

## Evidence Session: Youth Services and Community Work

**Monday 16<sup>th</sup> October 2017**  
**11.30-13.30**  
**Wilson Room, Portcullis House**

**Present:**

***From the Commission***

Vicky Foxcroft - Chair  
James Cleverly  
Chukka Umunna  
Siobhan Benita  
Keir Irwin-Rogers

***Witnesses***

Stephen Webster – NCS  
Beth Murray – Catch 22  
Richard Parkes – Young Lambeth Cooperative  
Gary Hutton – Product of a Postcode  
Rhammel Afflick – British Youth Council  
Temi Mwale – The 4Front Project  
Tekisha Henry – Former Deputy Young Mayor of Lewisham  
Steve Drowley – Cardiff Metropolitan University

**Key themes to emerge from this session were:**

- The impact of funding cuts
- Importance of evaluation, access to data and desirability of agreed national standards
- Relationship between national, local and voluntary service providers
- Need for longer term, consistent and sustainable approaches
- Need for safe spaces for young people and a better understanding of underlying issues
- Absence of trust and understanding between young people and established institutions/service providers

**Specific suggestions that arose:**

- A new national youth policy framework which would make the provision of youth work a statutory duty for both local authorities and central government
- A new professional standard for youth workers which would include training in areas relating to mental health issues
- Requirement for national organisations to support smaller and/or grassroots organisations through sharing of resources or expertise

**Before the session, witnesses were asked to consider the following questions:**

- The impact of the on-going reduction in funding of youth services
- How youth services were being delivered, how their effectiveness was being measured and how this has changed over the past decade,
- What providers and users of youth services see as being the biggest challenges in the system and what do they predict as future trends in youth services,
- How joined-up, or not, various youth services providers are (public and voluntary sector) and where the main fault lines lie?
- Whether there have been any positive developments in the sectors and, if so, whether can good practice can be shared

**During the session, the following additional questions were asked:**

**James Cleverly** asked about fractures in the sector and how collaborative working could be encouraged. In a context of tighter funding how should available money be distributed and devolved?

**Chukka Umunna** asked how national and local policy makers and organisations could do more to help smaller charities and providers. What practical support could they offer, for example with things like provision of office space and help with funding applications? On funding, Chukka also asked whether it was possible for organisations to become more self-sufficient and less reliant on money from local authorities or national agencies. In the context of having met a lot of individuals who work with young people but who are unable to evaluate their impact or demonstrate whether they are using funds effectively, he asked whether a statutory national framework on standards and evaluation of youth work would be useful.

**Siobhan Benita** asked how the sector could ensure that innovation and new ideas were facilitated, especially in the context of increased evaluation and monitoring.

**Keir Irwin-Rogers** asked whether the onus for evaluation and measurement should be shifted from providers to contractors, in particular to avoid scare resources being diverted to time-consuming bureaucracy.

**A summary of the points that were made by witnesses (grouped by theme):**

***Impact of funding cuts***

- There had been a significant reduction in funding of youth services, which had resulted in increased competition for funding amongst providers and more silo-based thinking with less collaboration.

- Cuts had had a massive impact and whole areas of youth work were disappearing. Consequently, the most skilled people were being taken away from the front line.
- There had been major reductions in local youth services. Instead, services that did still exist were often run from hubs and whilst these could be good, they were harder for many young people to access (issues with transport and costs etc.).
- Due to lack of funding, there had also been a shift away from open access services (which all young people can benefit from) towards targeted work which focussed only on the most acute issues.
- Many local authorities were commissioning out their youth services. Whilst this wasn't necessarily a bad approach, it had led to lack of consistency and accountability in areas.
- There was a sense that whilst statutory agencies could still get some funding, it was much harder for voluntary agencies to do so.
- Large organisations with strong brands were more likely to get funding than smaller, local charities, even though the latter might be doing very good work on the ground.
- Funding for mental health issues had also been reduced and – in the context of youth violence – this was a very serious problem.
- People thought that austerity might have led to the sector opening-up with people collaborating and pooling funding, but instead there had been an increase in “silo-isation”. As one witness said, “..instead we see people put their arms around their pots of money.”
- The charity sector had also become super-competitive. Smaller charities working on the same/similar issues (such as reducing knife crime) didn't collaborate because they needed to protect their funding.
- Lack of collaboration had a negative impact on young people, for example, one young person might find themselves engaging with 15 or more different agencies, e.g. CAMS, school, social worker, YOTs, police, housing provider.
- Such a disjointed environment made it difficult for young people to access the help they needed and to know where they should go for the right help.
- Several of the witnesses thought that collaboration could be incentivised if funding was devolved to a more local (PCC) level.

***Importance of evaluation, access to data and agreed national standards***

- Unlike in some other areas, this sector hadn't seen “a revolution in evidence” and there was insufficient understanding - or sharing - of good practice. Across many areas, youth work was being done in the same way it had been for many years with little or no reference to “what works”.
- As one witness said, “I would hesitate to say there's been a big focus on evidence-led youth work. Although there are pockets of extraordinarily great examples of where it's happened, we're not seeing evidence-led practice across the board.”
- Due to a lack of evaluation, it was difficult to assess whether funding was currently being used effectively or whether, for example, various pots of money could be utilised differently to greater effect.
- Youth services used to be inspected by OFSTED and this had often been useful in identifying good practice as well as areas in need of improvement. Despite an increased focus on

outcomes and measurement, however, at present youth services remained an “unregulated marketplace” with no overriding paradigm. Most witnesses were in favour of the creation of a national standard/framework of practice, one that would help to raise the quality bar for youth work.

- A national framework would also help to fill the current “youth policy vacuum” and could apply clear statutory duties on government and local authorities to ensure that a high standard of youth services are provided.
- National and local governments could help to facilitate a more evidence-based approach by giving access to data so that organisations could analyse where the needs are and ensure they are not wasting precious resources on problems that perhaps don’t exist. The more evidence that could be generated and shared about the sector and its work, the more this would help small charities in particular to target their efforts and to engage effectively in any future national framework.
- Any national framework, however, would need to be mindful of grassroots organisations, many of whom might struggle with resources or capacity to meet complicated new standards. It should not place too big a burden on these organisations.
- It was recognised that some voluntary front-line, youth work was very hard to measure. One-to-one work, for example, was resource intensive but in some life and death situations, it was vital. There should be a way of capturing the impact of this work as it may not meet traditional KPIs.

#### ***Relationship between the national local and voluntary providers***

- Large organisations would regularly get funding to run local schemes despite not having the necessary local connections and intelligence. In many instances, it might be more beneficial for them to allow smaller organisations to take the lead on the front line. Young people were more likely to work with smaller organisations (they wouldn’t, for example, talk to the police or social services) but smaller organisations often didn’t have the resources to mediate.
- There could often be a disconnect between funders and smaller, grass-roots organisations with the latter finding it difficult to secure relatively small amounts of money to cover even their basic operating costs.
- There were scores of socially motivated volunteers and young people engaging in the sector who wanted to make an active contribution to their community. In addition, many businesses wanted to influence and positively impact their community too.
- The voluntary sector had a tremendous amount of expertise and knowledge about what was going on on the ground. Commissioners should work with volunteers to co-design solutions and tap into this capacity that already existed.
- There were some excellent examples of collective working, for example the West London Zone which had replicated good work in America. This involved local authorities working with funders, trusted local charities, community link workers etc. using data and social impact money to reach the right people.

- Catch 22 was another example of an organisation that was adopting “generous leadership” – the idea that everyone within the sector has a responsibility to open-up their back office and allow individuals/new and small players to share resources and “plug in”.
- Catch 22 also recognised MOPAC and projects in Wales as other examples of where good practice was happening in collaboration between services and pooling of resources amongst organisations.
- It wasn’t just about funding. Commissioners and large organisations could also use their network and, for example, to lend their legitimacy to funding applications, or to help introduce other organisations to the right people.
- Historically charities had been seen as an addition to government and, therefore, an addition to a fully-funded statutory youth service. Couldn’t we, however, create a different approach whereby – if the evidence on performance was available – charities could be an integral part of a mixed provider service model. As one witness from a charity said, “No one is going to volunteer for their council, but they will definitely volunteer for us.”

#### ***Need for longer term, consistent and sustainable approaches***

- The current structures produced quick fixes rather than dealing with systemic issues but short-term interventions are not effective.
- Long-term relationships need to be nurtured and supported and interventions must be consistent over a long period of time. Overnight change was not going to happen.
- Services provision was not consistent. Youth clubs, for example, would often operate for a relatively short amount of time before funding was withdrawn. Consequently, trust and a sense of community was built up only to get broken down again which itself had deep and negative consequences.
- The voluntary sector also needed to be working with the next generation and shifting focus to early intervention.
- New analysis was also needed on what grassroots organisations actually need. Currently they are having to intervene at the point of crisis but this was not an effective or sustainable model.

#### ***Need for safe spaces for young people and a better understanding of underlying issues***

- If you wanted to tackle youth violence, you had to meet young people in their own communities and create spaces where they felt safe to talk. Grassroots organisations were able to do this in ways that others could not.
- Many national or larger agencies would not have a real understanding, for example, of the psychological impact of a postcode on young people
- The importance of knowing young people, knowing their families, knowing the community and building those relationships over time was crucial in helping people to open up and, consequently, to find the right solutions.
- Many young people would not travel to a youth/social work centre outside their own neighbourhood.

- Young people were more likely to accept support from small, local organisations than from traditional institutions but it was often these smaller organisations who struggled to secure funding.
- It was suggested that a new profession was needed – this would build on traditional youth work but would also include additional skillsets and training around, for example, CBT. This recognised that many young people who were involved in violence were displaying learnt patterns of behaviour and there was a need for youth workers to understand this better.
- Mental health issues were a significant underlying factor – as one witness said, “Lots of young people are being traumatised, either by experiencing violence in the home or by seeing it or being a victim on the street.” These young people were carrying an awful lot of issues with them which often had damaging implications.
- Some young people had a disregard for their own lives as well as the lives of others.
- Youth services – and the professionals working in them – needed to be culturally competent and to take into account, for example, problematic intergenerational experiences with the criminal justice system. A key factor driving violence/vigilante culture was a lack of trust between some communities/individuals and institutions/authorities and these issues needed to be understood and taken into account.
- Young people were often divided into groups but - if managed correctly - youth provision could help to build cohesion and create new senses of community. The fear between different groups had to be removed.
- Importance of communication between different service providers, e.g. mental health services, social services, schools etc.

***Absence of trust and understanding between young people and established institutions/service providers***

- Trust was a central issue and needed to be addressed if solutions were going to be identified and developed.
- The lack of action on youth violence was one key reason for low levels of trust in young people. Despite many reports and recommendations over the past years, policies had not been implemented, actions had not been progressed and the situation had got worse rather than better.
- As an example, one witness highlighted that hardly any of the recommendations in the 2009 Home Affairs Select Committee report had been implemented and/or were still in operation now. This lack of action had had a negative impact on young people’s faith in the system’s ability and willingness to work on their behalf.
- One witness said he had been attending meetings on these issues for over ten years but that nothing had changed. Young people were rarely included in the meetings. They didn’t need others to speak on their behalf, they should be at the table. As long as the environment was right, they would be able to engage and should be listened to. Indeed, only they held the answers.
- Without a voice in the debate, young people’s lack of hope and sense of powerlessness was increased.

- Often, the only contact young people had with authorities was through police officers or social workers and these individuals were not necessarily best placed to provide the most effective support.
- For some young people, reporting something to the police was like “signing their own death warrant”. This perception was deeply-rooted in places and difficult to change. Sometimes, people who were able to make the biggest changes in the community were those who had lived through similar experiences themselves.
- The three “Ps” - every young person needed “...a Purpose, a Place to Live and good People around them.”