

A National Community Service for NEET young people?

"One of the most important things you can do on this earth is to let people know they are not alone."

Shannon L. Alder

It's a tough world for adolescents today. A few decades ago there were conventional family structures, comparatively few parental break-ups, youth clubs and, of course, the Church: all offering solid foundations for young people, as and when needed.

Little of that exists today. Society is a melting pot in which each generation looks after itself, virtual worlds compete with real worlds, and Church seems to be run for and by the old fogies.

For the past few days, media attention has moved away from Brexit and focused on insecure young people whose only resort is to violence. So we ask - is it time to re-introduce a form of National Community Service, in order to restore a sense of belonging with the community as a whole, with the self-discipline that would accompany it?

The most crucial need for young people in care is the yearning for a sense of belonging, after years of being passed from pillar to post, both at home and at school. I recall speaking with Kriss Akabusi MBE a few years ago, who explained how that yearning was so strong it could have led him down anti-social paths just as easily as social ones. He explained how joining the Army had made all the difference for him, providing both structure and self-discipline to be able to look forwards.

But Looked-After young people are the tip of the iceberg in this respect. There's hundreds of thousands of young people who experience an insecure adolescence, and so many factors which make it such. We last wrote about this on [16 April last year](#), and the situation is no better today.

Of course it's easy to blame all this on today's family structures, as one of the Question Time audience did last Thursday evening. And it's true that the immense generational self-indulgence started with my generation in the 1960s - but it's gone much further than that now.

Issues of gender and identity, whether personal, social or national, swirl around us today, leading to a melting pot of uncertainty. We should certainly be teaching tolerance of all different ways of living, but sometimes it feels like we are teaching insecurity. Meanwhile nearly half of today's children are born out of wedlock (48% in 2016), and marriage is no longer the bedrock of security that it was.

So young people are often torn between two or more real worlds and, on top of that, there's a raft of virtual worlds which compete for their allegiance. These can draw such a deep absorption that they compete with real relationships: hence the current ['Immersive and Addictive Technologies Inquiry'](#) by the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee.

When David Willetts published his book 'The Pinch' in 2010, he focused mainly on the economic imbalance between the generations. That has still to show improvement, but relational instability has significantly deteriorated in the intervening years: not due to Government, but due to an ever more fluid society, where "Anything goes, as long as it's with a consenting adult". That's a very self-indulgent creed, a long way from the other fundamental principle of "Love your neighbour as yourself", which is also deeply embedded in society. It makes life very difficult for young people, very challenging to know what's right and what's wrong.

So perhaps it's time to look for a new interpretation of a tried and tested approach in order to help young people find stability and self-discipline: National Community Service for all young people who are not in Education, Employment or Training.

In contrast to the military model, this would focus on that second fundamental principle of “Love your neighbour as yourself”. It would focus on the needs of the homeless, the hungry, and the lonely, and it would give a real sense of purpose to all those involved.

Its structure would need serious Government funding, as it would involve strong leadership and operational structure. There could certainly be a role for a military approach in this, in order to provide structure and training in self-discipline.

But it would not only provide an answer to that yearning for a sense of belonging, but also an alternative to the almost feral gang culture and a route towards normal employment.

Finally - regular listeners will be aware of the focus we and our sister organisations The Share Foundation and The Share Centre have placed on the Child Trust Fund.

The oldest children with these accounts are now 16½ years old, and at this age they are able to control their own account if they wish, prior to getting access to their money at 18.

The Share Foundation has set up a new website ‘CTF Ambassadors’, calling for volunteers throughout the United Kingdom to visit secondary schools and wake up this huge scheme, which benefits six million young people. They’ve just printed a [new leaflet for teenagers](#) to increase awareness of the account.

Notwithstanding Brexit votes and the Spring Statement, Labour MP Helen Goodman MP is tabling this Wednesday a debate on Child Trust Funds at Westminster Hall, and there is increasing awareness of the need to raise the profile of this sleeping giant.

So if you’d like to volunteer as a CTF ambassador, please register via www.CTFAmbassadors.org.uk and play your part in empowering the next generation.

Gavin Oldham

Share Radio