

# Austerity youth policy: exploring the distinctions between youth work in principle and youth work in practice

Will Mason

## Abstract

*In the contemporary political and socio-economic context the future of open access youth work remains uncertain. Since the Conservative/Liberal Democrat Coalition government came to power in 2010 substantial funding cuts seem to have been coupled with increasing, often misguided expectations for the youth work sector. Emerging from this context are distinctions between youth work in principle, as espoused by contemporary youth policy, and youth work in practice, as experienced by practitioners. This article draws on empirical data to explore these distinctions. Presenting ethnographic material from three years of research with casually paid youth workers, volunteers and young people, the article illustrates some of the contradictions embedded within the Coalition government's youth policy. In this endeavour the discussion also demonstrates respondents' commitment to the principles of child centred, open access youth work.*

**Key words:** Youth policy, youth work, local staffing, partnership working, training.

IN THE CONTEMPORARY political and socio-economic context youth workers and volunteers are faced with the dichotomy of meeting targeted, intervention based policy agendas and 'maintaining the core principles that form the foundation of youth work' (Dunne *et al*, 2014a:7). At the same time, government funding cuts compromise the capacity of the youth work sector, whilst expectations of youth work delivery seem to perpetually increase.

Since the Coalition government came to power in 2010 a number of reviews have directly critiqued its youth policy (Davies, 2011; 2013; Taylor, 2013). However, these reviews would benefit from a firmer empirical grounding in the everyday experiences of youth workers and young people. This article is based on three years of ethnographic field work. The field work was conducted as part of an ESRC funded doctoral research project, situated in and around three open access youth services within two areas of a post-industrial northern city. The research aimed to explore the everyday experiences of youth workers and marginalised young people from minority ethnic backgrounds. In this endeavour, it revealed the value of the local youth services, alongside highlighting the constraints imposed upon them by the contemporary funding landscape and youth policy context.

The central purpose here is to empirically demonstrate some of the contradictions embedded within the Coalition government's youth policy. By representing the everyday experiences of a group of professional youth workers, volunteers and young people (aged 11 – 19), the following discussion illustrates distinctions between youth work in principle and youth work in practice. In so doing, it demonstrates respondents' commitment to open access youth work that is founded on voluntary relationships of trust and respect (IDYW, 2012).

## Mapping the UK youth policy context

Within the UK, the relationship between central government, local authorities and youth work dates back to the 1940s, where youth work was politically supported as a means of helping young people through the disruption created by the second world war (Davies, 2010). Historically, local authorities have had a major role in managing the organisation of youth work in the UK. However, local authorities tend also to have been directed, to a varied extent, by national youth policy, which lays 'out the boundaries within which practice "on the ground" will – perhaps *must* – operate' (Davies, 2010:7). Over the past three decades 'the triumph of neo-liberal capitalism ... expressed initially in Thatcherism' (Taylor, 2013:2) has imposed increasing pressures on the youth work sector. Indeed, the marketisation and privatisation that characterises the neo-liberal project has significantly compromised the character and stability of open-access youth work.

In order to situate the Coalition government's youth policies it is important to briefly explore the foundations laid by the preceding New Labour government.<sup>1</sup> Youth services quickly became the subject of political scrutiny with the arrival of New Labour in 1997. Espousing their prioritisation of 'education, education, education' and getting 'tough on crime' the government's new Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) produced a number of papers on youth issues (Coles, 2006). Reporting on *Truancy and School Exclusion* (SEU, 1998a), *Rough Sleeping* (SEU, 1998b), *Teenage Pregnancy* (SEU, 1999a), and *Opportunities for 16-18 year olds not in Employment, Education or Training* (NEET) (SEU, 1999b), the SEU identified interconnected youth policy issues, prompting the funding and development of 'Connexions', a new inter-agency youth service (Mizen, 2003; Coles, 2006).

The £420m Connexions Service was initiated in 2001 with the aim of providing integrated support for young people between the ages of 13 and 19, 'improving the coherence' of what was currently being provided by organisations such as the Careers Service and the Youth Service (DfEE, 1999:9). 'Ostensibly a universal service offering innovative support and guidance measures to all young people' Connexions' priorities nevertheless rested with those 'at risk' of early disengagement from education, demonstrating a movement towards targeted and outcome oriented youth provision (Mizen, 2003:461).

Despite the encouragement of its inter-agency work and some critical, yet reasonably optimistic

reviews (Coles *et al*, 2004; Hoggarth and Smith, 2004), Connexions quickly buckled under the pressure of what was a rapidly changing policy context. As Coles *et al* (2004) demonstrated, the emergence of a new set of policy initiatives between 2001 and 2004 prompted the reshaping and undermining of the Connexions Service, marking simultaneously a shift in the responsibility of youth provision away from central government towards local authorities.

Of particular note were the measures to reform and improve children's care outlined within the Green Paper *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003). Responding to the outcomes of an enquiry into the death of Victoria Climbié the *Every Child Matters* proposals required local authorities to integrate services for increased efficiency in the protection of at risk children and young people. Central to this enterprise was the creation of Children's Trusts, which were designed to play a leading role in the coordination of local authority commissioning for children and young people's services. This placed the responsibility for service commissioning, quality and outcomes firmly in the hands of local authorities, undermining Connexions' sub-regional partnerships. In 2004 the *Every Child Matters: Next Steps* (DfES, 2004) paper confirmed that the budgets for Connexions were to be aligned and pooled within the new local authority structures, giving local authorities a considerable level of discretion in deciding how their Connexions Service was funded and delivered (Davies, 2010).

Consolidating the role and resourcing of local authorities the following Green Paper *Youth Matters* (DfES, 2005) announced the provision of £115 million of ring fenced funding. This funding was to be distributed between all local authorities through Youth Opportunity Funds (YOF) and Youth Capital Funds (YCF) – the first capital funding for youth work in over 30 years. The overall aim of these funds was 'to improve the provision of positive activities for young people, by giving young people the power to decide how this funding should be spent in their area' (Golden *et al*, 2008:iii). Indeed, within their pursuit of integrated and coherent youth services New Labour did demonstrate a financial and social commitment to the youth sector and young people's participation within it. These are commitments from which the Coalition government have largely retreated. However, two significant and lasting tensions were also imposed by New Labour's youth policy:

*The incorporation of the public services, previously known as 'voluntary', into the newly entitled 'third sector' tipped the balance of control over youth work in favour of the central financing bod . As a result, voluntary and community organisations became increasingly reliant on funding that subordinated their practice in alignment with government priorities (Davies, 2010).*

*The prioritisation of targeted provision saw a shift away from open access youth work, towards programmes where those deemed 'at risk' were required to attend (Davies, 2010).*

Despite some gains, New Labour had laid the ideological foundations for youth work by the time the

Coalition government came to power in 2010. Since 2010 a number of policy initiatives, focusing on the financing and delivery of services for young people have intensified the challenges facing youth work practitioners (Davies, 2013). These challenges frame the contemporary experience of youth workers and young people.

On the 1st of February 2010 the Cabinet Office and the Department for Education published the Coalition government's *Positive for Youth* policy paper (CO and DfE, 2010). This paper brought together all of the government's policies for young people aged 13-19. In particular the policies outlined within *Positive for Youth* 'set out a new partnership approach for giving young people more opportunities and better support... with voluntary and community groups and local businesses drawn in as full partners' (CO and DfE, 2010:1). This 'new partnership approach' encapsulated one of the core purposes of the *Positive for Youth* document: 'to play down, if not actually write out, the state's direct role in providing or even funding' youth services (Davies, 2013:9).

*Positive for Youth* stressed the responsibility of local authorities, communities and businesses for the organisation and delivery of youth services. In an attempt to articulate some support for this responsabilisation, the document also committed to making volunteering easier and 'funding improved brokerage between businesses and projects for young people' (CO and DfE, 2010: Ministerial Forward). In other words *Positive for Youth* packaged the Coalition government's economic withdrawal within the rhetoric of the 'Big Society'. Indeed, one year after its publication:

*The existence of hefty budget reductions at local level was confirmed by local authority heads of youth services. For instance, Harry Fowler, Head of Birmingham Youth Service, said that his service was facing 50% cuts over the following two to three years: £3 million from a total budget of £5.8 million* (House of Commons, 2011:33)

Nationally, Davies (2013:18) has recognised that by mid-2011 the average budget cut to education-based youth services was 28 per cent, 'with some authorities cutting by 70, 80 and even 100 per cent'.

At a practical level, the consequences of national youth service cuts have resulted in the redundancy of experienced youth workers, an increase in unqualified volunteers and in some instances, the closure of valued youth work facilities. Reflecting critically on the practicalities of capturing alternative funding from the private sector the Education Select Committee (2011) recognised that smaller youth services found it hard to access these sources. This was particularly the case within the context of private organisations' reluctance 'to provide money to "top up" statutory funding' (House of Commons, 2011:31). Additionally, the Select Committee's (2011) recognition that many youth services were unaware of the alternative social and financial opportunities available to them suggested that the government's commitment to 'improve brokerage' between businesses and youth services had failed to reach those in need of support.

Despite the economic constraints imposed by austerity measures, the Coalition government's youth policy has also raised expectations for those involved in the provision of services for young people. Reflecting the trends outlined within the European Commission's (2014) Youth Work Report, UK youth workers currently find themselves under increasing pressure to emphasise measurable outcomes, partnership working and targeted services in the context of declining 'upfront financing' (Dunne *et al*, 2014a). Paradoxically the push for partnership working has also been coupled with increasing competition between youth work initiatives. As Fyfe and Moir (2013) have recognised, youth workers are often now directly competing for funding at the same time as being expected to work together. Whilst in principle the deployment of services to disadvantaged communities, the integration of agencies and the measurement of outcomes should produce benefits for young people, in practice these expectations are problematic.

For example, the Cabinet Office and Department for Education's (2010) *Positive for Youth* paper; the cross governmental *Ending Gang and Youth Violence* report (Home Office: 2011); and the Department for Local Communities *Helping Troubled Families* initiative (DCLG: 2012a) have all emphasised the integration of local services in the management of targeted young people deemed, problematically, 'at risk' (Turnbull and Spence, 2011). On controlling youth violence, the Home Office (2011:22) report argues that 'police intelligence by itself won't be enough', suggesting that local agencies 'will need to share all the information and intelligence they hold'. This is a contentious requirement for many youth workers, whose professional relationships can balance precariously on young people's confidence in their discretion (Crimmens *et al*, 2004; Davies and Wood, 2010).

The Coalition government's focus on preventative intervention amongst those 'at risk' of becoming involved in 'antisocial behaviour' has also added pressure to youth workers through the introduction of payment-by-results schemes (DCLG, 2012b). The payment-by-results scheme demands increasing evidence of the 'impact' and 'outcomes' of funded youth services (Davies, 2013). However, as the Education Select Committee (2011:83) has accepted: 'the outcomes of individual youth work relationships can be very difficult to quantify'. Outcomes are contextually specific and they are not delivered by single programmes or organisations (Taylor, 2013). Problematically, for 'both principled and operational reasons' (Lehal, 2010:98) this focus on measurable outcomes has led some youth work managers to focus disproportionately on the production of figures whilst 'abandoning critical youth work practice' (Cooper, 2011:14). Indeed, Cooper (2011:1) has gone as far as suggesting that the current preoccupation with government targets 'is closing off opportunities for progressive ways of working with young people and, as a corollary, is stifling the capacity of young people to overcome the structural constraints limiting their life chances'.

As it stands the Coalition government's youth policy expects local authorities to organise, deliver and evidence productive, targeted provision, at the same time as suffering significant funding cuts

(Dunne *et al*, 2014a). The policy push for multi-agency approaches and measurable outcomes, evidenced by the Young Foundation's *Framework of Outcomes for Young People* (McNeil *et al*, 2012), also inadvertently compromises the delivery of critical youth work, leading at worst to the reproduction of structural inequalities through young people's engagement with uncritical practice (Cooper, 2011; Taylor, 2013). For those involved in youth work the current economic and political environment imposes constraints and raises contradictions; complicating the delivery of services, at the same time as diminishing the rewards of inspired practice at all levels.

## Research methods and setting

This article is informed by three years of ethnographic research with professional youth workers, volunteers and young people (aged 11 – 19). The ethnographic approach is immersive and characteristically encompasses a variety of research methods for the collection of data.

Practically, the research was conducted in and around two youth clubs and a homework club. These services were all located within Maple and Meadow, two areas of Forgefield, a post-industrial northern city.<sup>2</sup> Forgefield has a rich history of steel production. It also has an ethnically diverse population of which 19.2% are from minority ethnic backgrounds (ONS, 2011). Amongst others, the city is home to White British, Pakistani, Bangladeshi, Bengali, Yemini, African Caribbean, Jamaican, Chinese and Somali communities. This diversity is, in part, the product of high levels of inward migration, during the mid-20th century, to meet the growing demand for industrial labour. However, the subsequent decline of the steel industry has left Forgefield with levels of long term unemployment that are above the national average (ONS, 2011).

Maple and Meadow are both densely populated areas. Over half of the housing in Maple (74%) and Meadow (56.2%) consists of flats, maisonettes or apartments within purpose-built housing blocks (ONS, 2011). On a scale of 1 – 32,482, where 1 is the most deprived living environment, the 2010 Indices of Deprivation ranked the area surrounding the Maple flats 2,864 (ONS, 2011). Similarly, the area surrounding the Meadow flats was ranked 2,962 (ONS, 2011). Maple and Meadow are both economically disadvantaged and ethnically diverse. Excluding 'Pakistani' and variants of 'White' all of the ethnic categories measured within Maple and Meadow during the 2011 Census exceeded the city averages.

All three of the youth services involved in this research were open-access. Despite this, the clubs were principally attended by Somali males (aged 11 – 19). The youth clubs were staffed by local, casual workers/volunteers and they were funded by a variety of private and public sources. These sources included the Home Office, the local council, the Football Foundation, the National Lottery, local businesses and the Police. Throughout the data collection period (06/2010 – 06/2013) 14 youth workers engaged in semi structured interviews, 11 young people engaged in two in-depth focus groups and detailed ethnographic field notes were collected for analysis.

Interviews and focus groups were recorded and transcribed by the author. These transcripts were reviewed line for line and coded using an ‘open coding’ technique. Open coding refers to the ‘process of breaking down, examining, comparing, contextualising and categorising data’ (Strauss and Corbin, 1990:61). This process generated a set of codes for each transcript. The sets of codes were then compared with a mind to establishing themes. Themes were generated according to the principles of analytical induction (Becker, 1998). This required ensuring that the product of analysis genuinely reflected all of the available data, enhancing the ecological validity of the research findings (Bryman, 2012). In order to ensure that the research findings were aligned with the opinions and experiences of participants, participants were verbally updated throughout the process and invited to review written work. Indeed, both the practical and analytic processes involved in this research were guided by the principle of reciprocity. This is a strategy used to challenge the ‘hegemonic practices of traditional, hierarchical research’ which is based on the ‘belief that researchers and participants are equal, and that the research should be mutually beneficial’ (Huisman, 2008:372). Since June 2013 one follow up interview has been conducted, on request by a participant. The primary data collected between June 2010 and April 2014 directly inform the focus of this article.

### Trust and respect: introducing the youth work relationship

The general function of youth work is to develop *voluntary*, informal relationships with young people that are conducive to the provision of opportunities and support that aid positive social development (Willmott, 1966; Huebner *et al*, 2003; Krueger, 2005; IDYW 2012; Taylor, 2013; Dunne *et al*, 2014a). It is the principle of *voluntary* engagement that constitutes one of the most definitive characteristics of youth work practice (Davies, 2005; Lehal, 2010). A worker’s productivity is often dependent on the young people ‘opting in’ to informal interactions that could be the basis for ‘developing real relationships’ (Crimmens *et al*, 2004:28). By ‘opting in’, young people also reserve the right to ‘opt out’, in doing so leaving youth workers redundant. So, to some degree young people are always able to exercise a level of power within youth work relationships, albeit a limited one. ‘Because this is the starting point, practitioners have no choice but to *negotiate* with young people’ and these negotiations are facilitated by the development of voluntary relationships (Davies, 2005:8). The significance of youth work relationships were central to the practitioners involved in this research. The following comment from Abdi, a 30 year old youth worker in the Meadow area reflects this significance:

*Abdi: For me, the relationship is the foundation of youth work. You remove the relationship, that’s the end of what you were gonna do with that young person or what you were gonna do in the area. And, it’s a very difficult thing for a lot of people to comp ehend because if you haven’t done youth work or you haven’t actually observed youth workers, you cannot admire or appreciate how critical having a relationship with that individual is ... consistency is definitely important as well, because they’ve got to see you every week to build that*

*relationship and to strengthen it every week. Erm, so for me the relationship is paramount to this line of work.*

Abdi's comments confirm the foundational significance of relationships within youth work practice. Indeed, all fourteen interviewees agreed that productive youth work was founded on mutual relationships of trust and respect (Alexander, 2000; Crimmons *et al*, 2004; Davies, 2005). For the youth workers involved in this research, both trust and respect had to be earned and this was a process that developed over time. In the extract below Mohammed, a 15 year old regular at the Meadow club illustrates the centrality of trust within productive youth work relationships:

*Mohammed: I don't know like, I just don't know. If it was like, if I just went to a new youth club for instance, and they saw I had a black eye or something I would not tell them. Like it's basically a stranger, I wouldn't tell them what, how I got the black eye an all that.*

*Will: What about if it was in a local youth club in your area where you've known somebody for a long time?*

*Mohammed: Then maybe yeah.*

Mohammed's description of an unfamiliar youth worker as 'basically a stranger' illustrates the failure of the professional 'youth worker' title to equate a trustworthy status (St Croix, 2010). Instead trust, like respect, had to be earned through processes of interaction, often over a sustained and lengthy period (Crimmens *et al*, 2004; Davies, 2005). The youth clubs involved in this research facilitated the development of mutually trusting and respectful relationships proficiently. This was principally achieved through their local volunteering and staffing models. Indeed, casual workers and volunteers from the local areas almost exclusively staffed these services. In part, these staffing dynamics reflected longstanding managerial commitments to the provision of local opportunities. However, local staffing was also a product of the economic constraints imposed by the contemporary funding landscape, which, across the country, have seen volunteers 'increasingly replacing trained and qualified youth workers' (Davies, 2013:14).

## Evidencing challenges to critical practice

Analysis of the data generated by this research highlighted numerous tensions between youth work in principle, as espoused by contemporary youth policy, and experiences of youth work in practice. In particular, local staffing, partnership working and training arose as key sites of policy contradiction. Illustrating these contractions at the level of practice offers important empirical substantiation for contemporary criticisms of national youth policy (Davies, 2011; 2013; Fyfe and Moir, 2013; Taylor, 2013).



## Local staffing

Respondents often described their local ties with the communities in which they practiced as an occupational asset (Crimmens *et al.*, 2004). Workers/volunteers who had grown up in the same areas as the clubs they staffed always had pre-existing relationships with some of the attendees. In the extract below Liveer, a 17 year old casual worker refers to the advantages of locality:

*Liveer: It's like, I've grown up with them (attendees) so basically we know each other very well. If I tell them to stop doing what they're doing, if they're doing anything bad I'm sure they'll listen to me because we've grown up with each other; friends from day one.*

It is true that local staff and volunteers were able to draw on their existing friendships and contextual understandings of attendees' peer groups and familial ties to develop mutually trusting and respectful relationships. However, in practice, local workers'/volunteers' friendships with service users could also *inhibit* their capacity to engage in effective, critical practice. This was particularly the case amongst inexperienced workers and volunteers.

For example, homophobic mockery was commonplace within both of the youth clubs involved in this research. This behaviour was rarely challenged by any of the younger workers or volunteers, fashioning a situation where hegemonic gender roles were reproduced throughout interactions which reinforced discriminative perceptions of alternative gendered or sexual identities. Incidentally, the issues surrounding homophobic mockery notably reduced following the appointment of Lucy, a female volunteer who regularly challenged this behaviour. Lucy's outlook on gendered and sexual orientation was more liberal than many of the workers and, whilst she was from the local area, Lucy did not spend her leisure time with the service users. As a result Lucy was comfortable challenging some of the behaviours which other staff members were reluctant to address. Lucy's successes illustrate the value of diversity within staff teams. Indeed, in a context where the utilisation of local workers/volunteers is an integral part of productive engagement, staff diversity can go some way towards diluting the issues associated with the demarcation of personal and professional identities (Crimmens *et al.*, 2004). Within the following extract, Kel, a 22 year old casually paid worker recalls the challenges of working with his peers:

*Kel: Yeah it was like that when I was volunteering because, I was 18 at that time and a lot of my friends used to come down, and obviously I had managers and things that used to look over us, and I'm not gonna lie, I used to mess about. Just like them, you know what I mean? I used to run around like a headless chicken and just mess about just like they did, because they're ma boys. But then again, you got the managers that are about and they talk to you, and you have the evaluations. Bit by bit you realise like, you know I can make a career out of this, and if I keep going on like this I'm not gonna be nowhere really. I got to take it more serious. It's about realisation really. You've got to just clock onto the time and do it really,*

*just got to get your head down and do it. It's not, it's not easy man. When I was volunteering I wanted to quit because I thought: 'This ain't no fun no more.' I used to come to this youth club and try to work in it but my own boys were coming to this youth club you know? It ain't no fun no more. But then you've got to realise that it's not about fun, you've got to be responsible.*

*Will: And did you find that your mates understood that after a while*

*Kel: Yeah but after a while they stopped coming themselves, and I think when they stopped coming to the youth club it made me like work more.*

Kel's comments clearly articulate the difficulty some local volunteers faced maintaining a balance between informality and professionalism within youth club settings. Additionally – and this is important – for Kel it was the realisation that his voluntary engagement could lead to a career in youth work that marked his transition into responsible practice. This is not a trivial matter, particularly when the austerity measures introduced by the Coalition government mark such dramatic changes in the youth funding landscape. Indeed, if it is the prospect of steady wages that provokes responsible and professional practice for some, then the dissolution of these prospects through the decimation of youth service funding is likely to have detrimental implications for the commitment of local volunteers.

Notably, the decimation of sustainable career prospects for youth workers also coloured youth work managers' perspectives on nurturing local talent. Discussing fifteen years of practice with no pension, Royce, a youth work manager from the Meadow area illustrated this point:

*Royce: Who do I prepare to be my successor from the younger ranks? I would be interested in that if I saw a more sustainable way forward. If I don't see that way forward as an elder, then why should I spend my time preparing somebody to come into this field to be done over like myself? You know? I'm gonna say: 'No, take your intelligence elsewhere because it's not going to get any better anytime soon.'*

This concern illustrates a significant contradiction in the Coalition government's expectations of local and voluntary youth work delivery. Indeed, the ability of youth and community organisations, not just to recruit, but to *motivate* and *develop* volunteers is one of the misguided assumptions of the 'Big Society' agenda (Evans, 2011). If the dissolution of career prospects compromises volunteers' longitudinal engagement, then the traditional development of local talent and the mobilisation of local knowledge will be impacted negatively.

## Partnership working

Brokering partnerships between the local agencies responsible for managing health, education, housing, employment and criminal justice is central to the Coalition government's youth policy. These partnerships aim to provide young people with 'more opportunities and better support' (CO and DfE, 2010:63), particularly those deemed 'vulnerable' or 'at risk' (Home Office, 2011; DCLG, 2012a). In principle this is a rational and responsible goal. However, in practice 'joining up' services is challenging and a range of factors can influence the compatibility of the agencies included within the youth policy vision. Issues of compatibility become pertinent in the context of youth work, which necessarily centres on the voluntary relationships outlined above.

The young respondents involved in this research had the most respect for the youth workers they deemed trustworthy. As a consequence, maintaining mutually trusting relationships was a central part of the youth workers' practice. In some instances this influenced the ways in which youth workers managed their associations with other professionals, particularly the police. As Kel explained:

*Kel: Because it's with authorities, a lot of youth workers these days, young people say that they're involved in police activities, and the trust goes down the hill. We try to upkeep that trust and keep it going, we don't want to lose any trust with the young people. It's hard to get and you keep that bond for a long time.*

*Will: So it's important to sort of, keep a clear line between what you do as a youth worker and more formal authorities like the police?*

*Kel: Yeah yeah you have to keep a line because, then again it's trust. It's all about trust, if the young people see you talking to the police and then they get into trouble... I'll be honest with you, the majority of young people don't like the police anyway, their experiences of like brothers and uncles and cousins that are serving jail sentences, and they can see, it's not fair. But they do realise why they're in jail, but they're still not seeing that family member because of what happened (with the police).*

For Kel, accusations of information sharing fundamentally limited his capacity to engage productively with young people. The fragility of the observed youth work relationships, alongside their centrality to productive practice cemented Kel's reluctance to share information with the police. This reluctance was widely held by the other local youth workers/volunteers, reflecting general 'neighbourhood values' concerning 'informing the authorities about low-level crime and deviance' (Crimmens *et al*, 2004:29). Indeed, for the local youth workers, information sharing risked their youth work relationships *and* their broader local reputations.

Within both Maple and Meadow local relations with the police were poor. In an attempt to address this issue, approximately once every six months Community Police Support Officers (CPSOs) would arrive at youth club sessions, for five or ten minutes at a time. These attempts to develop rapport were predictably fruitless. CPSOs within the youth club were always perceived as an external, intruding group. The following comments from Mohammed (15) and Killah (15) two of the regular Maple youth club attendees illustrate this point:

*Mohammed: The police just judge you for what area you're from. For instance like if (pause) Maple doesn't have like a good reputation does it? I mean lots of crime and all that lot happen, so they'll just look down at you.*

*Will: Those police that come into the youth club a couple of weeks ago?*

*Killah: Yeah we don't like them.*

By showing up unannounced, local CPSOs contributed to the existing divisions between themselves and the youth services. Youth workers/volunteers were much happier to be forewarned about police visits. This meant that they could openly inform attendees in advance and in doing so avoid any allegations of colluding with the authorities. This illustrates the misguided nature of the government's assumption that local, increasingly voluntary service providers will compromise their professional and personal reputations by conforming strictly to partnership working policy initiatives. Indeed, brokering productive partnerships between youth workers and the police in Maple or Meadow would have involved overcoming established cultural barriers, a process that would need to occur over time with sustained support, engagement and compromise.

At this point it is important to recognise that the youth workers' reluctance to work in partnership with the police was not extended to all agencies. In fact, some of the respondents spoke positively about partnerships with social workers and career development advisors. This was because these partnerships added value, producing mutual benefits, without compromising the principles of child centred practice. However, in the context of diminishing resources and the predominance of risk centred policy initiatives (Home Office, 2011) youth workers are increasingly pressured to work alongside agencies that can compromise the foundations of the relationships that are central to youth work. This illustrates a process by which the contemporary funding landscape undermines the voluntary sector through the reduction of possibilities for sustainable, financed provision that promotes the core principles of youth work.

Indeed, in some instances the prioritisation of youth work relationships resulted in youth workers' refusal of potentially lucrative partnerships. At the time of the research, the Maple Homework Club was partially funded by a variety of sources. This club provided homework support for young people in the Maple area, many of whom did not have access to computers, printers or academic

help due to their parent's English language skills. This club was popular and consistently had a waiting list of prospective attendees. During the research one of the local schools approached the Homework Club organisers to broker a partnership, as John, a Maple Homework Club organiser explained:

*John: That's something that we've had discussions with the schools about because there have been times where the schools that the students have come from wanted, well, have possibly offered money to the Homework Club, but they want information that would allow them to measure the effectiveness of the money.*

*Will: Hmm ok.*

*John: And let's see, three years ago that was the first request came in, and the schools said: 'Can you let us know which of our pupils are attending the sessions?' and I said: 'Well we've not asked the pupils permission so we'll ask them over the next couple of sessions' and I was really surprised that 100% of them said: 'No, we don't want the schools to have our names'. I would have expected 50/50, something like that, but all of them said no, so we haven't done that.*

John's example articulates the significance Homework Club attendees placed on the separation of that service from their local schools. Despite the fact that the Homework Club was a space where attendees worked on homework set by the schools, they were uncomfortable with the establishment of any formal associations between the two organisations. This example reflects two points for consideration. Initially, it is clear that the Homework Club attendees *enjoyed* the fact that the club was not 'part of school'. The club had a different atmosphere and a more relaxed code of conduct which was conducive to voluntary engagement. Secondly, the dynamics within the Homework Club actively promoted the empowerment of young people, and in their refusal to share information with the schools, the young people gladly exercised that power. This recognition of young people's agency represents a key factor separating the Homework Club from the local schools. Thus, for these young people, working with the school represented both a symbolic and actual threat to the favourable power dynamics that were structured into their youth work relationships (Davies, 2005).

Clearly the government's expectations of partnership working reflect a limited understanding of youth work. Yet the contemporary funding landscape necessitates financial resourcing through local partnerships. In order to sustain their services youth workers need to seek partnerships which offer mutual investments and outcomes, without compromising the principles of their practice. However, the context of short term funding and part time working which characterises contemporary youth work significantly compromises workers'/managers' ability to seek out these partnerships. Again, this illustrates a contradiction in the Coalition government's youth policy.

If partnership working (CO and DfE, 2010) and information sharing (Home Office, 2011) are to remain central to the government's vision of youth work, then consultancy from youth workers will be needed in order to illustrate how, if at all, these expectations can be delivered without compromising the success and character of youth work.

## Training

The youth work managers involved in this research all reflected on the difficulties of developing professionally capable staff teams on shoestring budgets. Offering regular and innovative training was an integral part of maintaining high quality services. Training boosted the professional capacity of staff teams, it facilitated team building and offered volunteers and workers an important sense of development and progression. Delivering critical youth work practice is both emotionally and intellectually challenging. Volunteers in particular often needed to spend a considerable amount of time engaging with services before they could productively contribute to the delivery of youth work sessions. This posed challenges for youth work managers, who were increasingly reliant on volunteers, yet constrained in their capacity to train them. As Royce, a youth work manager from Meadow illustrated:

*Royce: ... motivating volunteers to stay with you, to train with you and then deliver is the hardest part of the job, because you're trying to create a service that has quality, but also the flexibility to work with young people and working with young people is not a straight road. They will throw a whole load of curve balls at you that you don't expect. I've been in all kinds of situations where, you know, the kid that I never thought would hurt a fly is a sexual deviant, or the kid that you think is the most boisterous or the most trouble causing is actually the most vulnerable. So, you know, you're dealing with all different walks of life, all different kinds of lifestyles, all different kinds of concepts and perceptions of life and you've got to train a volunteer to be open to all of these different elements, whilst not superimposing their own background into the work, which is one of the hardest things... So training volunteers to understand all of that is a hard, difficult process, especially when you don't get no money for training.*

Royce's comments illustrate the complexity of youth work practice. In order to meet National Occupation Standards (NYA, 2014) youth workers require a comprehensive understanding of the values and principles of practice, alongside the communities and young people they engage with. On top of this, youth workers are increasingly expected to shoulder additional responsibilities which require a deep comprehension of complex policy agendas (Thomas, 2011). This necessitates additional training. However, as Sally, the Maple youth work manager confirmed, in the context of contemporary funding constraints, training was increasingly difficult to finance:

Sally: ... *we haven't got funding for extra training. Training costs huge amounts of money because the funders, they want outputs, they want numbers of kids. No funders will give you money to train up your workers to that level of expertise that you can actually manage them. Most of our youth workers have a hotch potch of training. No way near as high as I'd like it to be, because they only work a few hours a week, how are we gonna do that?*

The issues outlined by Sally were amplified by the managers' reliance on private business investment, because for private investors the value of funding youth services lay in its potential to evidence their social, philanthropic activity. This required particular outcomes, such as attendance figures or emotive photographs, which staff training sessions could not deliver. As a consequence there was little or no room for private investment in training. Whilst cheaper in-house alternatives (delivered by members of the youth work team) were attempted throughout the course of the research, the fact that these sessions had to be scheduled on weekends and no financial incentives could be provided considerably reduced attendance.

Workers'/volunteers' perception of youth work as a financially unsuitable career choice also reduced their inclination to attend the training opportunities that were available to them. Indeed, the majority of the junior workers/volunteers involved in this research planned to attend university and pursue alternative career plans. This suggests that the challenges facing youth work managers, in terms of staff development and retention (Dunne *et al.*, 2014a), are likely to be associated with the diminishing professional status of youth work, imposed by the dissolution of sustainable funding opportunities.

Ultimately, training plays an integral role in the delivery of professional and critical youth work practice and this is exactly the kind of practice that is necessary in order to deliver the outcomes that contemporary government expectations impose (CO and DfE, 2010). However, brokering partnerships between youth organisations and local businesses (CO and DfE, 2010) does not alleviate the issues that youth organisations face financing this training. In 2008 the National Youth Agency audit reported 47 out of 144 local authorities had spent nothing on continuing professional development. In 2011 the Education Select Committee cited the value of investing in professional youth work development (House of Commons, 2011:49). In 2014 the European Commission's report on youth work suggested that the lack of 'clear learning development pathways...can lead to difficulties recruiting youth workers and result in high turnover in the sector' (Dunne *et al.*, 2014a:183). This suggests that the underfinancing of professional development in youth work is a sustained and obstinate feature. Yet, in the context of decreased support and opportunity for young people (Dorling, 2013; Gardiner, 2014), the importance of progressive and critical youth work is more pertinent than ever. If central government expect local community organisations to contribute significantly to the economic and social development of young people (Dunne *et al.*, 2014a) then the significance of sustainable practice and professional career development will have to be taken more seriously.

## Conclusion

This article has provided empirical support for some of the pertinent criticisms of the contemporary youth policy context (Davies, 2011; 2013; Fyfe and Moir, 2013; Taylor, 2013). The examples discussed are far from exhaustive, but they do closely reflect the primary concerns of the youth workers, managers and young people involved in the research. Respondents cited staffing, training and partnership working as key challenges to effective youth work practice. Exploring these challenges has identified points of policy contradiction, illustrating how and why local service providers struggle to meet the expectations imposed by the Coalition government (CO and DfE, 2010). Indeed, as youth services are becoming increasingly reliant on volunteers and short term private investment, they are simultaneously expected to provide innovative practices, aligned with government priorities, which produce measurable outcomes. This is simply not feasible.

The Coalition government have suggested that local responsabilisation, information sharing and partnership working will enable youth organisations to provide young people with more opportunities and better support – support which is crucial in the context of sustained inequality and youth unemployment (Gardiner, 2014; ONS, 2014). However, the data presented within this article illustrate a different reality. Whilst the youth services involved in this research were all proficient in the provision of safe spaces for young people, to do their homework or spend their leisure time, the capacity of these services to exceed these opportunities and meet the expectations of government were significantly compromised by the youth policy and funding landscape. This suggests that the Coalition government's youth policy has raised the expectations of youth work at the same time as undermining the capabilities of the sector, a paradox which raises distinctions between youth work in principle and youth work in practice. These distinctions illustrate an epistemic disjuncture between policy makers and youth workers, demonstrating the need for additional research, and knowledge brokering, if more informed and operational youth policies are to be developed. However the fact that youth policy is 'not a government priority' (Davies, 2013:26) does not bode well for this aim. It is also striking given the increasing evidence base for the value of youth work in the European Union (Dunne *et al*, 2014a; Dunne *et al*, 2014b).

Despite these challenges, the youth work sector is resilient. However, in order for open access youth work to realise its potential; to empower and successfully aid the social development of young people, youth workers need to resist the structural constraints that are currently damaging the stability of principled practice, at the same time as preserving morale and developing critical youth work in the context of diminishing resources. This amplifies the need for practitioners, in the plethora of settings within which they find themselves, to unite, define and defend youth work as a distinctive and indispensable discipline (IDYW, 2009; Taylor, 2013).



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## Notes

- 1 *A comprehensive overview of this history is beyond the scope and purpose of this article. For further policy detail see Coles (2006) and Davies (2008).*
- 2 *All locations have been anonymised; for further details please contact the author.*

[Back to Contents](#)