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Youth Work Policies in England 2019–2023

Can Open Youth Work Survive?

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Leamington Spa, UK

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PREFACE

UPDATING AND CONTEXTUALISING

Filling the Policy Gaps

By mid-2019—that is, less than a year after I had completed *Austerity, Youth Policy and the Deconstruction of the Youth Service in England*¹—I was having to acknowledge that the book had already ‘... been overtaken ... by new facts on the ground, shifting ideas and priorities, re-considered analysis, revised perceptions and interpretations’.² This prompted me to start a ‘Living History’ blog whose stated aim was to explore and comment on current and emerging developments affecting local Youth Services and their provision of ‘open youth work’. The posts which followed focused on budget cuts and MP reports, Covid-19 impacts on young people, the role of the National Citizens Service (NCS) and of ‘youth voice’ and whether (or not) we needed a youth work curriculum.

However, with each topic treated in a largely stand-alone way, it had become clear by mid-2022 that there were significant limitations to this approach—in relation, for example, to how the topics covered were inter-linked and their location within a continuously evolving wider policy

¹ Bernard Davies, 2019, *Austerity, Youth Policy and the Deconstruction of the Youth Service in England*, Palgrave Macmillan.

² Bernard Davies, 2019, ‘Living History – Youth Work (De)construction – Updated, July, <https://indefenceofyouthwork.com/2019/07/07/bernard-davies-launches-his-blog--youth-works-living-history/>, accessed 22 January 2024.

context. This book seeks to address those limitations by, for the five years to December 2023, providing a detailed document of record and commentary on policy developments relevant to ‘the youth work sector’ in England and to open youth work specifically.

Defining ‘Open Youth Work’

The book, however, has another high-priority aim: to give an explicit profile to the concept of *open* youth work and what distinguishes this from other youth practices. As set out in more detail in my *Youth Work: A Manifesto Revisited*,³ this distinctiveness assumes a number of crucial bottom lines:

- That open youth work provision and its face-to-face practice are shaped in crucial ways by young people’s voluntary participation—by their choice to become involved.
- That key starting points for the practice are identifying and then responding to the interests and concerns of the young people who actually engage.
- That, as an educational practice, it will seek to prompt and help young people to tap more fully and creatively into their potential.
- That, to do this, it will give high priority to building trusting individual and peer group relationships with these young people, particularly via careful negotiation of the inter-personal processes generated by the practice.
- That it will seek to tip balances of power in the young people’s favour, both within the youth work practice itself and more widely.
- That it will focus on how young people feel as well as on what they know and can do.

Key Chapter Focuses

To analyse and evidence the development of open youth work practice and its wider policy contexts in the five years covered by the book, chapters focus on:

³ *Youth and Policy*, 1 October 2021, available at <https://www.youthandpolicy.org/articles/youth-work-manifesto-revisited-2021/>.

- The continuing influence on government policy-making in this period of neo-liberal thinking and priorities.
- The condition of ‘youth’—both overall and in relation to more specific issues affecting their day-to-day lives, including their mental health.
- Funding for open youth work—both during and beyond the post-2010 ‘austerity decade’.
- How, within and beyond these state policy and funding boundaries, open youth work negotiated its role and contribution.
- The development and implementation of forms of ‘youth work’ which, redefined, stepped outside the distinctive open youth work model.
- The voluntary youth sector—both ‘traditional’ and new.
- The role and impacts of the National Youth Agency (NYA).
- Routes to training and qualifying as a youth worker.

With, by early 2024, another period of ‘austerity’ seeming likely—certain?—a brief ‘Epilogue’ specifically addresses the question posed in the book’s sub-title: Can open youth work survive?

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ABBREVIATIONS

A&E	Accident and Emergency
APPG	All Party Parliamentary Group
BYC	British Youth Council
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services
COSMOS	Covid Social Mobility and Opportunities Study
CSJ	Centre for Social Justice
CYI	Centre for Youth Impact
CYPN	<i>Children and Young People Now</i>
DCMS	Department of Digital, Media, Culture and Sport
DfE	Department for Education
DMU	De Montfort University
DoE	Duke of Edinburgh Award Scheme
DWP	Department for Work and Pensions
EHC	Educational, Health and Care
EPI	Education Policy Institute
ETS	Education and Training Sub-committee
GCSE	General Certificate of Education
GPs	General Practitioners
IFS	Institute of Fiscal Studies
IMF	International Monetary Fund
JNC	Joint Negotiating Committee
LEAs	Local Education Authorities
LGA	Local Government Association
NAO	National Audit Office
NATCEN	National Centre for Social Research
NCS	National Citizens Service
NCVO	National Council for Voluntary Organisations

NCVYS	National Council for Voluntary Youth Services
NEET	Not in Education, Employment or Training
NHS	National Health Service
NOS	National Occupational Standards
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
NYA	National Youth Agency
NYSAB	National Youth Sector Advisory Board
OBR	Office for Budget Responsibility
OECD	Office for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
Ofqual	Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation
ONS	Office for National Statistics
PAC	Peer Action Collective
PALYCW	Professional Association of Youth and Community Workers
SEND	Special Educational Needs and Disability
UNICEF	United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund
VCS	Voluntary and Community Sector
VRU	Violence Reduction Unit
YFF	Young Futures Foundation
YIF	Youth Investment Fund
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association



Underpinning Ideology

Abstract Throughout the period covered by this book, neo-liberal ideas committed to individualistic, competitive, privatising and anti-state priorities continued to influence government policies, including ones focused on youth services. Though the Covid-19 pandemic initially prompted some critical, largely pragmatic, scrutiny of these ideas, their constraints on these services remained, including on open youth work provision in England. One significant consequence was to raise the profile and extend the role of voluntary youth organisations, both via state commissioning procedures and as direct providers of open youth work facilities previously funded and run by the state.

Keywords Neo-liberalism • Anti-state • Covid-19 pandemic • Voluntary youth organisations • Commissioning

THE NEO-LIBERAL MIND-SET

Throughout the period covered by this book, Conservative governments remained deeply committed to neo-liberalism's individualistic, competitive, privatising and anti-state priorities. Far from co-incidentally, during these years, the long-standing structural inequalities embedded within the UK continued to deepen. In relation to class, this was, for example, illustrated in early 2022 by the evidence that if wages had risen over the

previous two decades at the same rate as company dividends, they would have been £2100 a year or 8 per cent higher.¹ Evidence also accumulated on inequalities linked to gender and race.²

For youth work, one particularly significant but often unremarked consequence of these neo-liberal influences was philanthropy's increasing presentation—by government and often, too, by voluntary organisations themselves—as a credible alternative funder and provider of those public services. Historically, of course, the role of these organisations in the UK had been crucial in creating, complementing and extending this provision, particularly when, bottom-up, it had emerged out of users' direct experience and action. It had also often imposed fewer of the bureaucratic procedures which over the years came to constrain much state-funded provision, including that of open youth work (see Chap. 4).

Embedded within the more top-down philanthropic processes, however, there have been (and often still are) at least implicit judgements by the wealthy, the privileged and the powerful on who are deserving of their support—and, at least by implication, who are not.³ By thus in effect depoliticising what are at root crucial political issues, philanthropy's growing influence contributed to the period's 'retreat from the state'⁴ and in particular from services paid for *as a citizen's right* out of the public purse. As, for example, Mae Shaw pointed out very early in the Covid-19 pandemic:

*In the midst of such sincere outpouring of public goodwill, it can seem churlish to remind people that the British National Health Service is a tax-funded public service, not a charity*⁵

Though that was once true, too, of a significant proportion of open access youth work provision—both building-based and outreach/detached—in October 2022, the National Youth Agency's (NYA's) annual

¹Richard Partington, 2022, 'Rate of UK dividend growth outstripping wage increases, says report', *Guardian*, 2 May.

²Prince's Trust/NatWest Group, 2022, *The Prince's Trust NatWest Youth Index 2022*, Prince's Trust, February, <https://www.princes-trust.org.uk/about-the-trust/news-views/princes-trust-natwest-youth-index-2022>.

³See, for example, Polly Toynbee, 2023, *An Uneasy Inheritance: My Family and Other Radicals*, Atlantic Books, pp. 85–6.

⁴Polly Toynbee, 2022, 'The Return of the State by Graeme Garrard review – why big government is back', *Guardian*, 7 May.

⁵Mae Shaw, 2020, 'Editorial', *Concept*, available at <http://concept.lib.ed.ac.uk/article/view/4364/5954>.

National Youth Sector Census revealed that youth charities and community groups were ‘disproportionally providing’, and being commissioned by local authorities to provide, open access and out-of-school activities for young people.⁶ By the following September, however, a fifth of over 750 youth work providers consulted by NYA had waiting lists of between three and six months, a quarter had less than six months’ worth of reserves and those operating in the most deprived areas were finding it difficult to recruit volunteers.⁷

NEO-LIBERALISM UNDER SCRUTINY

After the 2016 Brexit referendum had for some produced the ‘wrong’ result, a somewhat more critical debate on neo-liberalism did open up, including amongst some in powerful financial and policy-making roles. In December 2016, for example, the then Governor of the Bank of England, Mark Carney, acknowledged that

*... many citizens in advanced economies are facing heightened uncertainty ... and losing trust in the system ... Rather than a new golden age, globalisation is associated with low wages, insecure employment, stateless corporations and striking inequalities.*⁸

Three years later, the then head of the International Monetary Fund (IMF), Christine Lagarde, noted that ‘there are more members (of the Fund) concerned about inequality—which is excessive in many areas of the world—and how to remedy it ...’.⁹ Questioning the neo-liberal power structures from within became even sharper in the UK in the autumn of 2022 when Prime Minister Liz Truss’s ruthless tax-cutting ‘programme

⁶ NYA, 2022, *Delivering youth work in England: National Youth Sector Census, Second Report*, NYA, October; Nicole Weinstein, 2022, ‘Councils turn to charities to deliver open access youth work, *Children and Young People Now (CYPN)*, 31 October.

⁷ Emily Harle, 2023, ‘Youth work waiting lists soar amid financial pressures, report finds’, *CYPN*, 18 September.

⁸ Katie Allen, 2016, ‘Mark Carney: we must tackle isolation and detachment caused by globalisation’, *Guardian*, 6 December.

⁹ Larry Elliott, 2019, ‘Nations must protect spending on the vulnerable, says IMF chief’ *Guardian*, 14 June.

for government’ threw the global financial system into panic and created an ongoing budget crisis within the UK itself.¹⁰

By then, the arrival of Covid-19 had anyway prompted a serious challenge to some of these free-market positions, resulting in acknowledgements that, for example, ‘the state (is) no enemy of enterprise but its only salvation’ and that ‘there is no substitute for big government’.¹¹ As the pandemic further exposed and indeed exacerbated economic inequalities, even hard-line monetarists had to face the reality that, if disaster (economic as well as social) was to be avoided, then only ‘the state’—even in the form of the Bank of England—had the power and resources to respond effectively.

Between February 2020 and July 2021, for example, Chancellor of the Exchequer Rishi Sunak—a dedicated monetarist ideologue—found £370 billion of public money to ameliorate the pandemic’s worst impacts¹² while private companies long suspicious of the state intervening in their activities suddenly found themselves calling for it to give them more financial support.¹³ As the cost-of-living crisis began to take hold, during her 44 days in power, even Liz Truss found herself having to promise some state-funded financial support for people unable to keep their homes heated during winter.¹⁴

Most of these responses, however, were largely pragmatic—propelled by circumstances rather than by a change in the underlying ideology. For many other government interventions—most noticeably its Covid track, trace and test programmes—the bottom line remained that only the private sector was capable of delivering what was needed. However, not only did the procedures for awarding contracts often fail to achieve their main

¹⁰ See, for example, Larry Elliott and Rowena Mason, 2022, ‘A budget for the rich’, *Guardian*, 24 September.

¹¹ Polly Toynbee, 2022, ‘The Return of the State by Graeme Gerrard review – why big government is back’, *Guardian*, 7 May.

¹² Adam Tooze, 2021, ‘The Guardian view on pro-market thinking: ministers want it to survive Covid’, *Guardian*, 21 October.

¹³ See, for example, BBC News, 2021, ‘Covid: Business alarmed at prospect of further restrictions’, 19 December, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-59700289>; Joanna Partridge and Sarah Butler, 2021, “‘Knife edge’”: Nightclub ad gym owners call for urgent financial help’, *Guardian*, 21 December.

¹⁴ BBC, 2022, ‘Liz Truss reveals plans for tackling rising energy bills’, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/newsround/62833717>.

objective.¹⁵ They could even turn out to be dangerously ineffective¹⁶ and at times bordered on the corrupt and the illegal.¹⁷ At one point, it also emerged that some consultancy firms—many long-standing donors to the Conservative Party¹⁸—were being paid £1 million a day, with some individual consultants getting more than £6000 for a day’s work.¹⁹ All at a time when that core state provider in the field, the National Health Service (NHS), at great speed and with great effectiveness, was delivering a huge and hugely successful vaccination programme.

Nonetheless, though voter polling suggested that free-market ideas were ‘very much a kind of minority pursuit’,²⁰ for most within influential UK government circles, the commitment to low taxes and small-state privatised services remained unshakable. This was, for example, again exposed during the Conservative Party leadership campaign in the summer of 2022²¹ and demonstrated by the Truss budget proposals that followed. Under pressure from a significant and influential group of his backbenchers to cut taxes, it was then sustained by Sunak after he became Prime Minister in October.²² Even though by then the NHS was in serious financial trouble²³ and local councils across the country were making major cuts

¹⁵ Andrew Gregory, 2021, ‘NHS test and trace “failed its main objective”, says spending watchdog’, *Guardian*, 27 October.

¹⁶ Rowena Mason, 2021, ‘Firm that gave 43,000 false Covid results still processing PCR tests’, *Guardian*, 26 October.

¹⁷ Good Law Project, 2022, ‘We plan to ask the Supreme Court to hear an appeal’, https://goodlawproject.org/update/we-plan-to-ask-the-supreme-court-to-hear-an-appeal/?utm_source=NB&utm_campaign=public%20first%20update%20rec%20donors%20210122&utm_medium=email, accessed 22 January 2022.

¹⁸ Rowena Mason, Rob Evans and Joseph Smith, 2021, ‘Michael Gove Backer won £184m in PPE contracts after “VIP lane” referral’, *Guardian*, 16 November.

¹⁹ Hettie O’Brien, 2023, ‘From Puerto Rico’s bankruptcy to Britain’s Covid contracts: the private firms taking over public life’, *Guardian*, 16 February.

²⁰ Peter Walker, 2024, ‘Mhairi Fraser the rising Tory force who was bowled over by Trump’, *Guardian*, 10 Feb. 24.

²¹ See, for example, Richard Partington and Peter Walker, 2022, ‘Scale of tax cuts promised by Tory leadership hopefuls may cause “fiscal black hole”’, *Guardian*, 13 July.

²² George Eaton, 2022, ‘Rishi Sunak isn’t a centrist technocrat – he’s a proud Thatcherite’, *New Statesman*, 22 October; Larry Elliott, 2024, ‘IMF warns Jeremy Hunt against tax cuts in budget’, *Guardian*, 30 January.

²³ See, for example, Toby Helm and Denis Campbell, 2023, ‘NHS sinks into £7bn cash crisis as inflation and strikes bite’, *Guardian*, 17 September.

to their services,²⁴ the result was a Budget in March 2024, one of whose dominant themes was tax cuts.

For open youth work and its actual practice, these dominant neo-liberal policy contexts could have significant consequences—illustrated by the evidence set out in Chap. 5 of how attention and especially resources were diverted to redefined conceptions of ‘youth work’ with focuses on, for example, youth violence, schooling and employment and mental health.

²⁴Jessica Murray, 2023, ‘Nottingham city council plans cuts to libraries, care homes and youth services’, *Guardian*, 12 December.