

A Fig Leaf for Action: Critical perspectives on Youth Policy in the UK

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Abstract

This paper discusses the changing approaches that governments in the UK have adopted in response to youth issues and the extent to which these are reflected in dominant social constructions of youth. Our discussion offers a perspective on youth policy in the UK in 2014 set within an historical context with a particular focus on policy from England. We outline the debates and issues facing youth policy as a result of the opportunities and tensions created by recent transformations of local authority services and changes to the way in which youth work is funded and consider the implications of this for young people. Finally we consider some of the key elements to youth policy in the current era of austerity.

The picture of youth policy in the UK highlights the extent to which ideological crusades based on moral panics and deficit models of youth have given rise to a stream of policies which have successively failed to connect with the lives of young people whilst redirecting the blame onto young people themselves. We argue that constantly changing and underfunded initiatives have done little more than provide a ‘fig leaf’ to provide the illusion that something is being done.

Key words: Youth, modernisation, youth work, inclusion, joined-up working, youth transitions, active citizenship

Introduction

In 2011 the shooting of a young black youth, Mark Duggan, in North London by the Police triggered a chain of civil disturbances across the UK. British streets had witnessed unrest before, but the scale of the disturbances - extending across many towns and cities - and their occurrence in the context of a deep recession, sounded new alarm bells about the growing disenfranchisement and frustration for many UK citizens feeling the impact of austerity measures in response to a global economic crisis. However, unlike many previous urban disturbances and in spite of the response of politicians in blaming the events on a disreputable, thieving underclass of young people, this time those involved were not only young people but adults too. These events, and politicians' response to them, provide a window into the contemporary dilemma of youth policy. On the one hand a growing problem of poverty, unemployment, alienation and associated problems related to the decline of traditional employment. On the other hand a government with an ideological agenda to dismantle the public sector and loosen the responsibility of the state in response to youth issues.

This paper offers a perspective on youth policy in the UK in 2014 set within an historical context. It will discuss the changing ways in which governments and policy have responded to youth issues and the extent to which these are reflected in dominant social constructions of youth. We focus our analysis in particular on policy from England and we outline the debates and issues facing youth policy as a result of the opportunities and tensions created by recent transformations of local authority services and changes to the way in which youth work is funded and we consider the implications of this for young people.

Key themes and debates that, in our analysis, emerge as persistent narratives in youth policy include the 'problematization' of socially excluded young people; interprofessional approaches in responding to these 'problems'; a focus on encouraging 'active citizenship'; and an emphasis on education and training for employment. These features came into sharper focus from 1997 onwards and much of our discussion will focus on the impact of 'modernisation' and the contribution of the New Labour governments (1997-2010). The paper will finally consider some of the key elements to youth policy in the current era of austerity.

The 'youth problem'

The disturbances in 2011 reinforced the government's position that the 'youth problem' is the result of 'deficiencies' in the lives of individuals, families and communities. As far back as 1958, the

Albemarle Committee was established to review the Youth Service¹ in response to concerns related to increasing numbers of young people manifest in rising youth crime; and the perceived reduction in deference shown by young people towards their elders amid an emerging youth culture born of increasing affluence (see also Herzfeld 1992). To a large extent youth policy in the UK has been characterised by a discourse of ‘youth as a problem’, focusing particularly on those who are unemployed, young offenders, teenage parents, substance mis-users, homeless *etc.* – rather than all young people. Accordingly the purpose of youth work is seen in terms of addressing ‘*moral panics*’ (Cohen 1972) about the behaviour of young people alongside the need to secure youth service provision during periods of austerity and public spending cuts. Whilst youth may have always been demonised, in past generations young people have been able to escape this oppression via their transition to adulthood, independence and therefore citizenship facilitated by the security of regular employment. In contrast the reality facing a growing proportion of young people today is a bleak future of complex transitions and limited opportunities to claim their rights as citizens. Transition to adulthood is now not simply a matter of securing employment and independence, but is characterised as ‘fragmented’ and ‘precarious’ (Coleman *et al.* 2004, 227). There is little recognition in policy of this complexity and of the tensions that characterise young people’s lives.

Recent trends in youth policy need to be interpreted within the particular context that characterises youth and society in the UK in late modernity. A summary of some key statistics for youth in the UK provides a snapshot of the ‘condition of youth’ in modern Britain against which to interpret changes in youth policy.

Social profile of Youth in the UK 2014²

Unemployment (16-24 yr olds) has increased steadily since 2008 to 19.1% (ONS2014)

Increasing % of 20-34 year olds *living with parents* since 1996 (2013 – 26%)

UK has highest rate of under 17s (25%³, 2012) *living in poverty* in Western Europe

Decrease in *youth offending* – 12% of crime committed by 16-24 year olds (12% of total pop)

16-24 year olds are most at risk of being *victim of crime*

Child wellbeing in UK is lowest in Europe (cf. OECD countries)⁴

1 in 10 5-16 year olds have a clinically diagnosable *mental health* problem

45% of under 18s experience *bullying*, 26% on a daily basis

¹ ME (Ministry of Education) (1960), *The Youth Service in England and Wales (The Albemarle Report)*, HMSO, London.

² Figures from ONS 2014 Statistics unless otherwise stated

³ DWP 2014 Households below average income. London: HMSO

⁴ UNICEF 2007 Children’s Wellbeing in the UK

Teenage pregnancies for under18 is lowest since 1969 (35/1000 for 15-17year olds)

What is evident from these statistics is that rather than constituting a problem, young people are no more of a liability than other generational groups and, for the most part, exhibit characteristics of vulnerability which society and in turn policy are simply not responding to. Furthermore, if we look at the evidence we see that young people are no less likely to make a positive contribution. Young people aged 16-24 are more likely to volunteer; are more likely to be involved in new business start-ups (29% increase in business start-ups for the 18-25 age group 2008-2014) against an otherwise declining trend for the population as a whole. Whilst this could be argued to reflect the individualising tendencies of late modernity and, in the case of volunteering, a result of a lack of paid alternatives, these trends do nonetheless provide a picture of youth as active citizens making a positive contribution to counter popular images which problematize young people as feckless and troublesome.

Young people are of course not an homogeneous group and there are groups of young people who face particular difficulties; yet for the most part these are closely linked to poverty and disadvantage rather than individual fallibility. For example, Black Caribbean young people are 1.4 times more likely to be unemployed and disabled young people twice as likely; young people in custody are more likely to be from poor homes and 95% of imprisoned young offenders have a mental health disorder, many with more than one disorder⁵; 72% of children in care have behavioural or emotional problems⁶; and teenage parents under 18 years are more likely to come from the most deprived areas of England in 2009–11⁷.

Statistics such as these illustrate that many problems ascribed to young people are socio-structural rather than individualised. Yet these underlying causes tend to be glossed over in policy hence, as Williamson (1997, 201) argued, policy rhetoric might ‘attract populist credibility but bear little relation to the empirical reality of many young people’s lives or aspirations.’ For example in Youth Justice there is an assumption that prison rehabilitates young offenders; and in education that assessment and target driven learning is somehow better than the more holistic alternatives that social pedagogy, for example, offers. It is against this

⁵ Office for National Statistics (1997): [*Psychiatric morbidity among young offenders in England and Wales*](#). London: Office for National Statistics.

⁶ Sempik, J. et al. (2008) Emotional and behavioural difficulties of children and young people at entry into care. *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, 13 (2), pp. 221-233.

⁷ ONS 2014.

backdrop of contradictory discourses concerning the changing relationship between the machinery of the state and the lifeworlds of young people that this paper is written.

Youth Policy and Modernisation

Before the 1970s, the existence of a youth labour market and availability of jobs meant that youth policy was primarily focused on youth work to keep young people occupied and prevent a slide into criminal and anti-social behaviour. With the decline of the manufacturing industry, a growing proportion of young people were increasingly faced with an uncertain future. In spite of major industrial changes that had and were taking place, the blame was placed on young people themselves for not having the right skills. In response, a series of policy initiatives were conceived to provide youth training in order to enhance skills and reinforce young people's chances of finding work. In the 1970s and 1980s the focus for policy was primarily on education and youth work, vocational training and juvenile justice. The Youth Opportunities Programme was established to provide opportunities for young people to gain work experience as a bridge to work. However as Finn (1984) observed, in reality this was less a bridge to work and more like a 'gang plank to the dole' as young people were being trained for jobs that were no longer there. By the end of the 1980s the continued lack of results in terms of addressing youth unemployment led to a different approach in the form of compulsion to accept training or lose unemployment benefit, and the complete removal of benefits for 16 and 17 year olds. The unintended consequence was to create an informal black economy which led to further risky and potentially anti-social and criminal behaviour, in turn exacerbating the scale of 'the youth problem'.

Williamson (2005,13) argued that the 1990s witnessed a *gradual, and often grudging, political acknowledgment* of the scale and challenge of young people's social exclusion, culminating in 1998 with a recognition by the New Labour government of the need for a *clear focus on youth policy* and a *more robust and integrated* policy response to socially excluded young people. During the 18 years of Conservative government up until 1997, pernicious social policies and an ideological anti welfare crusade gave rise to a significant widening of social inequalities with devastating social consequences resulting in a growing proportion of families living in poverty. In 1997, after eighteen years in opposition, the New Labour government regained office with an espoused commitment to bring about radical social reform and to a programme of *modernisation* of public services.

The election of a New Labour government put social justice back on the policy agenda and with it, a dedicated focus on children and young people - particularly those seen as socially excluded or disadvantaged – and on eradicating child poverty. Most significantly the focus switched from incoherent and sporadic provision of informal learning activities for young people to a more proactive, comprehensive and strategic policy initiative to address social exclusion set within a wholesale reform to children and youth services. Williamson (2005,14) argues that *it is virtually impossible* to present the full catalogue of measures aimed at combating young people’s social exclusion and that some measures ‘*actually dovetail with wider measures concerned with the promotion of active citizenship*’. However, one of the themes running through this ‘*raft of measures*’, was, he asserts, aimed to ‘*allay populist concerns about idle youth and youth crime*’ (Williamson 2005, 14).

Key in New Labour’s policy manifesto was the setting up of the Social Exclusion Unit (SEU) in 1998 to develop Policy Action Teams in response to social exclusion, placing youth policy at the heart of social and economic regeneration. Of particular relevance was the Policy Action Team 12⁸ (SEU 2000) report on young people and the setting up of the Children and Young People’s Unit⁹ to deliver the new youth policy objectives. In 1999 the SEU published a major report entitled: ‘*Bridging the Gap*’¹⁰ outlining priorities for policy for socially excluded young people along with ‘*Learning to Succeed*’¹¹ to boost education for young people post 16. This marked a radical shift in social policy commitments to young people with a focus on Social Inclusion, Active Citizenship, Lifelong Learning and Community Safety and a new emphasis on cross departmental (joined up) working (Williamson 2006). New Labour acknowledged the need for a more robust and integrated policy response to the needs and situations of a growing number of vulnerable and socially excluded young people, but at the same time a growing awareness of young people as active citizens who should be involved in the construction of new policy.

In 1999, ‘Modernising Government’¹² asserted that professional policy-making needed to change in order to respond to the ‘*increasingly complex, uncertain and unpredictable*’ world, and that to achieve this change it should be ‘*forward looking, outward looking, innovative and*

⁸ Social Exclusion Unit (2000), *National Strategy for Neighbourhood Renewal – Report of Policy Action Team 12: Young People*, HMSO, London.

⁹ Both the Social Exclusion Unit and the Children and Young People’s Unit are now no longer in existence.

¹⁰ Social Exclusion Unit (1999), *Bridging the Gap: New opportunities for 16-18 year olds not in education, employment or training*, HMSO, London.

¹¹ DFEE (1999), *Learning to Succeed: A New Framework for Post-16 Learning*, HMSO, London.

¹² Cabinet Office, 1999.

creative, questioning established ways and encouraging new ideas', it should *'use evidence from a wide range of sources*', be *'inclusive*', *'joined up*' and *'evaluative*'. A key feature of the 'modernising government' agenda was to enhance efficiency and accountability by stipulating that practice should be evidence-based. This can be understood in terms of evidence informing the shape or model of practice, but also the way in which professionals are able to respond to emerging learning in practice. In seeking to reform services government ministers looked to other countries for ideas that could inform a more forward and outward looking and evidence informed approach. While politicians might argue that policy making is based on best available evidence, Berridge (2013, 1) has argued that, in the UK at least, the process is *'not wholly rational*' and that it frequently has *'strong political and ideological associations*'. Berridge argues that policy making *'does not exist or arise in a vacuum*' and that policy ideas are often *'borrowed*' or imported from other countries. Berridge calls this process *'policy transfer*' and he argues that the reforms to child and youth policy that took place in the UK in the 1990s under New Labour were heavily influenced by ideas *'imported*' from Europe. There are a number of key characteristics of the modernising government agenda.

Interprofessional Collaboration and the Involvement of Service Users

The Modernising Government agenda led to an increased emphasis on the development of collaborative and inter-professional practices and partnership relationships. The continuing presence of complex and seemingly insuperable social problems led to a policy belief that no agency or profession could be expected to address these issues single-handedly. Organisational and professional *'partiality and territoriality*', together with organisational, philosophical and cultural differences, were increasingly seen as having *'contributed to policy failure*' (Miller 2004, 132). The purpose behind this strand of policy was to encourage inter-professional collaboration, and to identify and disseminate 'best practice'. The new ethos affecting child and youth policy was characterised by moves to ensure departments worked more effectively together to provide a more integrated and coherent set of services, so that children and youth did not fall through the network of support that was available. At the same time joined up service could provide a more holistic response to the complex and multi-faceted needs that many young people have.

However, a number of obstacles were experienced in trying to make joint working across professional boundaries a reality. The legacy of different professional cultures, philosophies,

priorities and protocols between agencies persisted as an impediment to a swift transition to effective joined-up working. Even with new partnership initiatives there was a tendency for the agenda of different agencies to collide with each other as a result of multiple, overlapping policy objectives and a failure to be flexible with programmes and budgets. Miller (2004,152) argued that these calls for collaboration came ‘at the same time as specific professions feel threatened by a loss of identity and autonomy and are struggling to maintain a professional role’. Inter-professionalism, he suggested, has often been perceived as an attempt to ‘de-professionalise or undermine professional legitimacy’.

The shake up brought about by the modernisation agenda resulted in challenges to the structure and functioning of service delivery but was also further challenged by the imperative of professionals to involve service users in the design, delivery and evaluation of services (Barnes *et al.* 2007). There were two drivers here. First was the efficiency argument or consumer approach wherein it was recognised that patient and service user experiences were valuable resources for informing commissioning, planning and evaluation of services and thus making more efficient use of public funds. Second is the moral and ethical argument that service users should have a say about services that are provided for them. Developing public services around the public served to widen choice and enhance democracy and hence accountability in public services. The service user involvement movement is reflected in consultation and involvement structures such as Children in Care Councils, Student Councils, Service User Advisory Groups and the production of associated service user charters.

The involvement of children and young people was given momentum by non-government agencies who played an important lobbying role advocating the importance of hearing the voice of the child supported by legislation in the form of the Children Act 2004, and backed by the imperatives of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). However, the user involvement movement has been open to critique (Percy-Smith 2010) highlighting the weak and often inappropriate systems put in place to make involvement a reality, and raising questions about the limited extent to which users can really affect decision making in practice (Gibson *et al.* 2012).

A further critique is that users may be involved in a 'purposive-rational' way by providing a source of information to be fed into a bureaucratic planning process. There is little opportunity for service users to really communicate what is going on in their lifeworld or for reflexivity (and therefore learning) of systems in response to that (Percy-Smith 2010)¹³. As Percy-Smith (2010) highlights, children's participation so often leads to little impact on decision making, little benefit in terms of changed services and scant connection to outcomes in the lives of young people reflecting a situation characterised by a professional emphasis on '*participation for effective organisations rather than participation for human flourishing*' (Fielding 2006).

Active Citizenship: the new communitarianism

In the early 1980s, Conservative Government policy, driven by a concern about dependency on welfare, emphasised the duty and responsibility of citizens to be economically independent and usefully employed. By the late 1980s, however, this imperative had become softened with a drive to create socially aware and responsible '*active citizens willing to contribute to their community*' (Heater 2004). This balance between rights and responsibilities was further developed under the New Labour government building on ideas of civic republicanism and communitarianism. New Labour regarded active citizenship as a means of re-engaging citizens with decision-making processes within their local communities and it aimed to achieve this through developing opportunities in civic participation, volunteering, citizenship education and life long learning (Oliver and Pitt 2013, 79).

New Labour's vision was of a society in which 'active' and 'responsible' citizens are fully engaged in the labour market, in their communities and in the democratic processes and this has continued to be a theme in subsequent Coalition government policies. At the heart of this approach is a concern with restoring the balance between social rights and responsibilities with policy being explicit about the expectations of membership of society and willing to impose regulatory measures in respect of those who are unwilling to meet these expectations. Policy therefore, and in particular youth policy, has tended to be underpinned by preventative, educative, corrective or positive action measures to address what is deemed to be 'undesirable' behaviour (Miller 2004, 42). Such an approach led many to argue that 'social inclusion' has

¹³ (see also Nancy Fraser's critique of notions of 'the public' in her 'Rethinking the Public Sphere', *Social Text*, No. 25/26, 1990, pp. 56-80).

more in common with ‘social integration’ and ‘social engineering’ than with inclusion or economic and social equality (Levitas 2005).

The increasing sense of anomie and disenfranchisement experienced by an increasing minority of young people faced with unemployment and a bleak future and fuelled by a ‘nothing to lose’ mentality, had knock on effects on youth crime and anti-social behaviour instigating a further set of youth policy responses. In spite of children and young people being acknowledged in policy by New Labour, negative attitudes towards young people persisted in comments such as: ‘*Young people being dangerous and vulnerable ... where impulsiveness immaturity and the lack of regulation can lead young people into criminal behaviour*’¹⁴. Ensuing policy responses reiterated previous political views about the need to be ‘Tough on crime, tough on the causes of crime’ with the The Youth Justice Board in England and Wales emphasising a ‘new authoritarianism.’ This involved measures concerned with controlling and regulating young people’s use of space in the form of Curfews, Anti-Social Behaviour Orders, Parenting orders/Acceptable Behaviour Contracts, to tackle low level nuisance. As the Youth Justice Board report on anti-social behaviour noted, young people get more attention from the police than any other group in public space, most of it negative (YJB 2005). Indeed, as Muncie (2004) argued, the danger of such punitive measures was to open up the possibility for an increase in the number of lower end offenders being criminalised and propelled up the justice system. Wales developed its own youth offending strategy linked to the ‘*Extending Entitlement*’¹⁵ strategy for inclusion for young people. Programmes were developed to provide positive activities for young people to divert them from crime and, for those already in custody, intensive supervision and support programmes.

These policy imperatives of increasing social inclusion and of striving to create ‘joined-up, modern services’, breaking down the boundaries between professional groups, emphasising partnership, communication and active citizenship were all embedded in key children and youth policy initiatives (such as New Deal for Young People, Connexions, Every Child Matters) that were introduced between 1997 and 2010 and which created a significant shift in the underlying principles of service delivery for children, families and young people.

¹⁴ DFES (2005), *Youth Matters*, Cm 6629, HMSO, London.

¹⁵ NAW (2000), *Extending Entitlement: Supporting Young People in Wales*. Report by Policy Unit, National Assembly for Wales, September, Cardiff.

A New Deal for Young People (1998)

Policy changes during the late 1990s involved a stepping up of universal as well as targeted provision focused primarily on youth transitions to the labour market and the reduction of youth offending, but also focusing on key youth issues such as teenage pregnancy, educational underachievement and the growing problem of alcohol and substance misuse.

Youth transitions to the labour market was one of two major new policy priorities focusing on establishing a new ethos of 'welfare to work' (drawing on approaches in the USA) and the development of a new programme '*New Deal for Young People*' (NDYP¹⁶) representing a national (moral) crusade against unemployment and poverty. In spite of New Labour's 'new' commitment to young people, the New Deal initiative represented a tough approach to dealing with young people Not in Education Employment or Training (known as NEET¹⁷). The New Deal for Young People provided a mix of 'carrot and stick' measures designed to support and enable young people to overcome barriers to the labour market. Simultaneously NDYP imposed a tough punitive approach on young people who did not commit to education, training or work. No longer were young people allowed to receive unemployment benefit unconditionally; instead a Jobseeker's Allowance was introduced tied to young people's commitment to actively take steps to find work, gain work experience, return to education or receive training, with the failure to comply punishable through sanctions in the form of withholding their allowance.

Connexions (2000)

The different strands of the Modernising Government agenda came together in 2001 in a radical new youth policy initiative in England called *Connexions*. The Connexions Strategy aimed '*to provide a wide range of support to meet the young person's needs and help them reach their full potential*'¹⁸. It was suggested that while professionals and agencies continued to work in traditional uni-professional ways, there was an increased likelihood that young people would 'slip through the net' of service provision and experience greater social and educational

¹⁶ The New Deal for Young People is a UK wide programme. For further reading and critiques of NDYP see Percy-Smith, B. and S. Weil (2002) 'New Deal or Raw Deal?: Dilemmas and paradoxes of State interventions into the Youth Labour Market,' in Cieslik, M. & Pollock, G. (eds.) *Young people and risk society: The Restructuring of Youth Identities and Transitions in Late Modernity.* Aldershot: Ashgate. Jeffs, T. and J. Spence (2000) 'New Deal for Young People: good deal or poor deal?' *Youth and Policy* no. 66, pp. 34-61.

¹⁷ NEET has become a 'crude proxy' for defining social exclusion amongst young people and a lever for youth policy development (Williamson 2005).

¹⁸ DfEE (2000), *Connexions: The best start in life for every young person*, HMSO, London.

disadvantage. One of the key strategic aims of the Connexions Strategy was that those working with children and young people should be enabled to work across professional boundaries and to understand how their role fits in with the work of others.

Connexions was launched as a generic, new advice and support service to 'provide the best start in life for every young person'. Connexions was a universal service bringing together parts of the Careers and Youth Services and providing different tiers of support according to need. Key to Connexions was the pledge that all young people will have access to a personal advisor. Connexions was complemented by more targeted support for specific groups of young people in particular need, for example to ensure proper support and equal life chance benefits for children in care, pregnant teenagers and those with alcohol and substance misuse difficulties.

Many commentators concluded that the roots of the Connexions Strategy were rather more firmly placed within what Levitas (2005) described as a '*social integrationist discourse*', which focuses on participation in paid work being the key to social inclusion and to other social and economic goals including the reduction of crime and of welfare costs. Although Connexions claimed to be a service for all young people (a universal service), it was in practice a targeted service that gave priority to those most at risk of underachievement and disaffection. Edwards and Hatch (2003) criticised Connexions for its emphasis on '*education and work goals*' at the expense of '*social and emotional support*'. Hoggarth and Smith (2004, 11) described a '*tyranny*' of target monitoring that led to a phenomenon they called '*impact leakage*' within Connexions, whereby the potential impact of the strategy is lost. It was also argued that the target-led culture caused inequalities in resource allocation, with resources '*being taken away from the vast bulk of young people who do not pose a threat to order*' (Jeffs and Smith 2001, 2) and away from services that work with young people's personal development and underlying needs. In spite of the long heritage of Youth Work, many argued that the advent of the Connexions service undermined traditional Youth Services, with services in some local authorities disappearing altogether.

Over the years youth work has been pushed in '*different directions at different times by different interests*' (Bradford 2005, 58) but there is a consensus that underlying all its different guises is a commitment to '*voluntary*' and '*participatory*' relationships with young people with youth workers acting as informal educators seeking to engage collaboratively with young

people ‘*on their own terms*’ (Bradford 2005). In 2001, *Transforming Youth Work*¹⁹ was critical about the quality of some local authority youth services and argued that the move of youth work, in England, away from its core values of informal education and towards a more individualised, outcome-focused and target-driven model sought more formally to prioritise young people’s participation in education, employment and citizenship. In recent years the shift from ‘open’ provision towards the targeting of provision on working with groups of young people deemed to be ‘at risk’ in some way has been the most notable change in services for young people.

Questions remain about whether youth work should provide a service for all young people, or should target particular groups, take on individual casework and shift towards formal education. While Jeffs and Smith note ‘a certain despondency has infected state-sponsored youth work’ they recognise ‘a lot remains that is vibrant and healthy’ (2010, 14). Their evidence derives from the narratives of practitioners describing how they and others ‘*carve out space to develop relationships, engage in conversation and build communities with young people*’ (2010,14).

Every Child Matters (2003)

As attention turned towards early intervention and prevention work, the release of the Laming²⁰ report into the death of Victoria Climbié as a result of the failure of children’s services, signalled a major shift in services for children²¹, with implications also for youth policy. Laming concluded that children’s needs were being neglected or overlooked through a lack of ‘joined-up’ working, poor systems for information sharing and too great a reliance on professional and agency boundaries. A new framework, *Every Child Matters*, was launched with the intention of transforming services for children and young people so as to better protect and maximise the potential of all children and young people from birth to 19 years of age.

The *Every Child Matters* framework concerned all aspects of children and young people’s lives according to five outcomes:

Being healthy - ensuring children and young people are physically, mentally and emotionally fit and healthy, that they benefit from sexual health education and are

¹⁹ DfEE (2001), *Transforming Youth Work: Developing Youth Work for Young People*, HMSO, London.

²⁰ Laming Lord (2003), *Inquiry into the Death of Victoria Climbié*, HMSO, London.

²¹ DfES (2003), *Every Child Matters*, HMSO, London.

supported in living healthy life styles, including targeting smoking, drug and alcohol consumption amongst young people. The *Healthy Schools Initiative* is one initiative that has resulted from bringing together health and education services, to encourage children to eat more healthily.

Staying Safe – this involves stepping up child protection measures e.g. through the Local Safeguarding Children's Boards to protect children from abuse and neglect, but also safeguarding children from bullying, violence and crime.

Enjoying and achieving – ensuring children are supported in reaching appropriate levels of pre-school development, raising attainment, reducing school absences, and helping young people to achieve personal and social development goals through access to, and enjoyment of, recreation opportunities.

Making a positive contribution – involving engaging children and young people in decision making in school and community; reducing levels of crime, offending and antisocial behaviour and encouraging positive behaviours; developing positive relationships; developing self-confidence and supporting enterprising behaviour amongst young people.

Achieving economic well-being – encouraging young people in further education, employment or training after leaving school; ensuring young people are ready and able to compete in the labour market (through achievement of skills and qualifications); that young people live in homes of a decent quality and in sustainable communities where they can benefit from cleaner, greener and safer public spaces; ensuring young people have access to transport and material goods by addressing problems of poverty and material deprivation; reducing the proportion of young people living in low-income and/or workless households and enhancing the provision and take up of child care for all families.

The Children Act 2004 wrote these changes in Children's Services into legislation requiring all local authorities to develop and implement these new arrangements under the banner of Change for Children. It proposed a radical overhauling of the organisational and professional structures affecting all those working with children and young people. For local authorities this

chiefly involved bringing together Education and Health and Social Care service provision with the intention of facilitating more effective, integrated (joined-up) working. To facilitate effective multi agency working practices emphasis was placed on the development of common working practices such as ‘*common assessment frameworks*’, ‘*information sharing protocols*’ and a focus on ‘*early intervention and prevention*’ adopted by all agencies working with children and young people to ensure their needs are met as part of an integrated, multi-agency approach.

Aiming High for Young People (2007)

Following criticism of the Connexions Service and its emphasis on ‘problematic’ young people and the setting and meeting of targets, a re-emergence of the values of youth work began to appear in youth policy. After decades of young people saying they had nothing to do and nowhere to go, following *Every Child Matters*, the government responded with two major policy initiatives – *Youth Matters* and *Aiming High*^{22 23}. The central feature of these initiatives was to increase access to activities and services. Young people were encouraged to take a more active role in ‘positive activities’ and make a positive contribution in their communities, for example, through volunteering (e.g. *Millennium Volunteers* and *V Involved*²⁴) and an enhanced menu of youth provision.

Aiming High for Young People saw the publication of a new ‘ten year strategy’ in England that aimed to help young people in England, particularly those in deprived areas, participate in enjoyable and ‘*purposeful activities*’²⁵ in their free time to develop new skills and raise their aspirations. In Wales, *Young People, Youth Work, Youth Services*²⁶ set out a national strategy based on entitlements for every young person aged 11 to 25 ensuring opportunities to engage in ‘*meaningful activities that are challenging, creative and exciting ... [and] to participate in the planning, design, management and evaluation of all provision*’²⁷. The Scottish Government produced a similar strategy that also saw a commitment to informal education in its *Moving Forward: a Strategy for Improving Young People’s Chances through Youth Work*²⁸.

²² DfES (2005), *Youth Matters*, HMSO, London.

²³ DCSF (2007), *Aiming High for Young People: a ten year strategy for positive activities*, HM Treasury, London..

²⁴ V Involved was launched by Dept for Communities and Local Government in 2008 to replace Millennium Volunteers and promote volunteering for 16-25 year olds.

²⁵ DCSF 2007, 22.

²⁶ NAW (National Assembly for Wales) (2007), *Young People, Youth Work, Youth Services: National Youth Service Strategy for Wales*, NAW, Cardiff.

²⁷ NAW 2007, 13.

²⁸ SE (2007), *Moving Forward: a Strategy for Improving Young People’s Chances through Youth Work*, Scottish Executive, Edinburgh..

While this groundswell in policies for children and young people was welcomed, the lack of attention to the implications for practitioners on the ground was a major pitfall. Critics pointed to the lack of appropriate additional financial resources to ensure the capacity to make these changes happen; the low morale of many public sector workers faced with endless structural reorganisation and new initiatives whilst trying to maintain increasingly high caseloads; and increasing pressure on workers to achieve ever higher service delivery targets. Coles (2000) noted that whilst ‘joined up’ policy is a feature in central government, at the local authority level joined up working has been more of a challenge. Indeed a major flaw has been a lack of consideration of the systemic and organisational implications for implementing new policy initiatives.

Nevertheless, considerable progress was made in child and youth policy under New Labour, with the needs and well-being of children and young people becoming a major political issue. Extensive networks of services and support developed across the voluntary and statutory sectors in a spirit of cooperation. Policy provided opportunities to innovate practice and raise the bar in the quality and availability of services for children and young people. However, while some progress was made in reducing levels of youth crime and anti-social behaviour, significant problems persist. Teenage pregnancy levels remain high and alcohol and substance misuse as well as poor health and obesity continue apparently unabated. Whilst many children and families have benefited from early years preventative policy interventions, for youth it is more difficult to observe benefits trickling down from policy intentions and impacting in young people’s lives. Whilst many would see this situation as a policy failure, more realistically it could be argued that the current situation is the result of under-estimating the scale of the problems needing addressing. Many professionals would argue that the measures in place under New Labour were broadly correct, but more time, resources and worker support was needed to achieve sustainable benefits for children and young people (Williamson 2005).

The age of austerity

In 2010 the government in England changed and, in the absence of an overall majority, a Conservative-Liberal Democratic Coalition was formed. Davies (2013) has observed that youth policy under the Coalition has carried over ‘*some of the core features*’ of the policies of the previous government with the exception of a focus on ‘*enjoying and achieving*’ and ‘*economic*

well-being'. These, suggests Davies (2013: 7), were perhaps seen as '*too provocative for a new age of austerity*'. The coalition policy document *Positive for Youth*²⁹ repeated calls for a greater focus on 'targeted' and 'intensive' approaches, but a particular feature of youth policy since 2010 has been the increased use of competitive contracting out of youth service provision to the voluntary and not-for-profit sector. The Coalition Government expects a mix of voluntary-community sector and private business to provide its 'youth contract' arguing that '*the voluntary and community sector sits at the heart of the Government's ambitions to create a Big Society*'³⁰. The *Big Society* agenda is '*a call to action*' where '*citizens, communities and civil society providers all need to play a part in reducing the deficit*'³¹. At the launch of the *Positive for Youth* strategy the Government set out a vision whereby local authorities will build partnerships with voluntary organisations and businesses to lead the way with '*innovative projects that are inspiring young people*'. The aims are of course to make savings while at the same time find different and innovative ways of providing services.

The most significant shift in English Youth Policy under the Coalition, however, has been the absence of any acknowledgement that youth policy has a place within government. Immediately on forming a government the Department of Children, Families and Schools was rebranded as the Department for Education and no mention of *Every Child Matters* was permitted on government websites or documents. In 2013, the Secretary of State for Education, Michael Gove, announced that '*youth policy was not a government priority*' (Davies 2013, 26). Davies (2013, 9) has argued that the '*vagueness*' in the content of *Positive for Youth* (2011) was '*far from accidental*' and was in fact '*integral to one of the document's prime purposes: to play down, if not actually write out, the state's direct role in providing or even funding youth services*'. The main thrust of Coalition policy since 2011 has been towards developing a National Citizen Service wherein '*everyone but the government*' (Davies 2013, 12) should take responsibility for implementing a positive future for young people.

The Scottish and Welsh Assemblies have taken a slightly different focus in their most recent youth policies, retaining the principles of *Every Child Matters* and of informal education and association. Both the *National Youth Work Strategy for Wales 2014-2018*³² and the *National*

²⁹ DfE (Department for Education) (2011) *Positive for Youth: a new approach to cross-government policy for young people aged 13 to 19*, HM Government, London.

³⁰ DCLG (2010) *Building a Stronger Civil Society*, DCLG, London, 3.

³¹ DCLG (2010), 12.

³² NAW (National Assembly for Wales) (2014), *The National Youth Work Strategy for Wales 2014–2018: Supporting young people to reach their potential and live fulfilled lives*, www.wales.gov.uk/educationandskills

*Youth Work Strategy 2014-2019: Our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people in Scotland*³³ make a clear commitment to *the value and role of open access youth work provision* as a universal provision for all young people. Both also make clear statements about the link between ‘good’ youth work and educational achievement and aspiration; and both make a commitment to continuing to support funding of both voluntary sector and local authority youth work.

Conclusion

The picture of youth policy in the UK provided here is one that highlights the extent to which ideological crusades based on moral panics and deficit models of youth have given rise to a stream of policies which have successively failed to connect with the lifeworlds of young people whilst redirecting the blame onto young people themselves. Constantly changing and underfunded initiatives have done little more than provide a ‘fig leaf’ for action that provides the illusion that something is being done. At best, policy has provided a ‘holding pen’ (coercive and voluntary) for young people whilst their lives go nowhere.

Williamson wrote in 1997 (201-200): *‘the discontented young have [... in effect] been written out of the policy agenda...’*. The situation is not much better 20 years later. Faced with repeated hollow opportunities and false promises an increasing minority of young people have simply disappeared off the radar, choosing to no longer play the state’s game and instead eke out an existence on the margins, with major implications for their status as citizens, for social cohesion and for their own identities and well-being. As Williamson (1997, 203) concluded: *‘The futility of incurring ever-increasing expenditure on law and order, repairing damage, sophisticated security systems, and so on, when similar resources could be distributed more constructively in the interest of both social harmony and young people’s futures [is ...] self-evident.’* While Williamson’s comments were made twenty years ago, the current situation for youth could be argued to be just as bleak. At the current point in history we might be tempted to conclude: Youth policy? What youth policy? However, there is currently, in England at least, an interesting opportunity emerging for politicians to reframe where they see youth policy going. In England there is to be a General Election in 2015 with currently no clear consensus emerging

³³ SE (Scottish Executive) (2014) *Our ambitions for improving the life chances of young people in Scotland National Youth Work Strategy 2014-2019*, Scottish Executive, Edinburgh.

about which party will have a majority. The Labour Party has already indicated that they will make youth services statutory and shift responsibility for youth policy back to the Department for Education from the Cabinet Office and will give the vote to 16 and 17 year olds from 2020. Labour have stated their aim to reclaim ‘and reinvent’ (Puffett 2014) the *Every Child Matters* agenda for ‘where we are going in the years ahead’. We wait in expectation and hope for the next page to be written upon.

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