

Briefing Paper

The Impact of Leaving the EU on the Youth Work Sector in Scotland

Key Points

1. Youth work has faced continual resourcing reduction across the UK and in Scotland (Unison, 2016a; 2016b)
2. Youth work has reached a 'tipping point' (Gladwell, 2000)
3. Capacity of youth workers is stretched from the impact of austerity measures
4. Further funding reduction from Brexit could impact on CPD opportunities
5. A reduction in available spend would impact on the current social return that youth work contributes in the Scottish economy and to our young people
6. There is a need for further dialogue with the youth work sector to establish a renewed, creative, resilient and strong sector in response to Brexit

Context

In June 2016, 52% of the UK electorate who turned out to vote stated their wish to leave the European Union. Whether this was a protest vote, an anti-establishment vote or a vote of no confidence in the EU, the impact will be long lasting.

Young people will arguably feel this impact more acutely than many, particularly given that 'under-25s were more than twice as likely to vote Remain (71%) than Leave (29%)' (Moore, 2016). In this referendum, as the age of the voter went up, so too did the likelihood of voting to leave, with over 65s twice as likely to vote leave, than remain. Drawing on Bruter and Harrison (2016) Helm reported that 'the referendum stimulated feelings, particularly among young people, of "sadness but also ones of anger and frustration at people who voted to leave, and often at older generations"' (Bruter and Harrison, in Helm, 2016).

This briefing paper was prepared in February, 2017:

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Introduction

The impact of leaving the EU on the youth work sector is unknown and unpredictable. What is known however is that youth work across the UK has experienced a steady range of cuts in public funding since the current economic crisis began in 2008 (Unison, 2016a). It is also known that young people have been disproportionately affected by this economic crisis where unemployment is higher than for any other age group (Unison, 2016a); they are in more precarious jobs, have lower wages, and are 'torn between their aspirations...and their need for income' (Standing, 2011, p.74). Further, the European Commission (2014) has identified that, 'there is a growing use and reliance in EU level support and financing for the youth work sector as other sources of funding at national level are reduced' (p. 12).

Our concerns about the impact of 'Brexit' on youth work in Scotland are grounded in contribution analysis (Mayne, 2012) as a logical method for informing understanding of what might reasonably be possible in the future. However, what was planned and what actually happens may be quite different. Illogical or unexpected events can redefine aspirations and make it difficult to develop a logical pathway for change. Thus, as a specific measure or predictor of the future, contribution analysis is flawed. However, in these times of uncertainty, with increased demand on youth work to engage young people in times of deep-rooted economic crisis, 'there is pressure to do more with either the same or less funding than before' (European Commission, 2014, p.13). Thus, we use logic in our analysis of what is known in order to consider the problem of 'Brexit' for youth work.

Considering the Impact of leaving the EU on the Youth Work Sector

Our initial assertion at this time of change and uncertainty is to note that youth work has reached a 'tipping point'. Gladwell (2000, p.12) defined this term as 'the moment of critical mass, the threshold, the boiling point'. With Unison (2016a, p.4) estimating that '...between April 2010 and April 2016, £387m was cut from youth service spending across the UK' the impact on sustaining quality youth work provision is becoming more difficult. Specifically in Scotland, a survey carried out by Unison (2016b, p.4) on the impact of austerity on youth workers found that '79% of those who responded stated that there had been cuts or severe cuts to their team budgets this year, 82% said the same about "last year" and 83% said cuts or severe cuts over the last five years'. Despite the Christie Commission calling for

preventative spending cuts to local government, directly aligning with youth work practice, it was found that Scotland seems to be going the opposite way (Unison, 2016b).

Undoubtedly, the stress and strain put on workers will have an impact on their morale (Unison, 2016b) and potentially there is a risk of 'burnout' through self-sacrifice (Hughes et al, 2014, p.5). The lack of resourcing of youth work projects takes this tipping point to a more critical level than ever before, thus any loss of investment due to leaving the EU would present extreme challenges across a sector that is already struggling to sustain the minimum level of services and project management. It would additionally affect the CPD opportunities currently available through existent international partnership working which align with the *National Youth Work Strategy 2014-19* to build workforce capacity (YouthLink, 2014). A lack of CPD opportunities is combined with evidence that over 70% of youth workers saw an increase in their workload in the last few years (Unison 2016b). Together, this means that an already stretched workforce will have reduced capacity for innovative and creative youth work responses to as yet unknown social and political contexts.

Thus, despite the Community Empowerment (Scotland) Act 2015 (Scottish Government, 2015), which seeks to strengthen community voice and decision making through improved community planning processes, and the statutory regulations on the Requirement for Community Learning and Development, which came into force in 2013 (Scottish Government, 2013); the promise of reducing inequalities and ensuring that local services are managed by local communities is potentially compromised by a reduced infrastructure for youth work support and participation in, for example, asset transfer projects. Against this backdrop, there are obvious impacts in terms of a financial gap in the level of investment in youth work projects. Currently this includes significant levels of funding via Erasmus+ and workforce investment, as demonstrated in this extract from Beaver and Green (2017).

Erasmus+

- 10% of the total Erasmus+ funding is ring-fenced for the Youth strand.
- Participation in European projects increase young people's commitment against discrimination, increase interest in political life, increase respect for and appreciation of cultural diversity, increase readiness to work and live abroad.¹
- Between 2009 and 2016 Scotland received over €2,193,700 for Erasmus+ and formerly Youth in Action youth work.¹ This figure does not include the funding received indirectly as partner beneficiaries meaning the total received is much higher.
- Erasmus+ offers funding to support the professional development of youth workers in three different ways including youth worker mobility, strategic partnerships and SALTO (Support, Advanced Learning and Training Opportunities) resource centres.
- International partnership working provides invaluable CPD for youth workers. It would be difficult, if not impossible, to maintain similar CPD opportunities exclusively within the UK.

¹ RAY, *Youth in Action: Findings and Implications for Practice*, 2014, p.4, http://www.researchyouth.net/wp-content/uploads/2013/07/RAY_YiA_Findings-and-Implications_final.pdf

² Figures collated on projects based in Scotland from statistics found here <https://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/statistics-0> and <https://www.erasmusplus.org.uk/statistics-and-results-from-youth-in-action>

Fig (i) Extract from Beaver and Green (2017)

This investment has underpinned long-standing engagement with EU Partners in promoting understanding and mobility across the EU (European Commission, 2001; European Union, 2006) through international youth exchange programmes and the mobility of youth work students who have come to, and travelled from, Scotland from across the EU in order to undertake practice learning placements. Incoming and outgoing exchanges have brought international perspectives to the wider youth work sector workforce and more directly to the heart of our most deprived communities, which adds a social benefit in transmitting important values of social justice and equality, citizenship and sustainable development (European Commission, 2014; European Union, 2009).

According to Mayne (2012) logical claims to contribution are strongest when they provide a mix of context information, the perspectives of beneficiaries, theoretical and research information. Thus, in addition to information provided on EU funded projects (Fig i), we draw on longitudinal research that showed how international youth exchanges created chances for young Scots, to meet with young people who were different to them, and those whose beliefs and values were different to their own, which promoted mutual understanding, trust and the building of social and cultural capital (Coburn, 2011).

This research also showed that international youth exchanges engage young people in developing a range of practical skills in negotiation, planning and leadership (Coburn and Wallace, 2011) all of which impact on participants' lives beyond their time engaged in youth work. The young people involved in this research described their experiences of an exchange as life changing. This kind of work is firmly established across Scotland, which embraces the EU values and principles for equality and social justice, to bring benefit to youth work practice across Scotland.

Applying the logic model, if EU funding for youth work projects and youth exchanges are no longer available to the Scottish sector, it could be argued that the contribution of youth work to enhancing young people's capacity for social and cultural connectedness, for understanding and accepting difference, and for using such experiences in formation of their own identity, would be clearly impacted.

Of course, EU funding for youth work is only part of the story in considering its value. Commissioned by YouthLink Scotland, Hall Aitken (2016) have estimated that the social return on investment in youth work that contributing £656 million to the Scottish economy and shows a return of £7 for every £1 of public cash. Their findings show that:

- Youth work contributes at least £656 million to the Scottish economy
- Youth work has made a major difference to the lives of over 450,000 people in Scotland today (over 13% of the Scottish population)
- The confidence and motivation that youth work develops is rated by 85% of employers as very important compared with 27% rating qualifications this way
- The social return on investment of youth work is at least 3:1

Thus, a reduction in available spend, which might be reasonably anticipated in a Post-Brexit scenario, would impact on the current social return that youth work contributes in the Scottish economy and to our young people.

Conclusion

These concerns about the potential impact of Brexit on youth work are, at this uncertain moment in time, somewhat speculative or 'best guess' potentials. As yet, the exit negotiations are not finalized. The challenges of exiting the EU are unknown and untested. In responding to the concerns in this briefing, it could be useful to embrace this moment or 'tipping point', in order to consider how youth work, and youth workers, might cross a threshold towards a new kind of practice.

Set within a narrative of transformational creativity, it may be possible to establish a new discourse as a counterbalance to the very real fears, exceptional conditions and inherent uncertainties that a series of public sector cuts have brought to an already hard-pressed workforce (many of whom give their time voluntarily). An alternative discourse is required, but at this stage, the conversation about Brexit has not collectively been established in youth work or among youth workers. Further, the kind of re-imagined youth work that is necessary in a contemporary successful Scotland is also unknown.

This paper has drawn on what is already known and in the application of logic which can offer insights into the financial and other impacts of Brexit on youth work provision. Yet, missing from this analysis is a robust understanding of the views and capacities of a committed workforce, which offers a high social return on investment, for a renewed creative, resilient and strong youth work sector. The 'doom-and-gloom' scenario is not without substance as cuts take effect. Yet, the creative possibilities that this tipping point brings, have yet to be considered fully.

We believe there is an urgent need for a creative and forward facing dialogue between, and with, youth workers that responds to current Brexit discussions. Rather than becoming consumed or driven by a reaction that is grounded in uncertainty and fear of the unknown, additional research and space for dialogue in this area could fill the void and ensure that the youth work sector is adequately prepared for whatever Brexit discussions may bring.

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