

# **The Decline of the Local Authority Youth Service in England: Reflections of an actor in its demise**

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## **Introduction**

These assertive and tentative reflections cover the period from the genuine promise of a radical 1968 to the artificial optimism of a populist, authoritarian 2019. Across four decades I sold my labour to three different Local Authority Education (LEA) departments. Most recently, retired from the fray, I've sought to observe and comment upon the shifting landscape of contemporary youth work. For better or worse, however flawed and forgetful my memory, I've been party to the ups and downs of Local Authority (LA) Youth Services in England. In this spirit I will begin the story with two snapshots from my chequered career.

In the first I am to be found in the main hall of a rambling Wigan youth centre. A hirsute, profusely sweating part-time youth worker, I organise on two evenings a week a diversity of activities from weight training to basketball predominantly with young men, offset by a token last half hour of mixed volleyball. At first glance I appear to be the Positive Activities worker of New Labour's late 1990's dreams. Contrarily, I am seeing myself more and more as an informal educator, stimulated by the flux of my interaction with young people. I am intrigued by the infinite, if uncertain possibilities of association and conversation, the potential of relating without either imposed authority or a prescribed script.

More than a quarter of a century later I am to be found, besuited as befits a Chief Youth & Community Officer, in the Wigan Enterprise Centre surrounded by colleagues from the Planning Department. We are putting together a bid for time-limited funding aimed

at 'disadvantaged' young people. The rules of the competition demand that we promise to deliver on a number of targets - percentage reductions in anti-social behaviour, drug use and teenage pregnancies. I try to argue that the introduction of these outcomes will distort the Youth Service's relationship with young people. My misgivings are expressed to no avail. I leave, heavy of heart, having in the name of jobs rather than young people's needs, been incorporated into a sham. A colleague attempts to persuade me I have been pragmatically principled. I am reduced to uttering dismissive expletives.

With these 'selfies' as a backdrop I will propose that the decline of the LA Youth Service is rooted in the contrasting fortunes of two opposing economic and ideological expressions of capitalism, namely social democracy and neoliberalism. The former was founded on a post-war consensus favouring a benevolent, interventionist, if bureaucratic state, the necessary regulation of the market and a commitment, however partial, to the common good. The latter is based on a malevolent, interventionist and still, whatever the claims, a bureaucratic state, the rule of the market and privatisation, in the sense of both privatising services and of individualising every corner of our existence. Viewed through an educational mirror, social democracy at its best sought to nurture the active citizen, whilst neoliberalism's focus is upon 'homo economicus', the manufacturing of the compulsive, compliant consumer.

For the purposes of the following exploration I've identified four periods, which correspond to my best sense of the LA Youth Service's rise and fall over the last 60 years.

### **1968-1985: The Years of Relative Autonomy**

Having gained my teaching certificate, which in those times allowed me to pass as a qualified youth worker, my first teaching post ought to have brought me into contact with the LEA. It did not. Naively I took for granted the autonomy this absence afforded. There was no external monitoring of the contradiction in the church primary school between my erratic child-centred post-Plowden approach and the headmaster's conservative, paternalistic outlook. Thus his class faced the front in rows, whilst with a kindly shake of his head he suffered my insistence on arranging the desks into groups.

Once the concertina of a partition was closed he left me to my own devices.

Over in the youth club, where I started as a part-timer on two sessions per week, a similar lack of hierarchical oversight prevailed. We did whatever we wished, provided it was welcomed by the young people and didn't arouse the ire of other workers or the management committee. Whatever our disagreements, classically whether to ban or not the 'foul-mouthed', the argument stayed in-house.

This vacuum of explicit collective purpose was to be filled dramatically from 1974 onwards with the reorganisation of local government across England. By chance, just as the Metropolitan Borough of Wigan was formed, I became a full-time youth worker in the new authority. The fledgling Youth Service was top-heavy, composed of 6 youth officers, all but one graduates of the post-Albemarle National College for Youth Leader Training, yet less than dedicated to its questioning philosophy; keen above all to steer clear of trouble or complaint. They managed not to manage a mere 5 full-time staff.

Their prospect of a quiet life was to be shattered from above and below. From on high the Education Department witnessed an influx of creative professionals committed to cajoling schools and colleges into embracing a progressive child-centred and teacher-friendly agenda. Overwhelmingly in the early days white and male, these catalysts for social change were disciples of the Enlightenment. Within the next decade, led by a charismatic risk-taking Director of Education who, above all, invested trust in practitioners, a rich array of initiatives unfolded, amongst which, to mention a few, were the introduction of teacher advisors in all subject areas; a dedicated Arts Studio; an award-winning Youth Jazz Orchestra; a theatre company in residence and two outdoor education centres.

Despite this vibrant atmosphere the Youth Service management dragged its feet. Meeting under their own steam the workers seized the initiative, drafting a Programme of Action, which quoted Brecht's advocacy of 'the little fishes' (when the sharks the sharks devour/Little fishes have their hour) and democratic participation in its introduction. Such rhetoric was music to the ears of the Department's senior management. The Programme was accepted by the Education Committee,

strengthening the influence of those seeking to transform the Service from below. In the ensuing period the grassroots, bolstered by the recruitment of workers heavily involved in the social movements of the time, took control. Amongst the developments which transformed the Service were the remarkable advance of a feminist-led Girls' Work and an innovative Youth Co-operative.

Towards the end of 1981 I moved to Leicestershire to become a Training and Development Officer in the County Council's Community Education department. Fortuitously, or revealingly, a similar liberal culture of grace and favour prevailed with its Senior Community Education Adviser having the ear of the Director, and seemingly unchecked independence. Once again the purpose and direction of the Service was up for grabs. As in Wigan there was significant scope for influencing policy and practice from within and without the official channels. Leicestershire adopted and revised the Wigan part-time youth work training course, which encouraged workers to grapple with the implications of class, gender, race, sexuality and disability for their practice. Indeed the curriculum was used lock, stock and barrel on a City & Guilds course for Youth Opportunities Supervisors. Interestingly this desire to politicise the County Council's Community Education perspective lagged behind the practice of youth and community workers in the Leicester City Council's Recreation Department, many of whom were unqualified, women and drawn from the diverse ethnic communities of the city. At the time this tension was often stimulating, but it contained the seeds of issues to come, particularly around the themes of professional qualifications and remuneration. The LA Youth and Community Education Service remained the bastion of a JNC qualified professional cadre with its own distinct pay and conditions.

### **1985-1990 Swimming against the tide**

I moved to a post in Derbyshire, another County Council, as a District Community Education Officer in the midst of the highly charged atmosphere of the Great Strike of 1984/85. A newly elected Labour administration riding on the back of the dispute sought to implement a manifesto which included the radicalisation of Community Education. I was explicitly a political appointment, meeting within days directly with the socialist-feminist Chair of the Community Education Committee. In this context the

radical agenda was being imposed problematically by the ruling Labour group and my job was to be their enforcer. On the ground, Labour's insistence was disrupted by both layers of senior and middle management alongside long-serving staff, who paid lip-service to the rhetoric and carried on as before. For my part, I fell between all stools. I was distrusted by senior officers as being too close to Labour. Gradually, because of my high profile and my close relations with the mining community, I was perceived by key politicians as having political aspirations of my own. Personality conflict aside, the Derbyshire project was ill-fated. By the late 80s social democracy and its offspring municipal socialism were on the retreat. It was perhaps no coincidence that the Bolsover District Team, for which I was responsible, whose territory was the heart of the Derbyshire coalfield, became known as the Headbangers for taking the Council's progressive policies too seriously. As it was, thanks to the support of a compassionate senior manager, who to my everlasting shame I had bad-mouthed, I escaped by the grip of my dentures the wrath of the Council's authoritarian leadership.

Before moving to my last LA destination, this is an appropriate moment to reflect on the role of the youth work trade unions across the period I've traced, in particular when thinking about how a progressive practice seemed to swim successfully in the 1980s against the neoliberal tide. At the beginning of the decade the majority of LA Youth Service activists were to be found in the Community & Youth Workers' Union (CYWU) born out of a quiescent professional association and transformed into a trade union with a radical constitution based on the right to caucus, the creation of which paralleled the development of work with young women, black youth, gay and lesbian young people. Local branches flourished, exerted considerable pressure upon the employer and played a leading role in the resistance to the Manpower Service Commission's neoliberal attempt to colonise work with young people. Inevitably CYWU in its radical guise came under pressure from within and without as the political balance of forces moved towards neoliberalism. CYWU endured a number of internal crises and adopted a more traditional model of organisation. Given neoliberalism's attack on trade unions and collective organisation in general, no matter what form CYWU might have taken, it would not have arrested a decline in influence, linked organically to the demise of LA Youth Services.

**1990 - 1997 Coming Home**

By twist of fate I was appointed to the post of Chief Youth & Community Officer back home in Wigan, where the liberal culture hung on and where officers rather than politicians still made the running. In one of the last throws of the progressive dice, the Education Committee agreed to a new structure for the Youth Service, notable for the adoption of two Advisers specifically for work with young women and the opening of a number of young women's centres on the Authority's council estates. The budget was increased and more staff appointed. The mood was optimistic, but hopes were to be dashed as post-Poll Tax cuts began to bite.

The '94/'95 budget saw a full-time workforce reduced from 32 to 12 and the Authority's youth centres closed. Whatever my concerns about the undermining of workers' self-organisation by the presence of a supposed radical manager, in an enormous tribute to 25 years of grassroots activity, over 5,000 people with young people at their head marched in protest. It was a stirring expression of improvised, yet rehearsed collective social action. It is still a testimony to the genuine impact of a Youth Service on the social fabric of the Authority. It came to nought. Of course a rearguard action took place. In Wigan we defined a new role for the remains of the Youth Service as the conscience of the Authority's Services for Young People. Like many other Services shattered by the budget reductions, with little or no option, we entered the neoliberal market, bidding for short-term targeted funding to keep something of a compromised show on the road.

Many of my colleagues in the now redundant Confederation of Heads of Young People's Services took refuge in Blair's 1997 victory, taking me to task for failing to grasp that a managerial commitment to delivering and accounting for agreed outcomes would be the salvation of the Youth Service. In the event New Labour did inflict gradually an instrumental data-demanding agenda. In the process New Labour all but deleted the term 'youth work' from its increasingly authoritarian discourse, replacing it with the patronising notion of 'positive activities'.

Lest I forget, it's necessary to mention that in this period I pursued enrhusiastically

the creation of a Council for Voluntary Youth Services. My pluralist effort to bring closer the ‘professional’ and voluntary wings of provision was too little, too late and expressed an underlying tension - the qualified youth worker’s indifference, even disdain, for the voluntary sector. At its most extreme this was revealed in the attempt to block funding for the Scouts in Derbyshire on the basis that the Association was a quasi-military outfit. I suspect that this arrogant perspective was widespread at a local and national level, leading to a parallel indifference within voluntary youth organisations to the fate of the Youth Service. It explains perhaps why leading voluntary youth organisations have been seduced by neoliberal funding streams heading in their direction, even as this state finance threatens their historical independence.

### **2000: On the sidelines**

From the year 2000, having left the Youth Service for pastures elsewhere, I have been reduced to being no more than a commentator on ensuing events. However my thoughts upon proceedings have the enormous benefit of being grounded in a continuing critical conversation with practitioners, not least through my significant involvement with In Defence of Youth Work (IDYW). In retrospect, neoliberalism was a long time coming, but when it arrived explicitly in the guise of New Labour, it found the LA Youth Service not fit for purpose. Of course my anecdotal description of the Service might well be seen as an exercise in nostalgia, an ageing form of homesickness. Nevertheless I will offer some observations on why it was not up to neoliberal scratch and ponder whether the very idea is consigned to the refuse bin of history.

1. Let me begin by noting a number of narratives, which have gained common currency within youth work and which have played into the hands of the Youth Service’s critics and opponents. Firstly I want to counter the self-indulgent narrative so prevalent in youth work circles that our practice was, indeed continues, to be little understood. This belief in the mystery of our practice has been a godsend to the technocrats, who proposed that following their instructions would be the key to explaining to ‘stakeholders’ what we ourselves couldn’t explain. For what it’s worth,

my experience of reporting to, talking with managers, councillors, parents, young people and folk on the street was that by and large they got the message. Providing places and creating moments of association and activity outside of formal education was, in their minds, beneficial to young people and the community. Wilful ignorance, especially amongst politicians, regarding the Youth Service's identity only reared its head when the money ran out. Secondly, much to the delight once more of the managerialists we have colluded with the narrative that the Youth Service in the past never explained or justified properly its endeavours. Indeed I remember well a young youth worker berating me for what she saw as my generation's failure. I could but respond, that albeit inadequately, from the very first report to a youth club management committee to my very last Annual Report as a Chief Officer I sought to make the case for the cause, using art, drama, music and of course involving young people along the way. Thirdly, another problematic narrative peddled without much thought is that the Youth Service was bureaucratic and stifled initiative and/or that it condoned poor practice. However as I have tried to show, the Youth Service and Community Education were far from bureaucratic. Whether the quality of practice under social democracy or neoliberalism can be defined as good, bad or indifferent begs questions of subjectivity, interpretation and politics from which we shy. As it is I fear my own efforts as worker and manager seen through a radical lens were sometimes worthy of praise, sometimes neither here nor there and sometimes poor.

2. The LA Youth Service expressed, albeit imperfectly, a holistic educational perspective. It was a pluralist, argumentative project. It was often unruly. Its rhythms were orchestrated by young people and youth workers in concert. From the point of view of neoliberalism it was not under sufficient manners. It needed to be monitored and regulated. One of the exquisite ironies at the heart of neoliberalism is that whilst it advocates the free market and despises the regulation thereof, it is obsessed with both regulating public services and regulating the behaviour of the individual. Hence, after 30 years, none of the authorities for whom I worked possessed any files on the individual young people, with whom we engaged. Today, courtesy of questionnaires on first contact and devolved social work-lite caseloads, every young person appears to be under the bureaucratic microscope.



3. The LA Youth Service failed to provide neoliberalism with the evidence (or should we say data) demanded by its competitive market-driven ideology. By the time of New Labour's election Outcomes-Based Management, born of the early 1990s with its avowed goal of measuring efficiency and effectiveness was dominant and being embraced by Youth Service management. Because the outcomes agenda required structure and surveillance, the Youth Service's tradition of open access and open-ended voluntary provision could not deliver. The illusion that personality can be measured, that inventories could provide comparable metrics in relation to the ebb and flow of a young person's emotional and social condition required the funding of work with referred, targeted groups which were imposed, time-limited and prescribed.

4. Problematically for neoliberalism, the LA Youth Service possessed a measure of stability in terms of funding and staffing - an utterly unacceptable and inflexible scenario. Thus, core finance was gradually reduced in favour of competitive bidding mechanisms, dressed up as strengthening the youth sector market and encouraging social investment. By 2013 the National Youth Agency was advising projects that collecting the right data was crucial to surviving in a world where the Youth Service was disappearing in the face of commissioning, outsourcing and payment by results. In this manner young people themselves were commodified, turned into data for sale and exchange. The existence of a permanent unionised workforce on nationally agreed pay and conditions (JNC), able to challenge management, was an affront to neoliberal sensibility. Thus LAs starved of resources made JNC workers redundant and, in the turn to outsourcing and short-term contracts, opened the door to the use of inferior pay and precarious conditions.

5. The LA Youth Service was based on collective reference points for its engagement with young people - the youth club, the local street or park, the young women's project and so on. Neoliberalism abhors authentic collectives of shared interest. Neither accident nor austerity explains the closure of 600 youth clubs between 2012 and 2018. New Labour's Minister for Youth had previously revealed neoliberalism's hostility, declaring that youth clubs were dangerous places where gangs would prosper. Prime Minister David Cameron's insight was to recognise that the demolition

of Youth Services had to be countered by an alternative, namely the National Citizen Service introduced in 2010; an unremarkable but heavily advertised Summer month-long programme, based consciously on the promotion of the mixed social group of young people in opposition to support for young women and men's own peer groups.

6. As the above suggests, no incoming ideology can achieve dominance without incorporating some of the features of previous ideologies. The leap would be too far. Hence neoliberal rhetoric is laced with references, for example, to empowerment and participation. The absurdity of someone being empowered from above by the powerful is a political question lost in talk of young people becoming more confident, resilient and entrepreneurial. As for participation, it is dressed up in the garb of volunteering and social action, the latter no longer meaning an agitational practice in support of the community, but one in which involvement enhances primarily the CV of the individual.

7. The undermining of the LA Youth Service has posed serious dilemmas for the training agencies tasked to produce youth work's professional cadre. A shift from the welfare professional under social democracy to the performative professional under neoliberalism can be perceived [Bradford 2015]. The former sought to be critical, relatively autonomous, siding with the young people's agenda. The latter accepts obediently the surveillance, monitoring and metrification of practice, siding with the State's agenda. As the Youth Service collapsed and the workforce fragmented, placements, where open youth work prevailed, were ever more difficult to find.

8. One of the achievements of the LA Youth Service in the struggle about the meaning and purpose of practice was to bring to the fore via, for example, the emergence of autonomous work with young women the heterogeneous make-up of young people; that they could only be understood as individuals through the inextricable collective relations of class, gender, race, sexuality, disability and faith. Bearing this in mind does not lead to simple conclusions. This dialectical grasp of the human condition is an anathema to neoliberalism with its unerring emphasis on being responsible for one's self. Within youth work we see the resurrection of that

implausible being, the general young individual and the generalised category, young people. It leads inexorably to an acceptance that in a world of generalised competition all social problems require individual resolution.

9. In a nutshell, the assault on the LA Youth Service has been but one moment in the neoliberal aim of depoliticising social relations. Whatever its weaknesses, the Youth Service was a contested political space. Staff meetings were moments of collective reflection not unquestioning instruction. The best of its practice grounded its involvement with young people in the continuing relations of oppression and exploitation at the centre of capitalism. Today, the voices in English youth work emanating from such as the National Youth Agency and the Centre for Youth Impact reflect the watchwords of the so-called 'third culture' - 'no politics, no conflict, no ideology, simply science, delivery and problem-solving'. Evidently another Framework of Outcomes, another imposed technical template, floating above society, will bring enlightenment and secure youth work's future.

### **Is the Tide Turning?**

Is the Youth Service dead in the ditch, to borrow a phrase? Last year a series of events under the title, 'Is the tide turning?' prompted the following agreed points amongst others in an *In Defence of Youth Work* position paper. Interestingly, reference to a Youth Service is nowhere to be found:

The rejuvenation of a distinctive, state-supported youth work focused on inclusive, open access provision ought to be based on a radical and complementary relationship between the Local Authority [LA] and a pluralist, independent voluntary sector.

The renewed practice should be sustained by statutory funding, the purpose and allocation of which ought to be determined locally via a democratic youth work 'council' made up of young people, workers, voluntary sector representatives, officers and politicians.

Certainly, the initiative was prompted by a degree of optimism about the Labour Party's

social-democratic turn under Corbyn, which has dampened as the Brexit farce has unfolded, especially as the overall debate shifts yet again to the soft policing of problematic youth.

Let me finish, though, on a fanciful if melodramatic note. Given the present political turmoil, it is possible that by the end of the year we will be governed by either an authoritarian, right-wing, populist administration or by a progressive alliance [Labour, SNP, Greens, Plaid Cymru] committed to a social-democratic programme of redistribution and renationalisation. In these contrasting scenarios, what price youth work, what price a Youth Service?

*This article draws in particular on the 'On The Sidelines' section of a fully referenced chapter I co-authored with Paula Connaughton, Tania de St Croix, Bernard Davies and Pauline Grace to be found in the SAGE Handbook of Youth Work Practice. However, in this specific case, the history of the LA Youth Service, my interpretation might well be challenged by my friends and comrades.*

## **References**

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For a sense of In Defence of Youth Work's history and purpose, see <https://indefenceofyouthwork>.