**“Peer learning in youth work” - 2nd InterCITY Conference, Helsinki 2013, a concept paper**

The Helsinki Conference is a follow-up to the 1st InterCITY Conference “European Peer Learning on Local Youth Policy” in Leipzig, 10 -12 October 2012 organized by the Federal Ministry of Family Affairs, Senior Citizens, Women and Youth, JUGEND für Europa, Deutsche Verein für offentliche und private Fürsorge e.V. in collaboration with the Cities of Leipzig and Köln. The Conference gathered nearly 100 people around Europe representing local youth work. The aim of the 3 day meeting was to promote *peer learning and networking of local youth work in Europe*. Full documentation of the conference can be downloaded from <http://bit.ly/14ZQ4fH> and a print version can be ordered from [siebel@jfemail.de](https://webmail.welho.com/imp/message.php?index=1503). The 2nd Conference will be held in Helsinki 9-10 December 2013 and the 3rd in the Netherlands in the City of ´s-Hertogenbosch in 2014.

The aims of the 2nd InterCITY Conference are (1) *to develop peer learning as a Europe-wide practice in youth work and beyond* and (2) *to* *establish a European Network of Local Government Youth Work*.

Peer learning refers to a process of accumulation of knowledge and competence through a networked form of learners (or practitioners) learning from each other. Recently peer learning has appeared to the policy agenda of youth and education in the EU.[[1]](#endnote-1) In youth work peer learning can be used to improve work with different youth concerns (participation, transition to work, social exclusion, etc) and to design better youth policies.

Youth concerns such as lacking opportunities for youth participation, intolerance, inequality, poverty and unemployment can be essentially faced through youth work and as a collaborative effort with other actors. Local youth work specialized in for example youth participation should be offered an opportunity to exchange experiences and develop new forms of youth engagement. The Conference offers such opportunities, but will also develop a systematic approach to peer learning. How to network youth work expertise on specific topics to create peer learning processes? How to design learning events and organize the reporting back? How to make the Europe-wide experience more transparent; to national and European youth policy design and support?

Municipalities have a key role in providing welfare services and youth work for young people. In Europe municipalities differ in terms of their size, responsibilities and service provision, from a small poor rural municipality to a well-resourced large urban area. The smaller municipalities need to develop basic services for youth and establish their recognition within the community and its decision makers. In big cities those responsible for youth work and youth policies must be able to flexibly react to the needs of young people and be able to create multi-agency strategies and services. Most European local governments struggle with a variety of challenges on that continuum. Municipalities and youth work actors with similar challenges can make a learning leap by exchanging experiences on their failures and successes. The Conference provides an opportunity to answer questions like: How can municipalities of different size and resources create a local youth policy? How can youth work and youth policy contribute to youth integration into education and employment and to incite young people to take action? How to align large sectorized departments and other actors in a bigger city to provide integrated services for youth? How to consolidate integrated youth policy in the strategies of the City Council? And furthermore, how to increase the visibility of local youth work and policy in the design of national and international youth policies?

The second aim of the Conference is to establish *a European Network of Local Government Youth Work*. The network consists of national networks of those responsible for local government youth work. The organizers will carry out, before the event, a study on existing national networks on local government youth work and invite their representatives to the Conference. Terms of reference of the Network will be drafted in beforehand and they will be discussed and adopted at the Conference.

The Network has two objectives: (1) To promote peer learning and (2) to represent local government youth work in Europe. The first objective echos the Council of EU general initiatives of the resolution on 2010-2018 framework for youth cooperation (15131/09, p. 14): “supporting the development of youth work and recognizing its value”. Across Europe local government youth work is facing very similar youth expectations and problems, as well as management and financial challenges. All municipalities are searching for best policies and methods to meet the needs of young people. As the solutions to common issues can be very different, it makes sense to compare experiences and as a peer learning activity together develop better youth work. At its best peer learning is about policy development, identifying and addressing the critical factors for policy change together with the practical youth work development, improving the ways of working with young people along the policy guidelines.

The EU youth policies highlight better cooperation with local authorities and strengthening expertise and knowledge on youth, youth work and youth policy (opus citatus, 14-15). In EU a good part or even the majority of youth work is carried out by municipalities and cities. These public authorities have updated knowledge on youth through the daily face-to-face contacts of youth workers and through local research, reports, statistics, evaluation and cross-sectoral programs. Local government youth work is where the methods of working with young people are constantly evaluated, reflected and developed. Local government is also the focal point of linking European and National (and regional) youth policy guidelines and priorities with the local needs and conditions: ideally European youth policies should consist of these local policies and strategies. It would make sense for the European organizations and governments to use the present-day knowledge of the said Network on youth, youth work and youth policy in Europe.

1. Pedagogically peer learning relates to John Dewey’s pragmatist educational thinking and constructivism, according to which learning is practice-based, learner oriented, it presupposes a group or a network of learners and it leads to accumulated knowledge, competence and action. Recently peer learning has received additional interest due to the development of the Social Media. *Crowdsourcing* refers to outsourcing problem-solving or learning to a larger (online) public. According to its proponents crowdsourcing becomes "learning for everyone, by everyone, about almost anything." Apparently modern media offers increasing opportunities for learning from peers.

Peer learning has also emerged in the recent educational policy texts. According to the new formulations of EU’s Lifelong learning policies “Exchange of good practice and peer learning [becomes] a key part of reforming the European education and training systems” (Lifelong learning policy: *Strategic Framework for Education and Training*, Education and Training, European Commission). The strategy is that “EU-wide peer learning activities are organized either by groups (“clusters”) of Member States interested in specific topics, or by expert groups established by the European Commission”.

As learning is practice and practitioner–focused, it becomes necessary to develop peer learning as a combination of different types of learning contexts. A recent study on peer learning (through peer group mentoring) in teacher education says: “Peer group mentoring relies on the integration of informal, non-formal and formal learning with constructivism as the core principle” (Heikkinen, Jokinen & Tynjälä (eds) *Peer-Group mentoring for Teacher Development*, 2012, p 8). The authors emphasize that “the informalization of learning is a reflection of a major pedagogical trend in our time, constructivism, which is based on the idea that learners construct their knowledge on the basis of their prior views, knowledge and experiences, so that they can better be linked to the information at hand” (Heikkinen et al, 2012, p 6). In the youth field there is a long tradition of the practice and promotion of non-formal learning. Peer learning as a form of non-formal learning has been recently accentuated also in the policy programs of the EU youth field. As an example the *Renewed framework for European cooperation in the youth field 2010 – 2018* (Council Resolution 26 Nov. 2009) invites the commission to ”propose a flexible framework for peer-learning activities”. Also a proposal for a Council Recommendation *On the validation of non-formal and informal learning* states that non-formal learning is characteristically peer learning in some leisure, work or 3rd sector activity which must be better recognized (p.1, COM(2012) 485 final). The 2nd InterCITY Conference will develop such frameworks for practitioners of youth work to learn from each other. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)