

The Shape of Youth Work in the West Midlands:

A Profession at Risk or an Opportunity for Innovation?

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Introduction

The recent austerity measures imposed by the Coalition Government have hit Services for Young People hard. There have been significant, and some would argue, disproportionate cuts to local authority youth services, ranging from 20% to 100% of funding, totaling more than £100million (BBC, 2011). In places the voluntary sector has taken on some of this work, however, funding for the voluntary sector is also threatened as is the infrastructure support available to these organisations.

Youth Work in the West Midlands has been affected by these cuts, but the picture has been patchy. The national policy for youth work has been, at best, vague and as such local services have resorted to developing their own delivery models. Youth Focus West Midlands (formerly the West Midlands Regional Youth Work Unit) has had a regional role in supporting youth services and integrated youth support services. However, recently, contact with some local authority services has become difficult, and the picture of youth work, the shape of services and the needs of staff have become unclear.

The project

Between April and July 2012 the Creative Communities Unit undertook a knowledge transfer project in partnership with Youth Focus West Midlands to scope the shape of youth services across the West Midlands. The specific aims of this project were to:

- scope the shape and the needs of the statutory and voluntary youth work sectors in particular in relation to community engagement and leadership of services;
- identify appropriate, innovative ways to respond to these needs, including the potential for the use of social media;
- develop a regional collaborative approach to youth work training;
- establish new partnerships between the university and key organisations within the region.

This paper debates the findings of this project in the light of current youth work policy, practice and developments. It concludes with a number of recommendations for ways forward for youth work and Youth Focus West Midlands.

Methodology

Youth Focus West Midlands had a range of email contacts for Heads of Service, Training Officers and Voluntary Sector leads based across the West Midlands. These were contacted in a general email requesting help with the project. Seven attended individual meetings to discuss their services, five from the statutory sector and two from the voluntary sector. One voluntary sector lead took part in a telephone interview and one

head of service from a statutory sector youth service sent an emailed response. See table 1.

Table 1.

	Statutory	Voluntary	Total
Meeting	5	2	7
Telephone	0	1	1
Email	1	0	1
Total	6	3	9

The questions used to structure the discussions can be found in appendix 1.

In addition to the direct contact made with individuals, desk research was used to gain further insight into the shape of local services.

Findings

Shape of services

It is clear that there is no longer one comparable structure for youth work across the West Midlands, and the variation between even neighbouring services is vast. This makes it difficult to find commonalities between services, to share practice across local authority borders and to offer support to services from a regional level.

Most youth services have faced significant budget cuts in recent years, ultimately resulting in the restructuring of services and the loss of either staff or youth work sessions or buildings. It is not uncommon for services to have accommodated budget cuts of 20% or 30% over three consecutive years, and to be facing similar levels of budget cuts in the next two financial years. Some of the heads of service, although they had found this process wearing, welcomed the opportunity to streamline their services, seeing it as an opportunity to assess where the service is and identifying ways of working more cost effectively whilst retaining services to young people. They have changed how services are delivered and reconsidered vacancies in order to find savings. For example, one authority has streamlined all full time posts to the minimum required to deliver their programme and implemented 40 week, minimum 6 hour contracts for all sessional part time staff. Holiday activities are covered by a pool of casually employed staff. Other services have seen more drastic cuts to services, provision and centres which have been less welcomed and had a greater impact on contact time with young people and the levels of staff morale. It is worth noting however, that the majority of service leads were positive, and in many cases proud of what they have achieved in relation to reconstituting provision for young people during what many considered a difficult period.

Many of the participants in this study from local authority provision identified that their service or team now sits within a wider team of integrated services or multidisciplinary teams, with most commonly, information advice and guidance, youth offending teams and family services. The name of the service may or may not reflect this. This change was

initiated in 2004 with the advent of New Labour policies including Every Child Matters (DfES, 2003) and the Children Act (2004) and subsequently Youth Matters (DfES, 2005) and the Common Core of Skills and Knowledge (DfES, 2005) which called for an increase in multidisciplinary teams and a shared approach to training and development. However, some service leads felt that this policy had been abandoned by the Coalition Government leaving services with little direction and resulting in services across the West Midlands varying in both name and remit, from Integrated Support Services within teams of professionals from education welfare, family support and drugs and alcohol services, to Youth Services which partner with other departments within the authority. Youth workers, youth work managers and strategic leads also have different roles and job titles depending upon the geographical area in which they are employed, and while some have retained their JNC status, others have moved to NJC terms and conditions of employment.

A common theme within Local Authority Youth Work is a move towards a reduction in 'open access' services for young people to a more targeted youth provision for vulnerable young people, including young people with disabilities, looked after young people, young people not in education, employment or training, teenage parents and young people at risk of presenting antisocial behaviour or who misuse drugs or alcohol. Some services are providing an element of both, although most service leads envision that ultimately open access youth work will be commissioned to other sectors. Indeed, in some areas, this move has been part of the recent restructuring of services, although again, the model of delivery varies with some seconding workers from the local authority, some moving buildings to voluntary sector management but retaining staff and some proving grants for Voluntary Youth Service Councils. Currently, the model most local authorities are adopting is one that employs staff as either, youth workers providing targeted provision, or youth workers providing open access or positive activities, although one had full time staff who had a dual role providing both targeted work and open access work.

The three voluntary sector organisations involved in this project were umbrella Voluntary Youth Service Council organisations offering support to a range of smaller voluntary and community organisations through a membership model. One organisation had staff seconded from the local authority youth provision which they felt strengthened the relationships between the local authority and the voluntary organisations. The remaining two received grants from the local authority to deliver their services. Most voluntary sector youth groups which sat under these umbrella organisations deliver positive activities work. A small minority deliver targeted youth work with groups such as young carers, young farmers and homeless young people. The uniformed organisations operate on a membership basis and do not offer a drop in facility to all young people.

Community engagement

In discussing community engagement, most youth work leads felt that their organisations were able to engage effectively with those young people who they were in contact with but did not necessarily engage consistently with the wider community. In many local authorities this wider community engagement was carried out by a central department. In some cases young people's participation teams had been more closely aligned with these central departments, creating a distance between young people's participation and voice and youth work.

There were also concerns raised about how engagement with young people and wider communities can be effective in areas where services have a reduced presence as a result

of budget cuts. However, the transference of building stock to local community groups in some areas can be seen as a means of responding to community needs and continuing provision for young people in areas where local authorities are no longer able to provide services.

Leadership of services

Youth work managers are becoming increasingly unlikely to be from a youth work background. Some service leads argued that youth work managers need to be management trained more than they need higher level youth work training. In addition, some of the key agendas driving contemporary youth work practice, such as multiagency working, safeguarding and case load management are not seen as 'traditional' youth work roles or qualities. As a result more generic managers, with specialisms in other types of work with young people, are being placed in youth work management roles. Where local authority services have experienced this, youth workers reported feeling vulnerable and ultimately those services appear to have been more greatly affected by cuts and restructuring.

Relationship with the statutory and voluntary sectors

The relationship between the voluntary and statutory sectors appears to have a substantial influence of the health of youth work across their local authority area. Where the relationship is positive, with a history of sharing practice, resources and support, youth work appears to have remained in a strong position, albeit using a different model of delivery. Where the relationship has not been nurtured, youth work appears to be in a precarious position as local authority services are reduced. In some cases the voluntary sector may be too small or have limited capacity to adopt services. Equally, where there has been an unwillingness to share practice in the past, or a competition between parties, the relationship appears unable to sustain the negotiations needed to ensure youth work provision is able to continue.

Skills and training

A range of skills were identified as needed at both delivery and management levels. For the deliverers of youth work most service leads said that they required the same skills that have been traditionally needed by youth workers, however, there was a slight variation between the skills identified for the voluntary sector and those identified by the statutory sector. For the statutory sector the traditional skills required were identified as:

- Good communication skills
- Building relationships with young people
- Being able to challenge young people
- Detached work
- Groupwork
- Levels 1, 2 and 3 youth work qualifications
- Advocacy
- Facilitation skills

In addition to the more traditional youth work skills a newer set of skills were also identified including:

- One to one working
- Mentoring
- Managing caseloads
- Safeguarding
- Report writing
- Health and safety
- Support young people not in education employment or training
- Supporting vulnerable young people
- E Safety

For the managers of youth workers, a further set of skills were identified including:

- Leadership and strategic management
- Partnership working
- Working with elected members
- Negotiation skills
- Report writing
- Challenging the defensiveness of youth work
- Understanding families and communities
- Multi-agency working

For the voluntary sector, a different but related set of skills was required recognising that volunteers were often engaging in youth work during their limited spare time. Equally, there was also the recognition that the training needs of the voluntary sector depended greatly on the size and type of the individual organisation. The skills identified by the voluntary sector included:

- Programme planning
- How to support volunteers
- Safeguarding
- Duty of care
- Safe recruitment
- Running voluntary organisations
- Risk assessment
- Levels 1, 2 and 3 (for project leads, but not seen as essential) youth work qualifications

Above all, it was clearly stated that the greatest quality required from volunteer youth workers is their commitment to the work.

The need for level 3 youth work training and the JNC was debated with a number of participants in this study. There was a split in opinion as to whether the level 3 youth work qualification was required for full time youth workers, although no organisations paid for staff to complete the course. Most people recruited youth workers who are already qualified. One service lead felt strongly that the nationally recognised JNC qualification did not equip youth workers to do their jobs effectively and merely produced academics. Another echoed these thoughts, stating that it was difficult to find good quality, qualified youth workers to employ.

The requirement for part time staff to be trained at level 3 in youth work is also variable. Most authorities are happy for sessional youth workers to have a level 2 qualification, with a level 3 being a development opportunity for those interested. However, the majority of authorities have not delivered a level 3 youth work qualification this year either as a result of too little demand as a result of a reduction in staffing levels, or, a lack of capacity to deliver it as a result of training posts being deleted or significantly reduced.

The demand for level 3 and JNC qualified staff in the voluntary sector is minimal; the organisations involved in this study are welcoming of level 3 youth work courses but recognise that they are a large commitment for a part time volunteer. The difficulty in attracting students from across large counties to attend training courses was also acknowledged. However, given the skills identified and the reduced capacity of the statutory sector to deliver training, (who have traditionally provided the infrastructure support to the voluntary sector), there are potentially some significant gaps in training, and hence skills in both the statutory and voluntary sector emerging.

Current training for youth workers

The JNC recognised qualification in youth work is currently obtained via a three year BAHons. or a post graduate degree qualification which is endorsed by the National Youth Agency. Prior to 2010, the lowest level qualifying award was a two year diploma or a Foundation Degree. While this shift to degree status could be welcomed as an effort to recognise the professional status of youth workers in line with other professionals such as teachers and social workers, the move to what for most people meant a three year, full time programme during a period of increasing austerity, in this author's experience, resulted in a drastic reduction in employers willingness to support employees to complete the course and presented mature students, in particular, with further financial pressures.

The level 3 qualification in youth work appears to be in an equally precarious position. A number of local authority services for young people have lost either all or a significant proportion of their specific youth work training budget and the staff responsible for its delivery. The number of staff employed by services have reduced and therefore consequently the demand for the level 3 youth work qualification has reduced thus making the delivery of courses to a handful of staff in an area unfeasible. Another barrier to the delivery of level 3 courses has been the geographical access to the course, particularly in larger counties and where youth workers are limited or restricted in the time they are able to commit to completing training. These combined factors have seemed to result in a 'level 2 will have to do' attitude, in that local authority services which once insisted on youth workers aspiring to a level 3 qualification can function with a lower baseline of training. In some areas local authorities are no longer able to support the voluntary youth sector to complete training; in others there are no opportunities for youth workers to complete the level 3 youth work qualification at all.

Where level 3 courses exist they are either NVQ courses or the Qualification Credit Framework (QCF) courses accredited through one of few awarding bodies, including City and Guilds, ABC and NOCN. It has recently been announced that a Certificate at Level 3 will provide youth workers with a Youth Support worker status. While for some this is an adequate qualification, for others it can prove costly and is not necessarily responsive to local and individual organisational needs, or the needs of isolated youth workers.

The role of the region

Youth Focus West Midlands has recently undergone significant changes, adopting a charitable status. These changes came as a result of a need for the organisation to become independently constituted, allowing it access to funding from a wider variety of sources, and a reduction in attendance of youth workers, managers and strategic leads across the region following a significant reduction in staffing and posts at a local level.

The strategic leads involved in this project were largely supportive of the role of the Regional Youth Work Unit and the support it offered. They recognised the value of having a central support mechanism, the opportunity for networking and the development of a 'critical friend' relationship with staff members. However, the individuals responding to this project recognised that it was only useful if local authorities were engaged with the Unit and attended meetings, and that the voluntary sector was underrepresented. One individual stated that it became difficult for there to be representation from her authority as there was a lack of clarity within her local authority as to who should attend and the authority had frozen all travel expenses outside of the immediate locality.

Several suggestions were made for ways in which a regional organisation for youth work could support the work of local statutory and voluntary youth services. These included:

- Shared training and development opportunities
- Sharing resources
- Marketing products and ideas, gaining copyright for these and selling them
- Rethinking the number of meetings and how these are carried out, including the use of online technology
- Increasing the role and presence of the voluntary sector
- Support and application for funding, including for region wide projects
- Developing a website to share good practice, provide access to resources and raise the profile of the regional organisation and local youth work services.

The future of youth work and youth work training

Opinion was divided over the future of youth work in the West Midlands and nationally. Some felt that the current changes were merely part of a cycle, and that the impact of recent cuts to youth work provision will be felt through increased antisocial behaviour, teenage pregnancy, unemployment and crime and ultimately the government will reinvest in youth work to address these increased needs. Others felt that the current changes will have the ultimate effect of dismantling the structures on which both the statutory and voluntary sectors rely, and so even a reinvestment in youth work will now resurrect what has been lost.

Most felt that the voluntary sector played a vital role in ensuring that youth work survives, and that the voluntary sector could benefit from the recent increase in local authorities commissioning services to other agencies. A strong voluntary youth sector was seen as essential to the future development of youth work in the region, in particular for the more 'open access' provision. However, all of the voluntary sector leads argued strongly that a reduction in infrastructure provided by local authorities, in particular in relation to training, financial support and procedures would have a detrimental effect on voluntary sector youth

work. Key to the strength of the voluntary sector, then, are the infrastructure organisations on which the voluntary provision relies for support. Such infrastructure varies depending on the local authority area in which the provision is based, but this might come from one or more organisations such as the Councils for Voluntary Youth Services, Voluntary Sector Councils, Local Authorities, local training agencies or Youth Focus West Midlands.

There were concerns about the survival of youth work as a profession and in particular the future of training and the JNC National Qualification in Youth Work. There is potential for the need for this professional qualification to reduce significantly in coming years as a result of a reduction in the number of youth workers being employed, the reduction of employer training budgets, the demise of the JNC professional status in some areas and a requirement for fewer staff to have the qualification. The need to pay youth workers less appears to be reducing the need for either JNC status or the JNC recognised qualification. Some participants in the study were critical of the qualification arguing that the JNC qualification produced academics, not youth workers, and another aired their frustration at the difficulty in finding quality, qualified staff.

Discussion

The shift towards local authority services for young people delivering more targeted provision, and the voluntary sector delivering positive activities raised the question of a definition for youth work. This discussion has been debated by numerous authors over the years (Jefferies and Smith, 2010; Davies, 2005; Batsleer, 2008; In Defense of Youth Work, 2010). Davies (2005) provides a manifesto of youth work, outlining a range of methods which express a central core of values, including the need for youth work to:

- be voluntary;
- seek to tip the balance of power in young people's favour;
- work with young people because they are young people, not because of a label;
- start from where young people are starting;
- view the young person as an individual;
- respect and respond to the young person's peer networks;
- respect and respond to young people's wider community and cultural identities;
- go beyond where the young people start and encourages outward, critical and creative thinking; and
- be concerned with what young people feel as well as what they know and can do.

Davies (2005, pg 7) recognises that this list is 'deliberately purist' and that practice may vary considerably from this. In addition to these, others have identified qualities such as being concerned with education and welfare of young people, association and relationship and integrity (Jefferies and Smith, 2010, In Defence of Youth Work, 2010). The question is, then, how much of the current practice identified through this study can be called youth work as outlined in these definitions? The rise of work with young people who are considered 'at risk' certainly comes from a standpoint of working with young people because they have a (usually negative) label attached to them. Indeed, targeted youth work, by its nature is based on a deficit model of young people, which panders to and reinforces the negative perceptions of young people streamed through the media and national policy and culminating in individual fears and an increase in oppressive approaches designed to address a 'problem'.

The fact that many young people are referred on an individual basis to youth workers through other professionals and an increase in case loads of youth workers can, in some circumstances, reduce the voluntary nature of the relationship and focus more on the individual than the collective or wider community. The sense of youth work being fun and enjoyable as well as developing their personal and social skills appears to have been lost.

Equally, as the more open access youth work is moved towards the voluntary sector to adopt, it was identified by participants in this study that this provision is largely taking the form of positive activities for young people. While a space for young people to enjoy meeting with their peer networks within their communities plays a vital role in young people's lives and can meet many of the points outlined by Davies' manifesto, there were concerns raised by participants of this study that many voluntary youth groups are largely recreational and are not grounded in the values of youth work to informally educate young people (Jeffs and Smith, 2010), address power inequalities and encouraging outward facing, critical thinking (Coburn, 2011).

It is the educational elements and those that create space for anti-oppressive practice and critical thinking that are in danger of being lost in the raft of current changes experienced by youth work across the West Midlands. Equally, youth work in both the statutory or voluntary sectors appear to be less central to the role of giving young people a real voice in their communities or in society. In many local authorities, the role of 'participation' or youth councils have moved towards their community engagement departments. While some of these structures are still effective there are some questions to be raised around which young people these structures attract and how young people's voices fair against more powerful adult opinion.

The loss of an identity

A lack of strategic youth work lead, at national and policy levels has left individuals and organisations vulnerable. The Coalition's approach to the Big Society has been deliberately non-directional, which following New Labour's integration of services has left 'each youth service for itself'. The loss of a generic name for youth work and youth workers, and in some cases a JNC status, has the potential to accelerate the loss of a professional youth work identity.

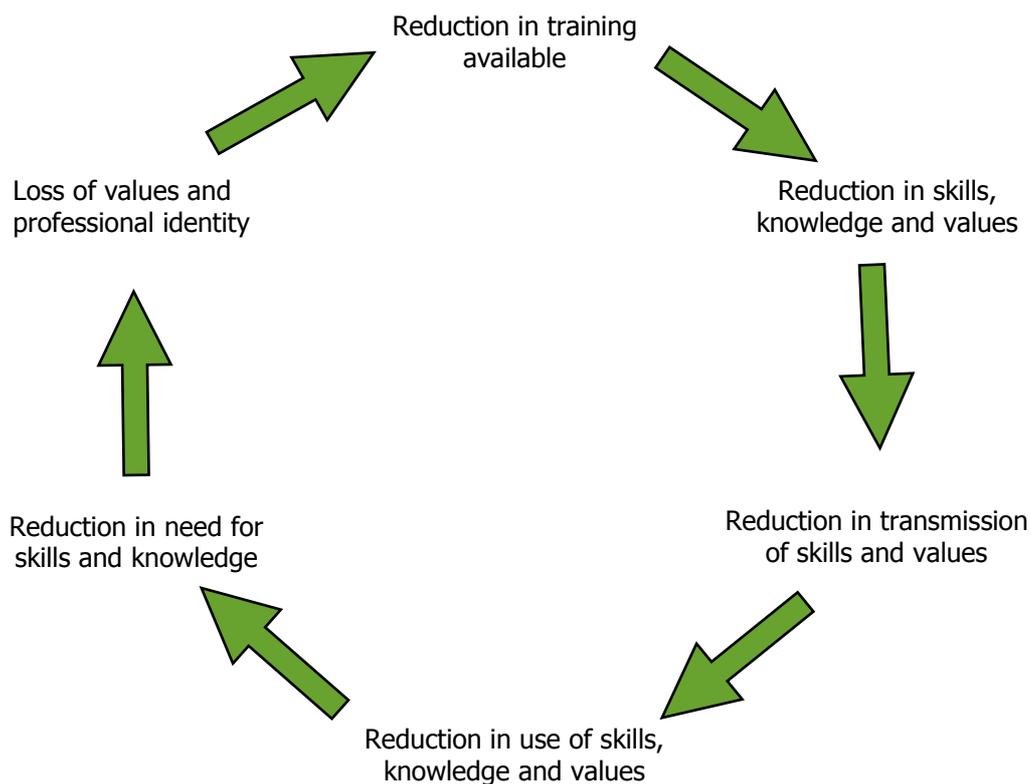
In addition, youth workers are moving into non-traditional youth work roles and organisations. Professions such as teaching, social work and education welfare are increasingly requiring youth work skills from employees. Equally, targeted youth work with an emphasis on case loads has the potential to detract from the core values of youth work and the areas identified in Davies' (2005) manifesto. Combined with a reduction in the demands for youth work training, an acceptance of lower levels of training being adequate for practice and increasingly fewer opportunities for shared reflective practice, these factors have the potential to deprofessionalise youth work.

It could be argued that youth work could afford to reduce its over-reliance on 'professionalism' which has, in part, served to devalue work which is not delivered through qualified youth workers or local authority services. This combined with increased managerialism throughout New Labour and Coalition governments has contributed to a

rather bland view of youth work, increased levels of bureaucracy and the current precarious position youth work finds itself in.

What is vital in the current climate however, is how youth workers maintain their distinct roles amongst other professions working with young people. How do they learn about and develop skills reflecting the values of youth work and the ethos within which it operates if not through training or through supervision? How do youth workers get support for their role if not through their teams? Without a shared commitment to reversing effects of the current destabilisation of youth work, youth work is in danger of being deprofessionalised in the sense of its identity and value base will be lost. As support and training for youth workers reduces, either in quality or quantity, the use and transmission of youth work skills and attitudes reduces, subtly changing the culture of the youth work taking place and the expectations from young people, communities and other staff, while other types of training become prioritised. As a result the need for those skills in the area is reduced, as new staff entering the profession have a different aspirations for training and development. Ultimately, the values upon which youth work is based and skills needed to effectively deliver it are lost, further reducing the need for training. See diagram 1.

Diagram 1. The loss of youth work identity



This threat is heightened by the apparent devaluing of youth work qualifications, such as the Level 3 and JNC qualification in Youth Work. It is through training, challenge and reflection on practice that youth workers are able to retain a clear set of values which can be shared and utilised to benefit the lives of young people. Sharing these skills and

having advocates of youth work as a profession increases the demand for the work and associated training.

Reversing the Trend

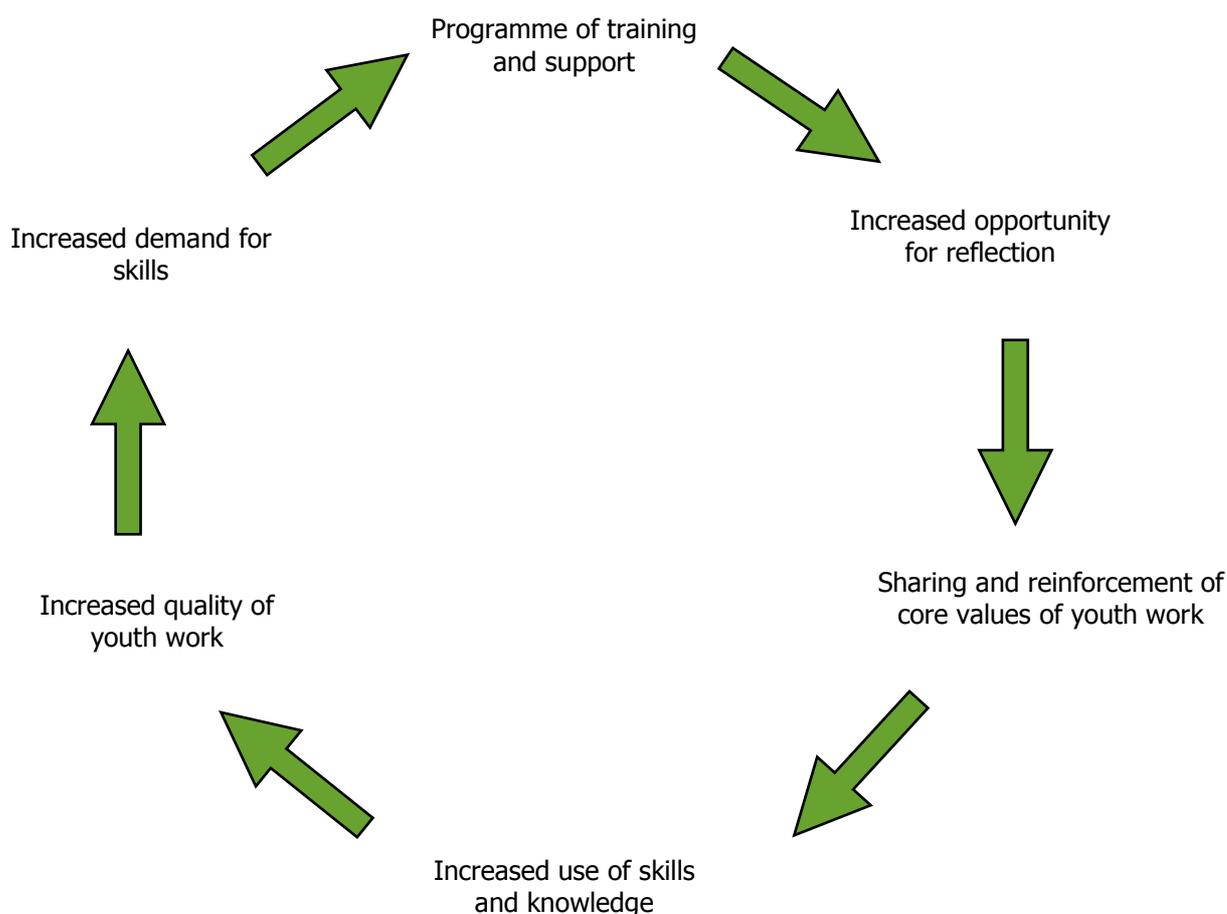
Diagram 1 outlines a somewhat depressing model of the loss of a youth work identity through devaluing its skills and training. It is clear however that the core youth work skills, those which reach and engage with seldom heard young people, those that encourage young people to reflect and adjust behaviour, and those which give young people a voice, are as popular as ever, but not necessarily in youth work settings. These skills are needed in schools, in social work settings and youth offending teams, education welfare and drug and alcohol teams, with young people in care and with teenage parents. It appears that youth work is being dispersed into non-traditional youth work settings and ultimately reaching a broader range of young people.

The need to hold onto a profession, while being responsive and adaptable to new settings, therefore becomes paramount. Job titles and roles are changing as are the services in which youth workers are based. Youth work managers are now less likely than in the past to have a youth work background or youth work qualification. The values of youth work, its identity, skills and knowledge required to effectively carry out the role therefore need to be relayed through other, less traditional, means. A body such as an Institute for Youth Work, if operated effectively, could contribute to this. However, more than ever, training, mentoring and shared practice through alternative networks are vital to the survival of youth work as a profession.

Strengthening the Identity

Diagram 2 presents a model to reverse the current trend of lost identity and drives up the quality of youth work across the voluntary and statutory sectors in the region while reinforcing youth work as a profession through a coordinated programme of support and training.

Diagram 2. Strengthening an identity



A coordinated approach to training and support presents an opportunity to share and reinforce the values, knowledge and skills of youth work, which will drive up the quality of youth work. With increased quality comes an increased demand for skills and knowledge from the programme of training and support.

This paper proposes a programme of training and support which can be rolled out across the West Midlands in order to ensure the sector is strengthened, rather than threatened. With this, however, a new way of working within and between organisations is emerging.

A shared approach: Locally delivered, regionally supported

The rhetoric of partnership working and shared practice is nothing new and many local authority areas have developed a real partnership approach to developing work with young people which both responds to the current financial pressures as well as being designed to respond more closely to local community needs. Where these partnerships have been nurtured, youth work, although operating in a different model, has been retained.

However, the reality in some places is very different. A sense of competition and isolationist approaches have left the work of some youth work organisations, from all sectors, devalued and therefore vulnerable. Equally, the reduced numbers attending the

regional meetings, which in part initiated this study, indicates that while partnership working may be effective in some places, information is not being shared regionally.

It is becoming increasingly apparent however that no one sector can survive without the support of the others. Without funding, much of which comes from local authorities, the voluntary youth work member organisations could not deliver to their current capacity. Equally, local authorities could find that youth workers and youth provision could be lost without the support of the voluntary sector as increasing levels of provision are commissioned to other agencies. Training providers rely on organisations to recruit youth workers and create the demand for training. In addition to this external funding relies on a partnership approach to applications and delivery of projects. Youth work organisations can no longer afford to work in silos. Without recognising the mutual support that the other offers, organisations will find themselves vulnerable.

Local Authorities, Voluntary Youth Councils, other member organisations, voluntary youth services, training agencies and Youth Focus West Midlands all have a role to play in ensuring that partnerships are developed which can respond to the needs of local young people, support youth workers and ensure the identity of youth work is retained and reinforced. Deliverers of youth services in the voluntary and statutory sectors have a responsibility to share practice and to develop networks and local working arrangements with other sectors. Local authorities, although their role in direct delivery may reduce, have a responsibility to provide support to deliverers of services, continuing to fund the voluntary sector and ensuring funding is available to train well equipped, effective and safe youth workers (Mair, 2012). They also have a clear role in supporting networking opportunities through sharing information of operational organisations. Voluntary Youth Councils have a role in developing capacity within the voluntary youth sector to ensure that it is able to respond to the increasing opportunities to tender for work. Finally, training agencies and universities have a responsibility to ensure that progression routes are in place for youth workers, and that the values, skills and knowledge of youth work are maintained through quality training programmes. As more youth workers move into non traditional youth work settings, local networks, coordinated by the most appropriate local organisation will become increasingly important to ensure that all youth workers gain access to the networks, support and training opportunities on offer.

Of course, central to these partnerships are the need for funding and investment. However, where once organisations may have competed for funding to deliver work, the approach to accessing funding needs to be a partnership effort.

The role of Youth Focus West Midlands within this could be to:

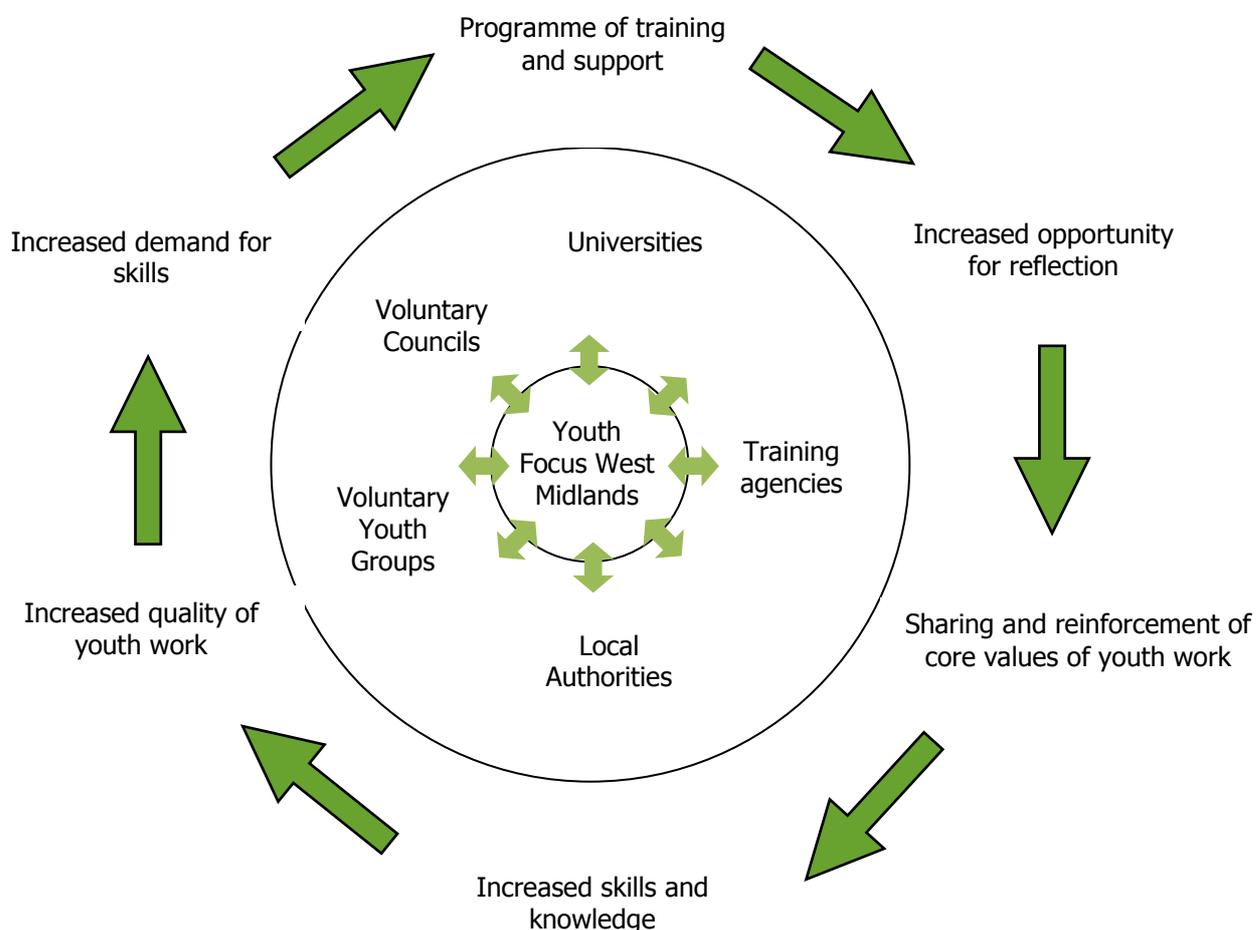
- act as a conduit for policy information and funding opportunities from a national level;
- coordinate regional level funding applications, drawing in partnership organisations from several local authority areas and to attract funding from a range of public, private and charitable sources;
- develop a range networking opportunities, both virtual and face to face, providing youth workers and managers of services with space to reflect, identifying policy issues and these impact on the work at a local level;
- develop systems for sharing practice and resources, including through an online forum;

- support a regional approach to the development and implementation of a programme of training and support which is developed through the local partnerships; and to
- promote the work carried out across the region at a national level.

Many of these roles are already being addressed by Youth Focus West Midlands and others are included as areas for developing in their business plan. It is hoped that the new membership structure for the organisation will increase opportunities to develop as central point of support and information for all youth work organisations across the West Midlands.

Diagram 3. presents the model of shared practice supported at a regional level.

Diagram 3. A new model of practice.



As mentioned, the variation in locally delivered models makes regional coordination of provision difficult. However, Youth Focus West Midlands can retain a largely supportive function while developing a coordination role for funding applications and training and support programmes which could be regionally developed and locally delivered. This would ensure that practice could be easily shared across the region but remaining responsive to local needs. As the Regional Youth Work Unit, the organisation used several key areas of commonality in order to support youth work at a local level, such as

quality, workforce development and young people's involvement. As Youth Focus West Midlands, it would be appropriate at this stage to reassess the new areas of commonality across the region to ensure the organisation is able to respond to shared, immediate needs. While it is unrealistic to assume that all local youth workers will attend regular regional meetings, Youth Focus West Midlands can continue to act as a central point to distribute funding and support to local partnerships to develop their own programmes at a local level.

A programme of support and training to reverse the trend

This study identified a number of concerns regarding the reduction in levels of training and development opportunities available to youth workers, and the loss of a youth work identity through a decrease in the opportunities to share practice and celebrate the distinctiveness of youth work. As we saw in diagram 2, investment in a programme of training and support, delivered locally and supported regionally could help youth work to retain and strengthen its identity and reverse the current trend of destabilisation.

A vision for a programme of training.

There appears to be considerable gaps in training opportunities in some areas, particularly where local authorities have been unable to continue in their roles of providing training opportunities for statutory and voluntary sector youth workers. Further significant barriers to training, particularly at level 3, are the limited numbers of potential participants in some local authority areas and the distance they are required to travel to get to training venues.

In order to overcome some of the difficulties it is proposed that a blended learning, Level 3 course for youth workers is developed, consisting of online learning combined with a small number of contact sessions. It is recognised that this approach to training youth workers is alien to traditional methods of delivering youth work training. Youth work is a hands on profession and training has reflected this. However, increasingly, youth workers need to engage with technologies in their work with young people and as we have seen, face to face delivery of many courses has become unfeasible.

While online training may be a barrier for some, the need to act overrides this. Online learning does not automatically equate to a lack of support. Quality distance and blended learning courses provide students with excellent tutor and peer support and the blended nature of the course being proposed here means that some face to face contact with tutors and the larger group will be maintained. The course, co-ordinated at a regional level, would be made available to all areas, with a recognition that some existing level 3 courses, delivered locally using traditional methods will continue to be offered where they are currently successful.

A vision for a programme of support

The Voluntary Youth Councils are successful in ensuring infrastructure support for the voluntary sector. However it would appear that a sharing of practice for youth workers across areas and between organisations is a rarity. Youth workers from all sectors are

having fewer opportunities for supervision and mentoring within their own organisations than in the past.

Some Voluntary Youth Councils 'buddy up' new voluntary organisations with established ones to create informal mentoring opportunities which provides new organisation with additional support and an opportunity to share good practice and discuss values and skills underpinning the work. It is proposed that this model is extended and broadened to ensure youth workers are provided with some form of local networking opportunities across the sectors, and mentoring schemes for both organisations and individual youth workers.

This proposed programme would be of particular benefit in areas where the local authority has reduced its provision and there are few strong networks for the voluntary sector. The local partnership arrangements will identify which organisations are best placed to lead on this. However, there could be a role here for Youth Focus West Midlands in relation to a coordinated approach to programme and applying for funding for its delivery.

Conclusion

The youth work sector in the West Midlands is undergoing significant change. A new local approach to youth work has emerged, which is, on the whole more responsive to local need. This new approach, while creating variation across the sector, should be celebrated as a strength as it meets needs, encourages a broadening of skills and enables services to be challenged on existing ways of working. However, it is the similarities within this variation which give youth work in the West Midlands its identity and it is these which need to be nurtured, encouraged and promoted. Youth Work can no longer operate in silos and be precious about the work; such practice leaves services vulnerable and isolated. Youth work needs to move with the times and develop partnership approaches which ultimately benefit young people. As youth work moves into a new era, its future in the West Midlands lies in its ability to communicate, share its values and support each other in delivering quality youth work for young people.

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Appendix 1

Questions used to structure discussions with service leads.

1. How many youth work staff are employed in the statutory sector? At which levels?
2. How does youth work operate in the statutory sector? Which department does it sit in if any? Through youth centres? In partnership? What is their remit? Targeted? Open access? What issues are they trying to address?
3. What skills do you now require people working with young people to have? What level of training / CPD would you expect?
4. Who are the managers of youth work? What skills and levels of training would you expect from managers of youth workers / those working with young people?
5. Who are people working with young people being recruited by / working for across the City/County?
6. What is their remit? What are the issues they are addressing?
7. Taking the City/County as a whole what proportion of youth work is carried out by voluntary and statutory sectors?
8. What relationship do you have with the voluntary sector?
9. Are you aware of any work with young people being carried out by private organisations in the area?
10. How well do you feel the statutory/voluntary/private sectors working with young people engage with the community? What do you think are the training and development needs in relation to this?
11. What do you think are the current training needs of youth workers or people working with young people at a delivery level? Are these any different for the voluntary sector/private sector?
12. Where do you see the future of youth work? How do you think it will look in 10 years time?
13. How do you see the future of training for youth workers?
14. How connected do you feel to other services working with young people across the region? How do you think the region can work more effectively to support the needs of people working across the sector?
 - Leadership of services?
 - Community engagement?
 - Delivery of services?
15. Do you have any other ideas about how the needs of services for young people can be addressed?
16. Any other comments?

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