Straws in the Wind

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

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Contents

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[1]. 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.

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.

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[1] 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

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.

1. Introduction

In April 2009 we published *Squaring the Circle* (Davies and Merton, 2009a, 2009b), the findings of a modest inquiry into the state of youth work in a fast-changing policy environment. We wanted to learn how youth work was conceptualised and applied as youth policy and resources shifted towards more targeted work with young people; and to understand the impact of these developments on the practice and professional identity of fieldworkers and their managers. We concluded the report by highlighting a number of dilemmas for young people, youth workers and their managers, derived principally from the changing relationship between the state and young people as individuals and members of groups and communities. We suggested these raised questions that merited further inquiry and research.

Since then there has been a more extensive roll-out of policies affecting young people and considerable political change. Britain is now led by a coalition government which has embarked on what it describes as a radical programme of reform designed to cut the national deficit fast and deeply with huge implications for the funding of public services. It also aims to radically re-orientate the relationship between state and citizenry, moving away from top-down regulation and target-setting towards locally devised creative solutions to enduring social problems, encouraging local communities to take over aspects of service provision. The government believes it has been elected on a mandate of 'small state, big society'.

The new government has said little to date about youth policy, other than launch a manifesto pledge for creating a National Citizenship Service for 16 year-olds. However, the consequence of an immediate and steep reduction of the deficit and exhortation to people to take greater responsibility for meeting their own needs is that the state will provide little more than a minimum safety net. The expectation remains that services will continue to work in partnership and that the voluntary and community sector will play an increasingly important part, although there will be less funding on which all providers will be able to draw. The move away from universal to targeted and preventative services is likely to quicken. Services may well have to be radically redesigned with resultant changes in forms of organisation and structure for planning and providing them. In order to 'protect front-line delivery' management posts will go – indeed many have already done so. Links between local authorities and schools will weaken. Already the flagship initiatives that featured the active involvement of young people in shaping and funding provision (YOF and YCF) have disappeared. And all of this is taking place in the context of increasing levels of youth unemployment and a squeeze on the provision of higher education places. Although a clearer picture is unlikely to emerge until after the announcement of the Comprehensive Spending Review in late October 2010 the prospects for young people and those who provide services for them are bleak.

The policies of the new government notwithstanding, we had already thought it timely to return to some of the themes we had begun to explore in our earlier inquiry by revisiting the local authorities and perhaps visiting some additional ones. As before, the intention was to discuss with managers, front-line youth workers and young people a series of questions concerning the relationship between policy and practice with which they had been sent beforehand. Some of the questions were the same as we had raised in 2008-9 and some were new (see Appendix 1). Because of the turbulence and churn in the sector, we were unable to revisit all twelve local authorities and in fact our modest sample was reduced by a third so that in the event we visited only eight, some for the

second time and others for the first. (See Appendix 2). As with the first phase we spent a day in each service in discussions with managers, front-line workers and young people participating in youth work projects and programmes run by both the local authority and its partners in the voluntary and community sector. We would like to record our thanks to those we met who generously gave us their time and attention during a period of huge uncertainty and anxiety.

Because the sample is so small and random, no generalisations from it about the current overall state of youth work can be or have been made. We would therefore not claim our report on it to be anything more than a snapshot of how those directly engaged in providing young people with opportunities for support and development though proven youth work methods are responding to the challenges they are facing. In particular, we have sought to understand the impact of the drive towards integrating services for young people as this policy has been evolving between what we choose to regard as two phases of a continuing inquiry. We have called this report *Straws in the Wind* because this best describes our findings.

Again, as in the first phase, it has been hard to detect clear and unambiguous patterns; indeed, much of the evidence, derived from people's testimony, is inconsistent and at times paradoxical. Nevertheless, we believe that the findings are valid and afford some useful perspectives on the state of a professional practice that is under threat – so much so that there are now two national campaigns, *In Defence of Youth Work* and *For Youth's Sake* designed to preserve it. If nothing else, we hope that the qualitative evidence in the report furnishes those committed to youth work as a viable and progressive profession with the grounds for arguing for its continuation and development in the service of Britain's young people.

2. Youth work as a distinctive practice

For the first Inquiry, a key objective was to clarify whether and how youth work managers, field practitioners and young people themselves conceptualised youth work and the ways in which they might see it as a distinctive way of working with young people. This was quite explicitly not an exercise in proving youth work's superiority over other forms of practice. Its purpose was to identify how far there was a shared understanding among those we were meeting across the country about the defining characteristics of this practice. This then provided a benchmark for comparing respondents' assessment of what was happening to the practice within a changing policy environment and new structural arrangements.

What emerged cumulatively from these responses was a widely agreed definition of the practice amongst managers and workers which, in their own language, some young people in effect endorsed. These more abstract statements were further clarified and indeed grounded by examples of practice which were judged to capture the essence of good quality youth work.

In order again to 'benchmark' responses, similar prompts were used with workers and managers for the second Inquiry. Though these discussions produced few new perspectives – indeed as taken together, the material largely confirms those gathered during the first Inquiry – their responses are summarised briefly in this section.

Brief case studies shared with us as examples of youth work as a distinctive practice included:

A comedy club for young people

Members of the local authority's Youth Forum were wanting to initiate something which would be more intellectually challenging to local young people than an event focused only on singing or dancing. They set up young people's workshops run by practising comedians which were over-subscribed and then organised a competition at a major local venue with a national profile. A comedy showcase was then taken into local youth clubs which, in order to help break down local 'tribalism', included clubs which the young people involved would not normally have visited.

The youth workers saw this as youth work because it was innovative, dynamic and challenging. After exploring what other young people might want and what they could offer, the Youth Forum members decided what should be done. They also needed to negotiate between young people and workers – for example on which youth facilities should showcase events – and to collaborate between projects, including ones for 'hard-to-reach' young people.

Building a local skateboard park

Over three months two detached youth workers worked in the area with a group of young people - seen as problematic by other residents – who had long been asking for a skateboard park. They took the young people to research other parks and helped them raise funds. In due course the 30 and 40 young people involved made presentations to the local authority's Scrutiny Panel at a public consultation and to OFSTED inspectors.

If I'd closed my eyes I'd have been pressed to identify who were the adults in the room.

The skateboard park is being used regularly by local young people.

It was a huge learning experience for the young people… It made them aware of their responsibilities.

It broke young people's isolation – changed community perceptions of the young people. They still hang around the shop but now they have a good relationship with the shopkeeper.

A village youth club

In one small village the young people valued the weekly visits from the mobile youth facility which had two youth workers and some resources on board. They liked the youth workers. One made a physical impression – *he's really cool with his dark glasses* – but what they really valued about them both was that they could talk to them in ways they could not with parents and other adults in the village. Teenage girls reported that in this small community where everybody knew each other's business, having some private space and conversation was extremely important to them.

This provision in this place at this time would probably have never occurred had the young people who lived there not behaved anti-socially and upset some of their fellow residents. The village had become known as a 'hot spot' for anti-social behaviour and attracted

the attention of the local police. In turn, they contacted the youth service. In times of limited resources is this kind of mobile facility ever more likely to be targeted at young people who make mischief – suggesting that policy drift and the attendant squeeze on resources are likely to result in a perverse incentive for young people to misbehave?

A club for disabled young people

The club provides residential opportunities where the young people are no longer *covered in cotton wool as they are at home*. Boundaries are pushed and the young people are encouraged to do new things by the youth workers. The club gives them time and space away from their families so that they can take part in positive activities in safety and yet take the kinds of risks discouraged at home. It gives the young people development opportunities that other young people enjoy, albeit of a different kind and at a different level. Most of the work is done in groups; only sexual health education is done on a one-to-one basis. There are strong links with parents who are encouraged to raise with the staff any concerns or issues they are worried about.

Capturing the defining features of youth work

(a) The views of youth workers and managers

Many of the staff interviewed were also given an opportunity to suggest key words or phrases which for them captured what was distinctive about youth work. Defining features of the practice which most frequently cited were:

- **Informal education**
  Though it's 'on the wing', it doesn't just happen by accident. It's planned … reflecting circumstances and the environment.
  An opportunity to do new things without fear of failure.
  Reigniting their passion.

- **Young people's voluntary participation**
  They can walk if they don't like it
  The young people come in, sit around … They don't have to fill out forms or tick boxes.

One example of an intervention with a homeless young person was offered by a full-time worker specifically to illustrate how the relationship only took off when the young person accepted that it was genuinely a voluntary one.

- **Offering fun, sociability and relaxation - in safety**
… sometimes it's just about the space for young people to go to. In clubs they don't have to do anything... Fun, safe spaces.
… a drop in with listeners where they can fit in and belong. Where someone smiles.

- **Young people-led; young person-centred**
Sharing their (young people's) journey, not joining ours.
Engaging young people in their own ways … (through) their particular interests and skills

- **Trusting relationships**
The quality of the dialogue – good conversations.
(It's) not just about activities. (You) use them to build relationships - not in own right but as a hook.

- **Empowering young people**
Other services take it on now… but it's bolted on. It's integral to youth work.
Young people don't just consume the service; they shape it.

- **Process-driven**
A slow process – listening – giving space:
Small steps.
Sustainability.

Other features picked out by staff for specific comment included:

- **Working with the 'hard-to-reach'** - **for social inclusion and equal opportunities.**
(Youth work) gives opportunities for young people who are marginalised to re-engage with mainstream services …

- **Working locally** – being community-based

- **Working for community cohesion**
It's not just about individuals...

- **Advocating for young people**
Youth workers are their champions.

(b) The views of young people

Finally, as prompts for reflecting on what if anything struck them as 'special' about youth work, young people were asked to suggest something really good or important that they had been involved in recently, perhaps with their friends; and what they felt they got from youth workers that they did not get from other adults they had contact with.

Sometimes prompted by supplementary questions, three groups of young people reflected in some depth on these questions. Their responses suggested that, for these young people, their

involvement with youth work had brought a range of important opportunities and gains rooted in valued relationships with the workers.

- **Education and challenge…**
The youth worker is a teacher of life.
Youth workers let our ideas bloom.
They help us to make things happen.

- **… but not teaching**
Teachers have a lot more boundaries. They (youth workers) don't judge you, like teachers. They're not trying deliberately to teach anything. More of a cocktail.

- **Open styles of communication …**
They text us before meetings.
We have their mobile phone numbers. We can just ring and talk to them.
They use humour.
… they don't fire questions… they listen

- **… personal support …**
(A) very close friend – a mother who listens and a best mate. They know you need something before you say it.
'Help not judging'

- **… and empowering experiences**
(We) choose to come.
Youth workers are in the foreground but they don't take over.
We can all express our feelings – they meet us half-way..

- **… leading to two-way personal relationships**
Respect you for who you are, accepting all of us.
…. not like our mum, not like a teacher, somewhere in between
(There are) different rules for youth workers – they find information for you and don't have to report you.

In one group largely positive views were countered by a series of comments which suggested that the young people concerned were far from starry-eyed about the youth workers they were meeting:

They're not always well organised – you hear about something you really want to do the day before.

They don't get things done – for our campaigns, the YOF Panel.

They can be too nice to unruly young people.

They could be stricter. When people come late, the ones who come on time have to wait.

Some of the rules of the Youth Parliament don't work – like when you don't attend regularly.

3. Practice now

When it came to assessing what was happening to youth work under recent policies, opinions were much more divided. Many of those interviewed – managers and some workers – were confident that, even in a changing and high-pressure policy environment, they were sustaining the forms of youth work to which they were committed, predicated on principles discussed in *Squaring the Circle*. Others were less sure. Discussion continued to focus on four of the issues raised in the questions posed at the end of that report.

- How is the pressure to achieve numerically recorded targets, especially for accreditation and record outcomes, affecting the practice?
- How far are young people engaging with youth work provision voluntarily rather than by being referred by other agencies and/or being required to attend?
- In the words of one contributor to the first Inquiry, how far is the circle being squared between provision that provides access to opportunities for all young people and that which is targeted at particular individuals, groups, localities and issues?
- Are youth work services becoming too risk-averse?

This section summarises the responses to each of these questions collected in this second phase.

Meeting targets

Nowhere was this range of views more apparent and extensive than when discussing what had been one of the most controversial issues during the first stage: achieving the targets for young people's accredited and recording outcomes. For some this has continued to pose few if any problems, either in principle or in practice. For example, in a drama group with a long record of high standard performances, though there had been pressure get some young people's achievement accredited, it remained very important that attendance was voluntary and that young people could stay involved even if they did not want accredited outcomes. Moreover, accreditation was only introduced once the group work had got under way and started at a point and time of the young people's own choosing.

Though some had reservations managers tended to endorse this positive view of target setting

> *We're not driven by targets such as crime-reduction. Person-centred above all else.*

> *My constant experience is that … it's relatively easy to demonstrate youth work outcomes for all five of the (ECM) outcomes.*

Some field workers were also positive about the need for and usefulness of such targets, in particular where the accreditation of young people's achievements could be integrated into the on-going youth work process:

> *Monitoring young people's journey can help. We should be accountable – we need to demonstrate a good standard. But it's time consuming – a pressure.* (Pre-employment course worker)

It's given the social workers the outcomes they need – hitting their targets. And the young people got youth work… It wasn't adult-run, shaped. (Full-time [Voice and influence] worker with looked-after young people)

On the other hand, the Inquiry again drew out a range of less supportive reactions to target-setting, on occasions from senior managers:

Youth work's being stultified by poorly defined targets

We're narrowing the focus. It's all about outcomes but we're never able to demonstrate the longitudinal outcomes. Like when you meet someone in the supermarket who's now an adult with two kids who starts talking about what the club meant for her. It's all measured in short-term blocks.

Despite the fact that integrated youth support services are no longer subject to judgement against best value and national indicators, the criticisms of targets and their monitoring were still voiced by field staff. Some of these explicitly contradicted senior managers' generally positive assessment of their value and impact, with one part-time worker impatient that they were now so much *part and parcel of the work* that managers no longer listened to their concerns. Full-time workers were also concerned.

They (managers) aren't always realistic – especially if there are short time scales.

We're completely caught up in the new public management.

They (the managers) are on your back.

It's supposed to be youth-led, but so much is put onto the kids. For example, Black History Month – we were told what to do. We had no time to ask the kids (what they wanted to do)… We have good relationships with the kids so they do us a favour, but it wasn't really what they wanted to do.

The young people's pace isn't always the officers' pace. (Full-time worker)

These statements show that some youth workers opposed more than the imposition of numerical targets but more specific direction from managers because it went against the grain of young people's self-determination.

As during the first stage of the Inquiry, concern was expressed at the amount of paper work needed to demonstrate targets and how this could distract from face-to-face engagement with young people:

Out of a three and a half hour working session … I spend (only) two hours in the actual work. We need to prove what we've achieved. (Full time youth worker)

More fundamental, however, were two other sets of concerns. One was about what was being measured or accounted for – sometimes to the point where even the workers concerned were suggesting that it was not youth work at all. Numbers as the predominant requirement of the monitoring procedures, were thus vividly highlighted by two workers from different authorities:

On reception … I'm just ticking boxes. Just young people coming in. But many (of the contacts) are not sustained…A 'contact' could be two minutes or two hours. (Advice centre worker)

Our centre is the best generator of figures in our service for recorded and accredited outcomes. When the service did face-to-face youth work we couldn't deliver stats. Now we don't have a single qualified youth worker, full-time or part-time… I trade off accreditations for money – the more accreditations we can offer, the less we charge. I spend most of my time dealing with invoices. (Outdoor education centre manager)

For one group of full-time and part-time workers this obsession with numbers generated the rhetorical question: how do you measure work with a young person who is just beginning to open up to a worker about their lives and their problems? Though this might represent significant progress in working with that young person, such achievement would not figure in the worker's targets.

Elsewhere an area manager raised similar concerns, talking about the focus on *numbers through the door* and the neglect of *quality evidence - support for individual young people* which the administrative processes were failing to capture:

Youth workers were often worried too about the impact of such monitoring approaches on direct practice by, for example, restricting spontaneity, informality and agenda-setting by young people themselves. As two full-time youth workers reported

Youth work's real intention is being squeezed out.

We're losing the youth work ethos. There's pressure … to achieve … to get accreditations whether young people need them or not.

Two final tentative pieces of evidence are also worth noting. One is that – though this was not always seen as negative - the pressure for targets is now being felt by many voluntary sector organisations, at least also suggested by responses from some of the areas visited:

A few years ago it wasn't all about accredited and recorded outcomes. They could choose to come. They had a lot of say. Now there's pressure to put on a programme – for example a criminal justice programme.

All funders have targets now – not just the local authority. The monitoring means there's less work done because it's target-led…

There's pressure to formally record, in however many beautiful ways you can. Young people do very well in the rest of their life. They come to the youth group to get away from formal recording…

And finally the pressure on staff to meet their targets had not gone unnoticed by young people in three of the authorities where they were interviewed. In one, accreditation was welcomed – though not as the reason for being involved in youth work projects. In a second *targets that can be achieved* were seen as one way of improving youth work, though in the third there was also an awareness of some of its possible distractions from good youth work:

Targets – (they) make workers rushed. (They) end up putting pressure on young people – making you bad if it's not done.

Voluntary and referred participation

A number of interviewees – workers and managers, including some from the voluntary sector – offered evidence that young people's voluntary engagement remained a defining feature of their provision and practice. They also concluded that for them this principle was not being breached by their having to accept referrals from other agencies which carried with it a requirement that young people attend.

> *The majority of our resources are going into the voluntary engagement. Social inclusion (work) happens only within Target Youth Support.* (Senior manager)

> *We offer an open access session with girls – (doing) range of arts work.* (Part-time arts worker)

> *100% (of the young people) attend voluntarily.* (Part-time worker)

Moreover when a service did accept referrals some managers would insist on young people's voluntary attendance, for example:

> *The teenage pregnancy work provides a range of groups and positive activities for young women who are referred mainly to youth workers at the fortnightly referral meetings but who engage by choice. One third of the first 66 referrals were 16+. There's a high retention rate.*

However, as the caveat added by this last worker quoted above suggested – *I hope that's protected* - there was an awareness that young people's voluntary participation, far from being taken for granted, may at some point need to be defended. (That managers had done this brought at least one case of appreciative comment from a worker). Thus, when a young man refused to join a local sexual exploitation project, one group of full-time workers found themselves needing to justify his freedom to choose to the agency. In another authority, an area manager commented that:

> *Getting youth workers into schools… they don't appreciate there's no voluntary relationship. Other services buy in what they think is youth work (but) it won't be what people wanted.*

And in the context of likely future moves in one authority to commissioning services, one voluntary sector manager commented:

> *Our present contract (for the open access work) ends in March. There are no guarantees it will carry on… It would be a tragedy if open access is lost.*

Moreover, ambiguity about what such voluntary participation might mean may be growing. One member of a group of full and part-time workers, for example, in describing their work as 'all voluntary', added that they hadn't *yet* had referrals. In the same group someone else commented that there had been some referrals, including some from social services, the police and the youth

offending service. Indeed the group eventually acknowledged that only senior workers and managers would be likely to know if a young person had been referred, but that they probably would not.

Other responses suggested a possible slippage in what has traditionally been understood within youth work as young people's participation by choice:

> It's a voluntary relationship – they choose to come. But there are incentives. If they stop coming they don't get the money. (Pre-employment course worker).

> The only compulsory part is our induction phase – young people have to come to that, maybe with a parent. After that there's a shift to choosing to come - once they realise the opportunities and activities we offer, the benefits of accreditation. (Voluntary sector manager)

Though the evidence was limited, it may also be that as youth work becomes more integrated with other services for young people such confusions about the meaning of voluntary participation are deepening and pressure on it is increasing. A full-time worker for example talked of being asked at a multi-agency meeting if they had a referral form. The worker's perception was that other agencies went there to swap referral forms:

> They refer people to other agencies who work with them for six weeks. It's like passing the buck and nothing gets done.

Elsewhere, a full-time worker was explicit that *the social inclusion work isn't voluntary.*

What seemed like straightforward examples of work which assumed required attendance by the young people were also offered. Thus much of the work of an arts project run by staff designated as part-time youth workers was focused on 'NEET' young people all recruited via referral from an E2E programme and on students at risk of exclusion from school. And one part-time worker commented:

> What we do in the school isn't youth work. The young people have no choice.

However there are examples of youth workers testifying to the benefits of youth work when working with young people at risk even when the interventions at first sight seem to risk compromising the principle of voluntary engagement. When young people are engaged in under-age drinking it is important that there are professional youth workers on hand helping them to keep themselves safe.

In one local authority managers and front-line workers spoke positively about the benefits of a project supported by the Regional Improvement and Efficiency Partnership (RIEP). Here youth workers were deployed to support vulnerable young people engaged in under-age drinking and at risk of anti-social behaviour. Youth workers reported that when they were working alongside young people, in particular on Friday evenings, the young people engaged with them on a voluntary basis. The youth workers provided support, advice and advocacy not punishment. Some youth workers said that they had not been in favour of this type of intervention at first but they had changed their minds when they had seen how much at risk the young people were:

> It's really, really good. I feel so valued and useful. More than I have for a long time. I really feel I am needed. And I am. These kids are very vulnerable. We can't stop them drinking but we can help them moderate it. We can keep them safe. We look after the drink for them while they go and get food. We give them hot drinks. We talk to them all the time about

what they are doing and the risks. They want that kind of support. They want to drink but they want to drink safely. We can help them do that. (Full-time worker)

Evidently the police have reported significant reductions in anti-social behaviour in the area since the B-Safe initiative has been introduced.

In another service, successive groups of young people identified as being at risk of entering the youth justice system took part in an innovative project that involved a number of services working in partnership.

> **Changing attitudes, changing behaviour** involved collaboration between the youth service, the police, the fire and rescue service and youth justice. It targeted small groups of young people who were judged to be at risk of anti-social behaviour and helped them look at the consequences of actions for themselves and for other people. It used the scenario of a mock car crash. Over successive weeks young people were cut out of the wreckage, arrested and taken to court where witnesses were called and their parents were required to attend. They were then taken to a local prison where they met and talked with inmates. The youth work values ascribed to this intervention were building relationships, promoting positive can-do attitudes and valuing where young people start from and move to in an experiential learning *process*.

Open access and targeted work

As some of the evidence outlined in the previous sub-section suggests, many workers and especially managers were keen to demonstrate that open access work was at least surviving if not thriving. Often however the context for these positives appeared to be somewhat threatening while what was actually being done seemed to be described in rather defensive terms. One group of workers, for example, thought that a view existed amongst other professionals that youth workers have the easier task because their provision was open access resulting, they felt, in YOT workers failing to acknowledge the targeted and preventative work they were doing.

Elsewhere, a senior officer described the local politicians as being *very pro open access work – they like their local youth centre* but said they were expecting the service's work to become more targeted. Meanwhile this service was working to an audit of local needs:
> *We make decisions about where our limited resources are to go – targeting areas of need. We have open access in order to target… Targeting is difficult if you don't already have relationships with young people.*

This service was also targeting *particular groups and types – like knife crime* while personal advisers and youth workers were working together to target NEET young people in every youth centre.

On the premise that *universal work is threatened – the interface is problematic*, another service had created a universal team – according to a senior worker *to ensure a focus*:

> *We're creative with resources. If there's one targeted young person on a trip, we take five others. (The dilemma) is not going to go away.*

> *We try to work targeted work to fit with the universal.*

In another authority, a senior manager also illustrated a stout defence of open access provision:

> *We've resisted pressures to be more targeted from other authority officers (on crime prevention, anti-social behaviour) who don't understand the universal work. If young people access voluntarily you get better outcomes than if they have to be there… We have fantastic examples of engaging with young people and not just moving them on.*

Examples could thus still be found of practice that reflected well-established youth work principles identified in *Squaring the Circle*. However, concerns continued to be expressed by youth workers and some of their managers that this was increasingly being affected by the sources of funding for the work. *We may be going down a worrying path* was how one youth worker expressed his anxiety about the prominence of a policy agenda directed towards the social control of young people.

Indeed, for one group of full-time workers, the general direction of travel seemed clear:

> *It's harder to respond to young people's expressed needs. Now it's about ticking the boxes.*

Part-time youth workers in one authority referred particularly to the continuing focus on young people at risk and those who were struggling at the expense of those who were getting on or getting by. Stressing the need to continue working *with* young people and not *on* them, they were worried about the threat this focus on targeted work implied to universal provision:

> *Centre-based work is really good because it's like being part of an extended family. You're there all the time [for them]; it works well. Youth workers are like grandparents and have the benefit of being with young people in a different kind of way to their immediate families but then giving them back at the end. We are there to help young people recognise and observe boundaries.*

A manager of a voluntary sector partner organisation also commented on youth workers' struggle to find the right balance between the different types of provision, maintaining that an over-emphasis on structure and targets could distort this. The drive to collect substantial amounts of information about young people was also seen as potentially obstructing good open access practice where it involved heavily bureaucratic processes.

In the same service youth workers had also noted the effects for open access work of the shift in attention from group work to work with individuals since they had been co-located with other professionals (see section 5) which also brought with it a greater emphasis on working with families. They had found themselves doing more referral work and were under pressure to have more positive impact on those young people who initially may not engage voluntarily. This, they felt, could lead to a loss of motivation (on the part of the young people) and a gradual attrition in the numbers participating voluntarily.

One worker saw within some of these experiences … *a confusion that youth work (just) means youth work skills* – something which was perhaps implicit in comments by interviewees from non-youth work backgrounds in three different areas and captured by one of them who reflected:

> *Youth work has adapted. It's so much better than in the past when it was all about table tennis and pool…*

Professionally trained and experienced youth staff, however, seemed to be drawing conclusions which were very much at odds with this:

> *Youth work is being lost – we have no choice.* (Youth worker)

> *You take for granted what you do. Don't always realise what you've lost. May be losing – the methodology. For example group work – others aren't getting it … the dynamics.* (Senior manager).

Risk assessments

When discussing how they implemented the kinds of youth work practice they aspired to, full and part-time workers in three authorities and one group of young people particularly highlighted the requirement to conduct risk assessments as a significant barrier. A part-time worker was clear that these were certainly necessary:

> *It needs to happen – to protect the workers as well as young people. The parents expect it.*

However in this same group the comment was made that:

> *You can't do anything spontaneously. If it's a nice night you can't just get into the bus and go somewhere. The paper work has to be in place.*

This view was endorsed by a worker elsewhere

> *We can hardly take the young people to do anything. It takes weeks to get the go-ahead…*

and by young people in a third service::

> *We can't do things we want to do. At short notice you can't do anything.*

> *My parents let me go to London on my own. Why do I have to get their permission to do something with a youth worker?*

One part-time youth support worker was able to say:

> *The line manager takes on most of the paper work. It doesn't have a massive impact on part-timers.*

For many workers however the amount of additional associated paper work was clearly a burden:

… it takes so much time.

You have to produce a new analysis for every activity and event – especially clubs.

And here too young people were noticing the effects:

(The consent forms) they really put off some people.

Youth workers are more restricted – they have more paper work.

They have to write everything down – go to the office to fill in forms.

All this paper work – it's almost like a police stop and search.

Moreover the mere length of the procedures seemed themselves to be a potentially major inhibition on the practice:

We had a girl invited to shadow a government minister. The paper work got lost in the manager's in-tray. I took her to London without it being signed off. Later she got invited at very short notice to sit in the Youth Parliament. It would normally take 10 days to clear the paper work. Because of the kudos of her going to the House of Commons it was done in 2 days. The senior manager called the insurance company for clearance.

For this full-time worker, too, there was another deeply worrying consequence:

There's a loss of credibility in our professional status – our discretion, judgement.

Summary

- Targets – particularly for accredited and recorded items – remained a significant feature of youth work practice even though they had been replaced nationally by targets for young people's participation in positive activities.
- For many managers and some workers such targets were seen as positive –for some as an integral and even a defining feature of the work. However, as well as often experiencing the monitoring procedures as burdensome, many workers saw them as diverting and/or distorting their face-to-face practice.
- Young people's voluntary participation - for almost all workers still a defining feature of the practice - was seen by many as under severe pressure, especially from requirements to target specified categories of young people who were referred and/or required to attend.
- Targeted work was also seen as continuing to squeeze open access provision.
- Though risk assessments were seen as important, the often lengthy procedures they involved were experienced by some workers as seriously limiting youth work's essential flexibility.

4. Key national policies and their impact: past and current

At the time of the first Inquiry, two national policies had become significant for youth workers and their managers. The first was *Aiming high for young people* (HM Treasury/DCSF, 2007) which set out a ten year strategy for positive activities for young people. Within this strategy and in the guidance that followed were encapsulated provision for extending the opening hours of youth facilities to Friday and Saturday evenings and for the greater voice and influence of young people in shaping policies and provision locally. A significant outcome was the creation of a national performance indicator concerned with the increase in young people's participation in 'positive activities' which replaced best value performance indicators for accredited and recorded outcomes. As this policy was relatively new and responses from local authorities had therefore been somewhat limited, an attempt was made through this phase of the Inquiry to find out how these policies have impacted on practice.

In the period between the two Inquiries a second high-profile national policy – Preventing Violent Extremism (PVE) – had also been widely implemented at local authority level. As this was particularly aimed at engaging with Muslim young people, responses were sought on its implications for youth work.

Positive activities

Aiming high for young people set out the Labour government's ten year strategy for positive activities. On the assumption that they would be 'structured', these were seen as having a range of personal benefits for young people themselves as well as for the wider society.

As an issue in its own right, the duty on local authorities to secure positive activities evoked few spontaneous responses in the second phase of the Inquiry and even fewer concerns. One head of service expressed a frustration over uncertainties about how performance would be measured which was perhaps reflected in the qualified comments of an area manager in this authority:

> *You find a way to deliver …The monitoring can be very painful but it's worth it.*

Some full-time workers, however, seemed to distance themselves from such a conclusion when they asserted that *it's not done youth work any favours* – mainly because, they believed, many of the programmes *have lost their educational aspect.*

The most consistent message coming out of the very limited evidence, however, was that services had worked hard to turn positive activities into youth work by another name – and that managers in particular felt they had achieved this with little damage to youth work practice. Senior managers in different authorities talked for example of reinterpreting the term as *what's positive for young people*, funding youth work as the service understood it and of *youth work as a sub-set (of positive activities)*. In asserting that *I'm called 'youth work manager'. I'm not responsible for tap dance classes on Sunday mornings*, a third clearly wished to distance herself from one Labour minister's

assertion that, as youth work is 'not informal education', what was needed were 'constructive activities, things that are going to enhance young people's enjoyment and leisure'. (Barrett, 2005)

In two of the authorities achieving the *youth work* outcomes of the positive activities agenda had been helped significantly by contributions from the voluntary sector.

Weekend opening

As part of its drive to extend the provision of positive activities, the Labour government had also provided some limited extra funding for opening up many more leisure facilities for young people on Friday and Saturday evenings. Though again justified as something young people wanted, ministers also made it clear that a key aim was also to reduce young people's anti-social behaviour, particularly in city centres.

The limited evidence gathered on this 'weekend opening' requirement suggested that it too had often been integrated into on-going youth work provision, though in this case with rather more of a struggle – and with at times, it seemed, some underlying resentment of the assumptions driving the government's initiative:

> *We've always had provision;*
> *We're made to feel guilty. But it's already going on. For the last 20 years I've worked every Friday night except when I'm on holiday.*

One senior manager however did put a significant gloss on to this view:

> *I just saw this as part of my job in the past. Then there was a shift to daytime working, to link with other agencies.*

In a single service, however, managers and staff were perceiving and interpreting very differently the responses to the weekend opening initiative and the way it is implemented. Managers reported that youth workers had initially been very sceptical and anxious about its impact on their work-life balance. However, they said, there had been:

> *… no major casualties; indeed youth workers are now embracing positive projects on Friday nights….we are not looking for 'strong outcomes', such as accredited activities. We are doing more conversation-based interventions and offering vulnerable young people practical help like signposting them to support if they have had unprotected sex. They are looking on the Internet for information on the damage that alcohol can cause.*

Another manager in the same service reported:

> *We are deploying our experienced full-time youth workers to support vulnerable young people in this way – there were over 100 young people drinking heavily last Friday night at the local festival and we were there for them. Our less experienced and qualified youth support workers are doing the open access/universal youth work*

In some authorities the voluntary sector had also made a significant contribution, with one representative emphasising that *we offer a consistent provision, open every night including weekends.*

Nonetheless, implementing the weekend opening policy had clearly sometimes been far from straightforward, with resources and especially staffing on occasions posing particular problems. One youth worker for example believed that they had been 'bullied' into participating and that some of the work had involved them in rounding up and working with young people very much the worse for wear. Senior managers in different authorities talked explicitly of it being *difficult to manage* and of needing to be realistic about existing resources, while a group of full-time workers confirmed that they had had to fit the new demand into existing workloads. In one authority full-time workers commented that, even though youth work was generally associated with unsociable hours, many staff were not behind the idea – not least when they had children of their own:

> *There needs to be a bit more discussion and incentive to staff for opt in for weekend working.*

It was suggested here, too, that teams were split between those that did and those that did not want to work at weekend, leading to perceptions of unfairness. Indeed, in this authority and also in one other, tensions such as these had been picked up by voluntary sector staff:

> *I see how others struggle for example to be flexible in their service provision (i.e weekend provision.)*

> *(The politicians) have minimum understanding of the grass-roots issues for delivering youth work. For example, weekend opening – it needs staffing.*

In one authority also – and this was despite a strong commitment to consulting young people – difficult decisions had apparently also had to be made on whether, within existing resources, young people's preference for opening provision on Friday evenings and Saturday daytime could be met.

In one authority, fulfilling the weekend offer had, it seemed, generated tensions with the police over both the approach and what was provided. This had required careful negotiation:

> *There are police vans roaming the streets getting young people into projects.*

It was perhaps not surprising therefore that what was offered sometimes provoked debate. One area manager, for example, was clear that:

> *The aim is targeted but wider at the same time – wider numbers, having a fun time… More open programmes… It depends on how you interpret it.*

More specifically a voluntary sector manager who had used the additional funding to work with new (and different) groups of young people on Friday and Saturday evenings, nonetheless wondered whether some at least of what his organisation was offering was not simply a recreational outlet for young people rather than youth work. He was also concerned about what would happen to these young people when the extra funding ran out.

Young people's voice and influence

One of the key commitments of *Aiming High for Young People* was to 'expand significantly young people's direct influence and control on the design, commissioning, and delivery of local services'. Most concretely this was attempted through the creation of the Youth Opportunity (YOF) and Youth Capital (YCF) Funds, to be administered locally by groups of young people.

Some strong and direct evidence of the impact of these policies emerged during some of the visits through sessions with groups of young people. Many, who had had been working together for some months and years, had, in addition to serving on YOF and YCF panels, been peer inspectors of provision, members of staff selection panels, area and authority-wide youth council representatives and members of the national Youth Parliament. In at least two authorities the young people interviewed saw themselves as having made significant contributions to designing a MyPlace project for a major youth facility in a town centre.

The flagship initiative in one authority was the establishment and growth of youth councils which since they started had seen an increase in number of youth councillors from 16 to 57. This included a 19-strong youth cabinet attended by the Cabinet lead for Young People's Services. The turn-out for youth council elections across the authority was 54 per cent - no democratic deficit here – with, in one area, 64 nominees competing for 11 places.

In another authority, amongst a group of eighteen mainly 16 – 21 year olds, some had helped run a youth conference which had presented views to workers and managers to be included in the authority's Young People's Plan. They had also been involved in the process which led the Service to being awarded the National Youth Agency's Quality Mark while individuals had also been on international visits to Romania, India and Tanzania and were now aware of *others worse off than us*. In a third authority young people talked about taking the lead on local park improvement; organising a pilot which had changed local bus providers' charging policy so that young people now travel at child's rates; and producing a pack on sex and relationships education which had been distributed widely and presented to national politicians. Young people in the fourth authority also talked with pride of the consultations they had carried out with older people about young people on the streets with nothing to do.

The young people articulated significant gains from these experiences. Some of these were quite pragmatic, such as gaining accreditation (*They're good but not the reason for doing things*) and enhanced CVs (*It helped me get a summer job*). Most however focused on 'softer' personal outcomes:

> *…the people you meet.*

> *I've learnt how to approach important adults*

> *Gaining skills.*

> *It builds your confidence*

One young person talked of gaining insights into council decision making – though, somewhat philosophically, had concluded that *results are slow*.

What also motivated these young people was they had had opportunities to bring some benefits to others, especially young people:

> *Working on young people's issues.*

> *Making a difference.*

> *Helping community cohesion.*

Exceptionally, a full-time youth worker in one authority (though not one of those quoted above) offered a somewhat sceptical view of these 'empowering' programmes. Though seeing them as *great in principle* and very positive about the impact of YOF, he suggested that, because *they've not branched out enough,* they had failed to reach 'challenging' and 'borderline' young people and so were involving only an elite section of youth population in the authority.

Hard evidence on this did not emerge from any of the visits. However, some of the young people were certainly familiar enough with the language of the professional youth worker and the local authority officer to talk comfortably about, for example, 'data collection', 'risk assessments' and 'community cohesion' – to the point occasionally where it felt that perhaps their critical view of what was happening was being blunted.

Preventing violent extremism

At the time of the second Inquiry, £60m of government funding was being made available to local authorities to work in Muslim communities to help combat violent extremist activity. The policy was proving highly controversial with – and indeed often seriously divisive within – these communities, even though by the time of the visits it had, under pressure, been modified to include efforts also to deal also with the right-wing extremism which these communities were regularly experiencing.

Though by the time this report was being written the new Coalition government had announced its intention to end the PVE policy, responses to it emerged in three areas. In two of these the view from the top was that services had been able use the money in very flexible ways and for authentic youth work purposes. In one case it had helped support youth workers through qualifying training while the second authority, as outlined in the example below, had in effect negotiated through the constraints of the PVE programme as handed down from central government.

> *We haven't compromised our values… We're expected to deliver PVE – we do it on our (youth work) terms.* (Senior manager)

Initial difficulties in targeting the identified communities had been overcome by for example:
- providing training for staff which was youth work-led and focused;
- focusing some of the programme on right wing politics;
- refusing to distribute a government promotional leaflet which was seen as highly offensive to the Muslim communities.

The money had been used to develop programmes which assumed young people's voluntary participation and which aimed at providing wider 'community cohesion' opportunities for them across communities. These included:

- multi-faith events;
- Islam awareness courses looking at the Koran in detail – run by a feminist Muslim woman which was welcomed by both young people and their families - ***They got young people taking an interest sometimes for the first time***.
- a trip by white and Muslim young people to eastern Europe;
- a drama production followed by workshops - ***It was a great two hours for young people***.

The reaction of one full-time worker faced with implementing the policy on the ground was much more hostile, not least because he saw it as a distraction from dealing with situations which were much more pressing and threatening for the young people he was working with:

> *I was asked to run it as a youth programme. I refused to touch the money. We've got a lot more trouble young people stabbing each other – Asian and Black young people.*

Academy schools

Two references were made to the new government's policy of encouraging the establishment of many more academy schools free from local authority control. Given the likely support for these from some local politicians, one head of service was concerned about what might happen to local authority youth facilities located on school sites if the schools became academies. A parallel concern was expressed by a senior manager in another authority about accessibility to a service like education welfare if it was to follow the schools out of local authority control.

Summary

- Many services had used the government's 'positive activities' policy to continue to develop youth work by another name.
- While some workers and managers insisted that they and their services have long provided for young people over weekends, some (including some voluntary sector organisations) had used the (former Labour) government's directive on and resources for Friday and Saturday evening opening to make additional provision, sometimes with young people not previously catered for.
- Groups of young people provided strong evidence of what they had gained from policies and resources aimed at increasing their influence on decision-making.

5. The long and winding road to integration

When the field visits were made during the first phase of the Inquiry (the winter of 2008-9) the New Labour government's policy of integrating services for children and young people was at an early stage of implementation. In response to what one senior officer had vividly described as *the exploding demands of integration*, progress in local authorities was shown to be uneven as they sought to change gear from services working as partners to much closer and more organisationally structured forms of co-operation. Following pathfinder experiments in some services new structures and processes were being put in place as managers and practitioners began to adjust to the expectation that they would share information, ideas, skills and resources aimed at securing better outcomes for young people.

A question of real concern to policy-makers, managers and practitioners remains the extent to which successful routes to integration lie in attitudes of mind or in structures and processes. Each however is likely to act in interaction with the other since making connections between service providers is only likely to happen if people want it to; and if they create arrangements which enable rather than inhibit the process. Even if new structures and processes can be set up, their success will ultimately depend on the motivation of the people involved to make them work.

The second Inquiry also suggested that integration requires that managers and practitioners are clear about its purpose and the roles associated with its implementation. Dedicated time and resources are also needed for communicating these and for relevant induction and training. All this implies a willingness and ability to handle the complexities and relationships entailed in 'joining up' and in managing and responding to the often substantial change it involves.

In the period that intervened between the first and second Inquiry the government sought to equip senior and front-line managers with training and development in the leadership and management skills needed for integrated youth support. Over 4000 staff were in scope for this initiative. During this second Inquiry we hoped to discover what further progress had been made by services in joining services up and the impact of such arrangements on youth work practice and on subsequent outcomes for young people.

The managers' standpoint

Perspective depends on standpoint. Most of the senior staff interviewed for the second Inquiry seemed positive about the moves towards integration. Some had caveats about how much progress towards it had been made or how the policy was actually working. Nonetheless, the starting point of almost all the senior managers interviewed was an often strong, in principle commitment to it. As one head of IYSS put it:

> I'm over the moon we've got an integrated service, especially for young people with multiple issues.

However, given the variety of structural arrangements which had been created, it was perhaps not surprising that they described the form and impact of integration differently. In more than one authority, senior managers clearly saw themselves as having had to negotiate their way through

wider and perhaps major structural change. One senior manager for example talked of a management team (of which they were a member) which now included all services, a single referral route into the CAF process and a strategy paper aiming in the future for *inter-disciplinary location*.

In another authority, where the retrospective message was: *We've kept the (youth work) ethos by winning the argument*, the process had included agreeing written protocols on, for example, young people's voluntary attendance and confidentiality in information-sharing, and ensuring youth work was explicitly woven into the authority's children and young people's plan.

Elsewhere however, based on a recognition that each contributing service had its own expertise, joined-up working seemed often still to rely less on changed structures than on the flair and initiative of individual staff – managers and workers. Here the model may be one of *evolution rather than revolution – a salad rather than soup approach* and one which could be *informally managed*.

The example below seems to demonstrate how in one locality the benefits of integration had been realised by a change of leadership which had brought a more outward-looking approach. This, the area managers concluded, had enabled youth work within the integrated environment to extend its reach and drive up standards.

In a market town though two youth centres were located next to a further education college, there had been little movement of young people between them. Following integration, a manager from the social care profession had been appointed to oversee youth work. As he developed a relationship with the college young people from the college came to the centre and staff became involved:

> *It's about the mindset – working in a more integrated way, having different people coming in and looking at what was there before. It may have been due to youth workers' reluctance to look to formal education (FE) preferring to look outward to the community and working with partners there. The (Social Care) manager was perhaps more comfortable going in and talking to the Student Support Manager in the staff room because of their background, ethos and way of looking at things. The contract (or contact) with a bigger beast helped us see a different level of professionalism. We've been business-ised we have a bigger more accountable body than the local youth worker. We can build trust and relationships at a different level.*

By the same token, managers seemed often to be relying on the leadership of individual workers to make integration work:

> *We work closely with all other services: planning, joint work. People just work together.*

> *All the agencies know what everyone else is doing.*

> *Before it was harder to get people around the table.*

Other perspectives however were less positive. The firm set of moves towards integration articulated by the youth work lead quoted above was, at best, represented only weakly on the ground. Perhaps closer to the reality - as we shall see below from other interviews – was this same manager's acknowledgement that integration was still in its early days, not least perhaps because of *…ingrained cultural roots in staff's jobs*. The distance still to be travelled was perhaps also

highlighted by this manager's reply to a question on the co-location of staff – (*there's) not a room big enough* – which seemed to assume that co-location referred only to planned future staff consultation and/or training meetings.

What you call and where you place a service are important to those who work in one. The naming and designation of services affected how staff perceived their role and the impact they could have on the young people they work with. In one area, after having been relabelled 'a young people service' the youth service had regained its original title and confidence. Indeed, its recent history and current situation were perhaps most vividly captured by one senior manager's comment:

> *We came back from the brink… from youth workers in locality teams under social care managers. (Along the way) we lost three managers.*

They clearly saw themselves as having carried on a determined fight-back, in the process reasserting the place of youth work as they defined it by creating a 'universal provision' team headed by a senior manager. At the same time they had done *the multi-agency thing – offering what worked, what young people needed… (We said): 'If you do it this way we'll get to the outcomes, be effective'.*

Some managers looked back to a time when the developmental focus of youth work was better understood, valued and structurally acknowledged. For one, when located in an education department, *we'd had a place*, but *now there is no main heading... everyone is (said to be?) doing youth work*. One member of this team, too, while acknowledging this wasn't necessary different from in the past, wondered whether senior departmental managers *know our business*.

The reference to the move from a specifically 'education' location – one of the very few made explicitly throughout the Inquiry – could also be seen to have wider implications. In none of the authorities visited had youth work been located in a way which sustained its built-in structural links to what might be termed 'developmental' rather than more 'remedial' forms of educational provision. As with the first Inquiry, this left open the question of what this relocation might mean in the long term for youth work's historic commitment, not just to 'child saving', but even more strongly to the young people's personal and social development and the potentiality model on which this drew. The legitimacy of such concerns could also be seen to be confirmed by an OFSTED report on outstanding local authority children's services which appeared as the Inquiry was being completed. In this the overwhelming focuses were on vulnerable children and prevention and early intervention approaches to them, with youth work playing occasional 'walk-on' parts in some of the case studies. (OFSTED, 2010).

The concern over which services youth workers become brigaded with was expressed by one middle manager who suggested that the loss of the structural link with education was a serious one:

> *Strategically it's a weird arranged marriage – I won't say forced! … Why put together <u>those</u> services (Youth Offending Service; Connexions)? Why not youth work with the schools and colleges? The reasons for the links aren't clear… Workers are good at external relationships – making links and partnerships. They may be far closer to other people (services) than (the ones within IYSS) – which bring the money. They need to maintain those other relationships.*

Views from the front line

The local authority

As suggested at the start of this section, successful policy implementation depends on effective communication between managers and practitioners about the rationale behind the policy and its likely impact on practice. This was clearly a challenge in some services. In all those visited, front-line workers, especially the part-time youth support workers, had limited awareness and understanding of the integration policy. This moreover was often laced with scepticism and disillusion. Indeed in one group of ten full-time workers the mere mention of the word 'integration' was greeted with uproarious laughter which suggested something bordering on cynicism.

For some workers the move was welcome – even long overdue:
>*I've been keen to integrate services for years.*

One worker also offered a qualification about what had happened - *it's not damaged us, youth work* – suggesting perhaps that field staff's sense of distance from recent developments could be interpreted as management having successfully cushioned them from or even headed off the more threatening possibilities of integration.

Nonetheless, the lack of awareness that something – anything – significant had changed was often striking:
>*I have to remember I'm working for IYSS, not the Youth Service.*
>
>*It's just a change of title – there have been no physical changes.*
>
>*They just got young people to design a new logo.*

Underlying these reactions – in the case of the last two comments, in a service whose senior managers acknowledged that the planned induction and training processes had not yet taken placed – was disappointment that little had been done formally to prepare them for the changes. These workers thus felt they still did not know key workers in other services - *there have been no formal introductions* - while only one of them seemed to know about plans for joint work across agencies which was to be part of a major international event taking place in the authority in the near future.

In one authority this drew from one worker the conclusion that the focus on integration was coming from managers but not being transferred to practice. Moreover, as this was one of the services where management's description of integration had come over as an enhanced form of partnership-working, an additional comment that joined-up working was being done on an ad hoc basis rather than as a result of integrated services also seemed telling.

Where levels of awareness about integration were higher, views on the limitations of what had been achieved also emerged. For example in a group which included both experienced and qualified youth workers and workers who were running pre-employment courses or worked in information, advice and guidance services:

>*There aren't enough links between the (different parts) of the new Service.*

We spend a lot of time pursuing different outcomes.

We're not sharing practice… We've not had shared training...

Within a single service front-line workers thus voiced very different views about the value of joining services up. One said: *I am in favour because it places more tools in the toolbox and it allows me to give young people a greater frame of reference.* Another however reported on a project supporting young carers that had been imported into the local authority so the young people could access different services. Though this had brought them benefits, such as easier access to some services, there was a downside too. Some contacts with more specialist services had been lost and the organisation could no longer apply for funds available only to voluntary projects.
Youth workers in the field were also sometimes struggling with the actual or possible impacts of co-location with other professionals. In one authority for example judgement was being withheld following an experience of a team of health visitors whose request to be accommodated in the youth centre had had to be turned down because of lack of space. After being moved out of the local clinic, the youth worker reported with regret, the health visitors had ended up with *just a desk*.

On the other hand, the *chance to shine,* identified in this group as a potential gain from integration, was not always, they felt, being taken seriously by other professionals. Though seen here as perhaps one of the *teething problems* of integration, a full-time worker in another authority who had been part of a 'pilot integration office' identified what could have been a longer-term problem. Despite the social workers in the team apparently recognising that youth workers worked differently and despite, too, monthly staff meetings, managers' heavy workloads were seen as having stopped these workers doing what was needed fully to nurture integration.

This apparent lack of clarity within other services about the nature and benefits of youth work interventions could limit their views about how professionally trained and qualified youth workers might contribute towards integration. Some complained of being regarded as highly-paid bus drivers; others that they were called on just to diffuse volatile situations *in case anything cracks off*. In one service, despite being a joined-up part of a more integrated youth support service, youth workers and Connexions personal advisers still, we were told, regarded each other with mutual suspicion. Some youth workers also saw personal advisers as still having a 9-5 Monday-Friday attitude and that:

… (while) we have to do all the hard graft and help get the young people ready for EET opportunities … they (Connexions) take the credit for the placement".

The voluntary and community sector

If the inquiry evidence is any guide, professional staff from the voluntary and community sector (VCS) are even more detached from, and even less prepared for, the integration processes and structures. This seemed to be true even though the stated intention is to make them key partners in its planning and in providing services – particularly, through the tendering and commissioning of positive activities. In one service, even though the voluntary and community sector enjoyed a good reputation and good relations with the local authority, it did not yet feel ready to take on the extra work and responsibilities associated with partnership working and commissioning. Serious problems were voiced, too, about representation of the sector and its capacity to attend key meetings. (*If*

you're not round the table you don't get talked about). There were clear penalties for *not being there*, with some organisations expressing concern that their dependence on untrained volunteers was not recognised and about tokenistic attitudes towards the sector. The result was thus often a feeling of marginalisation:

> *The third sector is the poor partner… partnership work is talked up but there not much in reality… I went to an inter-agency meeting – it was local authority-led.*

Elsewhere representatives of the voluntary and community sector claimed that partnership with the local authority had brought critical engagement rather than absorption. Nonetheless, many were wary about the onset of commissioning, seen potentially as an 'onerous beast', excessively bureaucratic and undermining of the constructive joint working which had characterised their existing partnership relationships. As one VCS interviewee put it: … *there is a key tension between the business side of things and doing what is best for young people*.

The context for many of these comments was what many from the VCS saw as the statutory bodies' pressure for partnership working which failed to give enough recognition or respect to the autonomous status of voluntary sector organisations. Here statutory sector managers' assumption seemed sometimes to be that better work could (only) be achieved through partnerships. One interviewee went so far as to suggest that, as a result integrating services, the very features which set voluntary sector organisations apart and made them attractive to some young people in the first place - their separate and different identity – was in danger of being lost.

For the voluntary sector, another possible consequence of the local authority's moves towards integration could be to draw the sector into additional (and not always welcome or achievable) operational roles and activities. Within multi-agency groups, for example, pressures could build for all existing providers to respond to individual young people by, for example, participating in the CAF process and by taking on the role of lead professional:

> *The young people often have needs beyond our limitations – doing one-to-one in a youth club. And then feeding back into a three-way relationship – the worker, the young person and another practitioner. That undermines youth work.*

> *You ended up being made to feel ashamed for not doing it. "You won't be the lead practitioner!"*

In other areas these pressures were felt also in local authority demands for voluntary sector providers to *capture data on 'who and how often'*:

> *We are being drawn into what feels more like a local authority agenda than a voluntary sector agenda.*

Views of young people

In one area, a group of young people displayed some awareness that integration had happened – and some (critical) reactions to the changes.

Since the move into a young people's service it's a lot more regulated. Everything's checked and rechecked.

It's hard to define the line (between the different parts of the new Service).

The service is bigger. It's harder to keep track. It was better all in the same building. Everything's bitty. 'Where do I go?' 'Who do I see?

It's harder to access the help I need.'

Merging – all into one. Two organisations just chucked together.. It's not made enough difference.

Further challenges to youth work within integrated structures

Though no generalisations across the authorities visited are possible, evidence from some of them suggested that, at least in part as a consequence of the integration agenda, some more specific, and inter-related, pressures on youth work might be starting to develop.

Prevention and early intervention

Overall, integrated services have been set an important role in 'prevention', often requiring efforts – by for example establishing early intervention teams - to intervene in the lives of young people seen to be vulnerable or at risk before serious problems can take root. On occasions this high priority brief seemed to have brought its own pressures on youth workers and on the kinds of practice they regard as distinctive. In one authority, for example, the senior management team talked of having had to 'negotiate back' from an initial departmental assumption that had failed to take account of young people's voluntary engagement with youth work and to build a youth work perspective into the department's early intervention strategy. In another authority, a full-time youth worker was at pains to stress how, exceptionally it seemed, her project had avoided these expectations:

> *Early intervention workers have all got caseloads - referred young people*
> *with targets to get them off NEET. The drop-in centre (where I work) escaped that.*

Evidence on this key feature of IYSS was limited. However, even when more supportive outcomes for youth work were mentioned, a question remained: in the longer term, and especially as resources are cut, will the preventative and early intervention priorities of children's and young people's services put additional pressures on open access forms of youth work which young people who are not being targeted as 'at risk' or as having additional needs attend by choice?

One–to-one work and work in groups

One of the questions raised by *Squaring the Circle* was what the longer term consequences might be of 'aspects of the youth offer that are closer to casework than group work'. Though providing only limited evidence, some respondents to the second phase of the Inquiry did offer some relevant insights.

In one service for example concerns were raised about the focus of the work being more on the social care and safeguarding of young people than on their informal learning and personal development. The adoption of the Common Assessment Framework was seen as having had adverse effects on the time and workloads of youth workers, leading youth work managers to wonder whether the core of the service – open access, voluntary engagement – might not be lost. The pressure to carry out more casework with individuals - *they are taking on pseudo second-class social work assignments* - meant that there was less time to do the kind of work with groups which helps to define youth work. This is particularly valued by youth workers precisely because of the importance of group life to young people's personal and social development and the failure often of other professionals to understand the principles and practices involved in using this kind of group experience as a developmental tool.

This was sharply illustrated in one group of full-time workers. Though, as in all such group discussions, this was explicitly focused on the state of youth work in their departments, a number of those involved had little experience of youth work or little opportunity to practise it in their current roles. As well as qualified and experienced youth workers who described 'on the wing' practice in fluid group settings, one member of the group worked in an advice centre and two others were tutors on pre-employment courses. Though the advice centre worker acknowledged that, with 98% of its work focused on individuals, the centre was not doing youth work, the course tutors' role was more ambiguous. Though working with (mainly pre-structured) groups which followed a set curriculum, they were clear this called the use of youth work skills:

> *It's not just about preparing CVs or for interviews. We talk in groups about how they feel about themselves, what they expect from life.*

In another authority, evidence of wider departmental pressure to take on more one-to-one work was at least suggested in separate sessions with full-time and part-time workers. One discussion focused on identifying individuals needing help within a school setting where young people's voluntary attendance needed to be explained. In the second discussion the comment was that, though workers did not formally take referrals, at some partnership meetings a youth worker might be asked to follow up with an identified individual young person with whom they already had a relationship.

In those authorities where workers addressed the issue, however, two other emphases emerged: that most of the work was still rooted in informal group settings; but that sometimes despite constraints (staff shortages, time pressures), forms of one–to-one work developed organically out of these group encounters:

> *Young people have issues. Time's allowed for one-to-ones.*
> *It's important someone's listening.*

Information-sharing

Another question left open by the first phase of the Inquiry concerned the sharing of young people's personal information amongst professionals and between agencies on the premise that this was with the young person's consent. In one authority <u>how</u> this was being done generated reactions - that other services wanted responses from youth workers, including information, which were not reciprocated - which, though not by any means new amongst youth workers or confined to integrated structures, were not helping the integration process. On occasions, workers claimed they thus ended up accidentally getting information that was essential for doing their jobs, leaving them, they said, always having to take the initiative. Their expectation was that they would be treated as 'on the same level' as other professionals such as teachers, social workers and YOT workers – but were not.

However, a more fundamental concern - raised by two groups of full-time workers in different authorities - was how far confidentiality was being compromised by such information-sharing duties and procedures. In one of the groups, it was suggested that the observation of confidentiality rules was lax, especially it was said amongst Connexions staff, generating the question from one worker: *Is this morally right?*

In the second group a sharp set of exchanges developed between youth workers and those tutoring on pre-employment courses, with the latter apparently finding it hard to understand why the former did not want to receive detailed information on individual young people before they had actually met them. As well as being an aid in their work with the young people, the course tutors also saw such prior information as protection in what could be potentially risky work encounters.

For the youth workers however one practice-focused priority was that their first meetings with the young people should not be influenced by other professionals' perceptions – and perhaps prejudices. As was noted by a group of workers in a different authority and context:

> … 'challenging' kids in school are often the best in the club.

> At (multi-agency) meetings a name pops up of someone who's done nothing (wrong) in the club.

Moreover, as the youth workers pointed out the collection of information, far from being an instant event or formalised procedure, was often for them integral to the whole youth work process:

> (Youth work is) not being rushed into collecting information (about the young person) .. (to) fill in a form from the word go. (Detached youth worker)

> Young people won't give us their names. They're homeless, on drugs. They (only) started talking about drugs on a trip to Alton Towers. (Full-time youth worker)

These youth workers however had another, more principled reservation: had the young people given genuinely informed consent for this information to be passed on to them? The potentially fundamental challenge to youth work practice of 'weak' interpretations of such consent was captured by one youth worker:

> *A social work student on placement went with a young women for a pregnancy test. Her tutor insisted she must record that on the data base. The student refused.*

This example vividly illustrates why worries remain amongst youth workers about sharing information about young people with other professionals who may work from a different value base. This view was expressed in the first phase of the Inquiry and was no less evident in the second – and may become more urgent if integrated procedures further remove workers' room for exercising professional discretion in such matters.

Partnership working outside the integrated structures

In more than one authority, both workers and managers were keen to highlight that, in various guises and contexts, effective partnership working had not just prefigured integration, with valued results:

> *…(We) are good at external relationships – making links and partnerships.* (Area manager).

It was also continuing outside the formally integrated structures. Indeed, the moves towards integration may sometimes have concentrated minds harder on these external forms of inter-agency working and in some cases helped extend them - to *… break down barriers.* (Area manager). This interviewee concluded for example that:

> *(Workers) may be far closer to other (services) than (the ones within IYSS) which bring in the money.*

In another authority, more concretely, emergent cross agency area-based 'learning teams' had been created made up of youth workers, police, YOT and drugs workers, chaired by a youth work manager.

Though references were made to work with a range of agencies, it was work with the police which figured most prominently in more than one authority, including in one case involving a voluntary sector project. Progress, however, could be tense::

> The police got a dispersal order (in one area). There was no consultation. The young people ran the police ragged – they had a great time. The next time they consulted and the Youth Service was involved. It was much more softly softly. Youth workers provided a safe environment. The young people moved… They understood why youth workers were involved – they were informed enough.

Out of such experiences, youth workers in this authority were by the time of the Inquiry doing what was called early intervention 'triage' work in police stations - *… to support young people at stressful moments.* Outreach work was also established, with a police officer or drugs worker and a youth worker working out of police vans initiating discussions with young people on relevant issues.

> *We explain (to young people) we're youth workers – make them aware of what we do.*

A range of staff – managers and workers – offered some telling and complementary, views on where this work had reached:

We can have a close dialogue about what's <u>not</u> working well – tell the police managers and they'll listen.

We now understand the police roles

Joint work with other agencies could also throw up its tensions for face-to-face practice, for example:

(The Fire Service staff) don't challenge young people like we do… They nip outside for a smoke during session – in front of the young people. They took a group out in their minibus – I had to run down the path after them waving at the kids to put their seat belts on! (Part-time youth worker)

Summary

- Though concerns remained about some aspects of its implementation, the integration of services was widely welcomed by managers and often seen as beginning to work effectively.
- A significant gulf existed between this managerial view and that of many workers who either saw integration as not (yet) having happened or were disillusioned by their early experiences of it.
- Despite local authority assurances that they were full partners in the integration process, several voluntary sector managers and workers did not feel that they had been included in influencing its implementation.
- Though some services felt they were responding effectively to the challenges, many workers and some managers saw the emphases of integrated services on prevention and early intervention and on work with referred individuals as diverting youth work from some of its key principles.
- Requirements or expectations that workers share young people's personal information were at times a source of significant conflict, particularly between and amongst workers who before integration had worked in services with different practices and groundrules.
- Integration had brought together practitioners who, though they all presented themselves as 'youth workers', revealed very different understandings of what this meant. As a result of this new organisational dynamic as well as of extending partnership working, particularly with the police, youth work seemed to be undergoing significant 'under-the-radar' shifts both of meaning and in practice.

6. Perspectives of the voluntary and community sector

The implications of statutory funding for the voluntary sector's independence

The involvement of the voluntary and community sector in the first stage of the Inquiry regrettably had been marginal. The invitation letter to services to participate in the second phase therefore asked specifically for meetings with 'managers and youth workers from voluntary sector partner organisations and services', not least 'because the voluntary sector is increasingly being called upon as a significant partner in directly providing youth work.' Nearly every visit included a session with representatives from the sector, although those who attended tended to be managers rather than front-line youth workers.

At some point in most of these discussions, those present were at pains to emphasise the actual or potential distinctiveness of the voluntary and community sector's contribution. Central to this (self-) definition was their view of themselves as autonomous bodies, independent in particular from statutory sector control.

> *We are an independent project. That's the key to our success.*
> *In the current contracts our independence is OK.*
>
> *The voluntary sector can challenge the statutory sector – its bureaucracies, its process.*
>
> *There are still strengths in the voluntary sector – freedom from management, within the constraints. We've still got to jump through hoops but we've got more freedom than the statutory sector.*

One core element of this independence was seen to be the possibility of being innovative – and often more innovative than statutory control and management allowed:

> *In the past the voluntary sector was at the cutting edge – aware of the wider picture.*
>
> *The strength of the voluntary sector is that it can do something different.*
> *We empower our staff to be creative…*
>
> *When I worked for (a voluntary organisation) it was more holistic, more flexible. I had freedom to respond to what young people wanted. As a council worker I'm run round by policies.*
>
> *I worked in a larger voluntary organisation. We were very independent and clear what we ran. If the local authority didn't like it, they didn't buy it.*

A key question for the Inquiry therefore was: how were this independence and the innovative possibilities for youth work which it allowed faring within the new local authority structures and procedures? When discussions with statutory managers did focus on the voluntary sector, rarely if

ever did they reflect on what was happening to these agencies' independence, why this might be important and the need to protect it. Indeed in meetings with statutory staff, workers and managers, it was unusual for the contribution of the voluntary sector to be raised spontaneously or in its own right and when it was discussed the strong overall message was that relationships were working well. As one senior local authority youth work manager put it: *We have a good reputation with (voluntary sector) partners.*

These positive assessments were certainly confirmed by some of those working in the voluntary sector:

> *Fortunately in the past youth policy has reflected our philosophy as a youth organisation, so it mostly has been a great partnership.*

> *(The local authority) recognises there's no set way of doing it. They're not prescriptive about what you can and can't do. (Our) sailing residential wasn't exactly (part of) the Service's youth work curriculum. The process fits in.*

We were also presented with one striking example of a voluntary sector young carers' project whose explicit aim was to work with the young people as young people and meet the same social and personal needs as for others in their age group. This had been done, it was said, by creating an ethos of enjoyment and relaxation and by building trust with the young people through voluntary relationships. In developing these processes, the worker drew a clear boundary between her work and the work being done by the project with the young people's families.

> *I let them (the young people) know I am there for them.*

More cautiously, too, others reported that *we still get some non-statutory funding* and that though *we have lost a certain amount of our freedom … our Board still gives strategic direction.* Those working locally for a national organisation were also clear that *we do challenge government on some policies.*

However these more positive and independent perspectives were less common than negative ones. Indeed when the voluntary sector's autonomy was not explicitly identified as under threat, this lurked as a source of concern in many of the responses, particularly to questions on funding. One respondent started from a *sense of shared values* with statutory sector colleagues – something which she saw as *very important.* Nonetheless she reflected on how times had changed in those relationships, particularly with the move from grants (*'Yes, a project, what is it? What shall I put on the cheque?'*) to a commissioning regime which, after a visit and reporting back, left the project to *fill in a form and wait.*

In part as a response to such processes, mission drift became evident.

> *Funding is having its effect… We're gearing projects to what funders want…*

> *We consult with young people about applying for money, then end up doing what (the funders) want, otherwise we won't survive.*

Of particular concern within all of this often were the constraints such funding requirements were placing on the organisations' ability to fulfil their critical and creative purpose

There's no money for innovation. The bigger you are, the less innovation.

Innovation can't guarantee results… It's changing the ethos of the organisation. Innovation and new ideas are being stifled.

Within all this, a number of very specific pressures were identified. One was the vagaries of the actual procedures through which a voluntary organisation had to negotiate to get local authority funding with, according to one voluntary sector representative:

… the local authority moving the goalposts. That affects good collaboration.

Another was having to adopt 'hard' targets which had to be monitored in rigid and instrumental ways, some of which seem to have significant knock-on effects for the actual practice.

We've lost our philosophy, which was against accreditation and outcomes… We need to take back our identity.

In the past … monitoring was very loose. Now there's lots of paper work.

If we do authority-wide work, the local authority wants exact absolute figures. (This poses problems) if we are doing the work with the young people who happen to be around. Less work is done because it's target-led.

The paper work (is a hindrance)… we should be accountable but (it's) more the quantity and quality … and the inconsistency … in how data is collected across services. The expectations that funders have that young people may be willing to offer up quite personal information about themselves (in the form of a tick box) very early in the relationship…

The impact of commissioning

As commissioning became the standard way of drawing on the voluntary sector's contributions, some of these pressures – particularly to fit provision into what the local authority defined as needed - seemed to be increasing. Here again, within the Inquiry managers in the statutory sector reflected little on how the voluntary sector might be experiencing this process. Indeed because young people in the authority were on commissioning panels, one senior statutory manager was clear that they and therefore youth work were at the heart of setting the strategic commissioning process.

Significantly in at least two of the authorities visited, these positive views were not shared by staff outside senior management circles. For some of them it was not just that the quality of what might be on offer was inferior to what they as statutory workers could provide. They were forthright in their view, too, that local authority decision-making was now balanced too much in the voluntary sector's favour. Indeed for one middle manager the likely effects could be *terrible*:

> *Some voluntary and community sector services do brilliantly, are already recognised and used by the authority. But many go where they will. It (commissioning) will decimate the profession.*

In another authority the full-time field staff gave examples of what they saw as voluntary organisations 'parachuting' into areas with which they had had no previous links and about which they did not have even basic knowledge. Nonetheless, they had been given higher budgets than similar (statutory) projects in other areas – and had then been left to get on with it without, it was felt, adequate monitoring or evaluation. This group of workers also offered a case study of a voluntary sector My Space bid being signed off by the council's chief executive in a way which, they felt, had taken no account of the work on an authority bid done by statutory staff over many months, including extensive consultation with young people. Underpinned by deep and barely concealed anger, one face-to-face worker commented:

> *The local authority doesn't look first at the strength of its own services. It's too eager to commission out to the voluntary sector.*

For many of the voluntary sector representatives themselves, however – including some from this same authority – such eagerness seemed at best a mixed blessing, not least because of the added pressure commissioning was already bringing, or was likely to bring, to do more and more of the state's business. One respondent was clear that '*… the council should pay for those services. Some of their own people (residents) are left to fend for themselves*', while another commented: '*I don't fancy the Third Sector as the deliverer of public services.*'

Beyond such principled objections, however, were more pragmatic ones, focused on the potential impact of commissioning on their own organisations' role and programmes, particularly in the context of integrated services:

> *With past money we had loads of different options. Now we've no choice – only what's being commissioned.*

> *… for the future there are noises about (more emphasis) on prevention and early intervention with all the universal services having to identify needs, respond to CAFs. That's a threat to youth work and to the autonomy of the organisation.*

Moreover, with such procedures came the added problem that:

> *… the commissioning money doesn't even cover our costs – for management. Especially given the amount of monitoring it needs.*

One overall and cumulative consequence of these funding regimes was apparently to intensify what had for some time anyway been a highly competitive environment. The daily reality of this was illustrated on one visit when, at the start of the voluntary sector meeting, a request was made that the discussion remain confidential within the group on the grounds that the organisations involved often found themselves competing with each other for funds. This reality was also explicitly articulated:

> *Existing competitiveness is huge. All the voluntary organisation play their cards close to their chest…*

In one local authority area, apparently determined attempts to avoid, or at least minimise, such competitiveness had been made by forming a large consortium of over 30 organisations. This, according to its co-ordinator, had *taken a lot of the pressure*, in part it seemed because *we got the sector ready for this (commissioning),* and had in due course enabled it to win bids totalling about two-thirds of the funding available. However, in the context of the Council only dealing with big consortia, this did not stop one member of the consortium commenting:

> *… I hate it. It narrows our choices. The Council have got a stranglehold.*

Indeed, questions of size cropped up in more than one voluntary sector group, especially in the context of commissioning:

> *(I'm concerned) small organisations might lose out …*

> *Certain of the bigger organisations have got the ear of the policy-makers. They're not representative of the sector. They're bureaucracies like the Council.*

> *Six organisations got together as a consortium. The Council insisted on an input into its programmes. It's all corrupt.*

In meeting one voluntary sector representative, the suggestion was also made that:

> *… only the commissioned organisations are here today. If you're a small organisation and aren't commissioned, you don't get invited to something like this.*

Finally, as these discussions were taking place, voluntary sector staff were just beginning to reflect on the likely impact of some of the (then) newly elected government's high profile policies. Though the full implications of the new 'austerity' era were at that stage far from clear, one respondent was already seeing evidence that the cuts would exacerbate existing competitiveness.

Nor, in two of the groups where it was considered, was the government's promise to create a 'big society' to replace the big state greeted with much enthusiasm. Insofar as it was understood at that stage, in one session the rhetoric of handing power back to 'the people' and proposals to take out a level of bureaucracy in order to make services appear cheaper received short shrift. The promotion of these policies as an opportunity for the voluntary and community sector was also by some greeted with at best ambivalence and sometimes with scorn:

> *Perhaps (it means) statutory sector's work (is) to be provided more cheaply by the third sector – twice as much for half the money? More youth work by the third sector, less by the Youth Service. Massive expectations. (The politicians) have minimum understanding of the grass-roots issues for delivering youth work.*

Summary

- Many voluntary sector organisations were experiencing pressure to implement national policies and their growing reliance on the funding that came with these as potential threats to their independence, flexibility and commitment to innovation.
- Though some in the voluntary sector were more positive, many saw the increasing move to commissioning services as likely to exacerbate these trends.
- Some staff in the statutory sector resented the funding priority being given to voluntary sector organisations, feeling that the quality and potential of their own work was being overlooked.

7. Resources in a time of cuts

Working with limited resources

Youth work has always been under-funded. Therefore it is no surprise that a number
of the responses revealed evidence that 'cuts' – or at least constraints on resources – were far from
a new experience for youth workers and their managers. Workers for example commented not just
on past recruitment squeezes and the effects for them of being short-staffed but also on shortages
of equipment:

> *We sometimes lose evidence of good work due to lack of resources to record it such as
> cameras.*

Voluntary sector providers also highlighted consequences for excluded groups such as disabled
young people:

> *… in our experience, far too often young people, especially marginalised and disadvantaged
> young people, are palmed off with workers and services that seriously lack the skills,
> experience, funding or commitment to provide young people with the quality and consistent
> provision they need and deserve…*

This, moreover, was said by one respondent to be happening in the context of voluntary sector
organisations having to adopt what might be seen as lower standards of provision than the statutory
sector:

> *The Council can afford a Level 3 worker. We get by on a Level 2. Is that best practice?*

Some of the responses from managers suggested efforts to address these pressures in a more
strategic way. In one authority the senior management team were clear that they had worked hard
to weave youth work into various strands of the Children and Young People's plan while in another
an audit of local needs was being used to allocate limited resources to 'areas of need'. Opportunism,
too, was often a well honed strategy – where for example 'positive activities' had been redefined in
order to direct the funding for it to youth work provision and where 'targeted' projects had been
designed also to include non-targeted young people.

The Inquiry also generated some evidence of a strong thread of enterprise running through the
responses, not just of managers but also of workers. A voluntary sector project which had started in
1998 as a small group of young people determined to do something for themselves now had an
annual turnover of between £100,000 and £120,000, much of it coming from contracts with external
bodies. And one full-time statutory centre worker in a very deprived area talked of raising thousands
of pounds a year in order to sustain work at the standard she believed necessary.

Short-term external funding

What many such initiatives had developed however was an increasing dependence on short-term external funding – on what a senior manager labelled *little pots (of money) for little bits of work.* Indeed the situation of one statutory arts project seemed to go well beyond this since, though its manager's post was paid for by the local authority, all its other resources were raised through external fundraising.

The problems inherent in this kind of funding were made very clear. Some stemmed from the bidding procedures involved, some of which were so extended that, as a specific example illustrated, young people's initial enthusiasm for the project could evaporate over the two months it took to get the money agreed. Late notice that a bid had been successful could also cause problems:

> *We steal staff – then it's too late to back fill.*

> *We were told we had (the money) in November; (the programme) had to be completed by December. There was no planning, no time to consult young people. Where's their voice (in that)?*

Most damaging to practice, however, was the short-term nature of so much of the funding:

> *(We do) high quality work only through external funding. We showcase it. The money ends, the work ends. There's no mainstream money. Only exceptionally do we get money for sustainable work, to support existing work. Established centres can't offer the same quality facilities or programmes as the short-term externally funded projects. There's only continuity for young people by inter-weaving from one project to the next to the next.*

The result as illustrated by one worker was that the work was at risk of being funding-driven – and not necessarily as defined by young people's needs:

> *We used to support (work) from age 11 to adulthood. Now we get them at 15 and16 because they're thrown out of school with criminal behaviour – the driving factor is the £1000 (funding). They can't fund … the club.*

For some youth workers and some of their managers the concern was also that, as it had been during the first Inquiry, practice was increasingly being shaped by funding streams tied to policies concerned with the control and safeguarding of young people rather than their development. Thus, in one authority where core budgets for youth work no longer existed and projects had to compete for the money available, youth workers identified potentially perverse effects of targeting scarce resource just at those in need or at risk:
> *Cutbacks should not prevent us from doing the basic youth work……every child deserves a childhood but if you're a bad person you get a nice one*

Over a number of years, however, special short-term government funding streams such as Positive Activities for Young People (PAYP), YOF and YCF had, when judiciously applied by managers and field practitioners, come to support a range of projects run by youth workers. Midway through 2010 the new government withdrew much of this money at very short notice, in more than one authority the

quantum of provision of positive activities, and thereby of young people's choices, was reducing. The freezing or actual ending of funding for both YOF and YCF also carried the risk of damaging the faith the young people involved may just have begun to acquire in the devolution of some power to them as service users.

Cuts – actual and threatened

Most of those interviewed were at the time of the Inquiry working with little information and high levels of uncertainty as they dealt with or faced up to very recent or threatened cuts. Workers and managers in one authority had already, they felt, come back from the brink – a proposed cut to youth work provision of £3.1M. Although this cut had later been reduced to £300,000, in the view of one respondent the whole episode had resulted in long-term damage:

> *Workers have lost trust in how they're valued by the higher ups… The staff now talk about the future, their own, the Service's… It gets in the way of talking about the real work.*

Though here and elsewhere, cuts to services were not new - one senior management team for example reported some past 'top slicing' because of social care overspending - the effects of new, albeit still small scale, cuts were already being felt. In one area workers reported that funding for both the pre-employment courses and the v project on which they worked was to end months earlier than planned:

> *The goal posts are always moving. There's no consistency in the work. It's bad for building relationships.*
>
> *We've got wide agency links. Lots of young people involved.*

In more than one authority, the Youth Opportunity and Youth Capital Funds were (at best) being frozen and residentials were being stopped.

In some areas, attempts seemed to be being made to avoid panic tactics. One senior management team for example talked of having already developed work with other departments which had cut costs – for example on promotion. In another authority vacancies for senior management posts were not being filled. Two heads of service, however, betrayed considerable frustration at the lack of a more strategic approach to what they knew was coming:

> *We know about the cuts but we don't know about the policy leading the cuts… With cuts of this magnitude – how do you do it over a two-three year period without a policy context… You can't just cut everything that isn't screwed down… There has to be a logical way of managing (the cuts). We'll need to try and deliver on statutory duties without just slash and burn (elsewhere).*
>
> *I don't know what this government's aspirations are for young people. Which makes it very hard to plan. I've been working on (the authority's) youth offer – a comprehensive offer to all young people. It's now nigh impossible to plan.*

An area manager, though in a different way, voiced what seemed like a related frustration:

> *It's very annoying. Who's going to offer up cuts! 'Efficiency savings' is a hidden term for cutting a youth centre… I vigorously disagree there's 'waste'. If people knew what youth workers do – the hours they put in – it's incredible.*

Despite these policy vacuums, hope, it seemed was not always entirely exhausted. One senior management team was putting some faith in the fact that *it's really important for the Youth Service that it has a profile and is being valued*. The senior management team in another authority, while acknowledging the future would not be clear till local politicians had made their decisions, was also pointing to a wide range of potentially *protective factors*:

> *The Youth Service is in good shape – it's valued by members, It has a high reputation.*
>
> *We've got the Q Mark*
>
> *We have partners' support*
>
> *Local people, communities, know the Service's quality.*

And one senior manager, despite fears about what was coming - *for jobs, the Service, the future of young people* - was keeping spirits up:

> *I'm not de-motivated. It's having the opposite effect – to do whatever it takes to prove the worth of the job. Staying focused on the evidence.*

In one authority, only minimal cuts to the IYSS budget had been imposed. Most stemmed from the removal of the ring-fencing of YOF and YCF and the ending of area based grants which mainly impacted on Connexions. Though these at that stage were being achieved without cutting staff, for 2011-12 it was anticipated that the level of the budget reduction would require major departmental restructuring.

In at least two of the services visited, however, not only were cuts already identified or taking place. Their effect seemed to be to drive the integration agenda further and faster. In one authority, the size of the reductions in Children and Young People's Service's overall budget (£1.2 million for 2010-11; £5.6 million for 2011-13) was leading the council to propose establishing 25 co-located teams to take on more targeted work and to 'think family', with a number of dedicated youth work buildings likely to be sold off. Though the service by then had contact with 30% of the authority's young people, there would in the future be no expectation of it to achieve this kind of target. In the recent past there had also been measurable declines in teenage pregnancy and anti-social behaviour while young people using the service had derived real benefits from funding such as PAYP, YOF and YCF - streams which had already dried up. These reductions in funding seemed likely to bring an even greater concentration by managers on prioritising and directing resources towards those aspects of services that the local authority was required to secure or provide. Pressure thus seemed likely to build on youth workers to demonstrate 'impact' - though without as yet any clear means of doing so.

The strategic head of young people's services in another authority reported that the successive cuts were also having impact on integration, with seven integrated service teams being reduced to three. The current preoccupation here was the loss of the area-based grant and the implications for so-called savings: in other words, how to make the non-school budget do more. A review was taking place within Connexions with a remit to do more with less. Considerable political support also

existed for schools to leave local authority control to become academies, to which elements of young people's services such as education welfare would be directly diverted.

Against this background, the strategic leader of services for young people considered that broad-ranging universal services as provided by personal advisers for Connexions and youth workers for the local authority could well wither, leaving the 'preventative' agenda seriously at risk. With these services no longer able to help interrupt the flow of young people into care or crime, this was likely to turn out to be a false economy given that the costs of remedial services for young people in care or in the youth justice system were so high.

These resource pressures were also seen as having clear implications for the skills sets of youth workers, with one possibility being considered to combine their generic skills with those of providing information, advice and guidance to create a single body of front-line staff.

In most authorities, however, from a part-time worker contracted to do two sessions a week through to full-timers and senior managers, considerable uncertainty sometimes generating drops in morale seemed to be the dominant mood, with some senior managers knowing more of what was likely to come than they could yet communicate to their staff:

> *Integration is now irrelevant for staff. They're more anxious about cuts, their jobs. We're the managers and we don't know.*

> *Somebody somewhere probably knows something – councillors, senior officers. Planning some knee jerk reaction.*

> *Are we well prepared? No! I'm gloomy…*

Even though a couple of those involved were inclined to be quite sanguine about the situation – *the cuts are needed now; in my school we are spending money we don't need to spend* – the pessimistic mood was also apparent in one group of young people:

> *Taking away things young people have isn't going to help them get rid of 'anti-social behaviour, bad stuff.*

Within this overall scenario, voluntary sector organisations often expressed particular anxieties, particularly since, in the view of one voluntary sector manager, cutting mainstream funding made it even harder to argue for voluntary sector provision:

> *…(the) third sector (is) invisible to the Youth Service… So it's particularly at risk - not seen as crucial.*

> *Some projects are particularly at risk – with disabled young people… Cuts will mean more fire-fighting.*

> *We're not feeling very positive. We're nationally funded. Our contract is ending – is unlikely to be renewed.*

March 2011 is the big date as three-five year funded initiatives will come to an end. People expecting things not to improve …

Existing competitiveness is huge… The cuts will exacerbate that.

Moreover, as one voluntary sector manager pointed out, the loss of the use of statutory buildings could have an even more serious effect than reduced funding for smaller projects.

What most frustrated some respondents about what was happening or was about to happen was, not surprisingly, the damaging consequences for young people including, as one full-time worker put it, making promises to them which are undeliverable because of lack of resources:

… young people have had lots of new experiences – residentials, outdoor activities… the most successful elements of youth work… (these are) now going down the pan… (Voluntary sector manager).

Things won't get better – just when things were good. (Young person)

And would there be resistance to the cuts? For one part-time project the only answer was to put more effort into raising more external funding. However, having thought about other possibilities, the prospects for other respondents did not seem promising:

We don't have the chance now… there are too many constraints. (Voluntary sector manager)

If you speak out you get called a trouble-maker. (Voluntary sector worker)

Though this (large proposed cuts) is part of the democratic process, people (workers) were scared. I consulted the office about the staff code conduct – about how far the staff could go. (Area manager)

Which led to the conclusion that *In five years time the Police Service will be funding the Youth Service.*

Summary

- Much imaginative and effective youth work practice was being done using external funding that is usually short-term and targeted at particular groups, issues or localities. This constrained its impact and, as some of it was being withdrawn during the period of the Inquiry, it was being rendered unsustainable.
- Though little hard evidence was available at the time of the Inquiry, staff –managers and workers, in both the statutory and voluntary sectors – displayed considerable anxiety and confusion over future budget prospects. Within the new integrated structures some predicted or expected cuts would result in significant reductions in open access provision.
- There are concerns expressed in some quarters that cuts might be or were being made in a policy vacuum, without any consideration of their strategic impact.

8. Management

One of the key functions of leadership and management in any service is to establish a clear vision for the work and inspire and encourage staff to implement that vision to the best of their ability. Clarity of purpose is thus vital. This however is becoming harder to achieve as elected members and senior officers, after years of being required both to respond to and initiate highly specific policy objectives, priorities and plans, are currently faced with something of a policy vacuum. This combined with an awareness of imminent and large cuts in funding makes it hard for managers to keep the workforce informed about the direction in which the service is moving. Some of these tensions were even more apparent during this second phase of the Inquiry than during the first.

The view from below: workers' expectations and experience

Workers' views on management were not explicitly sought but often came out as other issues were addressed – including in a reminder by one full-time worker that he and his colleagues were often managers themselves of buildings and other staff. However, discussions of management most often emerged when the focus was on youth work's integration into the new children and young people's departments (see Section 5); and on the monitoring of practice against Service targets:

> *… the flow charts. It all looks good – never mind the quality*. (Full-time worker)

In discussing these monitoring pressures, one group suggested that *they (the managers) are on your back,* another that *the managers manage downwards* and a third that *there's so much management speak.* A full-time worker in another authority also commented that managers have a different perspective from those in the field, sometimes imposing directions which they do not themselves have to justify to young people.

Some workers made clear that what they most valued from their managers was support, not least in helping to reduce or deal with the demands of the paper work. As one youth support worker said:

> *The line manager takes on most of the paper work. It doesn't have a massive impact on part-timers.*

And again:

> *I got an email from (another agency) asking for 'any data' on these two young people. I said I couldn't help them – unless the young people agreed. They demanded I share the information I had. I passed it up to my manager.* (Full time worker).

Other examples of managers being supportive were embedded in other responses – such as an expectation that management would ease tricky external relationships, particularly with the police.

In some cases the absence of management support was clearly noticed and regretted:

> *The senior managers don't come to these (area) meetings. Today is the first time I've seen (head of service) for months.* (Full time worker)

When they do come it's usually bad news. (Full time worker)

And workers in one authority believed that their managers should be more assertive about the importance of youth work:

We should be shouting from the rooftops about what we are doing

One group of full-time workers also commented that senior managers in the past came to workers' meetings with a feel for the work. Now they attended, it was said, to defend not promote. Another group reflected that, particularly in the light of so many policy changes, managers could not now do all the work and manage as well. They had therefore had to delegate some of their responsibilities, which could itself affect worker-manager relationships.

One group of workers expressed their concerns about accountability openly:

Hierarchy is so different now. There is nobody with whom the buck stops. There are things going on and you can't do anything. You get told it's nothing to do with me, it's a different district. There's nobody who can do anything (cf PYO). No direct line – managers will not get involved in the problems of youth development workers.

The view from middle managers

For most of the middle managers interviewed, offering this kind of support to field workers was a significant part of their role, though, as one area manager explained, what it meant

… varies for individual workers, from time to time, according to the type of work. For one of my workers it (support) is probably 40-50%, for another only 10%. But it is less than years ago. It's now more structured, more of an agenda.

This manager was also aware of a need to help front line staff interpret and apply local authority guidance on safeguarding policies and procedures:

To support staff as manager of staff, as managers within the Council, especially on safeguarding… The guidelines are more specific and extensive. The culture of youth work is to do your own thing – they need protecting from that. There's less room for manoeuvre.

A middle management team in another authority concluded that, though their contact with the field was important, regular visits had dropped down the priority list - that they were *treading* water. However they were, they felt, working to retrieve the situation (*it's coming back slowly*) through, for example, the introduction of six-weekly service-wide meetings and four-weekly locality team meetings. For a manager in another authority, however, the task seemed to be daunting:

… Keeping up staff morale is really difficult. The workforce is demotivated… They're passionate about what they do but suspicious – they've lost faith in senior management protecting them.

For such middle managers, however, supporting field staff was now only one of their responsibilities. Some still had face-to-face commitments which could add to their pressures:

> *I'm a project manager with responsibility for the project budget. And I do fifteen hours face-to-face work a week… It's more difficult to keep up (this) face-to-face involvement … especially when you're short staffed. There's all the extra paper work and the other pressures.* (Full time worker)

This worker talked, too, of the extra demands on time of adjusting to a new computerised data recording system.

Those who were full-time managers also found themselves, as one of them put it, *juggling* a range of expectations. Some of these seemed the inevitable consequence of being in the traditional 'meat-in-the-sandwich' role. One spelt out very clearly the wider context:

> *Upper managers make assumptions about what youth work is and isn't. They miss a lot of the inter-relationships (between workers and young people)… Some are very supportive … but they don't understand the importance of the relationships – they've not done it themselves so don't have that commitment.*

This would be particularly important when services were being encouraged to form closer alignment with each other and, if possible, integrate.

> *… I spend half my time managing the … council's procedures for – recruitment and retention, and child protection processes. Making sure all the bits of paper are in place.*

> *I'm not so much pressured as powerless… in the middle, keeping the messages consistent, information flowing. Dealing with fear about cuts.*

These managers, however, were not only responding to the expectations of internal accountability but also having to meet more demanding expectations from partner agencies and services:

> *I'm flying the flag at partnership events. Explaining the role of youth work.*
> *We've built the relationship with the YOT manager, through co-working.*

> *We can have a close dialogue about what's <u>not</u> working well – tell the police managers and they'll listen.*

The view from the top: the experience and perspectives of senior managers

Senior managers were specifically asked to consider their management role and in particular the balances within it between managing relationships, managing resources, managing processes and managing expectations. However, these distinctions did not always adequately capture how they themselves categorised their priorities. They also seemed to struggle with the question because they found it hard actually to identify if and where such balances existed. One respondent's immediate reaction was *that's a very difficult question* while another, equally spontaneously reacted: *Managing is bloody hard.*

In a context, as one put it, of *managing (being) about holding onto our personal and professional values*, colleagues added their gloss on this response:

> *It's now just hard. They keep asking for just a little bit more. There's always something else to remember to ask workers to do… Its complexity. A massive range (of tasks). Health and safety... Translating strategy into practice.*

> *I've never worked as hard – as long hours. It's how we lead, manage. We do it so others don't have to.*

This team also suggested that *we're not good at managing ourselves* and – notwithstanding their own honesty and introspection in responding to the question -
they reported that *there's no time for reflection*.

The senior management teams interviewed were clearly striving, as one made explicit, to work strategically, offer a lead and exert influence. Thus in one authority, the head of service reported that the principles underlying change were integration and co-location, with progress being made on both fronts simultaneously. One manager asserted that part of the job of management was to *open up dialogue between different people and different structures* and that this had led to a good relationship between managers based at headquarters and those leading services in the field.

> *We are managing relationships with the field well, in particular those between the youth officers and the district youth managers. We are aware of the tensions between the field and those here at HQ. But these relationships are crucial to enabling us to manage both the operational and the strategic aspects of our work simultaneously.*

Some managers reported that, in the same way that they have to become more adept at prioritising, so too do youth workers further down the management chain.

> *Youth workers are doing this (prioritising) too. Where before they were very against taking on any extra responsibilities they are now on board and asking 'where does this fit in my current workload; how do I prioritise this piece of work?' They are more prepared to find their ways through difficulties. Which is what we have to do……although youth workers fought to hold on to their autonomy they are now more prepared to be more accountable to their seniors and their peers and partners*

Nonetheless, a key contributing feature of senior managers' experience was, probably inevitably, the changing nature - and indeed unpredictability - of the demands made of them. This arose partly because priorities changed over a year. As one team member made clear, however, it happened too because, just as an overall balance had apparently been reached, it was disturbed by a new incident such as a police operation or (at least in the past!) by new money suddenly becoming available.

Within these shifting scenarios, however, some more consistent themes were revealed. In the context again of pressing external expectations, managing outcomes remained a priority since, as one head of service insisted:

> *… outcomes can't be allowed to slip… We need to emphasise our high class work ...*

Despite the use of peer inspection procedures and 'snapshot' observations of practice, what could complicate these processes of accountability were reductions in the time and opportunity for senior managers to have direct contact with staff. At the same time they had to acknowledge the significant shift in their role and what it permitted:

> *Historically I've had easy access to the team I'm managing – to calm the ship through personal contacts… Now I don't have that ready access to field staff. I can't get everyone together. I have to work through the IYSS management team… to adjust my own management role.*

In another authority the impact of the changes brought about by the move to integration were also highlighted by the head of service:

> *We're a relatively new Service – (formed by) integrating two separate services. The transition was probably as good as it could have been but it's hard for staff to understand – why (different parts of the Service) work different hours – during the day and in the evenings.*

This, it was openly acknowledged, meant there was still some management distance to travel:
> *We should be managing an authority-wide system – managing the politics (of change) for workers at authority-level… But we're only about half-way there. We still need a new curriculum, a quality assurance system…*

Ensuring service targets were met and that service standards were seen to be high clearly made managing these relationships outside the service another key priority. This could include managing expectations amongst politicians of different parties and across different authorities, including district councils in first-tier authorities. In another authority, moving into new central council offices had highlighted both the opportunity and the need to prioritise face-to-face communication amongst staff in other sections of the department, leading to many new (and time-saving) relationships, both personal and professional.

Elsewhere, however, what was described seemed to have thrown up more complexities, including in at least two authorities the need to fend off what one head of service characterised as pressures to adopt the agendas of other services. The result for one senior management team was what they termed *subversive management*

> *We're managing more by stealth. 'Youth work' doesn't have enough of a statutory 'wrap' so we describe what we're doing in business terms – as outcomes. We know what we want to deliver (as youth workers) and how but we're less and less upfront about it.*

What emerged from almost all the senior management teams interviewed as crucial protections against the unrelenting pressures of change and churn were team working, especially where there had been some consistent and stable membership; support from colleagues; and confidence in the lines of accountability:
> *We appreciate each other's strengths. There's been equilibrium in the team.*

> *We're getting stretched but we support each other: it's important we work together.*

> *We can rely on each other. You're not always on your own.*

I can rant and rage to my heart's content and I'm allowed to do that… There's space for me to be me on occasions. It's not held against me.

Summary

- While welcoming managerial support and guidance, some workers reported much less contact than in the past with senior managers.
- As senior managers within the larger integrated structures had taken on both more strategic roles and responsibility for a wider range of provision, their organisational priorities had changed and their time for direct contact with youth work practitioners had often been substantially reduced. In places this was further widening the gap between them and their field staff.

9. Professional identity

This theme was important at the time of the first phase of the Inquiry because of the then government's policy of creating a new youth professional status. Although this has since been abandoned, the matter was still a cause of some concern for those who took part in this second phase.

Professional self-image

In considering professionalism and professional identity, the starting point for two respondents working in the voluntary sector was to question what these were and how the terms were interpreted and applied:

> *Yes, the service should be 'professionalised' in terms of quality and I think advances have been made in this area… (But) there should also be scope, demand and expectation for people to be experienced (not necessarily qualified) professionals in our own right - whether that be in media, education, counsellor, lawyer, sports coach, social work, artist, etc etc, but to also have and be able to demonstrate the necessary aptitude and attitude to apply this work with young people or specific groupings of young people.* (Voluntary sector manager)

> *Professionalisation of youth work – JNC or not JNC? In between is ignored and not recognised. Pay a decent salary for that but forget about the other qualifications other people have.* (Voluntary sector manager).

> *Professionalisation has gone too far, and moved them away from the vocation of youth work. Good work can be - is being - done by people without a professional qualification. It might remove good workers from the service* (Full time youth worker)

Most respondents, however, started from the premise that professional status was important for youth work, that its loss would be damaging, and that its practice needed to demonstrate that it merited such recognition. Indeed one of the major worries about anticipated cuts in funding was the potential negative impact these might have on youth work's professionalism. One voluntary and community sector representative, for example, noted that, even without the latest round of 'savings', single status revisions might redefine roles and lead to pay cuts with the consequent danger of youth work no longer being JNC recognised and a professional occupation. The prospect of the now discarded youth professional status had been scary since it seemed likely to have the effect of lower requirements and qualification levels and of attracting people who may not have wanted to provide a service predicated on tried and tested youth work values and principles.

As in the first Inquiry, evidence also emerged, often implicitly, that the move into closer and indeed 'integrated' relationships with other professionals had raised both the profile of youth workers and respect for their expertise and impacts. Nonetheless, some youth workers and managers, while embracing the notion of professionalism, were still struggling with their identity as professionals and in particular how they were seen by staff in related services. One full-time worker commented for example that, though it was youth workers who worked with young people at 'the sharp end'

including those who had been referred by other agencies, they were still seen by others as 'babysitting' and were slow to be recognised as professionals.

For some these views seemed to have been confirmed by experiences of being co-located in departments where exposure to more influential professionals was much greater.

> *Youth workers don't have much professional status now anyway – they're not appreciated. Young people get it – taking them seriously, not judging them.* (Area manager)

> *I'm furious about it. My professional identity is in crisis. We've been sold down the river.* (Full time youth worker)

> *(In inter-agency work) anyone can be a youth worker.* (Senior manager)

The area managers of another service expressed a concern that youth work professionals would lose out to social workers as the safeguarding agenda took precedence over development. They were pessimistic about the chances of open access youth work surviving in the current climate.

> *The youth service won't be the same. They will keep what they have to - emergency services, intensive work with young people, targeted youth work. The generic work is the foundation stone for youth work. It is where we get our skills bag from …but the youth work qualification has less value now….it feels worthless; yes, our professional skills are valued…..even if they can't be practised.*

A voluntary sector representative put a particular spin on the self-searching about professional status:

> *'Voluntary' is assumed to mean unpaid – we're not seen as professional, with standards and qualifications.*

Their concern about whether those in the statutory sector saw them as professionals seemed to be confirmed by the comments of two respondents from the statutory sector:

> *The definition of professional is important …are the churches doing professional work? The third sector….As a profession we are pushed from pillar to post renamed and restructured.* (Full time worker)

> *(Commissioning) will decimate the profession. (Area manager).*

Proposals for a generic 'youth professional'

The Inquiry sought views on the proposal of the Children's Workforce Development Council (CWDC) - now abandoned by the new government - for a generic 'youth professional' qualification for those deployed in different roles across the youth workforce. . Many of those interviewed were unaware of the proposal or – by their own admission – confused by it. A number of respondents however welcomed it, and for a variety of reasons:

We have a lot to gain from other professionals – from the theory and practice of other professions… I don't feel threatened (by the youth professional proposals)… Financially it makes sense… The end result could be a better understanding of youth work and make recruitment easier - but is it achievable?.. As a foundation it's a good idea. We're putting together youth workers with Connexions and YOT – they have no youth work training. (Area manager)

It sounds OK. Everyone's professional standpoint is respected and understood. (Senior manager)

There are shared values – about reflective practice. It's an additional qualification. (Senior manager)

…the added knowledge and skills would be useful. (Full time youth worker)

…it might give youth work a stronger professional status and reputation. (Full time youth worker)

There are always additional skills that could be learnt. (Full time youth worker)

In one authority one of the CWDC 'youth professional' pilots was just about to get under way, shaped by a clear rationale and with strong support at different levels of the service:

It's youth work training (here) even if they go into YOTs or Connexions or mentoring. We have the influence on the training – we're implanting youth work into other services and professions… It's a genuine opportunity. (Senior manager)

We need to be in on it – to see what it is. To take a critical look. (Middle manager)

Another service had developed and was offering 'learning sets' based on the five professional standards set out in the CWDC proposal:

Youth workers ought to be developing the (youth professional) five standards. It would be useful if they were developed together (with other professionals). (Senior manager)

The opportunities for broadening possibilities are positive. (Senior manager)

A number of respondents, however, had sometimes serious reservations:

If you're too generic you lose what's distinctive. (Voluntary sector manager)

Another potential loss of youth work's identity. (Youth worker)

Why generalise? Why can't we celebrate the differences? (Youth worker)

Others talked of the possible loss of the youth work 'ethos', and of the risk of creating a two-tier profession while one full-time worker feared that it could lead to youth workers losing skills they have acquired as well as removing the *vocational qualities* of youth work and the reasons why people go into youth work. A colleague added:

It's a drive for status, and that's not what most people do youth work for. What makes a good youth worker is about the person and not a degree.

Summary

- Sometimes wide differences of view were expressed by both managers and workers on youth work's current professional identity and reputation, and in particular on the impact on them of its integration with other services.

10. Emerging themes and issues

- While recognising the need for accountability standards and procedures, including for risk assessments, there remain concerns that those most commonly in use at present are disproportionately stifling impact and can compromise some of the distinctive and highly valued elements of youth work practice, such as flexibility, improvisation and creating opportunities on the wing.

- Real tensions remain between intervention and prevention illustrated, for example, by the ways in which youth work targeted at already identified individuals, groups, localities and issues seems widely to be squeezing open access provision and voluntary participation by young people.

- In some areas discrepancies exist between managers and front-line workers about the value and effectiveness of integration as an approach to planning and providing support services for young people. This raises the question as to whether everything needs to be joined up or whether collaborative arrangements might be more flexible, from tight or loose.

- Some of the practices associated with integration, such as sharing information about young people, remain highly problematic for youth workers especially when working with staff from other professional backgrounds based on different ethical principles and driven by statutory requirements.

- Real and authentic integration is likely to remain elusive when youth work is differently conceptualised by professionals working alongside each other in multi-agency teams, where its meaning and practice vary and may at times be at odds.

- Some of the distinguishing characteristics of the voluntary and community sector's contribution to youth work – independence, flexibility, innovation – seem to be at risk as it becomes increasingly dependent on funding derived from national policies and commissioning arrangements in which these organisations seem to be at the end of a procurement line. Though ostensibly seen as partners, the sector often also feels marginal to the ways in which integration has been and is being implemented.

- The sustainability of some of the more imaginative and effective youth work interventions is at risk when it is largely dependent on short-term or targeted funding, much of which has already disappeared or is likely to be withdrawn when the funding cuts begin to bite.

- As the number of managers decline and those remaining become pulled more into strategic roles, their direct contact with and supervision of front-line staff become less evident. This is happening at a time when resources are scarce, expectations unclear and the challenges facing young people, their families and communities become ever more daunting.

11. Conclusions

We concluded *Squaring the Circle* by listing a number of dilemmas that youth workers and their managers had reported to us as a result of the state's interventions in the lives of young people becoming more prescriptive, intrusive and insistent. These concerned the location of youth work within local authority structures; the drift away from open access to targeted provision and from group work to casework; the increasing number of referrals from other services that threatened to compromise young people's voluntary participation; the preoccupation with young people's transitions to achieve positive outcomes in the future at the expense of attention to the here-and-now; the fragility and permeation of professional boundaries; the requirement to share information, putting at risk the integrity of trusting relationships that lie at the core of effective youth work; negotiating acceptable levels of risk; and credibility gaps opening up between managers and front-line staff.

Two years on and many of these dilemmas persist. The testimony of many of those we met during this second phase suggests that, if anything, they are even sharper. 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. Perverse incentives have become evident as projects hang on to young people as a means of protecting and preserving funding for their work.

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 needs and aspirations.

In this phase of the Inquiry we have seen how strong cultural differences persist between professions over operational matters such as the sharing of information; how sensible planning and provision of youth work opportunities are blighted by actual and anticipated shortfalls in funding; how the independence of the voluntary and community sector is jeopardised by its dependence on limited funding from the national and local state; how policy 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 drawn more into strategic matters the gap in perceptions between themselves and those they manage widens rather than narrows.

Indeed these gaps in experience and perception have become evident in a number of the themes and issues that emerged through the Inquiry. It is worth speculating why they persist. In part, they may be due simply to the differences in frames of reference adopted by managers and workers. These have always existed to some extent; after all managers consort with managers and the principal reference group for most workers would be their colleagues and peers. The ways in which

events, patterns and experiences are framed and interpreted are likely to be influenced by the preoccupations and priorities of the reference group. There are three further factors that may accentuate and intensify these gaps. The first concerns policy. Integration requires managers and front-line workers together and separately to build alliances; and as managers become drawn into more strategic roles and policy matters so their perspective is likely to diverge from that of those whom they manage. Secondly at a time of professional uncertainty when systems become more complex and fluid managers may think they have less on which they can communicate with any degree of confidence; so they may say less and unwittingly increase their staff's levels of anxiety. Thirdly, the squeeze on resources and the determination of service providers to protect front-line delivery entails an erosion of managerial posts. In a period of austerity, nothing more concentrates the mind than serious job insecurity. Therefore it is no surprise that this adversely affects the amount of time that managers are able to commit to keeping their staff in the loop..

In this harsh financial climate policy makers and funders are bound to turn 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 are likely to 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 are likely to 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 immediately demonstrable outcomes.

Because of the state we are in it is hard to find cause for celebration, as we approach the fiftieth anniversary of establishing the national college for training professionally qualified youth workers. These straws in the wind signify cold comfort. 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.

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Appendix 1 – Inquiry questions

Prompts for meetings with senior and front-line managers

- ❑ What for you makes youth work a distinctive practice within the overall provision of services for young people?   Perhaps you can describe a piece of work you have come across recently that best represents that?

- ❑ What factors help you to achieve your intentions and provide this practice?

- ❑ What factors get in the way of you achieving your intentions/providing this practice?

- ❑ How are current national and local policy priorities (including for example providing positive activities, weekend opening) affecting the way you lead and manage youth work?

- ❑ How is the current financial climate affecting the provision of youth work? How is it likely to affect this provision over the next 2-3 years?

- ❑ What is the balance of your work between managing relationships, managing resources, managing processes and managing expectations?

- ❑ What are the current tensions or dilemmas in your work? How do you account for them and respond to them?

- ❑ Do these tensions and dilemmas have any impact on youth work practice? If so, how?

- ❑ How if at all does the policy intention of creating a youth professional have an impact on your professional identity?

Prompts for meetings with youth workers

What do you do?
- ❑ Describe a fairly recent example of a piece of youth work that really represented you working as a youth worker.

- ❑ Are there key words or phrases that capture for you what was distinctively **youth work** about that piece of practice?

With whom?
- ❑ Roughly what are the proportions of the young people who you work with who (a) come voluntarily and (b) are referred or required to attend?

- ❑ What is the balance of your work with individuals and with groups of young people?

How do you do it?

- ❑ How do you conceptualise what young people need from a youth worker and how does this thinking influence the way you plan your interventions?

- ❑ Are there particular methods or approaches you use for making contact?

- ❑ What are the factors that help you make your interventions and what are the factors that get in the way?

- ❑ In what circumstances do you do your best youth work?

- ❑ To what extent are your analysis and interventions being influenced by current policies - eg re positive activities, integration, targeting, early intervention and prevention, impact assessment, budgets, voice and influence

- ❑ How are policies and structures aimed at achieving greater integration of services influencing the type of interventions you make?

- ❑ How is your work being affected by the current financial climate?

Dilemmas and tensions?

- ❑ Do you encounter any significant tensions or dilemmas in your work? How do you account for them and respond to them?

- ❑ How if at all does the policy intention of creating a youth professional have an impact on your professional identity?

Prompts for meeting young people

- ☐ Can you tell us about something really good or important that you have been involved in here recently, or perhaps with your friends? Can you give us two or three words that sum it up best for you?

- ☐ Do you want to go on being involved in these kinds of youth work activities?
  If so, why?

- ☐ How have you and your friends been able to influence the policy and provision of services for young people in your area?

- ☐ How have you and your friends benefited from this?

- ☐ What do you get from being involved in these youth work activities that you might not get from other places you go?

☐ What do you get from youth workers that you do not get from other adults you have contact with?

☐ Over the period that you have been involved in youth work have there been changes in the way it is provided? Have the changes been for the better or worse. If so, how?

☐ What else could be done to make the youth work you know about better?

Prompts for meetings with voluntary and community sector managers and workers

❑ What for you makes youth work a distinctive practice within the overall provision of services for young people?   Perhaps you can describe a piece of work you have come across recently that best represents that?

How do you do it?

❑ How do you conceptualise what young people need from a youth worker and how does this thinking influence the way you plan your interventions?

❑ Are there particular methods or approaches you use for making contact?

❑ What are the factors that help you make your interventions and what are the factors that get in the way?

❑ In what circumstances do you do your best youth work?

Policy impact

❑ To what extent are your analysis and interventions being influenced by current policies – e.g. re positive activities, integration, targeting, early intervention and prevention, impact assessment, budgets, voice and influence

❑ How are policies and structures aimed at achieving greater integration of services influencing the type of interventions you make?

❑ Are there any further current national and local policy priorities (including for example providing positive activities, weekend opening) affecting the way you provide youth work?

❑ How is your work being affected by the current financial climate?

Dilemmas and tensions

❑ Do you encounter any significant tensions or dilemmas in your work? How do you account for them and respond to them?
❑ How if at all does the policy intention of creating a youth professional have an impact on your professional identity?

Appendix 2 - List of services visited as part of this Inquiry

Derbyshire County Council

London Borough of Hackney

Hartlepool Borough Council

London Borough of Hounslow

Lancashire County Council

Lincolnshire County Council

Oxfordshire County Council

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council