

Education Select Committee - Conclusions and recommendations from the June 2011 Report

The purpose and reach of services

1. Various government initiatives from 1939 onwards have aspired to create a universal offer of youth services to all young people, principally delivered through local authorities. Yet, although the number of young people accessing services has risen over the past decade or so, in reality youth services have never reached anything like 100% of young people. Services often referred to as 'universal' tend to be open to all young people but located in particular areas, often of disadvantage, and are arguably targeted in a geographical sense. We do not believe that there are any truly universal youth services and consequently propose to use the term 'open-access' rather than 'universal' in drawing a distinction with targeted services. We recommend that the Government do the same. (Paragraph 19)

2. Services for young people have myriad aims and we do not intend to comment on their individual merits. However, we do underline an important point of principle about provision: namely that the purposes of youth services should primarily be to offer positive activities and enriching personal and social experiences and not solely to be seen as a mechanism to divert young people from misbehaviour. This is especially important given that 85% of young people's time is spent outside formal education. We urge the Government to announce publicly its intention to retain the statutory duty on local authorities to secure young people's access to sufficient educational and recreational leisure-time activities, which requires them to take account of young people's views and publicise up-to-date information about the activities and facilities available; and we remind local authorities that they must have regard to this duty. (Paragraph 27)

3. We understand that when public funding is limited priority may be given to services which support the most disadvantaged. However, our evidence showed that open-access services can sometimes be as effective as targeted ones in reaching those young people, that both can perform similarly life-changing roles in young people's lives, and that young people often move between them. Consequently, in determining which services to commission, local authorities must recognise that an open-access service could be more appropriate than a targeted one for improving certain outcomes for young people, or that both types may be needed. (Paragraph 28)

Identifying successful services: measuring value and impact

4. In light of the limited and somewhat outdated research evidence base about youth services, we believe there to be a strong case for relevant university

research institutions and other academics in the field, perhaps in partnership with sector research journals, to conduct a meta-analysis of studies relating to the impact and effectiveness of youth services. The Government should commission such an analysis from an appropriate consortium as part of its forthcoming youth strategy, and should publish the results, to contribute to the public debate. (Paragraph 36)

5. There is little doubt that good youth services can have a transformational effect on young people's lives and can play a vital role both in supporting vulnerable young people and in enriching the lives of others without particular disadvantage. However, we were 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. We were alarmed that the Department for Education is expecting local authorities to make spending decisions on the basis of such poor data about what services are being provided, let alone which are effective. (Paragraph 39)

6. We accept that the outcomes of individual youth work relationships can be hard to quantify and the impact of encounters with young people may take time to become clear and be complex. In that context, it is hard to reject the basic tenet expounded by a range of youth service representatives and young people themselves, that 'you know good youth work when you see it'. However, with a tight spending settlement and an increase in commissioning of youth services at a local level, we also believe it is essential that publicly funded services are able to demonstrate what difference they make to young people. (Paragraph 40)

7. Whilst wanting to guard against inappropriate or distorting measures like simple head counting, there is no good reason why robust but sophisticated outcome measures should not be developed to allow services to demonstrate the impact they have on young people's personal and social development. We accept the evidence we heard from the National Council for Voluntary Youth Services (NCVYS) that such tools already exist and that what is needed is agreement on a common set of standards which will allow services to be evaluated and compared. Consequently, we welcome the Government's decision to commission NCVYS to deliver an outcomes framework for application across the sector. This framework should take account of personal and social wellbeing measures, young people should be closely involved in its design and application and it should be simple and inexpensive to administer. New Philanthropy Capital's wellbeing index presents a good template for initial consideration. (Paragraph 51)

Service provision: funding, commissioning and payment by results

8. We disagree with the Minister that spending of £350 million per year—equating to around £77 per young person aged 13 to 19—on youth services in England equates to "large slugs of public money". On the contrary, we congratulate the sector for its long-standing dexterity in making limited resources go a long way and for continuing to support young people despite reliance on a patchwork of different funds. However, in the tight financial

settlement, services will need to redouble their efforts to leverage in other sources of funding, including making better use of philanthropic and charitable funds and private sector investment. Our evidence suggested that many smaller services found it hard to access such sources: we recommend that the Government and local authorities take positive action to support them by brokering partnerships with alternative funders. (Paragraph 61)

9. It appears that provision of youth services is currently "patchwork", as the Minister suggested to us, with a degree of duplication and overlap between activities and providers in some areas. We did not, however, hear evidence that decisions about current cuts to services were being made on the basis of assessment of what was needed locally and in order to weed out overlapping provision. On the contrary, the Government's assessment seems to be that cuts are being applied across the board to 'salami slice' youth services, where they are continuing at all. (Paragraph 68)

10. Youth services cannot hope to be immune to necessary public spending cuts. However, there have already been very significant and, in the Minister's own words, "disproportionate" cuts to local authority youth services, ranging from 20% to 100% in some areas, and further cuts are planned over the Spending Review period. For many wholly or partially publicly funded youth services, changes to Government spending and funding structures—including the reduction to the value of previous funds redirected into the Early Intervention Grant and the reduction in overall Revenue Support Grant to local authorities—may be both dramatic and long-lasting. The Government's lack of urgency in articulating a youth policy or strategic vision is regrettable, is compounding an already difficult situation and should not be allowed to continue. In setting out its strategic vision the Government should indicate its expectations of the range and standards of youth services which should be available across the country including, for example, access to information and advice, to varied opportunities for personal and social development and to volunteering. Such opportunities need to reflect the different requirements of those beginning adolescence and those entering adulthood, as well as other socio-economic factors. (Paragraph 69)

11. We welcome the Government's issuing of draft statutory guidance to local authorities not to pass on "disproportionate" cuts to the voluntary sector. We urge it to finalise this guidance and ensure that local authorities are made aware of its application to youth services. However, if local authorities fail to meet their statutory duty to provide sufficient services for young people, the Secretary of State for Education should consider employing his powers to direct them to commission adequate provision. (Paragraph 70)

12. We agree with the Minister's concern about a lack of awareness and information-sharing between services and geographical areas. The Department should take a lead in sharing best practice. We recommend that it establish a dedicated area on the 'Youth' section of its website for youth services and young people to post examples of innovative practice to encourage services to learn from one another. Local authorities should establish similar area-wide repositories. (Paragraph 71)

13. We support the broad principle that local authorities should primarily become strategic commissioners rather than simply the default providers of youth services. However, given that a significant proportion of youth services are already provided by the voluntary sector, to make significant savings local authorities will need to consider radical options—for instance, converting entire youth services departments into social enterprises, as in Kensington and Chelsea, or handing management of youth centres to the voluntary sector, as in Surrey. (Paragraph 83)

14. We believe there are a number of practical recommendations which will make commissioning of youth services more effective. The Government should draw these to the attention of local authorities, either through its forthcoming Public Service Reform White Paper, or by issuing guidance on commissioning practice. First, rather than simply continuing to commission those services currently being provided, local authorities should undertake a thorough review of what their young people want and need, avoiding duplication and waste and taking into account what is already being provided by other agencies. Second, the outcomes against which services are commissioned must include positive as well as deficit indicators. Third, local authorities should encourage partnerships bids, particularly those which mix large bodies which are well-known and have the capacity to invest in collecting management information, with smaller, community-based providers. Finally, Government should require local authorities to set out how they will involve young people in commissioning decisions, whether in representative roles, such as young mayors, or through processes such as participatory budgeting. The evidence we received suggested that such involvement can not only empower young people, but also enhance the effectiveness of spending decisions. (Paragraph 84)

15. We do not believe that a system whereby local authorities withhold payment until a service demonstrates specific results is suited to the funding of youth services, particularly open-access ones. First, many services simply do not currently collect appropriate data to measure outcomes. Second, the cohort is ill-defined, with many young people dipping in and out of services over a period of time. Third, isolating the impact of a single intervention is hard when a service may be only one of several influences on a young person's life. Fourth, results are likely to be achieved over a long time frame over which services would struggle to operate without any up-front funding. (Paragraph 90)

16. However, we do believe that there is scope for a form of social impact bond to be applied at a local authority level, in addition to core spending on youth services by local authorities. Under such a model, the Government could encourage social investment in a basket of outcomes for young people in a local area. If those outcomes improved, there could be a return to the investor and also to the local authority. We recommend that the Government carry out a feasibility study on such a system, bearing in mind that it should be in addition to current spending on youth services, not an alternative. (Paragraph 91)

The youth services workforce

17. Volunteers are highly valued and already much deployed across youth services and should continue to be encouraged. The experience of The Scout Association, amongst many others, shows the considerable potential for volunteers to be trained effectively and form a core part of the workforce. It is not, however, clear to what degree greater use of volunteers is possible, since they already comprise a sizeable proportion of the workforce—87% according to analysis by the Children's Workforce Development Council—and there are costs to their training and support. However, additional barriers to their participation should not be introduced, and in this context we welcome the Government's pledge to scale back the bureaucratic nature of Criminal Record Bureau checks. (Paragraph 102)

18. We acknowledge that the requirement to have a degree in order to acquire professional youth worker status may have had positive effects in cementing youth work as a profession. However, we are not aware of any research that shows definitively that higher levels of qualifications in youth work lead to better outcomes for young people, and it was not clear to us why a degree should be the only route into qualified youth work status. We believe that it would be timely to review the knowledge and skills likely to be needed by youth workers over the next decade and the range of initial training and qualifications which would help to secure these. (Paragraph 103)

19. The low priority afforded to continuing professional development of the youth workforce is concerning, in particular the fact that, according to the last audit conducted by the National Youth Agency in 2008, some 33% of local authorities spent nothing at all on it, despite accredited terms and conditions for youth workers recommending that it should account for a minimum of 5% of local authority youth service budgets. Investment in continuing professional development would be particularly worthwhile in enabling practitioners to share good practice and new ways of working between services. The Government must engage with the questions about qualifications, training and continuing professional development which we raise in this Report, and set out how it intends positively to support the sector in its developing its workforce. (Paragraph 105)

20. We did not hear sufficient evidence to convince us of the merits or otherwise of introducing a licence to practise for youth work, although we note that it does seem rather odd that other professionals working with children are subject to protection of title, when similar standards are not applied to the youth workforce. A recent proposal by youth organisations to establish an Institute for Youth Work which could set minimum standards across the sector and promote continuing professional development, is worth further consideration. (Paragraph 110)

Youth volunteering and the National Citizen Service

21. We applaud those talented young people who are engaging in positions of democratic responsibility and leadership, and organisations like the British

Youth Council and UK Youth Parliament for enabling them to take up such roles. We welcome the Government's support for democratic participation, and urge it to translate into practice its ambition to have a youth engagement body in every authority in the country which plays an active role in shaping and scrutinising those policies which affect young people. (Paragraph 117)

22. Whilst we acknowledge that a nominal cost may ensure commitment on the part of participants, we believe that the inevitable effect of providers charging up to £100 for participation may well be to deter young people from low income families. (Paragraph 123)

23. Evidence from the Minister for Civil Society and the Government Adviser on National Citizen Service suggested to us that funding for the programme may not continue to be ring-fenced beyond the pilots. Indeed, we found it ominous that both spoke in terms of generating funds from elsewhere, despite having emphasised that additional money was being made available through the Cabinet Office. We are concerned that this may mean, contrary to the Government's assurances, that National Citizen Service might end up in direct competition with other youth services for funds at local authority level. (Paragraph 125)

24. The cost of National Citizen Service in 2011 is around £1,182 per young person. By contrast, the German federal Government spends £1,228 per young person for a whole year's work-based volunteering programme, which we heard enhanced young people's skills and future careers. We do not see how the Government can justify spending the same amount for only six weeks of National Citizen Service. (Paragraph 128)

25. Although the Government has made clear that, subject to the success of the pilots, it wishes to make National Citizen Service a universal offer to all 600,000 16-year olds, it has given no indication of what percentage it calculates would actually participate. Based on the cost per head of the 2011 pilots, it would cost a total of £355 million each year to provide a universal offer of National Citizen Service assuming, for example, a 50% take up. Even allowing for economies of scale, the costs may well outstrip entire annual spending by local authorities on youth services, which totalled £350 million in 2009-10. (Paragraph 129)

26. Overall, we applaud the Government's aspiration to make a universal offer to all young people, and for the emphasis placed by National Citizen Service on social mixing, skills building, community engagement and young people's positive participation in society. In a world of less scarce resources we agree that introduction of the scheme would be a positive development. However, given the degree to which youth services are being cut, and in light of our concerns about the scheme's cost and practical implementation, we cannot support the continued development of National Citizen Service in its current form. Consequently, we recommend that the core idea of National Citizen Service be retained, but that it be significantly amended to become a form of accreditation for existing programmes which can prove that they meet the Government's aims of social mixing, personal and social development, and the component parts of National Citizen Service, such as a residential experience

and a social action task. We acknowledge that this may further reduce the overall resources available to the youth sector, and thus recommend that Government protects those additional funds currently earmarked for National Citizen Service and divert them into year-round youth services. (Paragraph 131)