

Wednesday 27 June 2018

APPG for Youth Affairs – ADCS evidence for the youth work inquiry

The Association of Directors of Children's Services Ltd. (ADCS) is the national leadership organisation in England for directors of children's services (DCSs) under the provisions of the Children Act (2004). The DCS acts as a single point of leadership and accountability for services for children and young people in a local area, including children's social care and education. We welcome the opportunity to submit evidence to the APPG for Youth Affairs.

1. National policy context

Whilst local youth services have disproportionately been affected by the year-on-year reductions to funding for children's services, the government has pledged up to £1.2 billion of investment in the National Citizen Service (NCS) by 2020. The NCS is a four-week programme aimed at 16 and 17-year-olds which is delivered by a variety of contracted providers in localities. ADCS is concerned that this provision does not always dovetail with the local offer nor reach the communities that could benefit the most, meaning the full benefit of this substantial investment is not being realised. Indeed, both the National Audit Office (2017) and the Public Accounts Committee (2017) have raised concerns about the reach, impact and value for money achieved by the NCS. The need to self-fund transport costs can be a barrier to engagement for young people from poorer households and not enough has been done to date to help children in care and those with special educational needs and/or disabilities to take up the opportunities the NCS presents. We would welcome future engagement with government on maximising this investment in local communities by ensuring as many young people as possible can benefit from the NCS programme.

To date, the government hasn't articulated a clear vision for youth services, preferring to promote NCS as a flagship programme. Without a clear policy statement, one which recognises the wider benefits of youth work, it continues to be 'cast adrift' from wider children's services, including education. Responsibility for this area of policy currently sits with the Department of Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), suggesting it is largely viewed as an 'enrichment' style activity; this move is most likely related to the NCS, which is, to some extent, run by sport and activity providers. ADCS would welcome discussions about the relocation of the lead for youth services. The Department for Education is the most obvious fit, however, youth services may also sit well within the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government given its focus on strengthening and engaging communities and giving more power to local people.

2. The local context

2.1. Practice

Youth services and youth workers play a vital role in our communities. This discipline is rooted in non-formal learning and the principles of universal access, however, in recent years this focus has changed as a result of falling funding. The early intervention and prevention work youth workers do by getting alongside young people contributes to a range of positive outcomes at a community and at an individual level e.g. diversion away from criminal activity, improved mental health and wellbeing and engagement in alternative learning programmes. ADCS wishes to acknowledge the role voluntary, community and faith groups play in the delivery of services and support for adolescents and older young people, however, this submission will focus on the role of local authorities in the co-ordination, commissioning and delivery of these vital services.

Via the building of trusting relationships with young people, youth workers help them to make positive decisions about their lives, develop confidence and resilience. These are challenging times and

talented, tenacious youth workers are working directly with young people to prevent problems from escalating, operating at the earliest of early help opportunities, but this is getting more difficult as the number of adolescents increases, new risks emerge and resources continue to fall.

2.2. Arrangement of services

Open access services operating from school-based facilities, mobile units or dedicated youth centres have all but disappeared from our communities, however, local authorities are adapting and moving towards different ways of arranging, commissioning and delivering these services, which are becoming increasingly targeted. And, as buildings located in neighbourhoods have been lost, efforts to retain some provision via the use of other community settings to deliver activities or the investment in a single, larger hub e.g. a youth zone or youth café in the town or city centre, have been made. Despite this, recent estimates suggest in excess of 600 youth centres were lost from local communities between 2010 and 2016 ([Unison](#), 2016).

The skills youth workers bring, whether operating in a dedicated team or embedded in a multi-disciplinary service, are invaluable. They are flexible, tenacious and focused on building relationships and promoting resilience. Youth workers are playing an increasingly significant role in the provision of early help support, work with care leavers and young carers or in Troubled Families and youth offending teams. They are also routinely leading community-based projects to support emotional wellbeing, undertaking targeted interventions in localities experiencing high levels of anti-social behaviour and violent crime or working with specific groups e.g. unaccompanied asylum-seeking children or LGBT groups. Detached youth work also lends itself well to efforts to identify and disrupt child sexual exploitation by targeting known hot spots. It is also not unusual to find youth workers supporting engagement activities such as the youth parliament or children in care councils.

2.3. Resources and funding

Despite the positive outcomes achieved and the ongoing demand from young people for constructive delivered activities in a safe space, youth services have been subject to deep financial cuts – recent [research](#) published by the Children’s Commissioner and the Institute of Fiscal Studies (2018) suggests funding for these services has fallen by 60% since 2010. Such cuts are short sighted, over three quarters of respondents taking part in a [survey](#) by Unison (2016) felt falling funding had resulted in young people feeling less empowered, led to an increase in crime and anti-social behavior and a growth in mental health issues.

As leaders of children’s services, ADCS members are advocates for the value of youth services but prioritising the funding of this provision is an increasingly difficult task when set against a backdrop of a 49% real-terms drop in funding for local government ([NAO, 2018](#)) and a significant increase in the numbers of children and young people requiring statutory support from children’s social care over the last decade. To mitigate against these challenges, some local authorities have embedded youth services in their early help offer to prevent greater social and economic problems from emerging in the future. However, the Early Intervention Grant for local authorities has fallen by £500 million since 2010 and is expected to reduce by a further £183 million by 2010. Funding for youth support services and outreach work is now routinely drawn from multiple budgets, including the Troubled Families programme and public health. Funding for the Troubled Families programme is uncertain beyond 2020 and the [LGA](#) (2017) recently estimated that public health budgets fell by £531 million between 2016/17 and 2019/20.

As budgets get tighter, difficult decisions must be taken which will have an impact on our ability to prevent children and young people from developing complex issues and it is likely the significant bulge of primary-aged children preparing to move up to secondary school will only serve to exacerbate this picture further down the line. Our financial ability to meet rising levels of need is not limited to targeted working with particularly vulnerable groups but wider support for promoting emotional wellbeing and healthy relationships is dwindling and schools are struggling to fill this gap. Waiting lists for services e.g. CAMHS, are growing in some areas as a result.

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2.4. The workforce

Recruitment of youth workers isn't a significant challenge for local authorities, however, retention is a growing issue as routes of progression disappear and social work is prioritised in training and development budgets due to the ongoing focus on the profession by central government and well publicised shortages in this workforce. In recent months **ADCS** (2017) has called for the development of a coherent workforce strategy for the totality of children's services - the need to recruit and retain the best staff to support children, young people and their families, particularly the most vulnerable is more pronounced than ever. We maintain the view this strategy is urgently needed.

Recent reports in the media (CYP Now, 2018) suggest that the number of degree-level youth work courses has fallen to its lowest level in a decade. This has been attributed to year-on-year funding reductions for local authorities and the voluntary sector. **ADCS** is also concerned that the location of the youth services lead within DCMS is contributing to this decline – youth services do not feature anywhere in ministerial responsibilities nor in the Department's priorities. All stakeholders, including central and local government as well as the voluntary and community sector, need to come together to celebrate the value of this profession and promote the rewards and benefits of working with adolescents and older young people as a matter of urgency. The sector also needs investment in order to attract, train and retain youth workers.

ADCS would welcome the opportunity to expand further on this summary submission via the provision of oral evidence to the APPG on Youth Affairs. Please contact katy.block@adcs.org.uk, **ADCS** Policy Officer, in the first instance.