

PYOG

Grŵp Prif Swyddogion Ieuenctid Cymru Wales Principal Youth Officers' Group

National Assembly for Wales Children, Young People and Education Committee
Inquiry into:

The Emotional and Mental Health of Children and Young People

Written evidence submitted by
The Wales Principal Youth Officers' Group

The *Wales Principal Youth Officers Group* (PYOG) is the representative group of officers nominated by each local authority as the professional and strategic head of the Youth Service. The group has an established role in advising on the strategic development and delivery of youth services and other associated initiatives and is a sub-group of the *Association of Directors of Education in Wales* (ADEW). The PYOG also has a strategic connection with the *Welsh Local Government Association* (WLGA) via the Lifelong Learning Policy Officer (Youth).

The PYOG welcomes the opportunity to respond to the *National Assembly for Wales Children, Young People and Education Committee* inquiry into *The Emotional and Mental Health of Children and Young People*, particularly given the valued contribution which youth work makes to the emotional well-being of young people aged 11-25 years via an educative approach in a variety of settings.

Introduction

1. For those young people who access the provision, Youth Work is widely recognised as having a crucial role to play in developing their **ability to transition successfully to adulthood**, in becoming positive members of their local communities and recognising their place in and contribution to the global community. It is based on a voluntary, trusting relationship developed over time with young people between the ages of 11-25 years of all backgrounds and abilities. Youth work has a valuable contribution to make to the health and well-being of these young people, which will be described in further detail later in this submission.
2. Youth Work in Wales is now (as of 1st April, 2017) a registered profession with the *Education Workforce Council* and has for some time had its own qualifications framework and National Occupational Standards, which define its key purpose as to:

"...enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential."

3. Youth Work offers successful preventative, open access provision which provides a non-stigmatising environment and acts as an access route for young people to get more specialised services (see below). The '**Five Pillars of Youth Work**' in Wales (**Youth Work in Wales: Principles & Purposes**) are that it is **Educative; Expressive; Participative; Inclusive and Empowering**.

Positive outcomes for young people

4. As a minimum requirement to providing strong foundations for them to thrive, young people need to be happy, healthy (physically and emotionally) and resilient. Whilst we all have risk factors present which can create environments for negatively or positively affecting our 'well-being', young people in particular (as they transition from childhood to adulthood) are at a time in their lives when **such risk factors can be amplified due to this transitional phase – undergoing numerous changes both physically and emotionally**. Whilst the adolescent mind and body is developing the robustness required to 'cope', it is also at its most vulnerable with factors such as peer pressure, modern lifestyles, bullying, bereavement, anxiety, familial change etc. - all potentially having a profound impact on a young person's self-esteem and ability to learn.
5. It is commonly accepted that young people today experience far more complex and faster lifestyles than previous generations, with the recent addition of social media meaning that almost everything captured or written is available and is accessible immediately. This can of course have both positive and negative impacts and the key to negotiating this high level assault on the senses and broad range of choice is education – **understanding consequences, developing critical thinking and learning how to make informed choices**. With an ageing population becoming more reliant on younger generations, **young people now, more than ever, should be seen as assets to society and communities and social policy needs to reflect this**. However, we have a long way to go as young people are often seen as a problem to fix e.g. being identified as NEET (Not in Education, Employment or Training).
6. The Youth Service is often in a unique position to contribute to a number of important agendas (Education, Health, Social Care, Social Justice etc.) in improving outcomes for young people. The work is based on a **voluntary relationship** between worker and young person, which starts where the young person wants it to - a Doctor may see a patient first, a school teacher a pupil and a Police Officer an offender, but Youth Workers engage with a young person first and on their (the young person's) terms and throughout the journey with this individual.

Together for Children and Young People (T4CYP) and Specialist CAMHS

7. As Youth Work is an education (not health) provision, the PYOG does not consider itself to be in a position to comment directly on some of the considerations of the inquiry e.g. reduction in waiting times, quality of data, thresholds, funding etc. However, Youth Work as a profession has always worked keenly, collaboratively and productively with the Health sector and is more than willing to contribute fully to the proposed new way of working, which has been termed Prudent Health Care as well, as the principles of T4CYP. It is the PYOG's contention that this ought to include a strong and valued preventative Youth Service, empowering young people to become valued members of their communities.
8. The Youth Service is currently not directly involved in developments in relation to the T4CYP programme at strategic level and has not yet linked up formerly at operational level. However, there is and has traditionally been a great deal of joint (Health sector/Youth Service) work going on at local level – indeed, Health and Wellbeing was the third most delivered type of provision across the 22 local authority Youth Services in 2015-16ⁱ. The PYOG also welcomes the recent development of *Enhanced Access* in Primary Mental Health Care, whereby each Local Health Board (LHB) has a designated point of contact for CAMHS concerns/issues. This provides opportunities for non-clinical staff to discuss the needs of and potential solutions for young people with emotional well-being issues. However, it is still too early since the introduction of this to make any judgement on its effectiveness. The PYOG also has a link to T4CYP via the WLGA Policy Officer's role on one of the work-streams, where opportunities for presenting relevant policies and practice have been invited and well received, and youth work influence has been welcomed.
9. **Youth services act as an important preventative service**, often keeping a young person from getting to a critical point where further, acute and far more expensive, interventions e.g. social services, housing, CAMHS, police etc. are required. By working closely with a young person via a (voluntary) relationship built on trust and helping them navigate through their difficulties and experiences, **the need for more acute and expensive interventions is often avoided**. However, whilst Youth Workers are trained to a high level and are skilled at engaging with young people, there has been a tendency in recent times to increasingly target the work at specific groups of young people. Whilst the sector continues to make strenuous efforts to retain open access provision (particularly given that young people of all backgrounds and abilities experience life pressures which, from time to time, they struggle to cope with and which, for some are – or become – prolonged or chronic medical issues), substantial reductions in funding across the sector has meant that a great deal of open access provision has disappeared.

Barriers

10. The PYOG has also responded to the *National Assembly for Wales (NAfW) Health & Social Care Committee Call for Evidence on Physical Activity of*

Children and Young People. In its submission, the PYOG is calling on this Committee to cross-reference the work of this inquiry, as physical health is important to positive emotional/mental health. In a similar manner, the PYOG calls on this Committee to do likewise.

11. The Youth Service is acutely aware that young people can face a number of barriers to accessing opportunities for physical activity. One reason is the **increasing influence of technology**. Whilst offering numerous positive opportunities, it is essential that a balance is struck between the use of social media and other technologies and being physically active – and physical activity providers need to recognise this by offering provision which is relevant, engaging and fun. For some, whilst not necessarily essential to accessing physical activity opportunities, access to outdoor facilities, parks, open spaces etc. (particularly for those living in urban areas), may be a further issue. For more structured opportunities, funding can also be an obstacle.
12. Whilst there is a focus on our ageing population in relation to loneliness, some of the above factors (there are others, of course) also contribute to too many **young people also feeling lonely and isolated**. This can be exacerbated by lack of support from some parents when their children get into their teenage years, as reported recently by the Children's Societyⁱⁱ, which describes a "...shocking scale of teenage neglect...", stating that "Neglect at home during teenage years can be as damaging as neglect during early childhood". Whilst this is a societal issue which needs to be addressed, young people in these circumstances need other outlets and support mechanisms in their lives – this requires joint (involving relevant professions as well as young people) and innovative solutions.
13. It is also crucial to ensure that **young people are consulted regularly** to learn what they perceive to be barriers to accessing services. Whilst their concerns, priorities and solutions can reinforce those of professionals, they can also be quite different and often more relevant e.g. transport is frequently raised as a barrier for young people, particularly in rural areas where access to services can be more challenging and even prohibitive.
14. There are issues around **body image and body confidence. Poor self-esteem** in young people can act as a major barrier to engaging in physical activity, particularly within formal education where compulsory group participation is required; classes are often large and many activities are mixed gender. This approach can create barriers for those individuals experiencing difficulty with self-image, self-worth, self-esteem or those exploring and establishing their own identities. Although Youth Work offers many specific avenues for young people to participate and develop their physical activity (provision such as DofE, leisure and sports activities for example) Youth Work's preventative **contribution to young people's personal, social and emotional health** can be underestimated, with its ability to increase young people's desire and confidence to access provision such as sports groups, extra-

curricular activities etc. This can be particularly relevant for those young people who are deemed vulnerable. Youth Workers also act as competent advocates, acting in the best interests of the young person whilst aiding the development of skills for that individual.

Opportunities

Education

15. As an education provider, the Youth Work sector welcomes the inquiry's focus on the contribution of education to emotionally resilient children and young people. However, the intended **scope does not appear to capture the contribution of the broad range of education providers** but appears to focus solely on schools. Whilst schools engage with the majority of young people aged 11-25, they are far from being the only education provider – **the education 'family' is much broader than this**, including Youth Work, the wider Youth Support Services, Colleges of Further and Higher Education, Work Based Learning Providers, Education Otherwise Than At School (EOTAS) settings, special schools (PRU's/EBD Centres etc). Across these providers is a wealth of expertise in well-being support, promoting and developing resilience, self-esteem, self-efficacy etc., which needs to be factored in to the continuum offered to young people. For example, independent (previously known as school based) counselling services are quite appropriately mentioned but it is often Youth Work that acts as the 'wrap-around' support for a young person before, during and after counselling interventions – **young people are often encouraged to engage with Youth Work following counselling input for good reasons as the provision complements clinical input**.
16. Welsh Government and the education sector in Wales are currently developing a new curriculum, which is designed to better reflect the demands of 21st century learning, the needs of employers and the needs of children and young people. There are real opportunities for the education family - in its broadest sense – to work closer together. In order to develop an inclusive and effective curriculum, this also **needs to involve other agencies such as Youth Work and health providers** (particularly in relation to the Health and Well-being Area of Learning – see below) in making a more comprehensive/holistic contribution to both its development and delivery.
17. Whilst all four of the main purposes of the new curriculum have the well-being of learners implicit throughout, one of the four is that of *Healthy, Confident Individuals*, with a specific 'area of learning' being that of *Health & Well-being*. Building Block 3 of the proposals is to 'extend and promote learners' experiences', which presents opportunities for schools and communities to work together in providing a rich menu of opportunities for learning. The aim is to make the new curriculum available by 2018, with all schools ready to deliver it by 2021 – time is of the essence.

Should you have any further queries about this submission or the work of the Youth Service generally, please do contact:

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ⁱ <http://gov.wales/statistics-and-research/youth-services/?lang=en>

ⁱⁱ <https://www.childrenssociety.org.uk/what-we-do/research/troubled-teens-understanding-adolescent-neglect>