the work could also have the effect of driving groups with a history of co-operation into damaging forms of competition which further disintegrated services (see Davies and Evans, 2012: 8; nef, 2012: 4; NCIA, 2012; Cox and Schmuecker, 2013).

As the grip of both the central and the local state on the whole commissioning process tightened, the fear of losing funding was increasingly forcing voluntary bodies to 'self-censor' – abandoning their role as even critical friend of government. Nor were their fears misplaced: in December 2012, the Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) issued guidance to local authorities on stopping funding what it called 'fake charities' which 'lobby and call for more state regulation and more state funding' (Barings Foundation, 2013: 42).

Whatever their wider consequences, the new contracts were almost always offered on the back of (often severe) cuts in resources, enabling the government to blame others for the loss of services and again providing them and indeed Labour, too, with another excuse for 'doing more with less'. As one survey reported by *Children and Young People Now* (CYPN) indicated, by the summer of 2012 around 19 per cent of local authority provision was being sponsored by voluntary organisations – nearly £1 in every £5 spent. As a result, capacity was being reduced both for reaching more 'difficult' young people and for innovating and responding to change, with questionable consequences (at best) for the quality of provision (Puffett, 2012d).

All this meant, too, that across the country volunteers were increasingly replacing trained and qualified youth workers. The Labour party for example noted, apparently with approval, that on the ground this often meant turning facilities previously staffed by trained and experienced professional youth workers into 'a youth club ... run by trained volunteers from the local community' (Labour Party, 2012: 6). A similar message was given to a CHYPS conference by a senior manager of Clubs for Young People (formerly the National Association of Boys Clubs and now, in tune with the new entrepreneurial spirit of the times, re-renamed 'Ambition'). Because, she reported, 'the financial climate had resulted in a decrease in qualified youth workers and an increase in volunteers helping to maintain clubs', her organisation was 'looking to provide more support and training for them where they are taking the place of qualified youth workers' (Puffett, 2012j).

Negotiating the new landscape

In its rush to embed these forms of privatisation (see NCIA, 2011), the Coalition clearly could not allow the facts to confuse. A 2012 ‘summer of sport’ delivered largely (and near-faultlessly) by state bodies apparently carried no wider positive messages. Nor, it seems, were there any negative ones to be derived and applied from the starkly contrasting Olympic (non-) performance of a major private company like G4S; or from the failures of A4E to get unemployed people into jobs; or of Southern Cross to care adequately for older people; or, en route to making huge profits, of the ‘dumping’ out-of-borough of children in residential care by private equity companies (Williams, 2012).

Even the marketisers’ value-for-money arguments, it seemed, did not stand up to the scrutiny of actual, long-term implementation. In the USA for example, where outsourcing services had a much longer history, it turned out that more federal government employees were needed to monitor, regulate and inspect contracted firms, while the government ended up paying huge amounts extra to these contractors than it would have done to its own employees. Despite this accumulating evidence and the contracting fiasco of west coast rail, during the writing of this article the Coalition government was proudly reporting negotiations for new tenders valued at £4 billion (Wilby, 2012) – a process which, in miniature, was mirrored locally across the country as youth work facilities were put out to tender.

This reconstructed neo-liberal landscape of provision prompts two sets of unashamedly moral questions which in the present climate have rarely been allowed articulation, even within organisations which still claim for themselves ethically-driven caring and humane ‘missions’. One is:

Is a drive for profit, even when, via a social enterprise, that profit is intended to be re-invested in the organisation, really compatible with providing a human service; or are there intrinsic incompatibilities in this relationship which simply make it too risky or even unworkable?

The second is:

Where now are responses to human need which, rather than simply being driven by individualised and competitive motives, are collective and collaborative, based on an ethic of shared responsibility for each other and expressed in part at least through state and/or civic society action?

Youth work practice: changing structures, shifting priorities

The ‘official’ view of young people: rhetoric and reality

In his introduction to *Positive for Youth*, Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, talked

enthusiastically about young people giving ‘enormous hope for the future’. Tim Loughton, too, as the then minister for children and young people, insisted that ‘young people matter’ and that the government was ‘passionate about creating a society that is positive for youth’ so that ‘all young people enjoy their teenage years and realise their potential’. Supported by a promise that youth policies would be subject to ‘youth proofing’ by young people themselves, the future focus, the paper declared, would be ‘on helping young people succeed, not just on preventing them from failing’ (HM Government, 2011).

Beyond the rhetoric, however, another view lurked, to emerge immediately things got difficult. As Graeme Tiffany pointed out (Tiffany, 2011: 1), even as *Positive for Youth* was being promoted the government was revealing itself as one of the worst offenders in demonising young people by choosing – repeatedly – to explain the August 2011 riots as entirely the work of a ‘feral, thieving underclass’.

Such knee-jerk reactions were underpinned by more deeply embedded ways of understanding young people and their lives which seriously narrowed the kinds of practice which policy-makers were prepared to endorse. They assumed for example that, once young people had been appropriately skilled and their confidence boosted, ‘personal qualities’ such as ‘resilience’ and ‘determination’ would enable each individual to triumph over all obstacles, including historic economic and political inequalities. ‘Formal institutions’ such as schools and ‘peer networks, families and neighbourhoods’ might sometimes impede this ‘navigation’ to ‘positive life outcomes’. In the end however ‘personal agency’ would win out, regardless of how unequal individuals’ starting points were or how uneven the terrain over which they had to travel (See McNeil et al, 2012: 6, 14, and the balance of evidence summarised in Annex 1).

Alongside this dominant view of ‘youth-as-individuals’ sat another somewhat contradictory one: ‘youth-as-transition’. Here the primary focus was on shaping young people into ‘active’, ‘pro-social’ and ‘integrated’ citizens, ‘responsible’ parents and ‘productive’ workers (see for example HM Government, 2011: paras 2.16, 4.34, 4.55, 5.4; NatCen, 2012: 7-8; DfE, 2012: para 2c). In this scenario, who the individuals actually were, as individuals now, seemed of little significance. For policy-makers, what mattered was how they would eventually fit into their handed-down definition of adulthood. Not only would this highly de-personalising, future-orientated definition of self have been unacceptable to older age groups but it also failed to validate and embrace the energy of a section of the population which, still relatively untainted by many of our society’s entrenched attitudes, was capable of injecting fresh and critical thinking into its institutions and activities.

Running through both these perspectives was a third: ‘youth-as-an-indivisible-entity’. Here apparently was a population category which, largely because those involved were going through the physical, mental and hormonal changes of adolescence (HM Government, 2011: para 2.16),

could be dealt with by policy-makers as if they comprised a single monolithic group. Such corralling into this relatively safe pen allowed the effects of other differentiating features of young people's lives and situation to be ignored or denied – their class position, their gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation, disability. Moreover, as well as being deeply felt personally and in the here-and-now by young people, these structural differences could result in far from positive longer-term 'life outcomes' – a possibility which, tellingly, got no attention within the 'youth-as transition' discourse.

Some of the contributions to the post-2010 policy debates did seek to break out of these analytical constraints. Compass's *Plan B for Youth* (Nandy, 2012) recognised the importance of young people's ethnic and gender (though significantly not their class) identities. It also kept its eye firmly on what were for them major here-and-now concerns such as poverty, jobs and housing. The Young Foundation's outcomes framework, explicitly eschewing 'a targeted model that only applied to certain groups of young people', strongly endorsed broad notions of 'personal and social development'. (McNeil et al, 2012: 19). Indeed the paper quoted evidence (some from past youth work projects) to demonstrate that approaches which have this as their aim '...can have greater impact than those that focus on directly seeking to reduce the 'symptoms' of poor outcomes for young people' (6-7). (This was a view supported by other research – see for example Robson and Feinstein, 2006: 21).

With these very much the exception, however, across the party political spectrum youth policy documents of the early Coalition period restated and reinforced many of the previous government's deficit-driven positions. Despite the ministers' initial rhetorical flourishes, *Positive for Youth* repeatedly returned to concerns about 'risky behaviours', 'under 18 conception rates' and 'the number entering the criminal justice system for the first time' (HM Government, 2011: para 5.37). The DfE indirectly confirmed these preoccupations when it refocused its statutory guidance to local authorities on young people's 'well-being' – a concept which, despite its comforting overtones, carries strong mental health associations which could be taken to imply that those services need to be offering more problem-focused, psychologically-based practices (DfE, 2012).

For its part, the Labour Party, in its own youth policy review paper and in subsequent statements, continued to highlight 'the long-term cost to the public purse of youth crime and anti-social behaviour' and so to suggest that youth work provision was needed to 'prevent (young people) falling into criminality' (Labour Party, 2012: 2; 3; Puffett, 2013). The Young Foundation's paper, notwithstanding its wider personal and social educational commitments, also ultimately drifted in these policy directions, with two of its four detailed case studies describing work targeted at bullied and 'at risk' young people and a third, though implemented through open access provision, assuming that, in advance, the practice would focus on a series of health 'issues' (McNeil et al, 2012: 41-52).

Cuts, the shift to 'early intervention' and work with 'troubled families'

Emanating from an overall 27 per cent cut in their spending over the four years from 2011-15, local authorities were subject to much more material pressures to move their youth services in the direction of what *Positive for Youth* called 'targeted' and 'intensive' approaches (HM Government, 2011: paras 4.14 – 4.27). By mid-2011 the average budget cut to their education-based youth services reported by the Select Committee was 28 per cent, with some authorities cutting by 70, 80 and even 100 per cent (House of Commons, 2011: paras 62-3). The DfE's own figures published in September 2012 (Puffett, 2012c) revealed a 2011 fall in spending on 'universal services' of nearly 18 per cent while, according to a CYPN survey, on average 9.6 local authority youth service posts had been lost during 2011-12 and a further 6.8 posts in the first half of 2012-13. (Puffett, 2012d).

The on-the-ground consequences of these cuts were stark. Not only were youth workers being made redundant and often expensive youth club buildings being underused or even boarded up (see for example Chandwani, 2012; Lepper, 2012), but also the local authority youth facilities which remained, widely relabelled 'youth hubs', were being given non-negotiable briefs to concentrate on 'at risk' groups, with staff trained and experienced as youth workers being reinvented as 'early intervention' or 'troubled families' workers (See Puffett, 2012e).

In its enthusiasm for some version of a 'national citizens' scheme, the Compass Youth *Plan B for Youth* largely ignored the potential of local round-the-year youth provision for achieving the social and political education it was keen to encourage (Nandy, 2012). With its advocacy of school-based youth clubs as cover, the Labour Party, too, gave such open access facilities only qualified support, hiding the realities of what was happening behind its 'doing more with less' mantra and, like the government, resorting to evasive platitudes like '... deliver(ing) good services while saving money (Labour Party, 2012: 3, 5; Puffett, 2013).

For both government and opposition, one of the main ways for achieving these contradictory goals turned out to be 'early intervention'. Through a DfE Early Intervention Grant Fund for 2011-12 this highly ambitious form of social engineering was initially allocated £2,223 million. This was to be used to encourage local authorities in England to target children in their first three years of life with the aim of breaking the cycle of problematic behaviour purportedly handed down from one generation to the next. Clearly this was an attractive policy option for a government which saw individual and family failure as a prime cause of what the Prime Minister had repeatedly labelled our 'sick' and 'broken' society. However, government enthusiasm for it seemed to cool during late 2012 and into 2013 when first it announced it was to top-slice £150m from the fund and then that for 2013-15 it was to be cut by a further £49m (Jozwiak, 2013).

Nonetheless, the overall approach was reinforced in 2012 by a DCLG 'troubled families' programme. Using figures which researchers condemned as deeply flawed and out of date (see

Crampton, 2012), and based on payment-by-results, this aimed by 2015 at ‘turning around’ 120,000 families characterised by the Department as ‘troubled’ because they ‘are involved in crime and anti-social behaviour, have children not in school, have an adult on out of work benefits and cause high costs to the public purse’ (DCLG, 2012). According to research carried out by NYA, youth workers had ‘a valuable role to play’ in this programme and indeed were ‘already making a difference by working with young people from troubled families’ (NYA, 2012).

Notwithstanding their stigmatising consequences, Labour, too, was keen on such approaches. For example, it supported a broadened version of early intervention, seeing it as a concept ‘not exclusive to the early years, but ... (as) an approach designed to support the early identification of problems’ (Karen Buck, quoted in Labour Party, 2012: 4; see also Puffett, 2013). Indeed, in January 2011 it was a Labour MP Graham Allen who produced an ‘independent’ report to government aimed at stimulating and shaping the policy (Allen, 2011). His constituency may have been displaying some of the clearest evidence of structural inequality in the country such as low levels of young people entering higher education. It may also, because of the cuts, have (in his own words) ‘shed projects and people who have done a great job’. Nonetheless, as he made clear when his report appeared, one of his main priorities remained saving money: ‘“After ten years we will tot up the savings”, he says cheerfully, although he concedes swiftly that he is “not there yet” in assessing “how you monetise the savings over those years”.’ (Gentleman, 2011). (In this latter judgement he was at least more cautious than the writers of the first NCS evaluation report who treated such long-term ‘monetising’ forecasts as entirely problem-free (NatCen, 2012: 9-10). Allen also gave strong support to ‘outcome-based commissioning and payment-by-results’ (Puffett, 2011).

Targeted support, targets and measurable outcomes

Though as we have seen the trend here too had begun under New Labour, these emphases on failing individuals and families led the Coalition to substantially sharpen its focus on ‘targeted support’ for ‘at risk’ or ‘vulnerable’ young people. Given, too, its commitment to paying on the basis of results demonstrably achieved, this was accompanied by an increased demand for evidence of ‘impact’ and ‘outcomes’. The Select Committee report on youth services for example was highly critical of the wooliness of some of its witnesses, declaring itself ‘... frustrated in our efforts to uncover a robust outcome measurement framework, in particular those that would allow services to be compared in order to assess their relative impact’ (House of Commons, 2011a: Para 39).

This was followed within months by the Young Foundation’s 60-page ‘outcomes’ framework offering, amongst other things, a matrix of ‘tools that can be used to measure the development of the clusters of social and emotional capabilities’. Though seen as ‘foundational to other outcomes for young people’, these were acknowledged to be ‘the outcomes that providers, commissioners and funders have found most difficult to quantify’ (McNeil et al, 2012: 22).

Some significant qualifications were sometimes placed round these aspirations. As we have seen the Young Foundation paper saw ‘personal and social development’, broadly defined, as the core purpose. It was also one of the few contributions to the targets and outcomes debate which accepted that ‘... measuring and isolating the impact of a particular service on the development of young people’s social and emotional capabilities is not straightforward’, not least because of ‘the sheer variety of (possible) outcomes’. It also recognised the effects on what it called ‘intrinsic personal outcomes’ of ‘... longer-term extrinsic outcomes such as employment, good health or avoidance of offending behaviour’ and ‘the huge variety of influences on young people’s lives, including school, youth projects, family, friends, possibly mentors or specialist professionals and the wider community (McNeil et al, 2012: 7).

The Select Committee, too, after expressing ‘little doubt that good youth services can have a transformational effect on young people’s lives’, accepted that ‘the outcomes of individual youth work relationships can be hard to quantify’. It also recognised that ‘the impact of encounters with young people may take time to become clear and be complex’ so that using ‘social impact bonds’ which would realise a profit for ‘investors’ once they had met their targets would be particularly problematic for ‘preventative and open access services’ (House of Commons, 2011a: Paras 39, 40, 83).

Nonetheless, often as a basis for introducing regimes of payment by results, the pressure intensified on all public services to demonstrate credible outcomes. Though often not acknowledged, this was a problem for all those working with the highly unpredictable ‘raw material’ of human beings – social work clients, school students, offenders, patients. For youth workers however it was particularly challenging given their commitment to starting their educational endeavours not just from where young people in general were starting but from the starting points (of attitudes, interests, concerns, problems) of the actual young people they were meeting now, in this situation, in their groups as well as individually. Without denying the need to be accountable, above all to these very young people, youth workers thus experienced the imposition of an ultimately highly instrumental ‘matrix’ like that propounded by the Young Foundation as sucking out much of the human content of their work, leaving only what was ‘measurable’ in statistical and indeed monetary terms as acceptable to managers and funders.

From Youth Services to services for young people

In the first years of the Coalition government, these approaches to practice and its evaluation together with the demand for budget cuts helped generate major extensions of the organisational changes which, as we saw earlier, had been initiated by New Labour. In particular they brought a further and decisive shift from ‘youth services’ – that is, local authority provision explicitly mandated to provide and support education-based youth work – to integrated ‘young people’s

services' based on multi-disciplinary teams briefed to undertake neo-Victorian forms of 'child saving'. Within these, youth workers more and more found themselves carrying caseloads of 'problem' individuals, with open access youth work, where it was not abandoned altogether, increasingly struggling for survival (See for example HM Government, 2011: 5; Puffett, 2012d; 2012e; Gratton, 2012; NCVYS, 2012a).

How deeply entrenched this mind-set had become was confirmed in October 2012 by the then ex-minister for children and young people, Tim Loughton, when he commented, 'A lot of youth workers in my area are being rebadged and put in other departments. It's happening all over the place. (But) it's not the department that staff are in or their job title, it's whether they are doing effective, quality youth work at the appropriate time' (Puffett, 2012e).

Some new organisational forms had begun to emerge – for example government-funded 'youth innovation' schemes in four local authorities. However, six months into their development the jury was still out on whether the models being piloted were in fact identifying effective new ways of organising services for young people and on whether anyway they were replicable in other areas (Puffett, 2012f). At about the same time the new children and youth minister, Edward Timpson was needing to fend off early and on-going criticisms, including from his predecessor, that 'youth services have been viewed as a "soft cut" in the (Education) department, or that he might allow youth issues to play second fiddle to the rest of his (substantial) ministerial responsibilities' (Higgs, 2012a, 2012B; Jowit, 2013).

Nonetheless, enthusiastically and uncritically key organisations whose historical role had been to advance and represent youth work bought into the now dominant conventional wisdom of 'integrated' and 'targeted' children's services. NYA moved early on this when in September 2010, ahead of his first comprehensive spending review, it advised the new Chancellor that '... current financial constraints mean funding for universal services may not be a priority, and that in turn communities are well placed to support a universal offer for their young people. However, targeted services which include a youth work offer are essential' (NYA, 2010: 4). Two years later it found itself expressing regret that a 'smoothie approach' to staffing youth services was moving workers (including youth workers) 'towards having generic staff roles' (Puffett, 2012e). Nonetheless, it seemed to take as given that open access youth work could be safeguarded – indeed, that it could survive – within the generic 'services for young people' preoccupied with early intervention then being created across the country.

By the time NYA was issuing its 'smoothie' warning, NCVYS was even more firmly and uncritically in the government's 'integrated' camp. Echoing a phrase first used by Margaret Hodge when she was Labour's youth minister (Donovan, 2004), its starting point was that '... to focus on the uniqueness of youth work alone is to risk working in silos'. To justify this position

NCVYS simply conflated youth work as a specifically *educational* practice with ‘... a greater use of youth work methodologies’ in ‘other areas of young people services’ (NCVYS, 2012b). Such ‘interventionist approaches’ by youth workers into non-youth work settings may well have been having some valuable pay-offs for the young people involved. What was less clear, however, was what in practice such hived-off, stand-alone ‘methodologies’ looked like. And even more opaque was what made them ‘youth work’ when young people were obliged to attend, when the precise outcomes required were pre-set, and when, with the practice focusing on their presumed defects and failures, the goals were overwhelmingly ‘welfare’ and ‘rehabilitative’.

The struggle for youth work

Challenging the dominant discourses

Clearly, in the political climate created by the Coalition government, prescriptions for protecting a practice such as youth work could not come easily. However, for those prescriptions to offer any hopeful ways forward, the thinking and analysis shaping them had to be liberated from the discourses in which they had been trapped since the 2007-8 economic crisis broke – and indeed before. Such a struggle was of course taking place well beyond the puny field of UK youth work, attracting comment from some of the world’s leading economists, political commentators and social philosophers. (See for example Sandel, 2009; Krugman and Wells, 2010; Hall, 2011). What, crudely, such thinkers were asking was:

- Do the economic arguments for cutting the public debt really stand up? Is this really so urgent, such a priority? Or are these arguments mainly (perhaps merely) a cover for an ideology of: ‘state bad, market good’?
- Is therefore the current radical ‘austerity programme’ really necessary?
- Are ‘market’ solutions anyway the only – even the main – ones available? In fact, haven’t they been – aren’t they still – more part of the problem? And, as was suggested earlier, might they not be seriously corrupting some of the humane and cooperative values which, historically, have been said to underpin our society and its public services?
- Indeed, if we really are ‘all in this together’, why is most of the ‘austerity’ burden falling on the poorest families, on the poorest (especially black and Asian) communities, on women – and on young people – and organisations which cater for them? (Cox and Schmuecker, 2013; Barings, 2013).

None of these starting points were going instantly to provide an answer to that classic question: so what do I do on Monday morning? They were a reminder, however, that a struggle for youth work’s survival had little chance of success (or even of occasional successes) unless it was cast within wider analyses – and wider struggles. These were being well represented by the Occupy

movement, UK Uncut, 38 Degrees and other internet and local anti-cuts campaigns and campaigns for specific services – some of which, heavily-against-the-odds, could have significant impacts (see for example Stroud Against the Cuts, 2012).

A top-down response

Top-down, perhaps the most consistent and coherent attempt to place some protections specifically around youth work came through the initiative to establish an Institute for Youth Work (IYW). As we saw earlier, this was led initially by a consortium which included NYA and NCVYS from within the youth work field as well as by organisations which had no specialist youth work background but which were clearly valued for their strong ‘market’ orientations. Following a series of consultative events and surveys, by late 2012 responsibility for ‘exploring the Institute’s feasibility’ had passed to NYA’s Education and Training Standards Committee (ETS), with NYA itself announcing in October 2012 that ‘if it is necessary (and) what the sector wants’ it would consider funding it (Puffett, 2012g).

By that stage the evidence from the consultations was that, of 233 respondents, 92 per cent judged such a development as a ‘positive thing’ and 61 per cent said they would join. Eighty per cent saw its primary function, led by youth workers themselves, as providing a voice for youth work and influencing policy (Puffett, 2012h).

However, beyond this broad in-principle support and the no less tricky logistical questions of how it would be financed and governed, deep differences on an Institute’s roles and functioning remained, some of which were equally principled. Of those consulted, for example, some saw it as a framework which, through co-ordination and advocacy, could help safeguard and even strengthen structures which had been central to youth work’s development for half a century or more but which were looking increasingly fragile in an ‘austerity’ era. Paramount amongst these were, for many, its qualifying training routes and the critical and self-reflective education these offered; and a salaries negotiating machinery and structure specifically designed with youth work’s often unconventional employment and working patterns in mind.

Such a body, it was argued, would be able to ‘hold’ the meaning of youth work as a distinctive practice, not least against government pressures to re-interpret it – though, as we have seen, as influential a player as NCVYS used the debate to argue for just such a make-over. Somewhat contradictorily, too, while claiming to be in favour of drawing in workers (paid and voluntary) with different levels of qualification and experience, some of the proposal’s supporters seemed to be envisaging something akin to professional association with the responsibility and indeed the power to register (and de-register) those with the professional qualification, to have a role in overseeing a

probationary year and even perhaps to issue a ‘licence to practice’.

However, such ideas were not supported by the majority of respondents, with the notion of a licence to practice attracting only 40 per cent approval (Puffett, 2012h). Indeed concerns existed that the Institute might end up as a take-over by the ‘professional’ wing of the youth work sector, thereby at best devaluing and at worst excluding part-timers and volunteers – still by far the majority doing face-to-face youth work. Here, both as an extension of its ‘anti-silo’ position outlined earlier but also because of the diversity of the organisations affiliated to it, NCVYS was blunt in its view that, ‘Membership should be open to anyone working with young people, regardless of qualification, experience or their particular learning or career pathway... (with) categories of membership based on services received’. It then went on to declare itself ‘wary of a membership system based on categories of youth work practitioner’, partly because this would make it ‘too difficult to build consensus’ and partly because it ‘would ... construct artificial notions of quality and professionalism within the workforce’ (NCVYS, 2012b: para 8). This was a position likely to be backed by many in the faith sector which, though claiming now to be the largest employer of paid youth workers, also drew many volunteers into its work with young people.

In a climate unsympathetic to youth work, the Institute proposal certainly represented, and indeed by many was being presented as, a concerted effort to protect and even to develop key elements of its institutional framework. As such, it seemed to be gathering broad support from key organisations as well as individuals, with ETS agreeing in late 2012 that there was sufficient interest to take the project to the next level of development. At the same time it was recognised that some issues needed further consultation, consideration, and debate: whether the body should have a regulatory role; whether membership categories should be introduced; what definition of youth work and youth worker should be adopted; and how the body could be made sustainable over the long term. With ‘critical questions’ such as these still on the table, an IYW ‘development day’ for ‘stakeholder groups/organisations’ was called in February 2013 to consider ‘governance, membership, a framework for ethical practice and continuing professional development’ (NYA, 2013).

Challenging from below

With often, at best ambiguous and reluctant support from these same organisations, significant bottom-up efforts were also made to defend youth work and its facilities. Some of these saw young people picketing the Prime Minister’s constituency office in Oxfordshire, speaking passionately in the council chamber in Haringey and helping to get 160,000 signatures for a petition in Derbyshire. Campaigns also generated a legal challenge in North Somerset, a youth workers’ strike in Oxfordshire and a ‘ChooseYouth’ campaign initiated by Unite/CYWU whose rallies and Parliamentary lobby gave young people platforms for expressing, powerfully and movingly, why

the distinctive ways in which youth workers worked were important to them. Set up originally to confront the undermining effects on youth work of New Labour's managerialist imposition of targets and targeting, the In Defence of Youth Work campaign supported these efforts, wherever possible working in alliance with other campaigning groups such as the Social Work Action Network, the National Coalition for Independent Action and the Federation for Detached Youth Work.

Occasionally there were important successes – the Derbyshire campaign for example forced the council into a u-turn on youth club closures (Puffett, 2012I) and the youth council was reported as having done the same in Redbridge (Clayton, 2013). However, faced with the Coalition's demand for huge cuts in local authority expenditure, most were not. One consequence seemed to be a loss of energy amongst young people who, having tested our democratic structures, found them unyielding and even dismissive. Another was low morale amongst the staff who survived and who had often been levered into jobs for which they had not been trained and which had little connection with their reasons for coming into youth work in the first place.

With even bigger cuts in the pipeline for 2013-14 and beyond and with youth work's prospects therefore likely to deteriorate still further, clarifying how to resist became increasingly urgent – and testing. For IDYW, campaigning in the new landscape posed difficult questions which seemed to have some important wider resonances. For example:

- Given the struggle so many workers were having, including many of its own supporters, to find jobs that allowed them to practise youth work as they understood and had experienced it, was IDYW holding in too purist a way to its own definition, including perhaps its emphasis on young people's right to choose to be involved – or not?
- Was it being too dismissive of the pragmatic choices managers were having to make as they strove to preserve some semblance of open access work within services increasingly focused on targeting?
- How should it be responding to the NCS's moves to develop area-based follow-up work with its 'graduates' as if youth work no longer existed – indeed, had never existed – in those localities?
- Given the emphasis in its own definition of youth work on tipping balances of power towards young people, how should it be responding to forms of young people's participation – youth advisors, youth MPs, 'youth-proofing' and indeed young entrepreneurs – which often seemed to be cast far too safely within adult-defined moulds?
- How could it deal with the growing demand for 'outcomes' in ways which accepted that youth work needed to be accountable but which was congruent with an educational process whose goals were derived from the personal and group expectations and interests which young people brought to their face-to-face encounters with youth workers?

With no uplifting blueprints available, for IDYW two broad responses to dilemmas such as these seemed important. One was to go on offering points of identity and support to those who still saw themselves as youth workers; who, with great integrity and – yes – resilience, in often unsympathetic organisations and in unfamiliar roles, continued to struggle to practise as youth workers; and who had not given up hope that youth work as they understood it would again be at the heart of what they did.

A second and more strategic response was to go on asserting that the core distinctive features set out in IDYW's original open letter (IDYW, 2009) offered some crucial bottom lines against which to test the subtle and not-so-subtle manoeuvres to render it indistinguishable from 'work with young people'. This certainly needed to acknowledge that the meaning of youth work had always been contested. It also needed to recognise that 'out there' survival (organisational, professional, personal) was often the unavoidable name of the game. But the case also needed to go on being made for a practice which, through words and deeds, significant numbers of young people had made clear they appreciated and wanted still to have available to them.

Meeting head on charges that this was romantic and unrealistic, the task therefore remained to help commitment to and indeed grass roots experience of this distinctive way of working with young people to survive beyond this historical moment into one when, again, it commanded respect, recognition – and public endorsement.

Postscript

On 23 January 2013 Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education, announced to the Education Select Committee that youth policy was not a government priority. In doing this he confirmed what one of his former junior ministers, Tim Loughton, had been saying for some weeks to anyone prepared to listen, including delegates at the Conservative Party conference and this same Select Committee.

Two things about this spat are striking. First, this was the same Tim Loughton who in 2010, as a minister, had adopted a completely hands-off stance when asked by a previous Select Committee about the government's response to the cuts which were already devastating local authority Youth Services. Not only, it seemed, did he or his Department have no idea how big these were but apparently on the premise that council spending was wholly unaffected by central government policy, he went on to assert that '... funding decisions are not made by us, they are made by local authorities'.

The second striking feature of Gove's announcement was that it apparently took most of the key organisations in the youth work field completely by surprise. Indeed for those who had spent over two years cosying up to the government on the premise that it was persuadable and winnable it may even come as something of a reality test, generating a letter of protest to Gove which immediately attracted the signatures of twenty-six chief executives.

Note

- 1 This article draws heavily on the work done over the past two-and-a-half years by members of the In Defence of Youth Work campaign in monitoring key policy developments affecting youth work and the Youth Service. Acknowledgement is due particularly to Tony Taylor for his critical comments on earlier drafts.

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