



SQUARING THE CIRCLE?

FINDINGS OF A 'MODEST INQUIRY' INTO THE STATE OF YOUTH WORK PRACTICE IN A CHANGING POLICY ENVIRONMENT

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1. Introduction

1.1 Context and motivation for the Inquiry

One of the starting points for this piece of work has been our personal and professional concern that youth work as a distinctive practice is being written out of the current policy script. This is by no means only our concern. It has been voiced, too, by others in the youth work field – by managers and practitioners, by trainers and researchers and by other professional commentators. (See for example Brent, 2004: 69-73; Spence and Davanney, 2006; Tiffany, 2007). Though apparent for some time, unease was increased by the position taken by *Aiming High for Young People* (DCSF, 2007a), the government's ten-year strategy for young people. Though referring to positive activities and targeted youth support as key components of the Integrated Youth Offer, this scarcely mentioned youth work as a potential contributor to achieving its priorities.

Against this background, it seemed timely to consider both how far a consensus view on youth work exists amongst those most directly involved with it and whether this retains a place in the contemporary public services for young people – the 'youth services' to which government policy statements repeatedly refer. In our view, exploring these questions required some form of systematic assessment of whether and how youth work is positioned and practised as part of the integrated youth support and development services evolving in England. What we have termed throughout as a 'modest inquiry' has been undertaken to initiate this assessment – in part to encourage discussion and debate about what is happening to youth work but also perhaps to act as a pilot for a fuller piece of research.

1.2 Aims of the Inquiry

Starting from some evidence of what youth work has meant historically, the Inquiry has sought to address the following questions:

- How is youth work currently conceptualised by youth work managers, field practitioners and young people?
- How far do these conceptions of youth work connect (or not) with the definition of youth work which we adopted as our starting point for the Inquiry?
- How are the main current youth work policy drivers – particularly *Transforming Youth Work: Resourcing Excellent Youth Services* (DfES, 2002), *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) and *Aiming High* – supporting or impeding the implementation of such a practice and its management?
- How are these policy developments affecting youth workers' understanding of and confidence in their own professional identity?

As the Inquiry proceeded, these broad aims evolved and were refined. In particular, we started from the assumption that our main focus would be on how youth work was being affected by the creation of integrated youth support services as envisaged by *Every Child Matters* and later by *Youth Matters – Next Steps* (DfES, 2006). It became increasingly clear, however, that for most of our respondents the full implications of these changes were just beginning to emerge.¹

¹ See Section 2 for a fuller exposition of the policy documents referred to in this Section.

1.3 A framework for defining youth work

As indicated above, the Inquiry started from its own definition of the key features of youth work practice – in this case derived from that proposed in *Youth Work: A Manifesto For Our Times* (Davies, 2005: 7). This assumed a practice which

- *is based on and develops from what young people bring and want;*
- *provides young people with support and opportunities for going beyond these starting points;*
- *young people engage with by choice; or which sets out to move them from 'having to' to 'wanting to' engage;*
- *sees enhancing young people's sense of becoming empowered as an inherent element of its processes, focusing on young people's identity, voice and place in society.*
- *is rooted in a holistic concern for young people, both as individuals and as members of peer groups and community networks;*

The planning paper for the Inquiry also proposed that a significant feature of youth work's distinctiveness was its concern for young people's 'here and now' experiences and preoccupations as well as for what currently preoccupies policy-makers - their 'transitions'. These too have therefore been given some attention.

1.4 Methodology

This piece of work was never intended as pure research using standard methods and techniques such as representative sampling, structured questionnaires or analysis of data sets. We have attempted to sample points of view from those engaged in the youth work process – the evidence collected is testimony – that is, qualitative information drawn from the experiences of those directly involved as managers, practitioners or users of youth work provision. We have sought to present a balanced picture and at times that has meant that paradoxes and contradictions will be evident. However that does not preclude some common themes and questions emerging which, we hope, will be amenable to more formal research at a later stage.

The Inquiry draws mainly on visits to a small number of local authorities which had been judged by OFSTED in recent reviews as providing 'good' or 'very good' youth work – that is, authorities which could be said to be starting from strengths in their responses to the key current policy priorities affecting the practice. Twelve authorities agreed to take part in the Inquiry. (See Appendix 1) A full day was spent in each meeting senior managers, front-line youth workers, youth support workers and young people. Discussions with each group were shaped and guided by a set of prompt questions circulated in advance. (See Appendix 2) These were designed to explore how participants understood, practised or experienced youth work and the factors, in particular those of policy and organisation, which were helping and hindering this practice.

We have deliberately chosen to think of and develop this piece of work as an Inquiry rather than a research project - for both positive and negative reasons. Thus, in selecting the twelve authorities, limited time and resources dictated that geographical accessibility as well as a positive OFSTED rating needed to be a criterion. No claims can be made therefore that the contributing authorities are 'representative' of the Youth Service nationally. Constraints of time and resources also limited the range and depth of the data we could gather within each authority as well as the depth of the comparative analysis

between authorities, since most of this was gathered through, at best, ninety-minute group discussions which often turned out to be quite discursive.

On the other hand, conceiving of what we were attempting as an Inquiry has had a number of advantages. It has particularly reminded us to keep our youth work 'hats' very firmly in place as we have met those whom we see as our field colleagues and the young people they serve. We have therefore striven to identify and start from their starting points and to listen to and remain respectful of their experiences and understandings of the complex, contradictory and fast changing working situations in which they find themselves and of their sometimes feelings of anguish about these. We have sought to extract from these personalised and localised responses some wider and deeper meanings and messages and to play these back in ways which provide those on the front line with a stimulus for further critical reflection on what is happening to youth work and some reassurance that they are not alone in their reactions and struggles.

Unsurprisingly, the Inquiry has not generated clear-cut and definitive answers to all our questions, nor to those – many the same ones – which field colleagues are facing. Though positive OFSTED inspections were the trigger for inviting local Youth Services to participate, some of these had apparently been and remained stronger and better placed within their authorities than others, especially politically, managerially and in the resources available. They thus seemed to be accommodating more easily to the managerial and organisational changes which have flowed from both the *Transforming Youth Work: Resourcing Excellent Youth Services* and *Every Child Matters* and *Youth Matters* policy frameworks.

This accommodation does however pose two questions. One, which for us has remained a question, is: how far are workers and managers underestimating the challenge to their preferred model of youth work which the radical *Every Child Matters* restructuring will bring once it is fully implemented? The second is: how far are the accommodations which have already taken place – particularly in response to *Resourcing Excellent Youth Services* but also to *Every Child Matters* - compromising or even undermining this model?

2. The current policy context youth work

2.1 Key policy drivers

The most significant policy drivers of youth work policy and practice since 2001 have been *Transforming Youth Work* (2001) and its follow-up document *Resourcing Excellent Youth Services* (2002), and *Every Child Matters* (2003). All three in their different ways embodied two key underpinning aims of a wider New Labour's strategy - to invest in but also to reform the public sector. One was to make services more efficient, effective and accountable. This made funding from the tax-payer increasingly dependent on public services demonstrating a positive impact on service users – now seen more and more as consumers - and on other stakeholders. For youth work this meant demonstrating that young people were achieving positive outcomes as defined by higher levels of educational achievement, reduced anti-social behaviour and teenage pregnancy, and positive contributions to their communities.

The second New Labour requirement of these services has been that they become much more 'joined up' – either through partnership working or, in due course, through actual 'mergers'. The result here for youth workers and their managers were expectations that they work closely with professionals whose value base and approaches might be very different from, if not in conflict with, those they saw as central to their own practice.

Not unreasonably, *Resourcing Excellent Youth Services* was described by the then 'youth minister' Ivan Lewis as a 'new architecture' for youth work. Relatively immune until then from the 'target culture' sweeping through the public sector more widely, youth work was now required to show more tangible and positive results for the resources invested in it. In particular, it introduced Best Value Performance Indicators (BVPIs) – on reach, participation and achievement (recorded and accredited outcomes) – which became a means for quantifying the results of youth work activity and for funders to mandate service managers to set and achieve targets.

This impetus was reinforced but also in significant ways overtaken by a second major policy driver with very different origins. Following the tragic death of Victoria Climbié while in the care of her extended family, the Laming inquiry set in motion changes aimed at strengthening the procedures for safeguarding children and young people brought together under the *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003) policy framework. This specified five outcomes to which all children and young people's services would actively contribute: being safe, staying healthy, enjoying and achieving, making a positive contribution, and achieving economic well-being. With the notable exception of schools, a duty was laid on all services at that time to work more closely together to safeguard, support and develop children and young people, with youth work being seen as one of the provisions needing to integrate into the planned local authority 'youth support services'¹. Through *Change for Children* (2004), a comprehensive and co-ordinated attempt was also instigated to reform the workforce so that all relevant staff had the skills and qualifications needed for such collaborative and indeed ultimately, integrated, multi-disciplinary working.

¹ Since then statutory guidance has extended the duty to co-operate to include schools, colleges and Job Centre Plus.

2.2 The impact and pressures of top-down policy

In sections 4, 5 and 6 we use the evidence from our visits to identify in some detail how youth work practitioners and their managers see these policies impacting on their work and their ability to adhere to the historic features of youth work which they themselves articulated. First however we attempt briefly to put that more detailed analysis in the context of their overall reactions to the policy drivers.

For some workers, the changes posed no serious problems or challenges – in effect involved no fundamental compromises. Thus, for one full-time worker who had just returned to face-to-face youth work after working abroad for four years:

“The funding opportunities are great now... The ECM help. You can express the value of what you do and sing about it”.

It was senior and middle managers, however, who gave the clearest endorsements of the national policy frameworks. Indeed in one authority which was amongst the most confident in negotiating the policy imperatives, the team of middle managers offered a view of youth work largely explained within these frameworks and their local authority’s corporate versions of them:

“We’re delivering the city’s corporate development plan....”

“We’re delivering key local agendas – community safety, integrated services”.

“We’re helping to achieve the vision of the (local authority’s) Children’s Plan”.

Other managers, albeit more selectively, also firmly supported many of these policies:

“Transforming Youth Work was the foundation...”

“The bottom up approach to services’ planning is useless without knowing where the government is going”.

“When the government throws us another initiative we think: ‘OK, how can we do it?’ We ... don’t prostitute ourselves”.

More than one senior manager also talked of cushioning field staff from these top-down pressures– something that was recognised by one part-time worker:

“We still have time and space (in the work). Management leave us time ...”

Other senior managers emphasised their determination to preserve as much of this space as possible by responding creatively, even subversively, to often highly prescriptive government (or sometimes local) demands - as illustrated in the following example.

Box 1

Working creatively within national policy parameters

Anticipating new government funding for weekend opening of youth facilities, one service carried out a consultation with young people. This revealed that most did not want a Saturday evening city-centre facility: many saw this as unsafe; for others living in rural parts of the authority it did not take account of their transport problems. The Service, choosing to ‘overlook’ national guidelines, therefore invested heavily in renting a prestigious venue next to an iconic cinema building in the town centre. This opens on Saturday afternoons and is already being used well beyond expectations.

However, resistance of this kind to the policy directives was far from the whole story. For many workers as well as some managers such freedom of manoeuvre was hard to find. One senior manager talked of *“having to battle constantly”* to make sure the Service wasn't drawn into an enforcement role on anti-social behaviour – something echoed by others in very similar terms:

“... government policies and initiatives where they veer towards talk of ‘non-negotiable support’ ... (do) not sit well with the traditional values of youth work”.

“... some professionals, councillors and MPs ... often want the Youth Service primarily to ‘keep young people off the street’, stop anti-social behaviour and take on an enforcement role...”

Pressure from local politicians was sometimes highlighted very specifically, especially by managers:

“(They have) expectations to fire fight.”

“Political pressure is building up on the (Council) leadership to do something about anti-social behaviour before the local elections”.

These contrary – in some cases sharply conflicting – reactions to what national policy was expecting, if not requiring, of youth work existed within individual services as well as between them. Though our evidence does not allow us to draw firm conclusions, it does suggest that managers were more likely to be favourable to the changes than workers (especially part-timers), with young people largely unaware of, or indifferent to them.

3. The impact of policy on practice: some conceptual ground-clearing

Most workers and managers were impressively articulate about at least some of the features of their practice which make youth work distinctive, in the process repeatedly identifying or implying the same characteristics and processes. These were often embedded, too, in practitioners' descriptions of a recent practice example which they saw as best representing them at work as a youth worker. Some of the same features came through, too, in young people's discussions on why they valued youth work.

However, in offering these definitions, both workers and managers used a number of terms or phrases in taken-for-granted ways, as if their meanings were self-evident and often, as if they were interchangeable. Given the centrality of these concepts to current debates, this section attempts to unpack these terms and offer explicit definitions of them.

3.1 Targets, targeted provision and targeted youth support

This report treats these three terms as being distinct in the following ways.

Targets set out specific objectives for practice with measurable outcomes which youth workers are expected or required to achieve. In the last few years the targets most commonly and controversially set for youth work have been the recorded and accredited outcomes to be achieved by young people. These derive from *Resourcing Excellent Youth Services* and can be expressed numerically.

Targeted provision describes specific programmes and/or facilities which are offered to young people or which they may be required to attend. The young people are given dedicated and often intensive attention because they have been identified as within certain 'at risk' and/or 'special needs' categories, for example -NEET, drug user, teenage parent, offender.

Targeted youth support has been recently introduced into the 'offer' made by local authority children and young people's services as a way of ensuring that such targeted support is provided in more reliable ways. Though a recent evaluation suggests that the new arrangements have yet to be fully and effectively implemented (see Palmer and Kendall, 2009), their intention is that the needs of young people who are identified as being at risk and in need of extra and intensive support, will be assessed systematically and a co-ordinated and closely monitored programme of interventions offered, using dedicated resources including staff and facilities.

3.2 Universal, generic and open-access youth work

'Universal', 'generic' and 'open-access' were terms used regularly during the Inquiry to distinguish practice and programmes from those which were 'targeted'. However, their different meanings were not usually clarified – something which is essential for making the most positive case for forms of youth work which are genuine alternatives to these.

Universal provision is available to all potential users, in effect as a citizen's right, without financial or other qualifying tests being applied – for example NHS medical care and state education for 5- 18/19 year olds. However, youth work has never had the statutory underpinning to ensure such universal and non-selective availability. Indeed, from its

nineteenth century origins, much of it has very deliberately been focused ('targeted') on 'the poor' and 'the lower orders' – today, 'the disadvantaged' and 'the socially excluded'. Moreover, as the long-running debates on secondary school selection illustrate, even if it were universally available it would not necessarily be 'open access' or 'open door' – the features which those using the term often seemed most anxious to highlight.

Generic provision embraces a range of inter-related or even integrated facilities and opportunities which in a youth work context might for example include sport, art and drama, IT and unstructured social interaction. Generic provision does not however guarantee the kind of inclusive 'openness' which youth workers and their managers seemed to be advocating when using the term as some such provision may restrict or filter entry – for example by requiring a qualifying level of skill.

Open access is the term used throughout this report as most accurately and positively capturing what respondents seemed to be seeking to convey when talking about 'non-targeted' provision. In this context open access is taken to assume:

- engagement by young people which is not dependent on their coming with a specified label attached to them personally – other than, of course, that of 'young person';
- engagement which does not hinge on eligibility criteria;
- engagement which is voluntary and which allows considerable (though of course not total) discretion about what facilities they might use and which programmes they might wish to join once they have decided to engage.

4. The impact of policy on youth work as a distinctive practice

4.1 Process

This section focuses on the distinguishing features of youth work identified both in our own starting framework (see Section 1.3) and by managers, workers and young people during our discussions with them, and assesses how these are being influenced by the major policy drivers. Though each of these is discussed as if it were a separate entity, in the realities of everyday practice, each is of course closely inter-connected and inter-dependent within a holistic style of work: that is, it is their operation as a configuration which makes the practice distinctive. Central to this practice is experiential learning – learning derived from what young people are doing, thinking and feeling in their current activities and inter-personal exchanges, including with the youth worker. It is therefore a form of learning most often rooted in informality, flexibility and a responsiveness to whatever the young people present and display – including, as one part-time worker put it, *“the fact that (they) will bring some frustrations to the youth centre”*.

In ways and to an extent that is rarely required in other practices, this approach by its very nature, demands an attention to process – to what is taking place amongst people: to the medium as well as the message. This was described by one worker as *“unforced”* and to which, according to another, a part-timer, *“there’s no end point”*. Moreover, exploiting this process for developmental ends requires patience and time. It also assumes considerable personal openness from the worker – something which, for one young person, was exemplified by the fact that *“we have their (mobile) numbers – we can contact them at any time”*.

For workers, these intrinsic personal dimensions of their professionalism were identified in a number of ways by both full- and part-time workers:

“... at the end of the day you are offering young people yourself”.

“We ... use our enthusiasms to enthuse young people”.

“We make fun of ourselves... It breaks down the them-and-us”.

“(We’re) being more human by revealing more about ourselves...”

Other key elements they stressed were unshockability; and a frankness of language vividly captured by a full-time worker who, to communicate more easily with young people during sexual health sessions she ran in schools, talked in matter-of-fact ways, she said, *“about tits and willies”*.

What clearly complicates the development and negotiation of this process, and especially its flexibility, are two other requirements inherent to it. As identified by field workers, one is the need to set and observe boundaries:

“...the risk of ‘going with the flow’ is that boundaries are difficult to establish and maintain”.

“We give them guidelines at the start – then they set their own boundaries, they’re just taken-for-granted”.

- or, as one young person put it, youth workers are *“like friends with authority”*.

The other requirement is for workers constantly to be on the alert to the possibilities and opportunities for challenging young people – not just about their immediate behaviour but also on their view of themselves: what they are capable of achieving and how they might realise more of this potential.

4.2 To stay 'open' – or to target?

One of the most widely perceived threats to this notion and use of 'process' was the way the current policy frameworks were tipping the balance of youth work from open access to targeted provision. Though no 'hard' data were offered, in many authorities the former was seen as being squeezed (often hard) in favour of the latter, not least because of how increasingly work is funded:

"There is a concern here amongst staff about the reduction in 'bread and butter' open sessions in order to increase more specialised work as this can mean some ... young people miss out". (PYO)

"Balancing targeted and universal – we can't square the circle". (Worker-in-training)

"One of questions being set for our new QA (document) is: 'What will universal provision be targeting?'" (Senior manager)

This was a trend of which a voluntary sector manager was also very aware:

"The statutory service has become more targeted, less open access".

One of the unintended consequences of the targeting strategy has been the introduction of perverse incentives as youth services have been required to prioritise individuals and groups judged to be at risk or to be causing risk to others:

"...(targeting) turns us into youth intervention workers, not youth workers". (Full-time worker)

Given the scarcity of resources in most services, this shift often could only be achieved through "... budget cuts targeted at universal provision". As a result, young people who had previously derived considerable benefit from open-access provision might well, in the absence of this offer, then end up in an 'at risk' category.

For youth workers in one service, plans for more targeted interventions also meant more emphasis on one-to-one work based on referrals from other agencies such as schools – a trend which could also weaken open access provision. (See Box 3, page 18; page 21-22).

4.3 The defining features of youth work

(a) Voluntary engagement

History

A club boy in relation to his officers has an advantage over a public-school boy in relation to his masters in the purely voluntary nature of the connection ... (Russell and Rigby, 1908: 364)

It is no use asking girls to whom one is unknown; they will not come; they are distrustful of such invitations, and shyness also will prevent their entering a strange place. (Stanley, 1890: 57)

Principles

For the young people we met – almost all, it has to be noted, recruited through open access provision – voluntary attendance was never an issue. Of course they chose to come – why would we even bother to ask? Most workers and managers, too, usually unprompted, repeatedly asserted this as a core, distinctive characteristic of their work:

“Young people have to want to work with us”.

“That’s the key difference (is) with more statutory agencies who might have the right to intervene and ... legislation behind them”.

Nor was voluntary engagement asserted for its own sake. Often it was seen as central precisely because of the opportunities it gave for going beyond young people’s starting points:

“The voluntary relationship is paramount to change in young people and can be used to challenge behaviour and attitudes, things to do and issues to address”. (Senior manager)

Practice

However, not only is this ‘voluntary principle’ currently under scrutiny theoretically (see for example Williamson, 2007: 33; Ord, 2009), it is also seen by many in the field as being challenged in practice, particularly by the increasing tendency for young people to be referred to youth work projects by schools because the young people are or might be excluded; by the police because of their anti-social behaviour; by Connexions because they need to be re-engaged in education or employment. (See for example Box 2 below).

Box 2

Working within the constraints of contracts

A requirement for young people to attend a youth centre was written into the contract agreed between the local Youth Service and a local school – an arrangement which the youth worker found highly constraining. The youth centre was open access – available to all young people in an area and with a programme of activities which they themselves largely determined. They and youth workers discussed ideas for this programme and ultimately the young people made their choices... In the process they learnt and applied the ‘soft’ skills of negotiation, persuasion and influencing.

The worker was asked to work with young people on the verge of school exclusion who were required to attend. He could not ask them to leave when they started ‘kicking off’ because the service was contracted to work with them. This, he felt, was undermining his ability to use a key youth work skill – negotiation.

In one service, almost all young people attended open access voluntarily. However, if a youth worker was working with young people referred by a school for alternative education, all those coming might be required to do so. One third of the young people taking part in the local Positive Activities for Young People (PAYP) programme were referrals. The young people on the Princes Trust XL or Entry to Employment (E2E) programmes were also required to attend.

A similar example was offered elsewhere – of a pre-NEET course run by the local Youth Service to which all the young people are referred.

“It’s not a real choice – the alternative is PE! The PRU kids have to come....it has to run as school – there’s a clash of cultures. (In the group work) a lot of the young people don’t want to be there – don’t want to do any work in the group... I’m not doing youth work – it turns me into a teacher”. (Full-time worker)

Such experiences left many workers and managers with doubts:

“(We’re) striving not to lose the youth work ethos (of) voluntary participation. (This) has to be negotiated with others - for example schools”.

The question then became: how to meet the challenge?

One answer, offered by both managers and workers, was to seek to put some distance between the practice and the most overt and controlling aspects of required attendance. In one authority, a clear understanding had been negotiated that youth workers would not be involved in enforcing attendance:

“The Service is not engaged in the coercion aspect even with partner agencies who do (have this responsibility).” (Senior manager)

Given such arrangements another manager was clear that *“... the voluntary relationship still holds... We’re looking at young people’s progression, their personal and social development”.*

In two other situations, however, this line seemed more fudged. In a school-based project, involvement with young people during compulsory school hours was not seen as problematic because the workers took the selected pupils off-site. In the second example, it was agreed with the Youth Offending Team (YOT) that young people could attend a ‘youth work-run’ group as part of their court order as long as the young person had agreed to this – in which case workers would report their non-attendance. Though workers and YOT staff were keen also for young people to engage with Youth Service provision beyond the order, not all took up this option.

Another increasingly common coping mechanism was more deeply embedded in practice. This in effect built in an extra stage in the youth work process, and in particular in the trust-winning relationship-building stage – described by one worker as *“turning reactive into being proactive”.* This additional stage was then used to motivate young people who *“start with various degrees of reluctance”* – to move them from attendance to participation. This approach was illustrated by one specialist worker’s account of a group of young people who over a year moved from resistance, via relationships and treats, to taking part in risky scenarios related to their personal experience. Others who had used it concluded that:

“If the youth workers have a good relationship with the young people, it may not matter it’s not voluntary”. (Senior worker)

“If you want the voluntary relationship you’ve got a long way to go to them before they come back to us.” (Full-time worker)

One school-based project was even able to point to youth worker-run sessions attended by regular truants who immediately bunked off again after they finished!

In these situations, the most skilful youth workers were able to convert a sense of ‘having to be there’ into one of ‘wanting to be there’. By making the activities, relationships and whole experience of being part of the programme so positive, the young person, initially referred and attending because they are compelled to, was choosing to take part on a regular basis.

(b) Starting – and going beyond - where young people are starting

History

(The leader) must study their standards, and exchange her point of view with theirs'. (Montagu, 1954: 24)

... the first object (is) Recreation ... the compelling force which brings members to the clubs... The second object we may call Education, ... The first object in itself leads to the second ... (Russell and Rigby, 1908: 19)

Principles

Especially when working in open access settings, most of the Inquiry's respondents took for granted that their starting points, as well as many of the vehicles they would use to try and move young people beyond these, would be 'recreational'. However broader points of connection were also highlighted when illustrating their strong commitment to being *young people-led, keeping young people at the core*. Moreover, in adopting this approach they saw themselves as needing to be as responsive as possible not only to young people's verbalised expectations but also, and perhaps most often, to ones identified by *listening, believing, understanding* – that is, recognising young people's non-verbal messages on what they might need and want from the contact.

"It's the softly-softly approach... picking up clues and signals".

"You pick up the mood ... when a comment is personal".

Some young people agreed:

"You can actually talk to them; they understand where we're coming from".

This approach to young people was seen by many youth workers, managers and indeed young people as rare, even exceptional – *"adults don't often do that"*. Other services were recognised as having other pressing priorities: getting through a syllabus; ensuring a CV is ready to go with a job application, taking young people through an intensive behaviour modification programme.

Though important in its own right for what it contributes to the overall youth work process – especially for developing trusting relationships with young people – being 'young people-led' was also seen as a means to the crucial educational end of encouraging and supporting young people to go beyond their starting points. One worker began with a caution:

"We should remember that they are young people first, not containers of issues for us to work with them on".

Nonetheless a strong consistent message from both workers and managers was that, with young people's agreement, youth work seeks to respond positively, often proactively, to young people's signals.

"We can take them a little bit further".

"A teachers says: 'This is how it is'. A youth worker says: 'Here are all the possibilities'".

That 'little bit further', those 'possibilities', can of course, take many forms. One is as an activity or activities – indeed, for one worker at least

“(Though) the process is important the product needs to give a sense of achievement – to have real quality... The work needs to have proper closure – not just to drift away”.

Such commitments also enable some Services to claim the positive activities currently being promoted by the government as essentially a youth work tool.

“Our staff are doing youth work not Positive Activities”. (PYO)

However, seeking to prompt young people beyond their starting points can, as workers explained, take more subtle, personalised and challenging forms. For example:

“We work across young people’s own divisions – ... the areas (where they live)”.

“Breaking down barriers – such as tackling racism”.

“If they’re drinking, we give them leaflets or run a game using a stereotyped picture of an alcoholic. We ask: ‘Do you see anything of yourself in that’”.

Attempts to stretch them are one of the elements of the practice which young people welcome:

“They build up your confidence”.

“(I) expect youth workers to challenge me..”

“They have training to get us to achieve the best we can”.

Practice

For sustaining such a practice, one senior youth worker was clear that the goalposts had been moved so much that he faced a choice: young people-led versus target-led. Much of this pressure was again coming from expectations or requirements to re-engage disenchanted school students or ‘NEET’ young people, reduce anti-social behaviour or combat illegal drug use. Outcomes were therefore seen, particularly by field staff, as set (often rigidly) in advance by the policy-makers.

“There’s a hierarchy from the Council Youth Service and Council targets which mean ... it’s top to bottom not the other way round.

It’s not about tailor-making responses to need....”

What added to the frustrations of a number of workers here, and of some managers, was that such work was often led by the money available rather than by young people’s needs. Not only did this pre-determine the focus of the work – including that of detached workers - to the point sometimes of naming the individuals who were to participate, it also in effect (indeed sometimes explicitly) set quite specific curricula, decided well in advance of any individual young person or group having been met.

Such projects were also seen as feeding other services’ and professionals’ limited understanding of youth work whose flexibility leads to unrealistic expectations of what it can achieve. The result, in the view of one team leader, was *diversion from the role*.

(c) Building relationships

History

... whenever a man devotes his evenings to gathering a few lads about him with the desire of being their friend, there we have an embryo club. (Russell & Rigby, 1908: 13)

... the basis of real friendship is the personal relationship... The head of the club must ... get to know and to understand really well every individual member. He must have it felt that he is their friend and their servant. (Henriques, 1933: 10, 90)

Principles

Of all the clichés used by youth workers to describe what is distinctive about their work “it’s the relationships, stupid” is perhaps the most common. And certainly this relationship-building was emphasised repeatedly during the Inquiry. However, these generalisations, and particularly what goes into developing and sustaining young people’s willingness to have youth workers in their lives, were given some important glosses.

For one thing, relationships are not seen as happening through absence of mind because, as one worker put it:

“You have to win their trust”.

Another essential was to make “it ... fun first, (to) get the relationships going”. And while listening, hearing and being respectful, workers also needed to:

“... be friendly and non-judgemental”

“... never stigmatising”

“... make them (the young people) feel safe”

“... set and maintain boundaries”.

As one principal officer insisted, “outcomes are a result of this – we need to hang on to that and not get cloned”.

Some young people, articulating what is required here, often confirmed what workers and managers were saying:

“They are more fun “

“They give you respect”.

“They treat you like adults”.

“They make sure everyone’s safe...”

“J... helps us and we trust her. She’s funny but she can be strict and serious too...”

Practice

This process of building personal relationships with young people is coming under pressure from a number of sources. One, mentioned above and recently confirmed as a national problem by the Audit Commission (2009), is the short-term nature of so much of the funding on which youth work now has to rely –

“There is so much short-termism”. (Full-time worker)

“One-off 12-month projects – they’re more about PR”. (Worker-in-training)

Indeed, what was described in a number of authorities were projects – again including detached work projects – which, in some cases, required workers within six months to go through a complete youth work process, from first encounter with alienated young people via the establishment of mutual trust, respect and rapport to measurable, often ‘hard’, outcomes.

Current pressures on relationship-building also stem from the expectation that youth workers will participate more fully in the procedures of the new integrated services. Efforts are clearly being made to resist these pressures:

“Youth workers (should) not become ... the lead professional, (this is the) exception rather than rule”. (PYO)

Elsewhere however, this is happening, particularly where (as in Box 3 below) workers are required to use the Common Assessment Framework (CAF). Introduced as a key part of *Every Child Matters*, this is a standardised approach to assessing a child's additional needs and deciding how these should be met, to be used by practitioners across children's services in England.

Box 3

One-to-one scenario: one full-time youth worker's experience

Jane, a youth centre member known to social services, began to talk about her problems to Mary, the full-time youth worker. Mary decided she needed to 'take the situation to a CAF'. With Jane's social worker on long-term sick leave, Mary found herself (*informally*) as lead worker, including taking on the child protection issues. Though Mary did not want to insist Jane came to the centre – "*I've managed it so far so it doesn't impact on the relationship*" – this was made compulsory. Jane now turns up at all times expecting Mary to give her forms of support which she feels are not within her role:

"We're trained for the lead professional role, but where does it fit in? We don't have the time. We're traditionally group workers. One-to-one is not our focus".

A related pressure mentioned more than once, sometimes in a quite matter-of-fact way, was for youth workers to work with families:

"There's more expectations that we'll work with parents – through CAFs". (Senior manager)...

targeted youth support begins with engaging young people and their families in services". (Senior manager)

Yet reservations about these expectations exist amongst workers:

"We don't work with parents. CAFs involve the whole family. Young people don't want us to (do that)"- and were also indirectly registered by a young person:

"Youth workers are more confidential. They keep it to themselves, not share it with our families".

However, it was the growing pressure on all professionals to disclose and share personal information on young people which many respondents saw as potentially most damaging to the distinctively youth work relationship with young people. Indeed, expectations here seem certain to harden as the government rolls out nationally its ContactPoint project requiring all professionals working with young people at risk to put their personal details on a shared database. (See DCSF, 2009). Driven by the government's wider commitment to providing earlier and more effective protection for the most vulnerable children, the project has nonetheless been strongly criticised by an independent study for seriously threatening young people's privacy and confidentiality (Anderson et al, 2009)

Precisely because of their informal roles and relationships with young people, youth workers often gain important intelligence and insights unavailable to other professionals. The latter may well on occasions need this information if they are to keep young people

safe, and enable them to achieve and progress through education and training into employment. The dilemmas here for youth workers therefore can be acute, particularly when those other professionals have an enforcing role with young people. Indeed, as the example set out in Box 10 shows (page 45), such information-sharing with other professionals who do not fully understand the youth work role or approach, can on occasions have damaging personal as well as professional consequences for youth workers operating in local community contexts.

Many of youth workers' current concerns focus on their lack of reciprocity:

"We worry about ... reporting back to other agencies and services when they do not report back to us – for example CAMHS are very secretive with the information they hold".

Though often only in passing or when prompted, others however, raised much more fundamental ethical issues which were posing them (and perhaps especially detached workers) some acute dilemmas. These, as a minimum, included how to ensure young people are giving informed consent to sharing their personal details; whether information shared by a young person should be passed on to others; and, how to protect the very relationships through which this information has been acquired, based as they are, as we saw above, on an often implicit assumption of confidentiality.

In some circumstances none of this need be a problem – for example, where a young person has asked 'their' youth worker to attend their case conference. In some places difficulties are minimised by agreeing certain principles and conditions. When meeting a group for the first time, for example, workers in one authority would accept general information on its history and dynamics but not detailed individual case notes.

"We don't want our attitude biased by too much prior information."

Elsewhere, workers were able to resist pressures to pass on information themselves by explaining that the young person had not agreed to this:

"We disclose information about young people only if young people consent. ... it's a judgement call. We tend to give agencies the minimum information – simply saying that the young person is being supported".

"There is no problem for a youth worker not disclosing if it is explained to the enquiring agency that the young person doesn't want the information shared."

However, because the requirement that young people provide personal information as a condition for engagement could affect relationships with the youth workers, one worker concluded that out-and-out resistance was the only option:

"I am actively encouraging young people to go against the system. I say here's a form; please don't sign it. The information goes on a data base and is widely accessible... I say 'the young person says I can't share that'".

(d) Participation

History

... a girls' committee ... is a very important element of a girls' club. (Stanley, 1890: 60)

A few boys' clubs place great reliance on the principle of self-government by the members. (Russell and Rigby: 85)

Principles

Practitioners and managers repeatedly and spontaneously identified *enabling the voice of young people - for them to be equal stakeholders* as a core element of their practice. Often this was illustrated by reference to specific 'participation' projects – a young people's 'Question Time' session with local councillors, or a young people group's with £40k to commission summer activities. Indeed often it was assumed that responsibility for fulfilling the participation commitment was mainly (even perhaps wholly) located in such projects, and in the specialist posts attached to them.

Elsewhere however this commitment was recognised as flowing more organically from everyday practice:

"At the heart of our service is involvement so that young people can make decisions about their lives". (Senior manager)

And one worker talked vehemently about

"... getting the young people involved in interviews for the full-time worker. They spent two hours training in interview skills ... and all asked the candidates questions".

This more integrated approach to participation was often rooted in two of the other youth work commitments: a youth-led form of practice and young people's voluntary participation. The former, as we have seen above, by assuming that *a youth worker (would) follow young people's lead ...*, starts from an acknowledgement of the young person's right to shape the youth work relationship and what comes out of it. The latter, it was suggested, carries within it a more equal balance of power between provider and young person than exists in most professional encounters, resulting in *horizontal relationships – young people to youth worker – a negotiated relationship.* (Full-time worker)

Confirmation of the importance of this power balance again came from some young people:

"It was not just a one-way street. (The worker) had power but there was never a power imbalance."

Practice

Overall, respondents were most optimistic about being able to act on this commitment to empowerment, seeing many of the current policy drivers as giving some support and indeed validation to it. Indeed, often, they felt they were being turned into experts as other services coming fresh to this requirement, found themselves under increasing pressure to meet it:

"... the participation work (we do) for school councils and democracy week ... they are respecting us for this". (PYO)

Many also identified new resources for developing this practice, particularly with the arrival of the Youth Opportunity (YOF) and Youth Capital Funds (YCF):

“YOF is a good example of youth work – giving young people the funds to do what they’ve planned ... giving them ownership...” (Senior manager)

New structures were also seen to be opening up new opportunities – not only local youth councils and cabinets but also the formal and informal linking of these into wider decision-making procedures locally and nationally through the Youth Parliament.

Even here, however, reactions to the wider policy priorities were not entirely positive. Reservations were expressed about how some (local) politicians or other professionals understood the concept of participation – limiting their interpretation of it, for example, to consultation.

“There have been difficulties ... bringing other services and organisations along with (a Youth Service) model – they tend to see it as a bit ‘scary’.” (Senior manager)

Concerns also emerged that other services were riding on the back of youth work to meet their targets for participation without crediting youth workers for what had been done.

(e) Working with and through young people’s peer groups

History

The sitting room attracted those girls who did not belong to classes ... with its few chairs and its large crowd of young people chatting loudly, sitting on the table, or on the floor, on the sides of chairs, and telling their experiences and giving vent to their opinions. (Montagu, 1954: 72-3)

Real pals ... are generally keen and even insist on sticking together. It is not uncommon for a boy to refuse to join the club unless his friend is also taken in. (Henriques, 1933: 46)

Principles

Only a small number of managers and workers made explicit and spontaneous reference to the informal ‘on-the-wing’ work with groups which has been at the heart of youth work since its inception, or indeed even to more structured forms of group work:

“Youth workers can work with these naturally-formed groups”.

“Others are good at one to one – youth workers are good at group work...”

“The kernel is group work”.

“I can change things when I’m working with groups”.

One worker’s vignette of practice focused entirely on a ‘treat’ outing in which the young people *talked socially and supported each other.*

Practice

Indeed, the clearest endorsements of work with groups as a key identifying feature of youth work came more implicitly, in comments on recent moves towards what was often specifically called ‘casework’. This, moreover, was being described as more structured than the one-to-one support which has long been a feature of youth work, especially as an extension of relationships developed in informal group situations.

Evidence of this development can be found in some of the material already presented – for example in the discussion on the rebalancing of provision from open access to targeted (see section 4.2, page 12), in the practice example presented in Box 3, page 18, and in workers’ concerns about the emerging information-sharing arrangements. However, not only were some respondents quite explicit that these shifts were taking place:

“Work with schools is based on group work but the casework approach is a significant element”. (Full-time worker)

“We do more one-to-one casework than we used to ... “ (Senior manager)

One PYO gave a detailed illustration of how it is occurring when describing a youth work personal adviser’s use of APIR (an assessment tool) to assess a young person’s needs. This led to work with the young person on an action plan to decide appropriate intervention and eventually to the worker referring the ‘case’ back to a generic personal adviser.

(f) Relating to young people in their community contexts

History

... it was not until ... the ruffianism of youths had reached such a pitch as to become an absolute danger to the community that ... men who had the welfare of their city and country ... began to cast around for some means of checking so alarming a development.. (Russell and Rigby, 1908, 9)

The environment of many of the boys is perhaps the greatest obstacle. The boys in a slum district simply do not have a chance. (Henriques, 1933, 10)

Principles:

In response to prompts designed to get workers and managers to identify what were for them the defining and distinguishing features of youth work practice, explicit attention to the community contexts of the work was most noticeable by its absence.

Practice:

However in discussing the actual implementation of policy, one principal officer did specifically highlight the service’s contribution to the authority’s neighbourhood renewal programmes. A team leader in another authority talked of *“making contact with young people in community settings: we’ve made a conscious decision to focus the project where they are at”*; while detached workers particularly often at least implied a high level of awareness of the community contexts in which they were working.

(g) Working with young people’s ‘here and now’ – and with their transitions

History

... a club could never be much of a service to a rough district unless it made arrangements ... for pleasures most boys could not otherwise obtain... (Their) lost childhood has to be regained for them ... (Russell and Rigby: 19)

The years between twelve and twenty will decide whether each individual is to become a valuable asset to his country ... or a worthless parasite... Multiplied by hundreds of thousand it is the decision upon which the future of England rests. (Russell and Rigby: 6)

Principles:

One of the Inquiry's aims was to explore the balance in youth workers' focus on young people's here-and-now – on the tasks and concerns which they face and wish to deal with in the present; and their transition into adult roles and responsibilities. A hidden agenda item for the Inquiry was whether the current strong policy emphases on 'effective transitions' (see for example Margo and Dixon, 2006) might be marginalising or even blocking youth workers' attention to young people's "'being' as well as 'becoming'... the quality of (their) present as well as preparing for the future." (See Williamson, 2008: 68).

Though specific reflection on these questions was sought in only two authorities, evidence on them emerged elsewhere, including from workers' practice vignettes.

Practice: Dealing with young people's here-and-now

For some workers the here-and-now is an important focus – in particular for ensuring the youth work experience was pleasurable and relaxing even while striving to make it developmental:

"... letting young people play and take risks; encourage(ing) them to explore things for themselves"

"... enabling young people to socialise either through play or education";

Young people, too, picked out as valued gains:

"(The) food, relationships, youth workers, trips".

"Going away on residential and having a laugh"

However attention to the here-and-now could have more far-reaching connotations. It could mean 'hanging in there' through a long testing-out process (see Boxes 4 and 5 below) and then attending to a young person's emotional well being; or giving them access to someone to talk to or responding to a basic physical need like hunger.

Box 4

Staying with the here-and-now – then moving on: a worker's account

A nervous young woman walked into a counselling drop-in. Silent for a while, she took a deep breath and said a friend had suggested she come. Producing a piece of paper she proceeded to interrogate the worker: who ran the service; was it confidential; would she ever be made to come? She was asked no questions, not even her name - just given the information she wanted. She left saying she might come back – which, over the next few weeks, she did two or three times, on each occasion going through the same process of asking questions, giving nothing away about herself, with no commitment offered or sought. One day she arrived and just asked to see the counsellor.

Box 5

Staying with the here-and-now – then moving on: a worker's account

It became clear that one young man was responsible for the serious damage being done to a new community building – particularly removing planks from the outside decking. Though he was known to the youth worker, she had no relationship with him and, when accused by other young people, he was clearly ready for a confrontation. Other agencies using the building were pressing for the police to be called.

One evening the worker found an opportunity to sit next to him. Though he was in a foul mood, when she asked him what he was interested in he talked about BMX-ing and eventually admitted he was taking the wood to build ramps for his bike. When it emerged that he always came to the club hungry, the worker drew him into a cooking group. Months later, when none of the young people turned up who were due to present a YOF bid, she asked him if he would do it with her. He agreed but insisted on going home first to change into smarter clothes.

Other young people offered sometimes moving evidence of such a focus. A young man who had been a carer when he first met the youth worker talked of

“attending the youth club was a break, time for myself without worries”.

Another:

“was able to share stuff with the workers about myself where I felt ... that I mattered to someone. They helped me get in touch with my feelings”.

Other examples included dealing with an eating disorder and an excluded young person who had learned how to make friends. As one of these young people put it, youth work was

“my way of trying to improve my life; not focused on my school work but on me”.

Practice: Supporting young people's transitions

Equally convincing examples were offered too, however, of youth work's contribution to young people's transitions which, no doubt, could be replicated across the country: of a 19 year old young woman with two children who is now doing an NVQ and of a boy who, having dropped out of school, is now back in full-time education. 'Moving on' might mean something quite short-term – for example providing a safe place where excluded young people can do their college work. Or, as some workers made clear, it might represent some much longer-term:

“...encourag(ing) young people to become well-rounded citizens, raise their aspirations and ... achieve things they might otherwise not have achieved”.

“...encourag(ing) young people to develop skills they carry ... into adulthood”.

Indeed, many of workers' practice examples – particularly of targeted work with more alienated young people – were substantially built around 'transition' objectives.

Practice: From the here-and-now to transitions

In addressing these areas of young people's experience, some workers were constrained by the policy pressures to be 'doing to' young people. Nonetheless, where they explicitly considered it, they found it difficult to separate in any meaningful way working with young people within their here-and-now from helping them to move towards future possibilities. Repeatedly, it became clear, the strength of the relationships developed during the work done on here-and-now issues acted as a platform for convincing young people to accept practical, social and emotional support and encouragement for moving on:

"The present holds the future in it too in every interaction".

"(Working on a six-week 'NEET programme') if you only focused on the destination it wouldn't start. It has to get them out of bed".

Two personal case histories (Boxes 6 and 7), provided by the young people themselves, capture something of this chicken-and-egg relationship.

Box 6

Staying with the here-and-now – then moving on: a young woman's account

L was doing well at school but her academic work gave her only limited satisfaction. When she was 12, a teacher pointed her towards the UK Youth Parliament, which brought her into contact with a youth worker. She went on to become a volunteer, taking part in the local authority's representative structures for young people; got involved in a range of activities while at school; and when she went to college. Though bullied at school

"... in the Youth Service you are a person, you are valued for who you are. You are in a safe environment, you acquire confidence and can write a new script for yourself".

Box 7

Staying with the here-and-now – then moving on: a young man's account

Though M also *could always do stuff at school* he became involved with the 'wrong' crowd and got caught up in drinking and drugs and hanging round the park in the evening. Though not sure why, he agreed to go on a Youth Service residential where for the first time

"I found a place where I felt I was important... These were adults who wanted to know me... ...I had a sense of being valued".

He later joined a peer education group working in different clubs and projects around the town and had been accepted onto a university youth and community work course.

5. Hitting the targets

This section examines an element of the current policy regime – the requirement that workers and managers meet a range of pre-set targets – which both saw as having the most pervasive effects on their practice and which attracted some of their most searching (and often critical) attention. It focuses first on respondents' overall reactions to dealing with targets and then in greater depth examines their experiences and views on those set for achieving recorded and accredited outcomes.

5.1 Working in a target-driven environment

Some respondents apparently regarded targets and the head-counting which goes with them as normal. Indeed despite the constraints, some – again particularly managers – argued that targets, far from getting in the way of youth work providing for young people in relevant ways, have been a positive development for youth work:

“Performance targets have been saviours of us given our past history of failure. We need to evidence, not just deliver”.

“(We are in a) strong position to survive as workers can articulate the work and its outcomes ...”.

“...they give us a focus – before we did whatever we did”.

“The current agenda has helped extend youth work beyond building relationships – identifying why we're doing a piece of work. Now we can answer questions about how to measure the work...”

Others, though less enthusiastic, seemed determined to make virtue out of necessity - or perhaps to play down their impact:

“The only target of concern is the number of young people worked with across the year”.

Where there were criticisms, they were sometimes focused, particularly by workers, on how the targets were being implemented and used:

“It's a stick to hit you with if you don't quite do it...”

However, many of the criticisms of this target-driven culture went deeper, and were at times fierce. As local youth services have been required to be more accountable and conform to the disciplines of performance management, and as targets and annual plans have come to determine activities and interventions, many expressed fears that the pursuit of targets was coming to dominate the work. Within this the risk was identified of valuing only what could be measured because measuring what is valued was difficult. In effect these workers and managers were asking: how do you count confidence, compassion, citizenship and the other outcomes on which youth workers put such emphasis?

Targets were also seen as reducing workers' flexibility, in the process removing one of youth work's salient features – the discretion of the practitioner in a face-to-face relationship with the young person. As one youth worker said,

“We are not proactive any more....the work is becoming too prescriptive..... in earlier days we were professional but did not have to be accountable in the paper-based, number-crunching ways we are now....managers are being driven by the targets....you can't win. If you go out and get a group to work well, then they move you on. I think that's when we're letting young people down”.

The results for some, especially workers, were shallower relationships and diversions from the deepening of trust with young people - so often the pre-requisite for a young person finding the confidence to try out new activities, develop new relationships and seek and accept the depth of support they might need. In these circumstances, too, it was perhaps not surprising that one principal officer reported that, as *"the Youth Service had become quite REYS-driven"* and every centre was expected to deliver sessions on sex and drugs, young people, too, were beginning to comment on the youth workers' preoccupation with targets.

The overriding fear here, frequently voiced by field staff, was that an obsession with targets was driving out quality by refocusing the practice:

"It's outcomes-led, way above our heads."

"Consulting with young people – is really a pretence; we know we have to meet targets of the county and the government".

"... It's not about tailor-making responses to need, about organically developing relationships".

"The expectation is that activities in sessions will have clear results.... Young people say they don't want an extension to school".

"(We're) being challenged by other agencies and led by targets – rather than being led by what young people want..."

Strikingly, managers from the small number of voluntary organisations who contributed to the Inquiry echoed such reservations, often unprompted. In one case they gave a sharp insight into how the demands of the statutory sector were reshaping what the voluntary sector was doing:

"The Authority seems more concerned with statistics than quality".

"We now need a lot more stats.....including recorded outcomes. Before it was very general... Filling in the (monitoring) form bites into the time to talk to young people and the workers about their concerns... Clubs are suspicious about somebody jotting down numbers. They see it as a reporting process"

5.2 Recorded and accredited outcomes

(a) Those against ...

Particularly amongst workers unhappy to be so preoccupied with targets, their discomfort was often most specifically focused on those set for recorded and accredited outcomes and the 'number-crunching' these involved:

"Everything needs to be accredited".

"Recorded outcomes have just been blanketed across the board".

"Accreditation is ... more negative than positive. The numbers are published".

"The emphasis is put on numbers (500 accreditations); nobody seems to care about the quality of youth work behind it".

Concerns were expressed specifically that focusing on these targets might exclude some young people including ones who are high priority for youth workers:

"A lot of young people are just not interested (in accreditation)". (Full-time worker)

"...accreditation prevents some young people from attending – they associate it with school". (Full-time worker)

“Maybe trying to achieve accredited outcomes competes with seeking to work with the hardest to reach”. (Full-time worker)

These views were echoed sometimes by young people:

“School is a pressure. Family is a pressure. I don’t want my youth worker to do the same with me”.

Underlying these concerns, too, was sometimes a resentment that, as a minimum, accreditation was taking time away from what workers saw as their core tasks as youth workers:

“(In a grant-giving group) It can mean some switch off from the group ... None of us have the time to do it ... It’s an addition to the practice - it doesn’t flow. We were in the office one night at 9.30pm trying to finish it off”. (Full-time worker)

Above all, however, were fears that the very process and intent of youth work was being compromised:

“Young people don’t come to be fitted into our peg holes. We have to fit them into whatever holes we have to fill”. (Full-time worker)

“If you’re not careful accreditation takes over the programme”. (Full-time worker)

“It seems achievements are not valued without certificates”. (Senior youth worker)

“Capturing very soft outcomes is a challenge”. (Full-time worker)

“Young people are learning stuff that can be accredited, but in the past they were learning soft skills like negotiation(which) are being devalued.” (Full-time worker)

(b) ... and those in favour

Nonetheless, the expectation that youth workers would create opportunities for young people to achieve recorded and accredited outcomes attracted considerable support, to the point where in some authorities, staff seemed now to be treating it as a given part of their work. Two significant caveats were sometimes added here. One was that at least as much prominence needed to be given to recorded as to accredited outcomes, not least because achieving these could mesh more comfortably with the youth work process overall. Secondly, these respondents asserted that the whole commitment needed to be underpinned by appropriate training.

Important rationales for this support were that *“aiming for accreditation has given direction”* and that this in itself offered important potential ‘political’ gains – as when in one authority a cabinet lead commented that youth work had been ‘beefed up’ by accreditation, resulting in less work *“at the sloppy end of empowerment”*.

Perhaps the strongest motivating factor, however, was that many young people, especially those who were gaining few formal qualifications by other routes, welcomed the opportunity to ‘get a piece of paper’ – something which not just workers (*“Shouldn’t young people have the chance of a recorded outcome?”*) but also young people confirmed more than once:

“Accreditation – they help you to get the evidence... It’s an opportunity to grab with both hands”.

“They are helping us get qualifications”.

“It looks good on your CV”.

For some staff this view was reinforced by their experience of using the process of analysing and recording young people's experience to enhance their learning:

"There is nothing intrinsically wrong with encouraging them to think about their achievements". (Full-time worker)

"Every opportunity is a learning opportunity ... we can pick up on things other people can't". (Team leader)

(c) Choices, dilemmas – and conflicts

However, youth workers' own motivation for encouraging young people down paths towards accreditation seemed to have as much bearing on their practice as policy and management requirements. Though sometimes entailing a struggle in the workers' minds and in the practice itself, what they and their managers – and indeed some young people – saw as helping was a practice process which allowed the accreditation to flow 'organically' from on-going work with the young people:

:

"It's about ... how much you want to do the youth work. You find the way to do what is really important to you and meets the needs of young people."

As a minimum, it was widely accepted, this process needed to include:

- Selecting an award scheme appropriate to local circumstances – even designing one which is tailor-made:
"Sometimes the Youth Achievement Awards or the Duke of Edinburgh Award works but we made a pragmatic decision to develop our own nationally recognised accrediting system as it simplified things". (Senior manager)
- Making accreditation a genuine choice for young people:
"It's offered – they say: 'It's up to you'". (Young person)
"Accreditation (being) done in a fun way – using other skills than academic..." (Full-time worker)
- Starting at the level the young people were starting:
"You fit the paperwork into their achievement". (Full-time worker)

However, one discussion – indeed, sharp debate – amongst a group of full-time workers revealed that the embrace of accreditation could be based on propositions which, for different reasons, made other colleagues uncomfortable:

"Some young people don't know they're doing it".

"Young people can get outcomes just by being there..."

"Young people didn't realise they were being 'entered for their awards' because the youth workers always focus on what the young people want".

"We have to not let the young people know they're working towards accredited outcomes, so they're more willing to do the work.....they've been in school all day and don't want more paper work.....but they like getting the certificates in the end."

For some – particularly workers already sceptical about accreditation – such 'education by stealth' raised serious questions, some essentially ethical. For example, if young people didn't know they were participating, were they making genuinely informed choices? Or, how in such circumstances could they be achieving conscious learning?

At the same time staff committed to using accreditation could also be dismayed, indeed angered and even insulted by what they saw as colleagues just 'playing the game' – merely ticking boxes. They too sometimes questioned whether the approach was in young people's interests.

Though in some services sometimes serious tensions between management and workers' realities clearly existed, evidence emerged that in others youth workers' attitudes towards accreditation had changed. This seemed especially true where an overall accreditation strategy had been developed, underpinned by a clear management steer, an openness to at times challenging personal and professional learning and a responsiveness to field experience. Here, having initially seen accreditation as threatening to well-established principles of 'open' youth work, a number of full-time workers had come to take a more pragmatic approach:

"As a service we saw that it was nowhere near reaching its targets and that we shouldn't worry about it. 'It is the quality of the outcomes that matters, not the quantity'. Accredited and recorded outcomes must ... be 'part of the offer'".

"Accreditation shouldn't drag the agenda. There are activities that don't lend themselves to accreditation say when you have 30-40 young people in a centre".

"There are a variety of forms of work in the Service so we're able to tick all the boxes. The managers make sure all corners are covered".

"We have to be creative around the agendas that come down from above".

In one authority where management and field perspectives seemed much closer than in some others, workers and managers reflected on their 'accreditation journey'. This had been fuelled by the head of service's proposition, quoted earlier, that *"when the government throws us another initiative we think: 'OK, how can we do it?' We don't prostitute ourselves"*. The Service had then, according to one team leader, started from a situation in which

"... the tail (was) wagging the dog on accreditation. Each staff member had individual targets. People set up projects to get the targets rather than setting up a journey that may lead to them"

Now, one worker concluded:

"I don't look at accreditation as a scary monster – everything we can do can lead to accreditation".

As another worker put it after acknowledging the resistance and indeed anger of some of the young people involved:

"... it is about creating a culture. It's about the ability to change, move, adapt, find in there what you want to do and do the job. They are not mutually exclusive (accreditation and youth work) you can find a way."

And, though one colleague very explicitly continued to distance herself from this view, three of this Service's other full-time workers agreed that:

"We will get better and more skilful at finding accreditation more meaningful to young people".

(d) Targets and outcomes: the balance sheet

Targets and their expression as accredited and recorded outcomes are policy-makers' ways of checking how providers are performing. In what they see, or have defined, as a

competitive market, those who fund and then manage the work are determined to know whether, where and how the investment of tax-payers' money is yielding the dividends they have decided are needed – to the point where in some cases youth workers are each being assigned a personal target.

But what is this dividend? At a time when such target setting and all its attendant detailed data recording is being questioned within medical care, social work and teaching, can the outcomes of a practice like youth work be quantified in these ways? If so, in youth work, where within these policy frameworks do the needs of the young people as they define them fit – and the capacity and capability of youth workers to respond to them? And, though now a widely shared position, may this not in fact be a classic example of confusing ends with means? For what purpose are young people being encouraged (even required) to get engaged? And, without legitimating the time needed to build and sustain relationships of trust and mutual regard, how will young people achieve the outcomes specified in *Every Child Matters*?

In some services the balance of responses to these kinds of questions was generally positive. Young people themselves also offered evidence of having been given opportunities to achieve without having to do too much 'hard work', including progressing via accreditation routes from being a user of youth work to volunteer and then part-time youth worker. One head of service was not too concerned that the Service was not achieving the targets. Here, it was the quality of the outcomes that mattered, not the quantity: whether accredited or recorded, they were not to be forced on young people but regarded as 'part of the offer'.

Other reactions however were, at the very least, more ambivalent. This was well illustrated by the acknowledgement within the group of full-time workers referred to earlier that some of them were just 'playing the game' on accredited outcomes. This was seen as cynical 'box-ticking' by some colleagues who were taking targets for accredited and recorded outcomes seriously and who had found ways of making the processes involved work for young people.

Elsewhere negative reactions to the obsession with numbers were much harder, including one head of service who had acknowledged that her only target of concern was the number of young people worked with across the year - though this, it should be added, was apparently seen as the measure of what had made this a successful service producing "*incredible*" results.

Field dissatisfaction was often particularly strong, especially amongst detached workers. Whereas for them, it was said, youth work was once concerned principally with "*organically developing relationships*" with young people, now numbers seemed to be all as each night they are sent out to make contact with twenty young people:

"When we're talking with just four young people we have to run off.....once it was about building relationships – why move on?" (Full-time detached worker)

Part-time youth support workers, too, could seem seriously demotivated by the target culture, claiming that at their level its dilemmas were felt most acutely. They talked of pressure to get the numbers through and of crude counting and measuring by managers interested only in outcomes often unconnected with their practice – or young people's everyday realities. Part-timers also felt that they were inadequately resourced to meet these requirements especially given that - as their full-time colleagues in a number of

services told us – most were working for less pay than they could have earned standing at a supermarket checkout.

Evidence from the Inquiry thus suggests that in recent years policy-makers have in a variety of ways significantly bent the purpose and style of youth work through the imposition of targets, not least by moving the goalposts. Thus BVPIs have now been removed, to be replaced by a different key indicator for service providers: an increase in young people's participation in 'positive activities' as laid down by Public Service Agreement 14, 'Young People on the road to success' (see DCSF, 2007b). Though now required to count something different, youth work managers and practitioners are clearly still going to need to have their calculators at the ready for some time to come.

6. Towards integrated working

6.1 From partnership-working to integrated services

Youth work practitioners providing support and development opportunities for young people have long worked alongside other professionals - teachers, health practitioners such as nurses and drugs workers, youth justice workers, Connexions personal advisers. Their contributions have been widely valued – particularly their ability to get alongside young people who reject or avoid other services, build and sustain relationships with them and respond flexibly. Often these other professionals are constrained from using such approaches by statutory duties or pre-set curricula.

Given how many young people slip through the net of service provision and end up excluded from opportunities available to their peers, this requirement for collaborative working can clearly be crucial. Most recently the duty to co-operate has originated in the occasional but tragic instances of child abuse in which a local authority and its partners have been seen to fail to safeguard vulnerable children. This has proved to be one of the 'wicked issues' confronting public services to which joined up working is proffered as the most sensible and progressive solution. Where a young person's problems are connected by threads of poverty, deprivation, low aspirations and educational under-achievement, poor health, petty crime and family breakdown which each draw in practitioners from different professional backgrounds, clearly solutions also need to strive to be connected. Policy thus now requires professionals to share resources, information and skills in order to agree and implement interventions for keeping young people safe from harm, at lower risk levels and providing them with the support and development opportunities they need.

Within these partnership scenarios youth workers have in some places increasingly been seen as key players. This is often because their work is rooted in communities and derived from a commitment to work alongside young people and from their agenda. Traditionally regarded as the service able to get to the young people other services cannot reach, they have consequently been treated by other professionals with a combination of admiration and suspicion.

Such ambivalent responses perhaps demonstrate that partnership-working, though now often invoked as a mantra, it is not a panacea. Like all such human endeavours, it has inbuilt weaknesses – not least inward-turning organisational cultures and historic inter-agency rivalries which are liable to generate unhelpful forms of empire-building. These may not only be resented by other services. Much more seriously, as one senior worker sought to illustrate, they can be damaging to what is actually offered to service users:

“The meaning of youth work is being diluted...because all sorts of people are doing ‘youth work’ – for example, the community police are setting up youth clubs with little training or support... They put some volunteers there and it’s just containment, getting young people off the streets, so the older ones get bored and leave ... and it collapsed... The junior club survived because parents supported it, but it’s entertainment rather than youth work in the sense of challenge”.

As well as negotiation from above, therefore, partnership-working demands sustained personal and professional effort from below. Once in operation, managerial and practitioner eyes have to be kept firmly on the intended beneficiary: not on smoother, sweeter agency relationships for their own sake but the young person. When this question of 'in whose interest?' is authentically embraced, tension or even confrontation with a 'partner' may arise, indeed be essential. (See Box 8, below). Such tensions seem

particularly likely where, as in some instances described during the Inquiry, the chase after money can distort how young people are approached and treated.

Box 8

Conflicting perspectives on partnership-working

I've had battles with management. On E2E there was a young person who a housing association was making homeless (for £200). I wanted to work with them to devise a payment plan... It was: 'Who are you?' 'I'm a youth worker.' 'Well. We don't think this is the way to go... We're going to serve notice.'... The young person wasn't working so it was really hard for them to contribute... The housing association weren't about solutions – they just wanted to get rid of it.

I rang the office and said maybe we should pay the £200. I was told this was unprofessional... I was not suggesting anything unprofessional. I question whether our responsibility is to the housing association or to the young person. Management maybe have lost the way on that sort of thing.

Such experiences illuminate how partnership, far from being a static structure, is made up of dynamic relationships within which friction is always a possibility and therefore requires constant vigilance. As one youth worker put it, with feeling:

"The emphasis on partnerships is a great idea but not everybody wants to do it. People pretend they do. On a paper audit it looks like they did. It's a great slog and energy consuming."

For partnership-working to achieve its aims, clarity about the distinctive contributions of the participating agencies, including youth work, is paramount, as one senior manager explained:

"... a lot of what we do is linked in to key partners – parish council, police, Youth Offending Team. We make (those links) by revisiting core principles because partners have to be clear and we have to be clear what we are bringing ... otherwise we lose the reason for coming together".

This kind of clarity can also head off the problems which result from ill-defined boundaries and allocations of responsibility for leading and carrying out the practice.

Clearly, if services are to ensure that young people do not fall through the gaps of provision, perhaps with life-diminishing consequences, such carefully structured and managed cross-agency relationships are essential. However, what is in process currently to bring this about – in effect, merging all youth support services including targeted youth support - aims to go well beyond mere partnership-working. For one senior manager:

(The move to) IYSS is strategically catching up with what's happening on the ground."

The local authorities we visited were at different stages in this still developing process from partnership-working to integration. Some had not moved beyond strengthening partnership arrangements – for example, between youth workers and personal advisers.

At the other extreme, some had already at least piloted the co-location of youth workers within multi-agency teams. The patchiness of this movement towards integration is reflected in the range of evidence we gathered on this key element of the Inquiry.

6.2 The youth work response: embracing integration

How then are youth workers and their managers faring in the current policy climate as policies and structures are being put in place to break down departmental boundaries ('silos') and test new collaborative arrangements? What differences are these changes making to practice – particularly to the core features of that practice identified by our respondents?

In one youth service the managers reported that their staff's interventions had always extended beyond youth work to include counselling and mentoring focused more on individuals than on groups of young people. Embracing a wider range of professional perspectives and skills was therefore nothing new. In another, closer alignment rather than full integration was favoured, with the service taking a 'slow and measured' approach with no plan to restructure, deconstruct or reconstruct. Rather, the youth service was concentrating on in effect extending partnerships (for example with Connexions and the youth offending service) to provide a better overall response.

Other services however were in effect 'seizing the day'. In one where proposals to join up youth workers and Connexions personal advisers had been anticipated with some foreboding five years earlier, enough common ground had been found for a manager to be able to say: *"We can now celebrate what brings us together without compromising the values of social education"*. The head of another service reported similar initial reservations about the *Every Child Matters* agenda which, as the service began to respond and contribute to a range of different expectations, was seen as potentially threatening to youth work goals. However:

"... the balance changed as we moved from locally focused to city-wide focuses. We knew where we fitted in partnership work – a key strength. That's kept up our profile. We can argue for the unique approach of the youth worker."

In the same service youth work staff who were members of a pilot area support team pointed to improved services for young people as they came to utilise the greater mix of skills that integration offered - *"we can open many doors"*. As a result young people's needs were being more appropriately met as practice and provision became more visible and accountable.

"Most support is delivered to young people in schools. We are helpful in linking up the schools and neighbourhood agendas.....we used to have a culture that emphasised differences between services; we now recognise the similarities we share". (Senior manager)

In another authority a youth worker also talked of more open and transparent relations and more permeable boundaries:

"Those walls are now down. I like it; it stops people staying in their own environment and then going home..."

This view was shared, too, by a worker from another service who saw workers seizing on every learning opportunity and recognising possibilities often invisible to others in

mainstream services. As a result they were linking young people's experiences to "the real world"

"... we can pick up on things other people can't... make the links... We start with their love of music and they do music at a hate racism event; we look at what the news says about young people and ask them what they think..."

For others it was easier to turn back demands on their time because, in a multi-agency team, they were clearer about other professionals' skills and knowledge and so better able to signpost young people to them.

However, the changes also brought uncertainty and fears. One was that youth workers would be managed by senior staff with little understanding of or even sympathy for youth work.

"The strategy lead (Youth) doesn't have a youth work background – has come from the youth offending service. Will probably pull the work in that direction". (Senior manager)

Personal as well as professional concerns about how people would fit into the new arrangements also surfaced. However, in these authorities less resentment had been experienced than anticipated, with the problems that have emerged stemming from a lack of knowledge of each others' roles and ways of working – something which was being addressed through joint training.

In some areas this training, extending beyond a combination of youth workers and personal advisers to include other service providers, was seen as extremely positive. One manager reported:

"I've just done the Team Around the Child training; I felt a real part of the group....youth work fitted in really well to the role play we did"

A full-time voluntary organisation worker also cited benefits which included training which was more available and accessible to the voluntary sector – and sitting in an office with local authority officers.

As in these grounded ways integration began to take hold, what precisely is being integrated became a little clearer. For some at least, in addition to joint training on policies and procedures, this included the development of a common language arising from these; enhanced skills and knowledge; and a shared practice which at times could demonstrate-through-action what youth work is and can achieve.

6.3 The youth work response: tensions, reservations and dilemmas

Here again, however, the overall picture was mixed, with negatives embedded in some of the positives. These might be very basic and practical: for example, limited opportunities for those working outside the local authority to be involved in planning and procedures:

"It's great to be included but voluntary organisations don't have the time or resources to attend Common Assessment Framework (CAF) meetings, don't get travel expensesCAFs are populated by county council staff and the voluntary sector don't attend." (Voluntary sector manager)

However, the problems of the services' closer alignment, even when stopping short of full integration, went well beyond the practical, at times presenting major challenges to

professional principles and codes of behaviour. For statutory youth workers, for example, greater accountability to other professionals for their interventions could be felt to weaken their autonomy and discretion. Being part of team staffed by people from other services - a school for example, with which the young people may be at odds – could compromise the advocacy role which some workers saw as important. As illustrated earlier (Box 3, page 18), a young person's trust could be put at risk when, as the lead professional, a youth worker was having to co-ordinate interventions. Indeed, though a young person might feel better for having a youth worker alongside them at the CAF meeting, once that worker is seen working closely with other professionals – some with much more coercive roles and responsibilities - the distinctive relationship of confidence and confidentiality that had hitherto existed with the young person could be threatened.

Then there were situations where those historic and cultural factors affecting how organisations relate to each other, mentioned earlier, came into play:

“Some schools are so closed off... actively work against you because maybe they are fearful of what you do. In relation to the extended schools agenda in one school – the young people asked for (the club); the school wouldn't deliver it so I did it. The school ... actively tried to stop young people going. It taxes your ability to keep going; it makes you sick at heart. They block in all kinds of different ways”.
(Full-time worker)

An experience such as these could have debilitating personal and professional effects:
“I went from managing a building to being out in a wilderness.” (Full-time worker)

Schools however were not the only agencies seen as acting in this way. In a number of areas the Youth Offending Service was judged to be particularly hard to draw into more integrated ways of working, with the youth workers in a service which prided itself on the strength of its relationships with other professionals labelling its local youth offending team as desk-bound and court-based.

As we have seen, some youth workers also found working with Connexions personal advisors frustrating – leaving them resentful for example that, on shared projects designed to move groups of NEET young people into learning or work, Connexions claimed the credit for what had been achieved jointly. Indeed youth workers and their managers were sometimes forthright in their view that they were dancing to other people's tunes:

“We are becoming more reactive to other people's agendas and less proactive with our own” (Full-time worker)

“Ticking a lot of boxes for other agencies”. (Full-time worker)

On occasions, the tensions – indeed conflicts – appeared to go to the heart of each profession's practice, raising serious risks of 'mission drift' for youth workers and their managers. One worker was clear about having been diverted from their youth work role:

“The homeless work isn't really youth work – it's floating support. The workers aren't youth workers. I don't do group work”

As part of a departmental early intervention and prevention programme, youth workers in another service were unhappy that, by being expected to support families with young children, they were taking on roles with an age group for which they had not been trained.

Co-location of staff from different professional backgrounds – often a key marker of integration achieved – also generated practice issues. Thus, in one area Connexions PAs and youth workers were operating from a building owned and managed by the local youth service. However, the service's guiding principle here - that young people themselves should have a big say in how the building looked and was run - did not sit easily with the Connexions' staff's view of the premises as their office and their space.

Despite its apparently happy ending, a very different but vivid example of the tensions generated by contrasting practice styles and approaches came from another area. (Box 9 below)

Box 9

Practice tensions within integrated working

A young woman was referred by the local Youth Offending Service (YOS) to the summer programme organised by a voluntary youth organisation as part of Positive Activities for Young People. As she was a heavy smoker the YOS team had insisted that she not be allowed to smoke while on the programme. During a cycle trip she insisted on stopping regularly for a smoke. The youth workers had to forbid her and got into repeated wrangles with her, resulting in a very stressful occasion for the young woman and for them. After she had managed to complete the trip without a cigarette, she was so proud of herself that she went home, told her family – also heavy smokers – and tried to persuade them to give up!

Some of the most commonly recurring examples of youth workers' practice dilemmas concerned work with the police – particularly when the young people involved had been reported for 'nuisance' or anti-social behaviour. In several cases outlined in different authorities, youth workers had had to resist being drawn into the enforcement process. Some were also wary when young people, triggered perhaps by the youth worker's presence, were unguardedly providing information – intelligence – which the police might feel bound to act on in ways a youth worker might not. Though this was sometimes understood by regular police and some community support police officers, youth workers could not by any means assume this would be true for all police personnel.

This example returns us to the question: where in an integrated youth support context does the priority lie between satisfying the interests of the agency and its multiplicity of professionals and those of the young person? The two of course are not necessarily mutually exclusive. However, as their own definition of their practice requires, if the youth workers are to stand unequivocally on the side of young people, they may well increasingly – and invidiously – find themselves between a rock and a hard place: regarded as 'precious' or 'unprofessional' by partner agencies, and, if seen to be working closely with other service providers, as 'one of the suits' by the young people.

7. The impact of policy on management

One of the frequently hidden consequences of the extensive and rapidly changing policy environment of the past decade, including the push towards integration, has been the often intense pressure experienced by youth work managers. With no additional resources they have for long been expected, often within short time frames, to take on a range of new initiatives, many allowing *“no time to digest what’s been done”*. Moreover, as we found in more than one authority, past budgets cuts made on the basis of protecting front line facilities had seriously depleted management capacity.

One of the effects of these pressures for managers personally is, not surprisingly, that *“there’s a lot of sickness and a lot of time is spent on dealing with things that have gone wrong.”* Organisationally, however, the impact on the management of youth work practice showed up in three ways particularly pertinent to the Inquiry.

7.1 Targets and outcomes

For many managers, targets such as accredited outcomes have provided a valuable management tool - a ready means for calling youth workers to account. Indeed, even though the BVPIs - of reach, participation and achievement - are no longer required by government, some managers intend to retain them. They may feel strengthened in this resolve by local politicians’ often strong support for them.

By no means all workers dismiss these targets: on the contrary, as we have seen, some find them helpful and supportive to their practice. However, many others expressed sometimes considerable frustration with them – experiencing them as mainly ‘paper work’ from which they get little feed-back; and as a serious intrusion on time for face-to-face practice.

Not only therefore will a convincing rationale now need to be made to many field staff for retaining BVPI targets. Workers will also expect them to be applied rather more pragmatically and flexibly - especially by part-time youth support workers - than has often been the case in the past.

7.2 Managing integrated working

To managers’ already testing and accumulating pressures have now been added what one senior officer called *“the exploding demands of integration”*. The timescales and lack of transparency with which these changes are being implemented have often been sources of both professional uncertainty and personal insecurity, as one senior manager explained:

“It’s been 18 months and I still don’t know what job I’m doingpeople used to know what I did, now no one knows ...”

Having to respond to other people’s – especially senior departmental managers - agendas could be additionally disabling, placing as it does greater pressure on managers to get the best out of their staff.

In some cases youth work managers are now also being asked to manage larger multi-agency teams in which youth workers may be in a minority. Examples were offered during the Inquiry of new structures and processes designed to help managers deal more

effectively with the demands of this more integrated inter-agency work. Even these however could bring their difficulties:

“The problem is matrix-management – we don’t know who is who or who should be making decisions...devolved into decision but budgets not devolved...there is a gap between devolution of people and resources.” (Senior manager)

Nor are youth work managers immune from high levels of interference from their own managers. Senior staff in one service talked about their micro-management by senior departmental managers who were making incessant demands requiring frequent and rapid responses. In addition to the extra pressures it brought, this apparent expression of top-level risk-aversion also failed to recognise that by its very nature youth work entails risk and that, as a recent OFSTED report made clear, (2009: para 9), it “has the potential to help young people test the boundaries between reasonable and risky behaviours”. In the words of one senior manager:

“Integrated Youth Support is a risk – senior managers don’t understand the youth work process”.

This, as many youth work managers themselves emphasised, placed an even greater burden on them *“to protect the Service from misunderstandings about youth work”.*

All this finally, and perhaps particularly significantly, has to be seen in the context of where youth work was being located within children and young people services. One Youth Service had moved out of a leisure department – a decision welcomed by its senior managers – only to be placed in a ‘targeted services’ division alongside ‘behaviour management’, youth offending, special educational needs and the pupil referral units. Another located in ‘targeted services’ had been linked with youth offending, and fostering, residential care and adoption. Others fell within divisions or directorates called ‘access to education’ (including SEN and ‘inclusion’); ‘prevention and safeguarding’; ‘vulnerable children’; and ‘access, inclusion and participation’.

Field staff rarely commented on these new arrangements while managers, though occasionally expressing some disappointment, clearly felt they had no option but to make what they could of them. From a broader perspective, however, they could be seen as evidence of a trend – whether deliberately planned or through absence of mind – which is disconnecting youth work from its educational ‘mission’ and its potentiality view of young people and hitching it to child protection and youth offending and the deficiency models of the young which largely underpin them. Youth work, it would appear, is at risk of no longer being valued primarily for its developmental possibilities but for its preventative and rehabilitative contribution to implementing wider child care policies.

7.3 Workers’ accountability, supervision and support

Especially where management posts have been lost, the substantial extra demands now being made on managers’ time and energy to contribute to more strategic inter-agency meetings has diverted many of them from operational management roles within their own services. This in turn has led to a *“dramatic erosion of opportunity for providing (workers) with support”*: A manager described the same trend somewhat differently,

“We’ve moved from managing staff and projects to managing partnerships....”

“The demands of joining up have eroded some of our quality assurance processes – no longer visiting centres (for practice observation) as we once did”.

“As an officer team we used to meet weekly – now it’s only monthly... Essentially we have to manage ourselves”.

Moreover, all this is happening in an environment in which ‘outcomes’ – or at least those treated as of most significance by senior managers and politicians - are much more transparent, so that what is regarded as poor practice may also be revealed more clearly. In the first place this may call for precisely the kinds of professional supervision and support which, as we saw above, is being reduced by wider departmental and authority responsibilities. Ultimately, also, it may call for work to be closed down. However, though this was a demand which some field staff made – often fiercely – in order to ensure scarce resources were not wasted on failing centres and projects and incompetent staff, managers could be left looking weak when, as had happened more than once, local politicians refused to sanction closures in electorally sensitive wards.

Though by no means a total explanation, taken together these trends have altered the expectations that managers and youth workers now have of each other. This has become particularly true in relation to, and as a result of, the structures and procedures put in place for setting, achieving and reporting on targets and their interventions with young people more generally. One field worker, with great feeling, spelt out this reality:

“The style of management is based on control at all costs. It’s as if they fear that if they don’t control a disaster will happen... Even if we are not the one who’s made the mistake it affects us all; we can’t put a letter out without running it past a manager. It squeezes the juice out of you; you wish for and desire to be trusted more and to be more equal.”

8. Current policy priorities and youth work's professional identity

8.1 Why a professional identity?

Anecdotal evidence over many years has suggested that many youth workers and their managers live permanently with a professional identity crisis – a state of mind which has been fed by the reactions of other professional groups, the media and the wider public repeatedly. The loose identification of 'youth workers' with suicide bombers and other undesirables has done little to reduce these insecurities while the apparent unawareness amongst even senior government ministers that professional youth work exists only confirms youth workers' worst fears. Thus, in introducing the Children's Workforce Development Council's (CWDC) *2020 Children and Young People's Workforce Strategy* (DCSF 2008), Secretary of State Ed Balls' list of those outside family and friends who might have 'made a real difference to us when we were young' included (emphasis added):

...a childminder, a teacher, a volunteer youth worker, a speech and language therapist or a nurse.

Though some would question whether even the aspiration is worthwhile, professional status would seem to be helpful if it is meant to indicate:

- a confident practitioner self-image underpinned by a clear sense of what is special about the method and skills of that practice and a confidence in applying these;
- managerial leadership which shares this conviction about the distinctiveness of the practice and advocates for and applies policies, resources and processes which enable as authentic a delivery as possible.

Some of the evidence already presented – for example where it reveals an uncritical, merely internalised, acceptance of current policy drivers – can be seen as confirming sceptics' doubts about the strength of youth work's professional identity, and self-identity. Nonetheless, many of our findings – particularly those in Section 4.3 which present workers' and managers' own articulation of what makes youth work distinctive – suggest that, as youth workers take on the new organisational challenges, these identities may be stronger than the internal grapevine suggests.

This section seeks to clarify how far this is the case.

8.2 Professional identity in the national policy context

One senior manager was extremely pessimistic about the overall national policy context here – not unreasonably, perhaps, given the Secretary of State's statement quoted above:

"I don't think the government values youth work ... the idea seems to be to broaden out from youth work to (undertake) more general duties related to services for young people".

However, one of the more significant findings of the Inquiry was the low level of concern about or even awareness of national policies currently being enunciated by CWDC with potentially major consequences for youth work's professional identity, such as its stated intention to introduce "a youth professional status across the sector, underpinned by a social pedagogy approach". (DCSF, 2008: Para 4.55). Few senior managers raised the

relevant issues spontaneously and when they did, this was usually because the senior management team included a specialist officer with 'staff development' and/or 'quality assurance' responsibilities.

One of these officers had a generally optimistic view of what the CWDC changes might bring. Recognising the Council's role as *powerful*, he praised their handbooks (for example on induction) as *"impressive and distinct"* and concluded that *"we need to join up rather than set up a battle because they'll win"*.

Others – all senior or middle managers – were less sanguine, interweaving their comments with what they apparently saw as related concerns about the future of the JNC structure.

"Workforce development and the implications of the JNC is a major issue in terms of impact in the future".

"We could lose the essence of youth work training- get 'working with young people' training instead".

"JNC is currently being maintained but we may have to let it go to recruit staff".

Even where, as in a group of team leaders, there was a consensus that youth work's professional identity was being strengthened within the local integrated structures serious questions existed about whether *this is it being diluted nationally through integrated qualifications? Where will youth work sit in the qualification structure?*

8.3 A local professional identity for youth work – existing strengths, new opportunities

The Inquiry generated significant if not overwhelming material in support of the view that youth work's professional identity is or can be strong and in some areas may even be strengthening in the new circumstances. Most of this evidence was provided by middle and senior managers, much of it from authorities which earlier, we suggested, were previously 'strong' and 'well positioned':

"We have strength in our professional identity and a clear professional role and we are there playing to it".

"We knew where we fitted in partnership work – a key strength. That's kept up our profile. We can argue for the unique approach of the youth worker..."

One of the ways these services are defining this strength is by service managers in particular being as clear as they can about youth work's distinctive contribution and *bringing passion and commitment to its delivery*.

"(You) need a strong practice base to maintain professional identity in a multi-disciplinary context – (you) need to be 'on the ball' ... evidencing the work and outcomes is crucial".

Others – senior managers and field workers - pointed to the quality and qualifications of field staff:

"One of our strengths is the professionalism of our staff – we have no one without a JNC and all part-time staff have to undertake training".

"We're in a strong position to survive as our workers can articulate the work and its outcomes".

"Positive factors include youth workers' abilities to engage young people in ways other services don't".

In some cases - again mainly in those 'stronger' services – a raised profile and more positive image seemed to be directly related to a service's response to integration. In the view of some managers and workers this was in part because this was prising youth workers out of their professional isolation:

"We've become less precious – not seeing (our) client group as just our domain. That enhances the professional identity". (Senior manager)

"We've never sold ourselves but now we're recognised ... There is more concern for us as youth workers." (Full-time worker)

As some senior managers were also keen to emphasise, this more outgoing response was freeing up youth workers to work in new ways which, according to one PYO, still meant that:

"Youth workers are doing a youth work job within an integrated set up. They have a distinctive and specialist role; they do not have to become something else".

And in turn this – for example by taking on targeted work alongside their traditional open access provision and by being involved in CAF procedures – was shifting other professionals' view and indeed understanding of their practice. In particular, colleagues in other services were getting a direct experience of how youth work could be valuable and effective – presumably for young people but also no doubt for other services needing to fulfil their own priorities.

"The tone's changed. We are listened to, invited in – people want youth work as we define it". (Senior youth worker)

"Our professional identity is on the turn because of CAFs and referrals. (Other professionals) have never looked on us as professionals. Now they hand on the difficult groups". (Full-time worker)

"We are the big guns now. Youth workers are the most skilled. Other organisations are trying to do youth work, but it's what we do... Being a big gun isn't just about having resources". (Senior youth worker)

"The Youth Service is now seen by others as a professional service, and where it wasn't always in the past – it used to be seen as ad hoc and disparate..." (Senior manager)

However, this last senior manager not only seemed to be struggling still against past negativities. By adding: *however ... there remains uncertainty ... post-2010*, he also flagged up worries about the future. For many others, these sentiments were closely linked – and predominant.

8.4 Old perceptions – and new threats

Though here too it was hard to be sure where the overall balance lay, for many respondents youth work was still a long way from being seen or treated as a professional activity. Rather, many continued to encounter deeply embedded dismissive perceptions of it, fed in part perhaps by *"our informality (being) interpreted as unprofessional"* and by *"the lack of a legal basis"* (full-time worker). Even the worker who saw her professional image as 'on the turn' started with the acknowledgement that *"we've never been looked on as professional – just as youth workers"*. This outside view had also been picked up by one young person interviewed – now a volunteer – who commented that *"so many people don't understand youth work"*.

A number of field workers offered vivid snapshots of this poor image – of “some services looking) down on youth work”; of other professionals’ “crude recreational image of youth work”:

“Youth work is seen by other statutory services as ‘fun’, ‘playing table tennis’ and being a ‘grandpa’ – play without responsibility’. Residentials (are) seen as ‘a jolly’...”

“We’re still seen as ‘the table tennis worker’”.

“(We’re) being treated as play workers who child-mind”.

And even where youth work was seen as having a valid or even valuable role workers still often talked of feeling that what they were contributing was treated merely as a sub-set of other practices - a relatively low cost substitute for other professionals:

“I just feel as though I’m a cheap teacher”.

“(We would) become a reactive service, always fitting into something else....never recognised for what it is....”

“... (it) makes us like A&E – knowing a little about a lot of stuff”.

Anguished cries of this kind, as was suggested earlier, are far from new. Though still sometimes suggesting professional protectionism, what was new were the comments on what could happen to professional identity and self-esteem when workers reached out to other services and professions. Thus, for the senior full-time worker who had been advocating with a homelessness agency on behalf of a young person (Box 8, page 34), his own management’s insistence that - at all costs, it seemed - good relationships with partnership agencies must be maintained was experienced as very damaging to his professional integrity as well as to actual practice:

“They (managers) want youth workers to be playing nicely with other people. The emphasis is on us to change to be nice; to negotiate our relationship. We’re the weirdoes out there banging on the window to be let in”.

However, perhaps the starkest illustration of how far in some authorities youth work’s struggle for recognition as a distinctive and disciplined way of working still had to go was provided by a full-time worker whose experience (see box 10, below) seemed to demonstrate a fundamental failure of staff in another service even to recognise her, still less to relate to her, as a fellow professional.

Box 10

An experience of ‘professional’ co-working

I work as a youth worker in the community where I live. I decided I needed to pass on my concerns about the children in one of the families on the estate. When the parents asked who had reported them, without consulting me, the social worker gave them my name. Not only do I feel nervous now about being out on the estate. It’s now very difficult for me to do my job.

9. An unfinished debate: questions for further inquiry and research

This Inquiry has revealed that there is a recognisable shift in the relationship between the state and the individual young person as policy priorities begin to dictate a series of changes in expectation and requirement. It is not unusual for the state to have a troubled and troublesome relationship with young people since they are naturally and, some would argue, healthily resistant to some of the measures prescribed for their welfare and development. History shows that youth work itself has been an imaginative and enduring response to some of the dilemmas such a relationship throws up.

However this Inquiry has strengthened our view that these dilemmas are being rendered more acute as the state's interventions become increasingly prescriptive, intrusive and insistent. Below, we set out some of these dilemmas as, hopefully, a prompt to further discussion aimed at deepening our understanding of how, for both managers and workers, they manifest themselves and how they might be addressed. Indeed, taken together, the questions merit more systematic research than the resources of the Inquiry made possible.

- What will the long-term consequences be for youth work of its location in local authority structures focused mainly on prevention and rehabilitation rather than on education and personal and social development?
- As policy imperatives, underpinned increasingly by the only available funding, demand that youth workers undertake targeted work, how can safeguards be provided for the forms of open-access youth work rooted in voluntary participation which so many young people value? As such provision is squeezed, where will youth workers learn and hone those 'on-the-wing' negotiating, responsive and educative skills which other services now say they value so highly?
- Is youth work's increasing incorporation of recorded and especially accredited outcomes compromising its distinctive style of work with young people; and with what consequences?
- As youth workers appear to become increasingly drawn into aspects of the youth offer that are closer to casework than group work, will they be able to maintain some of the distinctive characteristics of their practice – starting from where young people are, negotiating trusting relationships with them, working skilfully through their chosen groupings, advocating on their behalf?
- How does the focus on outcomes, in particular young people making successful transitions to independence, distract the youth worker from valuing young people's here-and-now experience for its own sake and supporting them in it? Insofar as youth workers are attending to young people's here-and-now, is this being valued and worked with only or mainly as a platform for building successful transitions?

- The self – a youth worker’s own personal repertoire of skills, attributes and experience – has always been the stock-in-trade of their practice. How can the ability to mobilise this resource and the style of work it generates and simultaneously maintain proper professional boundaries be sustained in light of some of current changes in policy and the organisation of young people’s services?
- Where the needs of service providers and service users do not correspond or even perhaps conflict, the dilemmas for field staff locked into partnership arrangements can pose a serious challenge to their personal and professional integrity. How widely is this recognised or even seen as significant – by policy-makers, local politicians, senior departmental managers and immediate line managers? What effective measures can youth workers and these managers take to resolve this?
- As integrated youth support services evolve, youth workers increasingly tend to find themselves undertaking multiple roles. Some of these may require them to take on more ‘enforcing’ than ‘enabling’ roles. Again the question that emerges is therefore: can they continue to practise with integrity as notions such as non-negotiable support are introduced into aspects of the youth offer - for example through targeted youth support?
- Confidentiality is one of the key principles informing the youth worker-young person relationship, especially given the informal and relatively unguarded ways in which young people so often interact with youth workers. How far is this being compromised by the duty to co-operate with other agencies and the attendant requirements to share information and intelligence with other professionals? Are the protocols in place framed to ensure that the rights and interests of the young person are adequately safeguarded?
- Local services for children and young people are risk-averse and becoming more so. This is understandable given the professional and political consequences that flow from hostile media coverage and public reaction when things go wrong. Against this background, how can acceptable levels of risk be maintained in providing youth work which by its very nature entails young people in developing appropriate levels of ‘risk-awareness’ as they negotiate the process of becoming independent young adults?
- How can the distinctive features of the professional practice which youth workers, managers and – in their own language - young people constantly reasserted during this Inquiry be safeguarded in the face of strengthening policy imperatives to, for example, reduce anti-social behaviour or get young people re-engaged in education and training?
- How far are these same policy imperatives widening the gap between managers and field workers at a time when the increasing pressures on youth work managers are having the effect of moving them from managing staff to managing organisational change?
- What will the long-term consequences be for youth work as a specialist and distinctive practice of the CWDC’s increasing emphasis on generic skills for working with children and young people, and on social pedagogy?

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Appendix 1

Participating authorities

Buckinghamshire County Council

Derby City Council

Derbyshire County Council

Royal Borough of Kingston-upon-Thames

London Borough of Hounslow

Leicester City Council

Lincolnshire County Council

Milton Keynes Borough Council

Oxfordshire County Council

Rotherham Metropolitan Borough Council

Staffordshire County Council

Stoke-on-Trent City Council

Appendix 2

Focus group prompts

(a) Prompts for meetings with managers and senior workers

- What are you intending to achieve as managers and senior practitioners of youth work?
- What are the principles and values underpinning your work? How do they influence your approach?
- What factors help you to achieve your intentions?
- What factors get in the way of you achieving your intentions?
- What is the balance of your work between managing people and managing projects?
- How does the current policy climate affect the way you lead and manage youth work?
- Do you encounter any significant tensions or dilemmas in your work?
- How is your sense of professional identity affected by current policy imperatives?

(b) Prompts for meetings with youth workers (full-time, part-time and volunteers)

- Describe a fairly recent example of a piece of youth work that really represented you working as a youth worker. Offer some key words or phrases that summarise the experience for you.
- 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 (a) with individuals, (b) group work and (c) with groups of young people?
- What processes do you use to engage young people? Are there particular methods or techniques you use for making contact?
- How do you conceptualise what young people need from a youth worker and how does this thinking influence the way you plan your interventions?
- 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 and the processes they have led to - e.g. Common Assessment Framework?
- How do policies that promote greater integration of services influence the type of interventions you make?
- Do you encounter any significant tensions or dilemmas in your work?
- Is there anything further you would like to talk to us about concerning your practice with regard to:
 - motivation and morale
 - styles of work
 - skills
 - settings
 - interaction and relationships with other professionals
 - relationships with young people

(c) Prompts for meetings with 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?

- Why do you come to this club or centre or project?

- Do you come because you want to or because you have to?

- How much do you come in order to enjoy yourself or to achieve something or both?

- What do you get from coming here 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?

- What are the best things about the club, centre or project you come to?

- What else could be done to make your coming here better?