

## Straws in the Wind

### The State of Youth Work Practice in a Changing Policy Environment (Phase 2)

Bernard Davies and Bryan Merton

#### Executive Summary

This is a report of the findings of a second modest Inquiry into the way policy influences the practice of youth work. It follows an earlier report published in 2009<sup>1</sup>. In both we sought to learn how youth work is being conceptualised and applied in response to the emerging policies of a government that had shown a very high degree of interest in the lives, challenges and achievements of young people. Our particular focus has been on the interventions made by professional youth workers designed to identify young people's aspirations and help them to achieve them.

In 2010 we returned to some of the themes with which we concluded the earlier report. We sought to dig a little deeper into the impact of some of the flagship policies that had been introduced towards the end of the New Labour administration. We visited a very small number of local authorities and there met with service managers, front-line staff and young people themselves from both the local authority and voluntary and community sectors. We asked similar or the same kinds of questions that we had asked in the first Inquiry. We encountered considerable turbulence and churn in the system but nevertheless were able to spend a day in each of eight services and gain some useful insights into the inter-relationship between policy, practice and outcomes for young people.

In both Inquiries there were wide discrepancies of perception, experience and view reported to us. From this qualitative evidence it has been hard to pull together consistent and coherent messages. Within the same area we typically found managers and front-line workers drawing on different frames of reference to make sense of what they believed to be taking place in the service and in the sector more widely. Nevertheless, it has been possible to identify some key themes and patterns, using the testimony of those we met to illustrate and enliven them.

Two years on from the first Inquiry we found that many of the dilemmas we encountered then still persist and indeed have intensified. Services remain pre-occupied by targets, requiring youth workers to measure the value of their interventions by the numbers they reach rather than by the quality of the relationships and opportunities they create. The meaning of voluntary participation has become more not less ambiguous as partner services and agencies call upon youth workers to devise and run programmes that young people are required to attend. The challenge for youth workers of converting a sense of obligation in young people to one of active choice has never been more urgent. Perverse incentives have become evident as projects hang on to young people as a means of protecting and preserving funding for their work.

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<sup>1</sup> Davies, B. and Merton, B., 2009a, *Squaring the Circle: Findings of a 'modest' Inquiry into the state of youth work practice in a changing policy environment*, De Montfort University, available at [http://www.dmu.ac.uk/Images/Squaring%20the%20Circle\\_tcm6-50166.pdf](http://www.dmu.ac.uk/Images/Squaring%20the%20Circle_tcm6-50166.pdf)

There are also reasons to be positive. The stock of youth work is still high, judging by continuing referrals from other services (schools, police, health). Youth workers continue to make an important and distinctive contribution to the integration of support and development services. They have found creative and flexible ways of responding to government policies, for example by extending the provision of positive activities at week-ends. Under constant pressure they adhere to tried and tested principles and involve young people themselves in shaping programmes to meet their own needs and aspirations.

Strong cultural differences persist between professions over operational matters such as the sharing of information. Sensible planning and provision of youth work opportunities are blighted by actual and anticipated shortfalls in funding. The independence of the voluntary and community sector is being put at risk by its reliance on limited funding from the national and local state. The policy of the new coalition has cut off key funding streams that had put resources and decision-making in the hands of young people the better to determine the provision they wanted in their localities. And as managers dwindle in number and get distracted away from day-to-day direct management of teams and resources, the gap in perceptions between themselves and those they manage widens rather than narrows. This process has been intensified by the tendency to draw this smaller number of managers, some of whom do not have a background in professional youth work, into more strategic roles with its attendant tasks of alliance-building and information sharing. As the policy and funding climate become more volatile change, uncertainty and complexity proliferate and people communicate with less frequency, clarity and confidence both up as well as down 'the line', with the result that they find it hard to keep each other in the loop.

As service budgets are cut policy makers and funders are turning more to supporting services that target already identified individuals, groups, localities and issues. Distinctive youth work methods are rationed to programmes and projects that become the preserve of those who are seen by policy-makers as needing them most. Educational principles and purposes have become increasingly hard to safeguard as ones in favour of 'child saving' and youth control are increasingly prioritised. Spontaneous and 'on the wing' interventions and the preventative properties of open access youth work become harder to defend. The demand for evidence of the positive impact of the use of scarce resources tends to encourage a narrow focus on those interventions that lead to more immediately demonstrable outcomes.

These straws in the wind signify cold comfort. It is hard to find cause for celebration. With resilience, resourcefulness and resolve – the characteristics it seeks to engender in young people themselves – as the profession's hallmarks, a determined, creative and sustained defence of good practice is increasingly going to be required, by managers and field practitioners, if - when we return for a third phase of the Inquiry - we are to find that youth work continues to make its distinctive contribution both to young people's wellbeing in their here-and-now and to longer-term positive outcomes.

**De Montfort University, October 2010**

**This is an executive summary of the report *Straws in the Wind: The State of Youth Work Practice in a Changing Policy Environment (Phase 2)* written by Bernard Davies and Bryan Merton, Visiting Professors in the Youth and Community Division, De Montfort University.**

**For a copy of the full report, please visit our website at [www.dmu.ac.uk/ycd](http://www.dmu.ac.uk/ycd).**

**For more information about the study, please contact:**

**Jason Wood, Head of Research, Youth and Community Division**

**Tel: (0116) 207 8740 / Email: [jwood@dmu.ac.uk](mailto:jwood@dmu.ac.uk)**