

The implications for youth work of Every Child Matters Economic Wellbeing

This paper is a summary of a longer National Youth Agency briefing paper by Gill Jones, Emeritus Professor of Sociology, Keele University. The longer paper includes full references and is available on The NYA website at www.nya.org.uk

Economic Wellbeing

'Economic wellbeing' is one of the key elements of the Government's Every Child Matters framework designed to protect children and young people and help them maximise their potential. It underpins all the other themes as its absence undermines health and creates barriers to achievement.

There are problems with the usual practice of measuring economic wellbeing in youth which assumes dependence on their family. Many young people of the same age will be at different stages of becoming financially independent. Transitions to independence have become more complex in recent years and more polarised between those in slow-track transitions of extended education and training and those who face fast-track transition and are at increasing risk of social exclusion. In summary, age is a poor indicator of need.

The loss of good jobs in the youth labour market, and the erosion of welfare and student grants for young people, means that many young people who would once have been self-sufficient are now dependent on their families. But there are many reasons why they might not get the support they need – from parental poverty, to complex family structures where obligations to support are not always that clear. There are structural factors too such as the clustering of disadvantage, the effects of discrimination, and the state of local education provision and housing markets. Policies for economic wellbeing must recognise all these challenges rather than focus just on maximising an individual's potential. The focus on 'employability' of young people is important but it can result in young people being blamed for their circumstances – letting 'the system' off the hook.

Most national policy in recent years has been informed by the need to increase the UK's economic competitiveness – including a focus on improving qualifications and reducing welfare dependence. For young people this has included a range of measures to encourage more young people to remain in learning – from the emergence of new incentives such as Education Maintenance Allowances to Young Apprenticeships and Entry to Employment (E2E). The government's review of financial support for 16 to 19s has started to introduce a more coherent approach to financial support for this age group and a more sophisticated approach to support than simple reliance on age.

The whole welfare to work and social exclusion agendas have been given particular emphasis because increased life expectancy and decreased fertility is combining to create a demographic crisis in which the 'dependency ratio' – the ratio of those contributing to the welfare system and those drawing on it – is becoming unsustainable. Young people not in education, employment or training (NEET), and other vulnerable people who may suffer from multiple disadvantages, have become important targets for preventive work and of provision that aims at reintegration.

Youth work, especially outreach work, is well placed to work with otherwise hard to reach young people and help them cross some of the barriers they may face to re-engaging with education and training, including by gaining basic skills or providing access to information and advice. The Steps Forward project in Newcastle, for example, does this through a Personal Development Mentoring Programme for marginalised young people aged 16 to 25. Each young person has a trained volunteer mentor for one-to-one support. Participants gain practical literacy and numeracy skills, plus the chance to develop independent living, communication and parenting skills. Increases in self confidence and self esteem have helped contribute to outcomes including paid employment, tenancy agreements apprenticeships and further education places.

However, policy towards young people increasingly links provision to a citizenship agenda which focuses on rights and responsibilities. There is a 'conditionality' with schemes including the New Deal and EMA that involves incentives and sanctions that is contrary to the ethic of youth work which is based on voluntary engagement rather than coercion. Other developments affecting youth work


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responses include an increasing focus on targeted area-based provision. While this can result in effective work, including projects delivered through The NYA-run Neighbourhood Support Fund, and may help achieve overall national targets, it does mean those in need outside of targeted areas can miss out, particularly those in rural areas. Work with parents and families is also increasing as part the growing emphasis on seeing young people's lives in their family context – *Youth Matters* envisages a step change in the way in which professionals who support young people also engage with parents.

Every Child Matters Outcomes Framework

The Every Child Matters framework attempts to address economic wellbeing at individual, family and community levels. It expresses its aims in terms of specific outcomes.

- **Readiness for employment:** This appears to mean an understanding of the realities of working life, for which young people get support in the form of impartial information and guidance and also reflects soft skills such as self confidence, teamwork and enterprise. It also requires vocational training and work experience. And it naturally requires identification and targeting of NEET groups.
- **Engagement in post school, education, employment or training:** This requires support for smooth transitions, flexibility to enable young people to review and revise the choices they make and to be sensitive to equality issues.
- **Live in decent homes and sustainable communities:** This outcome generally sees young people as living in their families of origin and appears to overlook the rise in youth homelessness from parents not always being willing to provide accommodation.
- **Access to transport and material goods:** Access to transport actually receives very little attention and once again is assumed largely to be a responsibility of parents. Access to material goods can be a poor indicator of economic wellbeing, especially among single young people who are less home-based in their leisure time.
- **Live in households free from low income:** This appears to relate to those in the parental home but highlights the need to provide particular support to vulnerable young people including care leavers and those with learning difficulties.

The contribution of youth work

Around 60 per cent of young people are estimated to come in contact with the youth service at some point between the ages of 11 and 25. Youth work helps young people achieve economic wellbeing by offering personal development, education and life skills programmes tailored to individual need, and by providing social, economic, educational and recreational opportunities designed to encourage social inclusion and lifelong learning. Its distinctive features include:

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

Youth workers tend to agree that the core purpose of youth work is the personal and social development of young people through informal education, although it is not always clearly understood outside the profession what it is that youth workers actually do. Youth work is more strategic than is sometimes portrayed and its holistic approach variously contributes to young people's re-integration, diversion and engagement in preventative activity, levels of aspiration and achievement and active citizenship. Through youth work, young people are helped to prepare for working life.

The primary medium is non-formal education – structured educational intervention in a non-institutional setting, which is negotiated between the learner and the facilitator, and which leads to a planned and recognised outcome for the learner. The outcome is not typically certification (though this is increasing) and includes elements which contribute to the acquisition of social capital, and the skills needed for employability. These are not just work-related skills, but also soft skills, including emotional literacy, creativity and enterprise. A fundamental element in the youth work value base is that young people set their own aims and objectives.

Forms of provision

Youth work provision takes many different forms, ranging between universal or open access centre-based provision and that which targets young people at risk. In many cases it involves collaboration with mainstream services, such as education, or forms part of the targeted service provision within government initiatives. It can identify previously unseen need, and can focus on those young people who are unlikely to be contacted through schools or schemes – the hard-to-reach.

Examples include:

- **Buildings-based work** – youth clubs and centres ranging from well-equipped purpose built youth centres catering solely for young people to clubs based in premises shared with other organisations such as community centres and village halls.
- **Detached work** – making contact with young people in their own spaces, for instance parks, bus shelters, shopping centres or on the street.
- **Outreach work** – encouraging young people to make more use of existing provision or to develop new provision.
- **Mobiles** – converted buses or other vehicles taken to particular localities, offering young people opportunities to meet together, take part in structured programmes and gain access to resources, information and advice.
- **Schools and further education colleges** – in many schools and colleges, youth workers contribute to formal education programmes, particularly relating to PSHE and citizenship education. They may offer lunchtime and after-school provision open to all young people, as well as developing programmes with specific groups of young people, especially those who are having difficulties. Youth workers are also involved in study support programmes.
- **Youth work involvement in government programmes** for post-16 education and training, such as the Learning Gateway, New Deal or Connexions.
- **Information, advice and counselling projects** – providing a range of services from information about local facilities to long-term support for individuals or groups of young people.
- **Youth forums**, councils or other projects enabling young people to learn about and engage in democratic processes, and to ensure that their views inform the development of policies and services.
- **Specialist projects, targeting particular groups** of young people, for instance Asian young women or young people in or leaving care.
- **Specialist projects focusing on specific activities**, for instance youth action projects, motor projects or arts projects.
- **Cross-community and international work**, in Britain or abroad, which brings together young people from different cultures and countries on joint projects.

Implications of Every Child Matters for youth work

The *Youth Matters* Green Paper (2005) indicated the need for services for young people to be integrated at local level in order to lead to the ECM outcomes. ECM specifies areas for action to ensure integration of services with clearly defined responsibility. These have major implications for the ways in which voluntary and statutory youth services are funded, organised and delivered.

ECM areas for action

- working with families;
- early intervention and effective protection;
- accountability and integration;
- workforce reform; and
- funding.

a) Working with families

It was the main argument of the earlier section of this paper that for economic wellbeing of young people to be addressed, attention must now be given to the relationships between young people and their parents or carers. This is largely because of the extension of the period of economically dependent youth and the difficulties associated with accessing parental support. Preventive work with young people is likely to be far more effective if the parent-child relationship is addressed.

Merton *et al* found that families, as well as friends and communities, could have a negative influence on the effectiveness of youth work. This is particularly going to be the case where the aspirations of young people, their parents, service providers and policy makers do not coincide. Youth workers can act as a bridge between young people and their families, but there may be resistance in the youth work profession to diverting attention away from young people to work with their families. Many young people experience problems in their family relationships and youth workers would not want to jeopardise their relationships with the young people they work with. Partnership working with other professionals may provide a means of working with families.

b) Early intervention and effective protection

There is a need for common assessment, tracking procedures, and monitoring if services are to be made more level nationally, and the main criticism of existing youth work services addressed. Information must be pooled between agencies if needs are to be identified and acted upon early, and if gaps and overlaps in services are not to be allowed to develop. The need for information sharing is obvious in child abuse cases. It may be less so, in the case of disaffected young people where the same procedures can be interpreted as control rather than protection. The ethos that lies behind agency information-sharing and common assessment framework may be seen by youth workers to breach the confidentiality principle on which their work is based. Youth workers may need some convincing that information sharing is in young people's interests. The ethos of rapid response multi-disciplinary teams is also quite contrary to that of street-based youth work, where relationships are long-term (ideally) and based on trust. On the other hand, youth work has a clear and existing role in identification of need, especially among hard-to-reach groups.

c) Accountability and integration

Clear mechanisms for governance are needed if children's and young people's services are to be integrated through local partnerships. ECM puts forward a structure for local services comprising a Director of Children's Services, with local safeguarding children's boards, and an integrated inspection framework (led by Ofsted). Under the ECM arrangements, Connexions is to be transferred to local authority responsibility, to allow the service to be more responsive to local need. Youth work has played a central role in the development and delivery of Connexions, for example, ensuring that Connexions reaches young people who are disaffected or at risk. There is variation in the quality of partnerships between local youth services and Connexions, but where they are close and confident, youth work is adding value. Youth workers already work with other agencies including housing, youth offending teams and police, leisure and health services.

At their best, local multi-agency partnerships are an effective way of coordinating services and filling gaps between services. Problems can however occur, such as the difference in professional ethos and culture between partners. Youth workers, by working in partnership with non-youth work professionals, may be able to develop more preventive work by widening the focus out from the individual and working with communities and families, without losing sight of their primary concern with young people themselves.

d) Workforce reform

ECM proposes a framework for workforce reform. This includes mechanisms for improving skills, through training and standards, leadership development programme, and improved mechanisms for joint inter-professional working, such as common core training.

What does this mean for youth work? In all, there are around 3,000 full-time and 21,000 part-time youth workers employed by local authority youth services in England, and an estimated half a million volunteers. The service is staffed by people with different levels of attachment to it and its professional values, therefore. Levels of training also vary widely. Crimmens *et al's* (2004) study of street-based work found that staffing could affect the quality of the service. Projects were staffed 75 per cent by volunteers or part-time sessional staff, though they could be working with high-risk young people. High staff turnover made training difficult. There was therefore a misfit between the aims of the service, to work through long-term relationships of mutual trust, and the reality of its staffing situation.

e) Funding

The establishment of Children's Trusts as commissioning bodies is intended to allow services to be

organised around local needs, and projects commissioned specifically to fill identified gaps. Effective youth work needs a secure funding base, to underpin staff development as well as youth work practice. Short-term, unstable and variable funding leads to differential capacity to deliver and is one of the reasons for the geographic unevenness of the service. Research shows that more systematic funding of street-based work may offer good value for money and measurable results. Funders may however be single-issue orientated and want short-term results.

Service management

The ECM Outcomes Framework sets out ways judgments will be made on service management, including leadership and value for money. The criteria include the following:

Ambition

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

Prioritisation

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

Capacity

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

Performance management

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

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

Measuring effectiveness

How should the effectiveness of youth work be measured? On the one hand its practice is seen as fluid, continuously shifting, and can offer no guarantee of reaching certain and final endpoints. On the other hand, services are adapting to policy developments and can point to tangible outcomes, such as re-engaging with education or reducing drug use.

The link between scope for evaluation and funding is likely to get closer, and it will become increasingly important to find appropriate means of evaluating youth provision, if the service is not to become skewed towards the achievement of hard outcomes. The DfES discussion document *Transforming Youth Work* (2001) listed qualitative criteria for 'good youth work', and The NYA has added a fifth:

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

The National Youth Agency

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

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

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

Our five strategic aims are:

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

It is clear that most of these criteria of quality do not lend themselves to development into measurable targets of effectiveness and there is the problem about evaluating the effectiveness of provision in that young people are subject to many changing influences. There is no easy way of determining whether desistance from crime or drugs, or increased self-esteem, is due to youth work or other factors. Qualitative and broader evaluation of the youth work process in context may be more appropriate than monitoring its effectiveness against baselines and targets.

Tensions and challenges

The question is whether the open, flexible, voluntary and exploratory approach of youth work can be maintained within the current policy agenda. Youth work is attractive to policy makers because it can make contact with hard to reach young people and is very useful in helping young people's voices be heard in consultations. But there may be less concern about preserving the integrity of the means by which these are achieved. Merton *et al* alert us to four main strategic issues which threaten to compromise the basic values underlying youth work:

- **The balance between universal or open access and targeted work** – the ever-increasing focus on targeting runs the risk of failing many young people who are less visibly in need. It will be important for funders to recognise that universal and open provision is both needed and effective.
- **Processes for identifying need and directing resources** – broadly speaking, ECM represents a shift in policy emphasis from treatment of problems to their prevention. On the other hand the increasing focus on anti-offending policies runs the risk of removing resources away from preventive work.
- **Relationship between youth work and schools** – should there be better links between mainstream and out-of-school/special education provision?. How will the increasing recognition of vocational courses impact on the relationship between youth work and schools? How desirable is the increased emphasis on accreditation? Is there a risk that informal and non-formal education will become 'formalised' and less attractive to some young people?
- **Retaining the voluntary engagement of young people** – the policy shift towards responsibilities rather than rights is reflected in increasing emphasis on the conditionality of benefits, contracts between young people and service providers, etc. Can the basic youth work principle of voluntarism (rather than its antithesis, coercion) be maintained in the face of this policy agenda? What happens to the relationship between young people and youth workers when rights (such as to participate or express a view) become responsibilities?

Conclusions

Youth work already brings a major contribution to the ECM economic wellbeing agenda. It plays a particularly important role in working through non-formal education with young people, often allowing young people to develop skills which will help them into work, but which do not get taught in school. Youth work enables young people to achieve their full potential in learning and work, and to gain protective social capital and life skills, and to provide the kinds of information, guidance and support they may need through the difficult period of transition to adulthood. It does these things effectively through relationships of trust and respect between youth workers and young people. Essential to effective functioning is long-term support, which allows time for trust to develop and personal life plans to be evaluated and if necessary revised.

Many aspects of ECM hold great possibilities for youth work. In particular, it might provide scope for longer-term and more secure funding and better support structures. Working in partnerships with other professionals is not new to youth work, but it can be difficult where there is a clash of ethos. Partnership working should, however, encourage professionals to reflect on their own professional values and also perhaps gain from learning about those of others. Partnership working with family workers, for example, may be a means of helping young people who have difficulties in their family relationships, enabling youth workers to understand more of the family context of young people. The flexibility in the ways youth workers engage with young people is one of the strengths of the profession, and it can be put to use in other ways. We live in a rapidly changing world, and for youth work to be a key player in integrated youth services, it must be responsive to young people's changing needs and able to adapt itself accordingly.