



by Des Burke

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Ensuring Quality and Safety in International Youth Exchanges

How safe are young people when they participate in exchanges or volunteer in different organisations? Sadly it seems they are not as safe as they should be. The communities they live in and the temporary communities they form or join during international events need to be places of safety and security. Those who are affected by abuse, bullying or any other inappropriate behaviour, are excluded from full participation and its benefits. If we are to ensure full, safe and equitable inclusion then we need to spend some time considering the issues raised in Des’s article. Thanks to Des for writing and to the Working Group for their important contribution.

► Introduction

In recent times there has been increasing identification of the importance of issues relating to risk and protection of young people. In the last edition of Coyote in the article by Lilliam Solheim and Adriana Armenta: ‘A Youth Campaign against Violence’, we heard that violence against children and youth is a global issue that cuts across societies, cultures and countries. This issue has also been discussed in the UK journal The Lancet.

Those of us working in the Youth in Action Programme are conscious of the need to build safety measures into our Programme. Youth in Action is the Programme the European Union set up for young people. It aims to inspire a sense of active European citizenship, solidarity and tolerance among young Europeans and to involve them in shaping the Union’s future. Youth in Action supports mobility of young people within and beyond the EU’s borders, non-formal learning and intercultural dialogue, and encourages the inclusion of all young people, regardless of their educational, social and cultural background.

Youth for Europe exchanges are one of the actions that are used to meet the objectives of the Programme. Thousands of young

people travel to different countries to meet and take part in projects with their partners each year. The benefits and opportunities deriving from these youth exchange projects to young people and youth workers alike are innumerable.

We pride ourselves that the Youth in Action Programme is well-run and that there are safeguards in place to ensure safety. However we know that no one working with young people can be complacent. There are risks that must be managed. We still have work to do if we are to ensure that these risks are minimised.

Protection and safety of young participants have been declared to be important principals for international youth exchange projects in the Youth in Action Programme.

Applying standards of good practice requires development of materials, sharing of good practice, training and awareness raising for those taking part in the Programme.

► Working group

A working group of National Agencies and the European Commission on training in Risk and Young Person Protection in International Youth Exchange has been working on the subject. The National Agencies of Austria, Belgium, Finland, France, Germany, Poland, Ireland, Norway, Portugal, UK, Italy and Turkey have taken part.

The overall purpose of this group is: *“To reduce risk for young people on YOUTH in Action Programme Exchanges”*. The working group brings together perspectives from the different countries to develop resources and training that improve the quality of youth exchanges.

- With the introduction of Youth in Action across Europe in 2007 young people from thirteen years of age are participating in international exchanges.
- Legislation and Services for young people vary greatly across the countries that participate. There are also huge cultural differences.
- The age of sexual consent ranges from 13 years to 18.
- In some countries people working with young people either as professionals or as volunteers must undergo police checks.

► The Guidelines for Good Practice

The European Commission and the National Agencies have been working with youth organisations, experienced youth workers and trainers to develop and share good practice in youth exchanges. In 2003 a seminar was held in Portlaoise in Ireland. Experienced youth workers from France, Germany, Greece, Sweden, Great Britain, Northern Ireland and Ireland met at the seminar. During the seminar the youth workers established a series of checklists for child protection in international youth work. The lists are aimed at preventive and crisis management activities and refer to the preparation and selection of leaders, involvement of parents, police checks, accommodation etc. The checklist was published as *‘Child Safety and Youth Exchange Programmes Guidelines for Good Practice’* in 2003. The European Commission then translated and distributed the document in twenty Community languages.

The guidelines have been updated since then and are now available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/youth/focus/doc/protection_and_safety/safety_and_protection_guidelines_good_practice_en.pdf

Other linguistic versions are also to be found at:

<http://ec.europa.eu/youth> in the section Protection and Safety

Youth workers were concerned about specific issues pertaining to international youth work which included:

- Insurance
- Legal responsibilities and obligations of youth workers
- Alcohol and substance abuse
- Health & Safety
- Researched evidence of the prevalence of abuse and neglect of young people
- Under reporting of abuse

Following the introduction of the Guidelines training in their use was given in Malahide for national agency staff and in Paris for project promoters.

► The Country Guide

The Country Guide gives a quick reference guide for leaders and young people who are planning to have an exchange project in another country.

The Guide was developed by the network of National Agencies of the YOUTH in Action Programme. This network has a unique insight into international youth exchanges across Europe. This Country Guide is aimed at improving the information available to young people and those working with them about countries that they intend to visit as part of a Youth in Action Programme exchange project. This information specifically relates to youth work and to information that will be of use during a youth exchange. The publication aims to enhance the experience of international youth exchange for young people as a safe, effective and enjoyable learning experience. The Country Guide is produced with the Support of the EU Commission. The source of all of the information is the network of National Agencies of the Youth Programme.

The Country Guide (Risk and Young Person Protection in the European Union) is available at:

http://ec.europa.eu/youth/pdf/doc1236_en.pdf

► Safety in Youth Exchanges

Chris Gould CEO of the charity Childsafe and former Police Detective Chief Superintendent has carried out research into risk in the area of international travel for young people. He has participated in several training seminars in the framework of the Youth and Youth in Action Programmes. Chris Gould brings a different perspective - one that youth leaders do not often hear.

At our trainers’ seminar in Antalya Turkey in 2009 Chris gave a talk on safety for young people from a police perspective. His focus is on prevention of criminal acts against young people.



Every year millions of young people travel to take part in gap year volunteering, language schools, sports and youth club trips. International youth exchanges form a part of this. Chris believes that for many people working with young people it is time to take a reality check about abuse of young people. Chris carried out an international study of police forces with UK Home Office and EU Commission funding. Out of 2000 cases of abuse in international travel less than 1% were reported to any law enforcement agency. In Chris' area – Avon and Somerset in the UK, 5000 cases of abuse per year are reported. Chris Gould is very experienced with dealing directly with offenders and has built up a picture of how paedophiles operate. As safeguards are put in place, offenders are driven to seek new places to go to gain access to young people. Chris believes that there are many such people now operating in the world of youth travel. Abuse is a horrific experience. There is a low risk of abuse in statistical terms but when it does happen it is of great significance for the young person involved.

Child Safe Booklets are to be found via the websites:
www.child-safe.org.uk
www.travelsafe.info.com

► Protection and safety of participants

The European Commission places a high priority on safety in the Youth in Action Programme:

In its simplest form, protection and safety address every young person's right not to be subjected to harm. In that perspective, there is no issue that is not potentially in some way related to young person's safety and protection. Protection in this context covers all kinds of inappropriate behaviour, including sexual and moral harassment, but also intercultural problems, insurance, accidents, fire, alcohol and substance abuse, neglect, bullying, degrading treatment or punishment, etc.

The fundamental objective is to ensure that all those who work with young people recognize a duty to safeguard the protection of young people and are able to fulfill this duty. To this end each promoter participating in the Youth in Action Programme should have in place effective procedures and arrangements to promote and guarantee the welfare and protection of young people. This will help to enhance the young people's experience as a safe, effective and enjoyable learning experience.

► Awareness Raising

To raise standards, awareness raising on the subject of safety needs to be provided for many youth leaders. A training module is being developed. It is based on an existing awareness raising module developed by the National Youth Council of Ireland. Work is being done to adapt this module for international work. The training has been piloted with trainers experienced in international work. The module is intended to be delivered in two short sessions. This module is designed so that it can be

incorporated into training events that address other subjects as well as risk awareness.

► Training of trainers

European trainers are key people to reach youth leaders in international work.

Resources of the training and cooperation plans that are available to National Agencies in the Youth in Action Programme can be deployed for this purpose.

Quality standards and safety management are facets of good youth work practice both at home and in international work.

Awareness raising is delivered in a way that also brings practical ideas for managing international youth exchanges.

In piloting the Guidelines and the awareness modules experienced trainers such as Clement Dupuis (France), Kathy Schroeder (Netherlands), Gearóid O' Maoilmhícl and Louise Monaghan (Ireland), Jose Soares (Portugal) and Jo Claeys (Belgium) have participated in this work.

► Introduction of the New Awareness Modules

Training of trainers events are being prepared to introduce the modules to a new groups of trainers. These trainers will then use the module in national and international trainings with youth leaders around Europe. We aim to maximize the number of leaders who receive this training, particularly from countries where there is no similar training available. This will require cooperation from trainers and from National Agencies. There will be two further training of trainers seminars during 2010 - in Bulgaria and in Malta. Applications from youth leaders for these training events will be made via the National Agencies of the Youth in Action Programme.

Des Burke is the Programme Manager for Youth Affairs in Léargas that provides the National Agency for the Youth in Action Programme in Ireland. Léargas operates under the aegis of the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in the Department of Health and Children. Des is a member of the working group on risk and young person protection that is composed of representatives of Youth in Action national agencies and the European Commission. ■

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