

The National Youth Agency

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# Research Programme Series

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## The contribution of youth work to the Every Child Matters Outcomes Introduction

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# The contribution of youth work to the Every Child Matters Outcomes

## Introducing the five briefing papers

**Around 60 per cent of young people are estimated to come in contact with the youth service at some point between the ages of 11 and 25 (NYA, 2006).**

The NYA Research Programme commissioned five papers by leading youth work researchers into the contribution that youth work can make to achieving each of the five outcomes outlined in Every Child Matters. The case studies in these documents provide examples of the range of ways in which youth work contributes to the ECM agenda, as set out in the Outcomes Framework:

**Being Healthy  
Staying Safe  
Enjoying and Achieving  
Making a Positive Contribution  
Economic Wellbeing**

This introduction to the set of five briefings outlines some generic issues that relate to the ECM agenda overall. It sets out the defining features and values of youth work, outlines the varying forms of provision that youth work can take, and addresses the implications Every Child Matters has for youth work.

## 1. What is youth work?

### Values in youth work

Youth work helps young people by offering personal development, education and life skills programmes tailored to individual need, and by providing social, economic, educational and recreational opportunities designed to encourage social inclusion and life-long learning (NYA, 2006). Its contribution has a strong professional base. Merton and colleagues (2004) identified four main distinctive

features of youth work. It is based on:

- ▶ **voluntary engagement** of young people;
- ▶ young people's **active involvement** in different features of local youth provision;
- ▶ use of **informal education** as a primary; and method
- ▶ a **flexible and responsive** approach to provision.

**The core purpose of youth work is the personal and social development of young people through informal education**

According to Merton et al (2004), there is widespread consensus within the youth work profession that the core purpose of youth work is the personal and social development (PSD) of young people through informal education. However, the study suggests that there is lack of clarity outside the youth work profession about what youth workers actually do. This is largely because many youth workers talk about their work in terms of its values rather than what it is meant to achieve.

**Youth work has a role both in the development of social capital and within the social inclusion agenda.**

Youth work is more strategic than is sometimes portrayed. Merton et al (2004) describe youth work activity as preventative, and point to its role in relation to **social inclusion**. The approach is a holistic one, in addressing the totality of a young person's experience in social context. Depending on the **individual circumstances** of the young person (including their community and family contexts), youth work variously contributes to their re-integration, diversion and engagement in preventative activity, protection and enablement, levels of aspiration and achievement and active citizenship. Through youth work, young people are helped to prepare for working life.

Youth work helps young people **maximise their potential**. Bernard Davies stresses its commitment to 'a potentiality rather than a deficiency model' of young people. He argues that youth work provides a

security and a facility which affirms ‘more critical and creative responses’ that can lead to change (Davies, 2005: 16).

The primary medium is **non-formal education**. This is defined by The NYA as ‘a structured educational intervention in a non-institutional setting, which is negotiated between the learner and the facilitator, and which leads to a planned and reorganised outcome for the learner’. The outcome is not typically certification (though this is increasing). The EU/Council of Europe (2004) indicate that youth work has a role in formal, non-formal and informal learning, ranging from structured alternative formal education (eg for dropouts, excluded, etc), to non-formal learning through youth activities, and informal learning of ‘soft skills’ through daily life in work, family and leisure. The youth work curriculum (Merton and Wylie, 2003) contains elements which contribute to the acquisition of social capital, and the skills needed for employability. These are not just work-related skills, but also soft skills, including:

- ▶ **emotional literacy** (self-awareness, self-esteem, motivation, sensitivity to others, handling relationships and diversity); and
- ▶ **creativity and enterprise** (feeding and expressing the imagination, thinking laterally, recognising and solving problems, calculating and taking risks)

A fundamental element in the youth work value base is that young people set their own aims and objectives (Davies, 2005). This means that young people are **listened to** and their views respected. Engagement needs therefore to be on a **voluntary** basis. The **flexibility and time perspectives** of the service make it possible for young people to review and revise their earlier choices, allowing them to re-enter education and training, for example.

### Forms of provision

**Youth work – while given cohesion through its basis in core values – is adaptable to different needs**

Youth work provision takes many different forms. It is not aimed purely at 13-19s, but often caters for young adults up to 25 years of age. It may be part of a community-based initiative rather than be specifically youth-based. The case studies in these documents include examples of both of these.

Current provision ranges between universal or open access centre-based provision and that which targets young people at risk. Youth work provision is diverse, catering for different localities or different

types of user. In many cases it involves collaboration with mainstream services, such as education, or forms part of the targeted service provision within government initiatives. It can identify previously unseen need, and can focus on those young people who are unlikely to be contacted through schools or schemes – the hard-to-reach. This listing (NYA, 2006) shows how youth work – while given cohesion through its basis in core values – is adaptable to different needs.

#### Forms of provision

- **Buildings-based work** – youth clubs and centres operated directly by local authorities or by voluntary and community organisations. They range from well-equipped purpose built youth centres catering solely for young people to clubs based in premises shared with other organisations such as community centres and village halls.
- **Detached work** – making contact with young people who cannot, or choose not to, use youth centres. Detached youth workers meet young people in their own spaces, for instance parks, bus shelters, shopping centres or on the street. Through developing non-judgmental relationships they work with individuals and groups to help them address the needs they identify and engage with other relevant agencies.
- **Outreach work** – encouraging young people to make more use of existing provision or to develop new provision.
- **Mobiles** – converted buses or other vehicles taken to particular localities, offering young people opportunities to meet together, take part in structured programmes and gain access to resources, information and advice.
- **Schools and further education colleges** – in many schools and colleges, youth workers contribute to formal education programmes, particularly relating to PSHE (personal, social and health education) and citizenship education. They may offer lunchtime and after-school provision open to all young people, as well as developing programmes with specific groups of young people, especially those who are having difficulties at school. Youth workers are also involved in study support programmes – voluntary learning activity outside normal lessons.
- **Youth work involvement in government programmes** for post-16 education and

training, such as the Learning Gateway, New Deal or Connexions.

- **Information, advice and counselling projects** – providing a range of services from information about local facilities to long-term support for individual or groups of young people.
- **Youth forums**, councils or other projects enabling young people to learn about and engage in democratic processes, and to ensure that their views inform the development of policies and services.
- **Specialist projects, targeting particular groups** of young people, for instance Asian young women or young people in or leaving care.
- **Specialist projects focusing on specific activities**, for instance young volunteer and youth action projects, motor projects or arts projects.
- **Cross-community and international work**, in Britain or abroad, which brings together young people from different cultures and countries on joint projects, through which they find common ground while recognising and valuing differences.

### Work with vulnerable groups

‘Street-based’ or outreach work is particularly effective in finding the hard-to-reach and most disaffected young people, who are unlikely to respond to school or centre-based work (Crimmens et al., 2004). An evaluation found that most of the young people involved with projects were male, partly because male youth cultures are more street-based, but also because the increasing policy emphasis on ‘youth nuisance’ was beginning to create a bias towards work with young men. The study of 564 street-based youth work projects stressed the importance for effectiveness of a flexible and open-ended approach, responsive to individual needs and based on voluntarism.

The duration of a successful intervention may be dictated by the time it takes for the young person to gain sufficient confidence and maturity rather than an arbitrary chronological cut-off point set by funding or project goals (Crimmens et al., 2004b: p 5).

It seems clear that youth work does not provide a ‘quick fix’ for social problems which may be deep-seated, or for patterns of behaviour which may be long-standing. Many of the evaluations of individual projects or of youth work methods indicate the need for longer time frames, possible only through longer-term funding and retention of professional trained staff.

## 2. The implications of ECM for youth work

### Towards an integrated Youth Support Service

There have been concerns for some time surrounding delivery of services for young people. Youth work was found to offer a crucial but uneven service (according to Ofsted inspections), while Connexions failed to take account of local needs and related services. The Youth Matters Green Paper (2005) indicated the need for services to be integrated at local level in order to lead to the ECM outcomes. The unevenness in coverage and quality can often be related to staffing and management problems and/or funding arrangements (Merton et al., 2004).

### ECM areas for action

ECM specifies areas for action to ensure integration of services with clearly defined responsibility. These have major implications for the ways in which voluntary and statutory youth services are funded, organised and delivered.

#### ECM areas for action

- Working with families
- Early intervention and effective protection
- Accountability and integration
- Workforce reform
- Funding

### a) Working with families

Supporting parents and carers is one of the ECM areas for action. The Parenting Fund is set up to support parents, balanced with Parenting Orders to emphasise their parental responsibility for their children’s behaviour (though not for their financial responsibility). It was the main argument of the earlier section of this paper that for economic wellbeing of young people to be addressed, attention must now be given to the relationships between young people and their parents or carers. This is largely because of the extension of the period of economically dependent youth and the difficulties associated with accessing parental support. Research has shown ease of communication with parents to be a major factor in reducing risk of teenage pregnancy. Increased homelessness among young people has been found to be because an increasing number of parents are unwilling to provide housing for them (Bynner et al, 2004). Preventive

work with young people is likely to be far more effective if the parent-child relationship is addressed.

Merton *et al* found that families, as well as friends and communities, could have a negative influence on the effectiveness of youth work. This is particularly going to be the case where the aspirations of young people, their parents, service providers and policy makers do not coincide (see Briefing 3 on the sources of young people's beliefs).

Youth work is currently orientated to the ECM economic wellbeing outcomes in terms of young people rather than their families. Youth Matters (DfES, 2005) refers to the prospect of a step change in the extent to which professionals who support young people engage with their parents. Merton *et al* (2004) point out that youth workers can act as a bridge between young people and their families. There are examples in the papers of projects which work with young people and their families. St Basil's in Birmingham (see the paper on Economic Wellbeing) has undertaken work with families, including mediation between young people and their parents, for some time, as part of its work in preventing homelessness. ASTRA in Gloucestershire, which works with young runaways, recruited a family worker. It is perhaps obvious that the family context is important in cases of homelessness or running away; perhaps it is less so in cases where a young person has dropped out of education, training or employment. Nevertheless, parents may hold the key to successful re-integration, not least in cases where they are expected to provide a home and financial support.

There may be resistance in the youth work profession to diverting attention away from young people to work with their families. Many young people do however experience problems in their family relationships. Youth workers would not want to jeopardise their relationships with the young people they work with, and their skills may not extend to working in a family setting. Partnership working with other professionals may provide a means of working with families.

**Parents may hold the key to successful re-integration, not least in cases where they are expected to provide a home and financial support.**

### **b) Early intervention and effective protection**

There is a need for common assessment, tracking procedures, and monitoring if services are to be made more level nationally, and the main criticism of existing youth work services addressed. Information

must be pooled between agencies if needs are to be identified and acted upon early, and if gaps and overlaps in services are not to be allowed to develop. The intention is to make sure that children and young people do not fall through holes in the safety net because of acts of omission on the part of service providers.

The need for information sharing is obvious in child abuse cases. It may be less so – in the case of disaffected young people where the same procedures can be interpreted as control rather than protection. The ethos that lies behind agency information-sharing and common assessment framework may be seen by youth workers to breach the confidentiality principle on which their work is based. Youth workers may need some convincing that information sharing is in young people's interests.

The ethos of rapid response multi-disciplinary teams is also quite contrary to that of street-based youth work, where relationships are long-term (ideally) and based on trust (Crimmens *et al*, 2004). On the other hand, youth work has a clear and existing role in identification of need, especially among hard-to-reach groups (Davies, 2005).

### **c) Accountability and integration**

Clear mechanisms for governance are needed if children's and young people's services are to be integrated through local partnerships. ECM puts forward a structure for local services comprising a Director of Children's Services, with local safeguarding children's boards, and an integrated inspection framework (led by Ofsted). A Children's Commissioner for England was established in 2005.

The transforming youth work management programme (TYWMP) was designed to help youth work managers who were having to cope with increasing demands, in part because of increasing awareness of the value of youth work. Tyler's (2004) evaluation of TYWMP found indications that working in partnerships involved more strategic thinking and operational management on the part of youth work managers, more scrutiny and review of practice, and also, perhaps more surprisingly, increasingly involvement of young people in service development.

Under the ECM arrangements, Connexions is to be transferred to Local Authority responsibility, to allow the service to be more responsive to local need. Youth work has played a central role in the development and delivery of Connexions, for example, ensuring that Connexions reaches young people who are disaffected or at risk. There is also crossover between Connexions and youth work

– many youth workers have taken on (with training) the Personal Adviser role, while many Connexions Services locate PAs within local youth services. Merton et al (2004, p. 13) comment that there is variation in the quality of partnerships between local youth service and Connexions, but where they are close and confident, youth work is adding value. Youth workers already work with other agencies (as several of the illustrative Case Studies in this Briefing show). There are partnerships involving housing, youth offending teams and police, leisure and health services (especially those working on the Teenage Pregnancy Strategy and Drugs and Alcohol Advisory Teams) (NYA, 2006). Partnerships with social services in supporting care leavers were, according to Merton et al (2004) the least developed.

At their best, local multi-agency partnerships are an effective way of coordinating services and filling gaps between services. Problems can however occur, as several evaluations have shown. One of the main areas of concern is the difference in professional ethos and culture between partners. Partnerships will therefore vary according to which organisation takes the lead, and this leads to continued national unevenness of services, and inconsistent data sharing, tracking, record-keeping and evaluation. The challenge is to find coordinating mechanisms and common strategies (Bynner et al, 2004).

Youth workers, by working in partnership with non-youth work professionals, may be able to develop more preventive work by widening the focus out from the individual and working with communities and families, without losing sight of their primary concern with young people themselves.

#### **d) Workforce reform**

**The devolution of Connexions' funding and the development of an integrated youth support service both have implications for the workforce. Local partners will need to build on the skills of today's professionals, clarifying their roles and developing their skills to meet new challenges. (Youth Matters, 2005: 63).**

ECM proposes a framework for workforce reform. This includes mechanisms for improving skills, through training and standards, leadership development programme; and improved mechanisms for joint inter-professional working, such as common core training through a Sector Skills Council (SSC), and breaking down barriers to joint working.

What does this mean for youth work? In all, there are around 3,000 full-time and 21,000 part-time youth workers employed by local authority youth

services in England, and an estimated half a million volunteers. The service is staffed by people with different levels of attachment to it and its professional values, therefore.

**A misfit between the aims of the service – to work through long-term relationships of mutual trust – and the reality of its staffing situation.**

Levels of training also vary widely. Crimmens et al's (2004) study of street-based work found that staffing could affect the quality of the service. Projects were staffed 75 per cent by volunteers or part-time sessional staff, though they could be working with high-risk young people. High staff turnover made training difficult. There was, therefore, a misfit between the aims of the service, to work through long-term relationships of mutual trust, and the reality of its staffing situation. Evaluation of Connexions and mentoring projects similarly show the importance of well-trained professional staff (see Bynner et al, 2004). Merton et al. (2004) found that lack of management support of youth workers and lack of clear professional development structures adversely affected the effectiveness of youth work.

#### **e) Funding**

The establishment of Children's Trusts as commissioning bodies is intended to allow services to be organised around local needs, and projects commissioned specifically to fill identified gaps.

Effective youth work needs a secure funding base, to underpin staff development as well as youth work practice. Short-term, unstable and variable funding leads to differential capacity to deliver and is one of the reasons for the geographic unevenness of the service. It is inimical to the idea of long-term and sustained contact with young people (Merton et al, 2004). More systematic funding of street-based work may offer good value for money and measurable results (JRF, 2004; Merton et al, 2004). Funders may, however, be single-issue orientated and want short-term results (Crimmens et al, 2004).

Examples like the SIGNPOST Case study and the evaluation of mentoring schemes for care leavers (in *Enjoying and Achieving*) show the importance of long-term core funding for the long-term involvement of young people and greater chance of positive outcomes.

#### **Service management**

ECM Outcomes Framework sets out ways the



directorates will judge on service management, including leadership and value for money. The criteria include the following (this is not an exhaustive list):

#### ECM Service management judgment criteria

##### Ambition

- Local services share objectives and targets
- Comprehensive analysis of needs take into account the views of parents, carers, children and young people
- Needs are mapped against provision and gaps

##### Prioritisation

- Priorities are clear and robust, and shared between partner agencies, parents, carers, children and young people
- Delivery achieves value for money
- Preventive services
- Effective inter-agency processes for planning and reviewing provision
- Accessible venues

##### Capacity

- Accountability and decision-making through CYPP and Children's Trust
- Efficient use of capacity – flexibility in services, use of local providers, pooled budgets if needed, workforce planning and action to recruit, train and retain staff.
- Effective identification, recording and communication of individual need through single recording system

##### Performance management

- View of children and young people listened to
- Regular and collective review of service performance
- Services regularly monitored, evaluated and reviewed, and findings used to improve services
- Contributions of different services integrated where development needs are identified, or new services commissioned

The emphasis on ensuring value for money, through evaluation and monitoring of needs and service provision, has major implications for the ways in which youth work is conceived and organised. The emphasis on shared vision is also challenging, since it will mean compromise and flexibility.

### Measuring effectiveness

How should the effectiveness of youth work be measured? According to Davies (2005: 21) the course of its practice is decided by human

interactions which are always fluid, continuously shifting and which, therefore, can offer no guarantee of reaching certain and final endpoints. On the other hand, Merton and colleagues (2004) found that local youth services in England were adapting to policy developments, and there were tangible outcomes, such as re-engaging with education or reducing drug use.

The link between scope for evaluation and funding is likely to get closer, and it will become increasingly important to find appropriate means of evaluating youth provision, if the service is not to become skewed towards the achievement of hard outcomes. Services need to be effective and seen to be effective – ie value for money.

The DfES discussion document *Transforming Youth Work* (2001) listed qualitative criteria for 'good youth work', and The NYA have added a fifth:

#### Criteria for good youth work that young people would want to use (from DfES, 2001; and NYA, 2006)

- Offers quality support to young people which helps them achieve and progress.
- Enables young people to have their voice heard and influence decision making at various levels.
- Provides a diversity of personal and social development opportunities.
- Promotes intervention and prevention to address individual, institutional and policy causes of disaffection and exclusion.
- Is well planned, focusing on achieving outcomes that meet young people's needs and priorities.

It is clear that most of these criteria of quality do not lend themselves to development into measurable targets of effectiveness. There is a problem about evaluating the effectiveness of any provision for young people. Being in a period of transition where much in their lives is changing, including their social relationships and their economic situations, young people are subject to many changing influences. There is no easy way of determining whether desistance from crime or drugs, or increased self-esteem, is due to youth work or other factors. Monitoring of effectiveness would require procedures such as randomised control trials (RCT), and these would require clear and standardised measurements of the aims and target outcomes of the intervention, and start and endpoints for the user (all of which ECM Outcomes Framework aims to provide). Evaluations have a much broader remit and examine processes and problems of implementation and delivery as well as outcomes (Bynner et al, 2004).

**Qualitative and broader evaluation of the youth work process in context may be more appropriate than monitoring its effectiveness against baselines and targets.**

### **Tensions and challenges**

The question is whether the open, flexible, voluntaristic and exploratory approach of youth work can be maintained within the current policy agenda. Davies (2005) is concerned that youth work is attractive to policy makers mainly because it facilitates the 'voice/consult' agenda and because of its ability to make contact with hard-to-reach young people. He suggests that there is less concern to preserve the integrity of the means by which these are achieved.

Merton et al (2004) also alert us to the dangers of compromising the basic values underlying youth work. They suggest that youth work is currently facing four main strategic issues.

#### **Key issues for youth work (Merton et al, 2004)**

- The balance between universal or open access and targeted work
- Processes for identifying need and directing resources
- Relationship between youth work and schools
- Retaining the voluntary engagement of young people

#### ▶ **Balancing universalism with open access and targeted work.**

The term 'progressive universalism' has been used to describe a system where there is support for all but more support for those who most need it (HM Treasury & DfES, 2005). What is the desirable balance between universal and targeted provision? The ever-increasing focus on targeting services and provisions runs the risk of failing many young people who are less visibly in need. It will be important for funders to recognise that universal and open provision is both needed and effective.

#### ▶ **Processes for identifying need and directing resources.**

Broadly speaking, ECM represents a shift in policy emphasis from treatment of problems to their prevention. On the other hand, the increasing focus on anti-offending policies runs the risk of removing resources away from preventive work. Youth work is well placed to identify needs at local level, especially in relation

to disaffected young people who do not come into contact with other agencies (Davies, 2005). It is also able to help young people express their views on what is needed and how provision should be shaped.

#### ▶ **Relationship between youth work and schools.**

The EC White Paper (2001) called for greater complementarity between youth work and formal education and training. Should there be better links between mainstream and out-of-school/special education provision, to avoid the dangers of 'parallel agendas' (Bynner et al, 2004). How will the increasing recognition of vocational courses impact on the relationship between youth work and schools? How desirable is the increased emphasis on accreditation as a means of 'purchasing' services? Is there a risk that informal and non-formal education will become 'formalised' and less attractive to some young people?

#### ▶ **Retaining the voluntary engagement of young people.**

The voluntary nature of youth work participation is seen as critical to its success, but is this one of the first values of youth work to become compromised? The policy shift towards responsibilities rather than rights is reflected in increasing emphasis on the conditionality of benefits, contracts between young people and service providers, etc. Can the basic youth work principle of voluntarism (rather than its antithesis, coercion) be maintained in the face of this policy agenda? Interestingly, Merton et al (2004) found that elements of coercion could be accommodated in youth work: youth workers could still work out plans and agendas with young people and convert 'having to' into 'wanting to', through negotiation. But what happens to the relationship between young people and youth workers when rights (such as to participate or express a view) become responsibilities?



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## **The National Youth Agency**

works in partnership with young people and with organisations and services to ensure better outcomes for young people. It is an independent, development organisation located between government and funding bodies on the one hand and service providers and their users on the other.

### **We strive to ensure that the work of services and organisations is:**

- relevant to the lives of young people;
  - responsive to policy;
  - effective and of a high standard;
  - efficient and provides good value; and
- successful in securing the best outcomes for young people.

### **Our five strategic aims are:**

- Participation: promoting young people's influence, voice and place in society.
- Professional practice: improving youth work practice, programmes and other services for young people.
- Policy development: influencing and shaping the youth policy of central and local government and the policies of those who plan, commission and provide services for young people.
  - Partnership: creating, supporting and developing partnerships between organisations to improve services and outcomes for young people.
  - Performance: striving for excellence in The Agency's internal workings.

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The National Youth Agency

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