

YOUTH WORK IN WALES

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Youth work involves a broad range of activities, concerned with education in its widest sense. Youth work is concerned with the education and development, both social and personal, of young people aged between eleven and 25 years, particularly those aged 13 to 19 years.

Youth work:

- supports young people in their transition from dependence to interdependence;
- assists their personal and social development through informal education and seeks to engage them in lifelong learning
- enables them to have a voice and influence in the services provided for them
- is a universal service open to all young people; and
- promotes equality of opportunity.

It is suggested that for work with young people to be seen as 'youth work' three elements have to be present:

- the relationship between the young person and the worker is voluntary
- the work has an educational purpose
- the focus of the work is directed towards young people

(Jeffs & Smith, Youth & Policy No.62)

YOUNG PEOPLE

One of the basic principles of the youth service is that it is based on a voluntary relationship, entered into by young people because they want to and not because the law, or anything or anyone else obliges them to. This special relationship between a young person and a youth worker is unlike the relationship a young person has with, say, a teacher, social worker or even a parent.

WHERE DOES YOUTH WORK TAKE PLACE?

The most familiar form of youth service provision is the youth club or youth centre. These can range from a one-night-a-week club run by a voluntary organisation in a rented hall, to a full-time club based in a purpose-built building, run by full-time and part-time paid staff.

Youth work takes place in a variety of settings:

- in youth clubs, including those which are purpose built, those which meet in community centres and other community venues, and those which meet in school premises
- in buildings owned and managed by voluntary youth organisations

- in centres specialising in the arts, sports and outdoor activities
- in residential centres
- in information, advice and counselling centres
- in mobile youth clubs and services
- on the streets, in cafes and in pubs when youth workers befriend young people
- through special projects which address specific issues such as drugs, criminal behaviour, homelessness, health, truancy, discrimination and the environment.

THE WORK

A great deal of face-to-face youth work is carried out by part-time and voluntary workers, who outnumber full-time staff. Full-time workers are often responsible for centre management, and divide their time between administrative duties, supervising part-time and voluntary youth workers, and direct work with young people. They may also liaise with and support part-time and voluntary workers running youth clubs in other venues.

Some youth workers are 'detached' - not based in a centre, but concerned with meeting young people on their own ground: in the street, arcades, shopping centres, pubs and cafes, and working with them on the central issues of their lives.

There are also some youth workers based at schools who may divide their time between youth work, teaching or pastoral duties, and others who are based in a neighbourhood or district, working, for example, on housing estates. Some youth services employ outreach workers, whose aim is to encourage young people to make use of youth provision.

Youth workers also work with other related professions. These may include youth justice, careers and social services, and health and housing organisations.

YOUTH WORK ACTIVITIES

Youth work offers a range of activities. Centres may provide an informal setting for young people to meet (a coffee bar, for instance), where youth workers provide guidance in an unstructured way. They may also be involved in more formal group discussions on a wide range of issues that concern young people, or may focus on particular groups such as young people who are unemployed, or young people with disabilities. Increasingly, young people are gaining recognition for their learning within the youth service. A key theme in current practice is 'empowerment' - the idea that it is possible for individuals or groups of individuals to make significant changes to their lives and the life of their community, with appropriate support from professionals.

The corporately developed Curriculum Statement drives the Youth Service in Wales and is deeply embedded in youth work practice. Its stated aim is to provide opportunities for young people that are:

- Educative
- Participative
- Empowering
- Expressive

The Curriculum is delivered in a wide range of settings, using a number of diverse activities involving young people in:

- Informal and structured educational programmes which enhance their personal development
- Places and relationships within which they can enjoy themselves, feel secure, supported and valued
- Discussing issues relating to health, relationships, behaviour, and responsibilities
- Becoming sensitive to their community, local and global environments, culture and heritage
- Finding challenge, recognition and achievement through adventurous activities
- Receiving information and advice through the availability of published material, guidance, counselling and group discussion
- Developing skills through individual or team sports, and taking part in informal recreational activities in a safe environment
- Developing expressive skills through participation in dance, music, visual arts, drama and role-play
- Travelling; experiencing residential opportunities and international exchanges.

YOUTH WORK PROVIDERS

Youth service provision in Wales is provided in three main ways:

- Through major voluntary organisations
- Through the Local Authority
- Through small independent local projects

Major voluntary organisations - have national headquarter organisations that support local groups. These include such organisations as Urdd Gobaith Cymru; YMCAs; Young Farmers Clubs; Duke of Edinburgh Award schemes; organisations which share a faith; and uniformed organisations such as the Scouts, Guides, Boys / Girls Brigades. Many have their own highly developed structures while others are looser federations of local clubs.

Local Authorities - there are 22 local authorities in Wales and each has a statutory duty to ensure that there are adequate facilities for youth work. Responsibility for providing youth services generally lies with the Education department but it may also be located within Community Services or Leisure.

Local projects - these local initiatives are usually set up by members of a community and administered by a small management committee and could include:

- community projects
- small independent projects (lottery funded, for example)
- multi-agency projects often set up to provide specific activities (eg. various health issues, homelessness)

Often these projects are not part of a larger structure or network and may have to rely on short-term funding.

WHAT SKILLS AND INTERESTS DOES A YOUTH WORKER NEED?

Youth and community work and community education demands the ability to relate to, and communicate with, a wide variety of people. Empathy and good communication skills (especially the ability to listen) are essential. It is important to be sensitive and emotionally mature, with the capacity to earn the trust of others, and to be able to offer information, advice and guidance in a way that is acceptable and useful. Resilience and toughness may be needed to cope with conflict and deprivation. To get projects off the ground, initiative and enthusiasm are required. Planning and administrative skills are also necessary.

Many posts require a commitment to work unsocial hours. Most jobs involve some travel; in rural areas, this can be quite substantial. A driving licence is useful.

Wide interests are useful, and it can be an advantage to have specialist skills or interests such as sports or arts.

Youth workers also need to be aware of issues that affect young people, such as government initiatives, changes in the law, and youth cultures and interests.