

Opinion Piece: The Threats and Opportunities Facing Youth Work in Northern Ireland

Paul Smyth – *former CEO of Public Achievement with a career in youth work spanning over 30 years in the voluntary sector, in the statutory sector (YCNI) and in the University Sector (Speak Your Piece Project, University of Ulster). I have extensive local and international experience – particularly working in conflicted and post-conflict societies. I have Masters degrees in both Youth Studies (MA) and Innovation Management (MSc) and a Certificate in Sustainability in the Third Sector.*

I firmly believe that youth work made a significant contribution to the building of the peace process (particularly from the 1980s onward), and to reducing the levels of violent radicalisation among young people. The recent closure of the Youth Council and Youthnet have left the voluntary youth sector particularly vulnerable, while the creation of the Education Authority means that much of the statutory youth work provision is ‘safe’ and risk averse (for example, not using social media to engage young people).

The removal by two Education Ministers of the Community/Good Relations budgets, coupled with poor public strategy in terms of good relations (TBUK/Fresh Start) and a culture of stop-start funding, has left much front-line youth work provision highly vulnerable. Workers are leaving the sector or are becoming burnt out. Gaps in funding (Peace, TBUK, Fresh Start etc) have weakened and closed several organisations. Voluntary sector youth provision is left without an effective voice, and the statutory sector cannot openly criticise public policy decisions, and is vulnerable to the wider cut-backs in education. Meanwhile in England, youth work provision and youth work training programmes have been decimated – and funding siphoned into ‘National Citizen Service’ – a pet programme for the former Prime Minister, David Cameron – which is also being run in Northern Ireland through Co-operation Ireland and a number of partner organisations.

Despite this grim picture, I believe that with some creative thinking, Northern Ireland could become a world-class hub of youth work practice. Particularly in terms of youth work as a tool for reducing conflict and increasing the civic and political engagement of young people. I will propose that youth work is devolved to local Councils (away from its current EA/DE home), and that a new youth work agency is established to support local and Northern Ireland wide provision. It should receive and distribute funding from a wide range of government departments (certainly Education, Communities, Health and Regional Development at a minimum) as well as leveraging in funding from trusts and foundations locally and internationally. It should support the development of social enterprise in the youth sector. It might also have research, practice development, evaluation (including evaluation capacity building) and youth participation strands.

The paper would – I hope – provoke some debate and new thinking about the role and purpose of youth work here, as well effective ways of supporting young people to become more productive and engaged citizens of a shared society.

February, 2017