Dr. Tania de St Croix, In Defence of Youth Work – written evidence (CCE0218)

1. Introduction

1.1 I am submitting this evidence on behalf of In Defence of Youth Work, a forum for critical debate that was formed in 2009 and organises seminars, conferences, and substantial online discussion amongst youth workers and other youth practitioners.

1.2 In this response, we mainly address questions 5 and 6.

2. Citizenship education (Q5)

2.1 We would like to remind the committee that education is wider than schooling and universities (formal education). While it is undoubtedly important for schools and universities to focus on political participation, it is also important to create conditions where a wider education sector – in our case, informal education, youth work, and community education – can flourish. This is particularly pertinent when we are discussing citizenship and political education. Political participation is best exercised in ‘real’ political situations, rather than only as role play; in other words, education through citizenship rather than only education about citizenship.

2.2 Youth and community work have a long history of being conceptualised as personal, social and political education. However, our political education role has not always been at the forefront, depending (ironically) on the policy priorities of the time. At times, political education has been envisioned in its more formal aspects even in youth work – e.g. youth parliaments, youth councils and young mayor projects. Such projects are valuable where they actively engage with a range of young people including many from marginalised backgrounds and communities (see for example the Lewisham Young Mayor project), rather than simply mirroring the demographics of Westminster.

2.3 The wider political education role of everyday grassroots youth work (e.g. youth clubs and street-based youth work) is intrinsic to an approach that treats young people as ‘creators, not consumers’ (Smith, 1982). While this has perhaps been neglected in recent youth policy and funding streams, mainstream youth work has a vital role to play, particularly in engaging with young people on issues that schools would struggle to deal with (such as young people who would like to campaign on education and schooling itself), and in engaging young people who are marginalised both in the schooling system and in having a say on political issues. Young people who do not feel comfortable or successful in school may not be inspired if political education is only, or mainly, associated with school.

3. National Citizen Service (Q6)

3.1 Youth and community work has a long history of engaging young people over the long term – and particularly in working class and ethnically diverse communities, as well as
with marginalised groups such as young LGBT people and young disabled people’s groups, and groups of young carers and young people undergoing particular challenges. While these groups have been closed down or lost funding, the National Citizen Service has been funded extremely well. There is no evidence that the National Citizen Service is more effective than year-round, community-based provision with a wider age group (youth work engages with young people aged 8-25, particularly 13-19, whereas NCS works with young people aged 16-17).

3.2 As youth workers we know that many young people enjoy NCS and get a lot out of it. We also know many young people who say it is not for them, for various reasons; these young people are never mentioned, however, and there has been a lack of research into why some young people are not interested. It is hardly surprising to youth workers that NCS is enjoyed by many young people and has some positive impact; NCS uses various methods long established in youth work (residential, social action projects, learning in groups, life skills, reflective discussions). However, it is aimed at young people of a narrow age range, is a ‘one size fits all’ model, is short-term, and appeals to certain kinds of young people who are already engaged in their communities and ambitious to go to university. Youth work has a history of engaging more widely, for a longer time period.

3.3 Lengthening the NCS is not the answer. While a short programme is able to achieve certain outcomes, only community-based longer-term provision that ‘starts from where young people are starting from’ is likely to engage young people who are not interested in NCS.

3.4 Making NCS (or any similar scheme) compulsory would lead to resentment and many practical issues. Telling young people they ‘must’ do citizenship activities or volunteering would be authoritarian, hypocritical, and contradictory to the nature of these activities.

3.5 The ‘value for money’ of NCS has been the subject of ongoing scrutiny (National Audit Office, 2017; Public Accounts Committee, 2017). £1,863 per participant (NAO, 2017, p.4) is a high cost for what is effectively a short summer scheme for 16 year olds in comparison to year-round provision for a wider age range. The Education Select Committee’s (2011) Services for Young People inquiry recommended that NCS was not continued in its current form in the light of ‘concerns about the scheme’s cost and practical implementation’ (p.60). ‘Value for money’ concerns have re-emerged in recent months, as official bodies have criticised the high cost per place, the money wasted on unfulfilled spaces, the lack of financial accountability, and the need for evidence on longer term impact (NAO, 2017; Public Accounts Committee, 2017). Its costs have risen steeply each year as it has been scaled up for increased participation: the government has committed to the rather striking figure of £1.26 billion over the 2016-2020 period (NAO, 2017, p.4).

3.6 At a time when young people are calling for renewed investment in youth work (UK Youth Voice, 2017), we would like to suggest that the NCS spending is reviewed – not only on its own merits in terms of ‘value for money’ but in comparison to what has been lost in the time when NCS has been funded. It cannot be right that the government cannot afford to fund youth work, but can afford NCS, which costs a great deal more per space. At least
some of the resources used for NCS should be diverted to community-based youth work, and to free training and education for youth and community workers (including volunteers) in political and citizenship education.

3.7 While its per-person costs have risen, NCS has gradually been reduced from a two month scheme to a three or four week project. Costs are rising but the provision is becoming shorter. Rather than emerging from what young people in local areas say they want, NCS takes similar – sometimes identical - forms in every region of England and, more recently, Northern Ireland. It is closely controlled and prescribed: its programme, timings, outcomes, and evaluation are embedded in the contracts that providers are required to adhere to – this does not tend to promote active citizenship and reduces the potential role of young people in shaping what they do on NCS.

3.8 Even in the ‘social action’ element of the scheme, which is specifically intended to be designed and carried out by young people, the need for a ‘social action experience’ to take place within a tight timescale militates against genuine involvement at young people’s pace and starting from their concerns. For example, the group observed as part of an independent research project was tasked with painting a ‘community room’ in a college, a project that was predesigned by regional staff (Mills & Waite, 2017).

3.9 Whereas political and citizenship education is a skilled role, most NCS ‘leaders’ are employed on temporary contracts for a few weeks or months each year. Poor pay – even for senior roles – is endemic, and is likely to become worse in the light of recent pressures on NCS providers to lower their costs.

3.10 Currently, there are 9 regional NCS providers, of which three are profit-making companies (NAO, 2017); others have ostensibly non-profit but have well paid senior staff and are reliant on NCS for their income. There should be no room for profit-making (or very high salaries) in the political and citizenship education of young people.

3.11 Below the layer of regional providers running NCS, other organisations (mostly small specialist providers) are subcontracted to deliver the scheme in local areas. It is well established that small, local organisations can lose out in subcontracting relationships: they are asked to share the risk of the larger organisations but have smaller reserves, and suffer disproportionately when targets are not met. This risk will be intensified now that the NCS Trust has been directed to recoup money from ‘unfilled spaces’ - any youth provider will know that an unfilled space does not mean that money was not spent (for example, a residential venue will not refund the cost for a young person who does not turn up). As well as the risk to smaller youth providers, there is presumably a risk to the reliability of evaluations. The ‘payment by results’ arrangements that incentivises recruitment will also, inevitably, incentivise organisations to exaggerate the number of young people who have signed up to and ‘completed’ NCS.

3.12 A particular orientation of NCS towards citizenship is suggested by the way in which it is evaluated. Since early pilots of the scheme, young people have been asked to agree or

1 The devolved Scottish and Welsh administrations have chosen not to run NCS.
disagree with various statements at the beginning of NCS and after taking part. Their results are compared with a ‘control group’ of young people who did not participate. In past versions of the evaluation, young people have been asked whether they agree that ‘In the long run people get the respect they deserve in this world’, and ‘If you don’t succeed in life it’s your own fault’ (see de St Croix, 2011; 2016). These statements are reproduce the message that failure is our own fault, and that social context or structural disadvantage does not matter. The agree/disagree statements in more recent iterations of the evaluation have been less obviously crude, but the vast majority of the changes measured by NCS remain fundamentally individualist and neglect the role of social inequalities.

3.13 NCS is fundamentally based on product rather than process; on consumption rather than creativity; on the quickest possible throughput of both young people and youth workers for maximum profit. However, an immediate closure of NCS – even if it is replaced by neighbourhood youth work - may not be the best way ahead. If politics is to become more decentralised and participatory, it is vital that policy changes must not be imposed on people – particularly marginalised groups of young people and precariously employed workers.

3.14 Therefore, we suggest that serious consideration is given to reviewing NCS and, in the shorter term, redirecting some of its future expansion-oriented funding towards community-based youth provision. NCS should be reviewed holistically alongside youth work provision and resourcing, both nationally and locally. Ideally, after a period of transition, the resources currently allocated to NCS should be devolved to local communities for participatory budgeting by young people, youth workers and community members. Certain principles must underpin this budgeting: for example, money should be ring-fenced for young people’s informal leisure-time services that they attend by choice; young people and youth workers should have a say on how programmes are carried out; and youth workers must be trained, valued, and supported. In making these decisions, local committees may well build on some of the positive aspects of NCS, that themselves draw on many decades of youth work history and practice: the residential, the emphasis on groups, and on young people’s action and political education. Other elements might be rethought: the layers of profit-slicing, the restriction to 16 year olds, the short-term nature of the project, and the ‘packaged product’ orientation that militates against genuine youth participation. Any change should not be sudden or imposed; time must be taken to discuss the possibilities with young people and youth workers, to think about how we can learn from the successes and limitations of various forms of youth provision, and how we can best use resources to benefit young people – taking into account the need for specific attention to potentially marginalised social groups.

3.15 The way that youth citizenship programmes are run must be congruent with the message of those programmes. Therefore, localised versions of NCS can be considered, yet only alongside other forms of youth work. Local, participative decision-making means that, in some local areas, the idea of keeping a ‘summer’ or ‘school leaver’ element could be retained. The point is that such decisions must be made locally, primarily involving those most affected and most knowledgeable – young people and youth workers.
References


Tania de St Croix, 8th September 2017

*Biography*: Tania de St Croix has been a youth worker for over twenty years, and is now a Lecturer in the Sociology of Youth and Childhood at King’s College London. Her recent research explored how part-time and volunteer youth workers are affected by policy in their everyday practice: see ‘*Grassroots youth work: Policy, passion and resistance in practice*’, published in July 2016 by Policy Press.