

Collateral damage

Britain's youth service, established half a century ago, is steeling itself for some heavy cuts from the coalition government. And this is bad news for young people facing drug problems. Sam Hart reports.

Youth work is in crisis. Heads of youth services and charities are warning of brutal cuts: virtually every local authority in the UK surveyed by the magazine *Children and Young People Now* said the axe was set to fall on its youth work provision - with potentially devastating consequences for young people. Experts are warning that the loss could mean

a severing of vital support to young substance misusers.

Youth work has its roots in the industrial revolution, when migration to the cities led to the birth of an urban youth culture. The statutory youth service was born in 1961 under Harold Macmillan's Conservative government after pressure from the voluntary

sector. It's Albermale report put the responsibility for providing meaningful activity for young people firmly at the door of local authorities.

Youth workers today say they provide a vital role in supporting young people with issues including substance misuse, with many trained as drug and alcohol specialists.

Young people face different problems to adults when it comes to substance misuse. For many, drug use is just one of a cluster of problems including poor mental health, boredom, lack of training and education and involvement with the criminal justice system. It is often an occupational hazard of a chaotic lifestyle rather than an isolated problem.

Experts argue that youth workers are uniquely well-placed to deal with these issues, providing an essential frontline service in informing young people about the dangers of drugs, providing diversionary activities and guiding them into appropriate services.

Youth workers operate in centres or 'detached' settings, providing strong bonds with the local community and clear boundaries around acceptable behaviour – key factors in protecting young people from substance misuse. And, crucially, they provide a stable, supportive and trusting adult relationship – potentially the only steady relationship in a turbulent young life – allowing young people to talk openly about their problems.

"Youth workers build relationships on a voluntary basis with young people as no other professional can," says Doug Nicholls, Unite's National Secretary for Community and Youth Work. "It needs to be recognised that for a young person whose life may be surrounded by chaos and neglect, a youth worker plays an important role.

Richard McKie, national programme manager at the National Youth Agency, adds: "Very often a good youth worker can achieve levels of openness and credibility that many other professions cannot."

Youth workers also say they are ideally placed to provide information and education about substance misuse away from traditional classroom settings – particularly vital for young people not in education or training. They are also able to support young people and guide them into the right services when there is a problem.

"Generic youth workers are a very strong source of referrals to our services," says Shaun Huxley, Director of Strategy and Development at Addaction.

As well as referring young people to services, the holistic nature of the role means that they are in a good position to provide a well-rounded package of support themselves.

Reading Borough Council for example urges youth workers to adopt a creative approach to tackling substance misuse, including discussion groups, involving young people in a 'natural highs' programme (including abseiling

and mountain-biking), confidence-building or in helping with their coping mechanisms, such as running stress management programmes.

An essential youth work premise of 'starting where young people are' has led councils to introduce 'youth buses' which are key in engaging young people in services. On Fridays, a brightly coloured youth bus parks in Ilford city centre in the London Borough of Redbridge, providing advice and information about issues including drugs, safer clubbing and safe sexual health. The bus also parks near schools, attracting young people on their way home with their free in-bus Playstation.

"In our first hour of opening the youth bus attracted one hundred young people," says Lequat Ali, detached youth work manager at Redbridge. "Forty five of them registered with us. Young people continue to register

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with us every week. They are initially attracted by the Playstation and the bus itself which is very attractive, but they stay to talk. They like it because there is no pressure. They can just stay for a short amount of time and have an open discussion. Talk about what they really want to talk about. We build up a relationship with them and that helps us provide the support they need."

Ali says that the open nature of the discussion can lead young people to talk about drugs as part of wider issues. For example, a free chlamydia screening service offered on the bus, led to discussions about how drugs and alcohol can affect decisions about safer sex. Ali points out that by no means all of those using the youth bus have substance misuse problems, but of those that do, the bus provides a vital gateway to other services.

"Those young people aren't likely to refer themselves directly to a drug agency but we can refer them if necessary or get them to attend one of the drug workshops that Fusion (a local drugs agency) run on the bus."

Experts say that axing this kind

of universal provision would mean many young people slipping through the net. Yet, it is this perceived 'softer' approach which some claim leaves youth services vulnerable to some of the most damaging cuts. And local councils across the country are struggling to find funding to keep similar projects running.

"Local authorities do not always see them as vital, frontline staff so they are a soft option for cuts," says Doug Nicholls. "But this is a false economy. If youth provision is cut we will end up spending more later dealing with greater social problems. Young people won't have that fall back of a service to help them make positive choices."

It's an opinion backed by Richard McKie: "We are of the opinion that good quality youth work saves money in the long run, and believe that more than ever before it is vital that we invest in our young people."

Yet youth workers are already feeling the pinch. A survey by UNITE this month claimed that 20-35 per cent of youth work funding was cut in George Osborne's mini budget earlier this year.

The Comprehensive Spending Review identifies youth work as one of the services that could be run by independent providers. Experts warn that the impending cuts seem likely to exacerbate the very problems associated with substance misuse, with one respondent to the CYPN survey warning of young people "becoming disaffected and marginalised," whilst another predicted that "employability, motivation, confidence and skills development" would suffer".

Meanwhile in Coventry, workers are struggling to stop the council contracting out its youth service which they say will result in cuts in wages and provision. And the beleaguered sector's uncertain future is having a knock-on effect on training, with a recent report in the Guardian saying that colleges and universities are struggling to attract youth work students and some have dropped their courses altogether.

It is widely acknowledged that the youth service, originally conceived by the Conservatives, is now destined to change irrevocably under the Conservative-dominated Coalition government. "It seems likely that youth services will see cuts, or need to be delivered in different ways," says Miller. Others are more pessimistic: "This government is setting out to demolish what was established in 1961," says Nicholls, "A good quality universal youth service."

■ **Sam Hart** is a freelance journalist