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Oireachtas

**An Comhchoiste um Leanaí, Comhionannas,
Míchumas, Lánpháirtíocht agus Óige**
Tuarascáil maidir leis Obair Óige sa Todhchaí

Iúil 2023

Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
The Future of Youth Work

July 2023



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**JOINT COMMITTEE ON CHILDREN, EQUALITY, DISABILITY, INTEGRATION
AND YOUTH**

Report on the Future of Youth Work

July 2023

33/CDEI/16

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Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth



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Senator Lynn Ruane
Independent



Senator Mary Seery
Kearney
Fine Gael



Senator Ned O'Sullivan
Fianna Fáil

CATHAOIRLEACH'S FOREWORD

Young people are one of our greatest resources. They are also one of our greatest responsibilities. We need to create a society that enables them to flourish. We need to respect their rights, needs and wishes. We need to support them to overcome the many challenges facing society and to constantly review what we are offering them, by way of supports and experiences, so that youth work can move with the times.

Children and young people played a critical role during the COVID-19 pandemic. We must acknowledge that, as well as the setbacks and challenges it caused many of them. I know that admiration for the role young people played has been stated elsewhere, but for myself and the Committee, it can't be stated often enough. We should always be mindful of the part young people played in the face of the pandemic, be it through the things they did to help their friends, family and neighbours or the things they had to forgo.

I wish to thank all stakeholders who engaged with the Committee in relation to youth work for their time and contributions to this report, but also within their communities, where they provide essential and often life-changing supports to young people. As this report demonstrates, youth work has a pivotal role to play and needs to be appreciated and resourced accordingly.

I also want to thank Senator Lynn Ruane for acting as Rapporteur. She brought a lifetime of experience to the job as well as a determination to see this report completed in good time. I think her genuine grasp of the issues facing youth work is clear to see in the report. I hope that the Minister gives full consideration and works to deliver on the recommendations provided for in this report.

Kathleen Funchion

Cathaoirleach

11 July 2023

RAPPORTEUR'S FOREWORD

The value and scope of Youth Work in Ireland has yet to be truly captured, the contributions of those within the sector, as experts and informal/non-formal educators, has been long undervalued and unrecognised. Too often we focus on the shortcomings of our young people, burdening them with expectations without acknowledging the complexities and challenges they experience, and how we as adults, and as leaders, often fail to create and sustain the kind of environment necessary for them to overcome that adversity and to recognise their potential as individuals.

This report will offer a glimpse into the culture and crucialness of youth work in Ireland, as a safe haven for our young people, and a space for empowerment and positive change. Through the experience and expert-led discussions held in committee, we get a glimpse of what happens when you take a young person away from the inequality of society, from the trauma, deprivation and pressures within their communities and you place them in another environment, one without formality or authority, without fear or expectation. They begin to feel seen, heard, and valued, and in response we get engaged young people with a desire to participate. Youth work encourages new perspectives to evolve, enabling young people to be active citizens, and empowered individuals.

The individuals that work within the sector play a very specific role in empowering our young people, essentially filling in the gaps in a system that is struggling to meet the needs of young people. When we consider the future of youth work, we should be prioritising one that recognises and respects the valuable contributions of youth workers, and the domino effect their commitment has on our children and our communities. In the backdrop to their positive attitudes and commitment is significant pressure; to meet the unmet needs of these young people and to build trusting relationships that aid personal and social development whilst the sector is significantly understaffed, underfunded and underpaid.

The current system is based on value for money and does little to vindicate the rights of our young people; ultimately perpetuating the cycle of class division, social exclusion and deprivation. By failing to acknowledge the value of our youth, particularly given the severe effects Covid-19 has had on their mental health and social development, we contribute to the negative stereotyping and to the exclusion.

We have much to do to adequately address the deficiencies facing youth work service provision, to rectify the 9% of vacant posts and the sub-minimum wage within the sector. We must create a workforce that young people can see themselves working in. For those most in need of services and support, there must be a conversation about the blocks to youth work; the absence of youth work internships and a Garda Vetting system that lacks discretion and sense. These opportunities must be accessible, and employers must be encouraged to hire people who have past convictions that are of no relevance to the job in terms of child safety.

It is only in the last several years that the Committee recognised 'Youth' within its title and remit. It is far time to address the intergenerational trauma and poverty we have extended onto our young people and to acknowledge their needs and entitlements. That becomes a real possibility with investment in youth work, investment into the futures of young people and the future of our society. When we think of the National Youth Council Ireland research that estimates every €1 invested in youth work would be worth €2.20 to the Irish economy, it is concerning that a mere 1.2% of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth budget is assigned to youth work for 2023.

Finally, I would like to thank all the contributors for their work, both in the Committee and their daily work. I would also like to thank the Committee for assisting me in acting as rapporteur.

Senator Lynn Ruane

11 July 2023

Contents

MEMBERSHIP	2
CATHAOIRLEACH'S FOREWORD	4
RAPPORTEUR'S FOREWORD	5
SUMMARY AND WITNESSES.....	8
RECOMMENDATIONS.....	10
What is Youth Work?	15
Issues Impacting Youth Work	16
1. Structural Inequality.....	16
2. Access to Mental Health Supports	17
3. Drug Use in Young People	19
4. 18-24 Year Olds	19
6. Rural Youth Work challenges.....	21
7. Detached Outreach Work	21
8. Safeguarding young people	23
9. Integrated Care in Education.....	23
10. Youth Work in National Policy	24
11. Funding	25
12. UBU and Quantitative Measurement of Outcomes.....	26
13. Recruitment and Retention in the Youth Work Sector.....	29
APPENDIX 1 Transcripts and Submissions.....	31

SUMMARY AND WITNESSES

The Joint committee held two Committee hearings, and some stakeholders provided written submissions alongside their opening statements. During both sessions and throughout the submissions the same themes emerged across almost all contributions. Young people are facing multiple crises in relation to poverty, intergenerational trauma, the cost-of-living crisis, homelessness, and lack of access to mental health support, and it is often youth workers working directly with young people who are left to pick up the pieces.

The Committee heard that there is a lack of national direction in youth work and an urgent need for a national framework and re-evaluation of the funding mechanisms as the current models are restricting the work of youth workers. A consistent message was one of young people in crisis, instability in the youth sector, challenges in retaining staff due to poor pay conditions and a workforce that fails to reflect the diversity of the population in Ireland.

Youth workers have provided practical answers and solutions to these challenges. This report aims to summarise the discussions at both Committee meetings and the submissions made by all organisations that participated and provide a list of recommendations. It was noted during the sessions that recommendations from reports can sometimes go unimplemented and it is the responsibility of the Committee to ensure this does not happen.

WITNESSES

Familibase

- Mr Brendan Cummins, Youth Work Project Leader
- Ms Fiona Kearney, Interim CEO

Solas

- Ms Leanne Lowry, Youth Programme Manager
- Ms Amy Carey, Chief Executive Officer

Connect 4 Project

- Mr Paul Perth, Team Leader

- Ms Grace Hill, Tallaght Drug & Alcohol Task Force Coordinator

Bluebell Youth Project

- Mr Gerard Roe Youth Worker

Crosscare Ronanstown

- Ms Sinead Harris, Management team
- Mr Greg Tierney, Youth Work Manager

St John Bosco Youth Centre

- Mr Stephen Sharpe, Project Leader
- Ms Emily Boyne, Youth Worker

St Ultan's Cherry Orchard

- Mr John Scanlon, Finance, Services & Campus Manager
- Ms Susan Menton, Integration Advisor

National Youth Council of Ireland

- Ms Mary Cunningham, Chief Executive
- Mr Paul Gordon, Director of Policy and Advocacy

City of Dublin Youth Services Board

- Ms Celene Dunne, Director
- Mr Mark McDonald, Director of Schools City of Dublin Education and Training Board

Rialto Youth Project

- Ms Dannielle McKenna, Manager
- Mr Jim Lawlor, Youth Worker

NUI Maynooth

- Professor Maurice Devlin, Professor of Applied Social Studies
- Dr Sinead McMahon, Community Work & Youth Work Team

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Committee recommends that every young person in Ireland should have access to local, accessible, high-quality youth work services, delivered by paid professionals.
2. The Committee recommends that the voices of young people and youth workers working directly with young people should be consulted and included in all future youth and community work policy development.
3. The Committee recommends that youth work should be subject to an all-of-Government approach, to ensure that the youth sector receives adequate attention and focus, at national level.
4. The Committee recommends that suitable and effective metrics are developed by the Department to assess and measure the quality and impact of youth work and youth services, in consultation with relevant stakeholders. This should include both qualitative and quantitative methods to better understand the scale of the sector and its impact on young people and their participation in society.
5. The Committee recommends that the Department embed and prioritise detached street outreach work in future policies relating to young people and youth work. Additional investment in detached street work should be separate to existing programmes, to aid the roll-out of detached street programmes around the county.
6. The Committee recommends less restrictive percentage ratios in respect of how youth workers can spend their time, to ensure that youth workers feel empowered to meet the needs of the young people they are working with, often being led by the creative and responsive nature of youth work.
7. The Committee recommends that specific supports are developed to support young people aged 18-24 when engaging with adult services, to ensure a continuum of care.
8. The Committee calls for the formalisation of the provision of youth services with young people aged 6 to 10, establishing this in future policy and funding schemes.

9. The Committee recommends increased funding for the development of places and spaces, to amplify the value of youth work in society, to aid shared learning between practitioners and to ensure that all young people have access to a safe youth work led space. The Department should liaise with the Department of Housing, Heritage and Local Government to assess the potential for the delivery of youth work services in underutilised or vacant premises. The Department should also liaise with the Department of Rural and Community Development in relation to capital funding.

10. The Committee recommends the implementation of multi-annual budgeting and investment for the youth sector, to allow medium and longer-term programming with greater confidence.

11. The Committee recommends that universal youth work should receive investment at the same rate as targeted schemes. Increased funding should be provided as required to provide adequate universal schemes across the country, ensuring that young people in rural areas or facing adversity have equal access to the benefits of youth work.

12. The Committee recommends that, where volunteers are also engaged in delivering youth work services alongside paid personnel, they should receive professional support and continuing professional development (CPD) training.

13. The Committee recommends that the youth work sector should be embedded as a key partner in addressing the social and economic structural inequalities facing young people in Ireland, highlighted within the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, and the National Youth Strategy.

14. The Committee recommends that within any new national framework for youth work, a strategy to address the challenges facing the sector in rural areas is required.

15. The Committee calls for the immediate restoration of youth and community work funding to pre-austerity levels, adjusted in line with inflation, population growth and factoring in the increased cost of service delivery.

16. The Committee recommends a re-calibration of funding for youth justice, to redirect justice led funding into youth services that seek to address the root causes of violence and criminality in the longer term.
17. The Committee calls on the Department to prioritise the recognition and professionalisation of youth work. Increased funding and pay parity are essential to this, but so too is the provision of continuous professional development.
18. The Committee recommends that all youth workers should be paid a living wage in line with the minimum essential standards for living (MESL) and have access to contributory pension schemes.
19. The Committee recommends that the programme to introduce apprenticeship opportunities into youth work needs to be advanced with urgency.
20. The Committee recommends funding for youth services to specifically empower young people to challenge racism, in line with the National Action Plan Against Racism.
21. The Committee recommends the development of an interdepartmental strategy to assist with the all-of-Government approach, to address the specific crises facing young people including, inter alia, poverty, housing, and mental health service provision.
22. The Committee calls for the full implementation of 'Better Outcomes: Brighter Futures' (DCYA, 2014), specifically the commitment to 'support and improve recognition of the role of non-formal and informal learning, and in particular the contribution of youth work' (ibid, p.67).
23. The Committee recommends that the new Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028 (Govt. of Ireland, 2022) fully recognises the importance and value of youth work, including it as a central pillar of all policies and programmes relating to children, young people and young adults.
24. The Committee recommends that a specific policy framework should be developed for the youth work sector, to harness and protect its distinctive

contribution to working with young people as well as to support youth workers and service providers.

25. The Committee calls for a review and commencement of further research into youth work, to ensure that the Department understands and addresses the issues facing the sector and can plan for future challenges. The research should be undertaken at national level, and include the following:

A. A mapping exercise to ascertain both geographical and type of service provision gaps around the whole country.

B. A review of effectiveness of the UBU (Your Place Your Space) model, the constraints it places on youth work services, and the importance of providing high quality experiences for young people.

C. An assessment of workforce planning review – to examine in detail the reasons behind issues with recruitment and retention within the sector.

26. The Committee recommends an immediate review of NSETS (North South Education and Training Standards Committee) with the aim of developing a coordinated approach to workforce planning south of the border.

27. The Committee recommends a review of the UBU funding scheme. This review should be wide-reaching, including project staff, and young people both within and outside of the services to assess the extent current practices may be contributing to the lack of provisions for disadvantaged youth, drug-related issues and the marginalisation of young people.

28. The Committee recommends that the Department, as a matter of urgency, conduct or commission a national workforce study. This should act as the basis for a development strategy to address the crisis in relation to staff recruitment and retention; the barriers to entering the profession; the need to support youth workers as experts; and to ensure the youth workforce reflects the diversity of Irish society today.

29. The Committee recommends the establishment of a working group to assess the merits of the national expansion of the Integrated Care in Education model.

30. The Committee recommends that the Department liaise with the Department of Health to reduce the unacceptable waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services.

31. The Committee recommends that alternative, community-based mental health services within youth services for young people be examined as a matter of urgency.

32. The Committee recommends a review of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS), to ascertain whether it is meeting the diverse needs of young people and communities.

33. The Committee recommends providing increased resources to facilitate the placement of therapeutic supports within youth services where young people are more likely to engage.

34. The Committee recommends that the Department increases the availability of Systemic Family Therapy, which works with a young person's whole family and support system, across communities.

What is Youth Work?

The Committee heard that the first framework for youth work was based on the principle of partnership between statutory and voluntary sectors; recognised not only as a social profession but, uniquely, a social movement. Witnesses in their submissions all spoke to the value and transformational impact of youth work. Young people find safety, and a sense of belonging in youth work, they gain confidence and resilience, allowing them to become more self-directing.

What is distinct about youth work is that it is a voluntary, informal and non-formal learning support that young people choose to engage with. Young people are at the centre of the relationship and are empowered to discover themselves and their potential outside the pressures of society. They are respected and valued as individuals; there is a core focus meeting the young person where they are at, rather than imposing a strict structure or regime upon them. The informality of youth work is part of what a trusting environment, encouraging engagement and participation. Submissions and stakeholders were passionate about voluntary participation, equality, inclusion, social justice and empowerment, with these pillars being central to the youth work process and stressed the importance of young people being involved in the decisions that affect them.

Witnesses shared anecdotal and evidence-supported benefits of youth work such as increased confidence and resilience, peer connection and connection with adults, improved physical and mental health, engagement in education, increased career aspirations, harm reduction and relief from structural inequality and poverty. Submissions included stories of young people reengaging with education while supported by youth workers, of a homeless young person who had a place to come to eat and shower every day alongside the support of the youth workers, and testimony of Senator Eileen Flynn and the impact youth work had on her life. While the goal is the quality of interaction and impact on young people's experience and lives, there is also an economic benefit to youth work. Research undertaken on behalf of the National Youth Council Ireland (NYCI) in 2012 conservatively estimated that for every €1 that is invested into youth work, the return on investment to the Irish Economy was €2.20.

The voluntary nature of youth work was cited as central to its distinctiveness. The committee heard that:

“The youth work relationship is built by putting young people, their needs and ‘where they are at’ at the centre of the work rather than an imposed agenda or programme dictated by adults or service providers.”¹

Issues Impacting Youth Work

1. Structural Inequality

The Committee heard that many structural and systemic factors negatively affected the provision of youth work services, the quality of support and services available, as well as retention and recruitment within the sector. Youth workers and experts spoke of the impact of austerity or decisions made by the state, a lack of expertise within the civil and public service, intergenerational trauma, food and childhood poverty and homelessness and how certain issues are exacerbated by the cost of living and housing crises. Youth workers are on the ground in communities working directly with the communities and young people facing these challenges and are in a unique position to support them through these most difficult situations; to not only reduce harm but also to provide a space for young people to have transformational experiences and overcome adversity.

The Committee heard of young people choosing to emigrate to secure a safe home and financial security, of young people accessing “food banks” and “shelter dinners”, eating at the youth service and too often continuing to go hungry. Not only are young people requesting to eat in youth services, but they are also asking to take food home with them for their families. These experiences are also reflected in the 2022 CSO figures which highlighted increasing numbers of children at risk of poverty and children and young people experiencing deprivation and consistent poverty. Recent research conducted by NYCI shows that eight in ten 18-24-year-olds surveyed are fearful for

¹ Submission: Dr Sinead McMahon and Professor Maurice Devlin, Dept. of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University.

the future and 1 in 2 reported struggling to make ends meet and over 70% surveyed by NYCI are considering emigrating to obtain a better quality of life.²

“When a young person's basic needs are not being met at home its very hard to deliver youth work. We are finding we are tending to these basic needs first before any youth work can take place.” – NWC

The Committee heard that youth workers often cannot focus on youth work because they are meeting the unmet needs that are happening as a result of structural inequality and poverty. Youth services are being expected to fight intergenerational structural inequality and this is not suitable nor sustainable. Youth work empowers young people to find their place in the world and a space to flourish and we should be creating a society that allows young people to have their needs met and engage in all that youth work can offer them.

2. Access to Mental Health Supports

The Committee heard that accessing mental health support for young people has been a longstanding issue that is now a significant crisis. Stakeholders spoke of how Covid-19 had a disproportionate and negative impact on young people, across their educational and social development, welfare, and mental health. In Dáil speeches, Minister Roderic O’Gorman commended ‘youth organisations as the unsung heroes of the Covid-19 pandemic,’ stating that their ability to ‘adapt quickly’ enabled them to provide a ‘vital support’ to young people. The Minister highlighted that young people who engaged with youth organisations during the pandemic fared better than those who did not.³

Witnesses spoke of young people who are struggling to function day to day and how the challenges they face in accessing support can compound this and lead to them becoming more and more disconnected and left behind. Referencing a 2-year waiting list for CAMHS in one area, and a 4-year wait for a youth mental health service that has yet to happen, witnesses communicated a complete lack of accessible, fit-for-

² Submission: National Youth Council of Ireland.

³ Submission: Dr Sinead McMahon and Professor Maurice Devlin, Dept. of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University.

purpose youth mental health services when people need them. Most areas have no under-18s dual diagnosis services, so if a young person presents to a mental health service with any kind of substance use, which can often be used to cope with mental health issues, they are being turned away.

One witness spoke of previous spates of suicides among young people in the past and of the fear within communities and services of what might happen if we do not meet the mental health needs of young people. Another witness spoke of a young person who was actively suicidal, referred to A&E by their GP and accompanied by their youth worker, only for the hospital to send them home after two hours. Youth workers had attempted to help this young person access therapeutic support for a number of years but due to being failed repeatedly by state services, the young person will only engage with the youth service.

The need to meet the basic needs of young people as a priority was communicated across the sessions and submissions and services that do provide therapeutic services and support communicated that they cannot meet the demand due to a lack of resources. It was suggested that it is almost impossible in some areas to gain access to CAMHS and, when people do gain access, the service is not meeting the needs of young people with trauma. The Committee heard from multiple stakeholders that when the system fails young people in this way, it is youth workers that step in and try to support the young person.

The Committee heard that there is a need to elevate and expand youth work as a profession. Youth workers spoke of how the lack of access to assessments and support over time becomes expressed behaviourally and the young person eventually is punished for the symptom of a need that was not met over and over and often results in that young person being criminalised, this is particularly the case where the young person may be neurodiverse. It was suggested that youth services are best placed to house therapeutic primary mental health interventions alongside youth services. Youth workers are at that intervention level and have a relationship with the young people and argued if they could offer additional mental health support in the youth works space it could be life-changing for young people.

Stakeholders spoke about the need for early intervention with complete wrap-around services in schools and youth services, and the requirement for trauma therapy and whole family trauma therapy to address intergenerational trauma. The issue of accessing Community Disability Network Teams (CDNTs) was raised in the Committee, and how when young people do not receive early therapeutic intervention when they need it, they are more likely to require more mental health supports and interventions as they get older which makes early intervention vital.

3. Drug Use in Young People

Stakeholders spoke of young people being disconnected from their communities, and sometimes families, through drug use and ensuing engagement with the criminal justice system. They described how further marginalised these young people are due to a lack of services designed to engage with them in a way that meets their needs. Undiagnosed mental health issues and neurodivergence, such as ADHD, were named as something youth workers were seeing as a reason that some young people were engaging in drug use, with young people communicating to outreach workers that they take drugs “just to feel normal” or to self-medicate.

The Committee heard of a young person aged 11 who is using cannabis daily and has disengaged from school. The stakeholder spoke of how youth services need to be able to engage young people before the age of ten, as often by ten years old there are already significant challenges in meeting a young person’s needs that should have begun to be addressed earlier. The Committee heard how significant resources are invested in a criminal justice response to this behaviour and not enough is invested in youth work which has been shown to have positive outcomes for young people.

4. 18-24 Year Olds

The needs of 18-24-year-olds were also raised, and questions were asked of stakeholders about what is required to support and advocate for this age group that are considered young people in the youth sector but are treated as adults and expected to advocate for themselves within adult services. Stakeholders spoke of how important engagement with this age group is and how an open-door policy is important. Again, stakeholders reiterated the importance of the relationship that youth

workers have with young people and how often when youth workers have a relationship with a young person of this age, they may have built that relationship and trust over many years. The Committee heard that traditional group work may not be a suitable support or intervention and youth workers need to be able to provide flexible case management to meet the needs of young people at different stages of their life.

One youth worker highlighted that funding requirements restrict what work can be done with young people and at what hour, and spoke of how this is not meeting the needs of older young people who may need interventions or support outside of the standard workday and outside of group settings. For example:

“An 18 year old is not having a crisis at 3 o’clock in the day when the arts programme is happening [and the youth worker can respond. It happens at all sorts of hours, including out of hours and at weekends. We need this flexible case-management approach to address those needs and to hold on to those young people.”⁴

5. Open Access Youth Work versus Targeted Youth Work

The Committee heard of the two main types of youth work in Ireland: open access or universal, and targeted youth work. Targeted services tend to be delivered by paid, professional youth workers and universal youth work tends to be led by volunteers and is open to any young person. The Committee heard that many places have no universal service, particularly rural areas where there may also be no targeted groups present due to the complexities involved. Existing bureaucratic and administrative barriers are posing real difficulty for small projects that rely on volunteers to provide services, while it can be very onerous to apply for even small grants.

Stakeholders spoke of the requirement for targeted youth work but highlighted the value and purpose of open-access youth work being available to all young people. Some stakeholders argued that universal, open-access youth work is vital social and informal education for all people. It enables young people to build relationships, feel a sense of belonging and learn and develop in safe supported spaces. It was suggested that universal youth work is significantly underfunded. In 2021 €2.2 million out of €67

⁴ Mr. Brendan Cummins, FamiliBase. Meeting of 21 March 2023.

million spent on youth services was allocated to the Local Youth Club Grant Scheme⁵ and that to provide a base of open-access universal services to all children, from which we can then grow targeted services, funding needs to be significantly increased.

6. Rural Youth Work challenges

The Committee heard of the specific challenges facing youth services in rural areas, such as increased costs in reaching a more dispersed youth population, increased isolation and issues accessing transport to services and a lack of services themselves.⁶ Submissions highlighted research that found there was a ‘lack of adequate funding for the provision of youth work services in rural localities and inadequate funding to support youth work practice in rural communities where young people experience specific needs’⁷. It was suggested that the focus around youth work can often be on Dublin, while young people in rural areas face issues around lack of access to transport to services. The committee heard that funding rural services is complex due to larger geographical areas with fewer young people meaning that youth workers often spend a lot of time travelling to provide services across multiple areas.

7. Detached Outreach Work

The Committee heard from a stakeholder about the “most at risk and disconnected” young people who often because of trauma, drug use and marginalisation become disconnected from their community, their family and themselves. Often times, youth services are not reaching these young people. Due to a lack of trust in authority and an immediate power imbalance, centre-based youth work fails to meet these young people where they are at which is a key principle within youth work. To build trust with young people it is important to meet them in their own spaces and it was suggested that sometimes young people who need the most support can be restricted from accessing services due to how these needs emerge behaviourally. That instead of tailoring engagement and support towards what young people need, we are placing

⁵ O’Gorman, Dáil Debates, May 2021

⁶ Şerban, AM., Brazienė, R., Basarab, T., Pasic, C. (2022) Young people in rural areas: diverse, ignored and unfulfilled, Council of Europe Report.

⁷ McAleer and NYCI, 2019. Rural youth: public transport, employment and investment in youth and mental health services key issues

rigid expectations on them and then excluding them from services when they do not, and more likely cannot comply.

Speaking of their own pilot project, one stakeholder spoke about the importance of detached street work and of how when a youth worker engages in street work, the power is in the young person's hands. He explained that by meeting young people in their own spaces and speaking to them in a way that feels comfortable and familiar to them, young people engage in authentic trusting exchanges. From this place of trust, youth workers can develop lasting relationships with the most at-risk and hard-to-reach young people, signpost them to other services and support them through interagency work. It should be noted that this project is not funded through the youth work sector but through a local drug and alcohol task force who spoke about the positive impact of the project and suggested that it be rolled out around the country to ensure that we are not leaving these young people behind. This project's future funding is not secured, despite seeing significant positive results.

It was suggested that a cultural shift is needed for youth workers to leave the safety of youth centres and be willing to engage with young people rather than reinforce the perception that some hard-to-reach young people in their own spaces are a safety risk. It was acknowledged that street work can bring a risk to personal safety and training is required to ensure that professional boundaries and experienced staff are equipped to engage in street work well and that if engaging with young people engaged in selling drugs, it is important to maintain strict professional boundaries and not be seen to be complicit in any way.

The committee heard an example of how an "anti-social" space had been transformed into a pro-social place through detached street workers setting up a marquee in areas often thought to be unsafe. Street workers support young people by helping them fill out forms for financial and housing support. Another Engagement project resulted in positive interactions with Gardaí and Dublin Bus which led to a reduction in anti-social behaviour in the local area. More examples of how this work is positively impacting young people were provided and can be seen in submissions in the appendix of this report showing that when the quality of interaction is valued, the most at-risk and hard-to-reach young people can be supported to transform their lives.

8. Safeguarding young people

The Committee heard that the media has a role in stoking fear in communities and the labelling of young people that gather in groups as potentially dangerous. A youth worker spoke of the misguided perceptions people often have of young people in groups and his experiences of young people discussing politics and social issues while passers-by might assume they are up to no good. He spoke of manufactured fear that is harming community relationships and how it impacts engagement and participation in youth services.

Vetting was acknowledged as an important safeguarding mechanism within the youth sector, but it was suggested and agreed that services should be using discretion when considering if a person's previous convictions should prevent them from working in the sector, a sector that believes in the potential of every person.

9. Integrated Care in Education

The Committee heard about the Integrated Care in Education model of St Ultan's, where children receive multidisciplinary support within the school environment with the child at the centre of the services, and it was stressed that interagency and interdepartmental collaboration is happening in practice within St Ultan's, as workers are doing this on the ground. Stakeholders spoke of the wrap-around supports they are offering young people and how vital this is throughout a young person's lifespan. They argued that this model can be scaled up and modelled elsewhere, as they have spent almost two decades building and developing the model they use. It was noted that UBU prevents vital family case management as a part of this model, and they need to fund this through alternative philanthropic funding.

On integrated care and education, the Committee heard:

“Our second level schools are all community colleges. They are called that for a very good reason, because we are supposed to be at the heart of our community in order to reflect and serve it.”⁸

⁸ Mr. Mark McDonald, City of Dublin Education and Training Board, meeting of 21 March 2023.

10. Youth Work in National Policy

Witnesses spoke repeatedly of previous youth work development plans, strategies, and frameworks where stakeholders were engaged, much work was done, yet very little was ever implemented from these processes. There was a strong feeling during discussions with witnesses and conveyed through the submissions received that a national framework is required that should include consultation with stakeholders, young people and workers on the ground and involve strategic planning, development plans, workforce planning and interdepartmental policies and programmes.

Some witnesses felt strongly that a sector-wide review in consultation with key stakeholders is required, while others felt that that work has been done multiple times and a strategic review is required. Frustration at the fact that failure to implement previous reviews has led to the current crisis was expressed by multiple witnesses.

The Committee heard that the Costello Report from the National Policy Committee almost 40 years ago had the principle of partnership with the sector and voluntary sectors built into it and it recognised that youth work is a social movement along with a profession which fed into The Youth work act 2001. The National Youth Work Development Plan 2003 and the National Development Plan 2007 had a strong commitment to youth work.

The National Youth Work Advisory Committee (NYWAC) was put on hold in 2013 and formally disbanded in 2017 without justification. Witnesses noted the NYWAC was the sole system for national consultation and partnership in youth work policy, and a source of admiration in other European countries. One stakeholder argued that decades of collaborative work which is required to address the complexity of youth work was lost. The Value for money review 2014, by viewing youth work solely through an economic lens, left little space for a discussion about quality.

It was argued that Youth work as a phrase and profession has meaning and stands for specific values and ways of working and this is not recognised in our national policies. There is no mention of youth work in the “Blueprint for the Policy Framework for Children and Young People 2023-2028: Blueprint (Government of Ireland, 2022). This has created concern that there will be even less focus on the value of youth work

going forward and a further commitment to the value for money, quantitative based approach currently under UBU, which sanctions a tight accountability regime undermining youth practice on the ground (See UBU section).

Since the recession, funding reductions have contributed to the closure of publications committed to youth work development, research and practice. It was mentioned that youth work has been moved around different government departments and that there is no National Youth Strategy. Stakeholders felt that there is a lack of leadership within the sector and stated that morale is at an all-time low. Witnesses from within the sector reiterated the responsibility the state has to all children and young people. Multiple references across both committees and submissions were made about how the government department responsible for children and youth work has changed repeatedly and of the challenges posed by its placement within the broad remit of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability Integration and Youth.

11. Funding

The Committee heard how youth work is funded by the DCEDIY through the Youth Justice, Adoption, Youth and Participation Division, the Youth Services grant Scheme and through targeted schemes. Almost all funding is delivered through intermediary agencies, with the Youth Service Grant scheme funded through Pobal, and targeted schemes funded through Education and Training Boards. The total funding available for youth organisations and services in 2023 is €75,648.00

The Committee heard that funding is allocated yearly which creates unnecessary uncertainty for both services and youth people who engage with them. Many stakeholders spoke of the need to simplify funding streams, making them multi-annual to bring some stability and certainty to services and for specific funding for staff, programme costs and overheads so that services are not having to reduce staff hours to pay for building costs with the increases in energy costs and cost of living.

Many witnesses and submissions spoke of how youth services were heavily impacted by post-austerity cuts and how, while some services have recently been reinstated to pre-austerity funding levels, in factoring in the growth in youth population, inflation, the impact of COVID and the cost-of-living crisis, services are operating on less money in

real terms than pre 2008 despite an increased need for their services. The impact this has on the recruitment and retention of staff was also referenced by multiple witnesses and submissions.

The Committee heard that just 1.2% of the 2023 DCEDIY budget was allocated to youth work and some stakeholders felt that this spoke to the lack of priority placed on the youth work sector in general and within a packed department.

12. UBU and Quantitative Measurement of Outcomes

Almost all submissions and witnesses communicated significant dissatisfaction with the UBU, Your Place Your Space⁹ funding scheme. The committee heard that UBU was developed from the Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes (2014). Many witnesses referenced the value for money review through both sessions and submissions, many feeling that an inherent flaw in the review is the focus on value for money, conveying a sense of placing a monetary value on the wellbeing of young people, rather than the quality and availability of services provided to young people. It was suggested that the review looked at services only through a performance oversight and economic lens and did not consider the key stakeholders or value quality standards as had been the case in the previous quality standards framework.

Based on recommendations from the review UBU replaced previous funding schemes such as SPY for disadvantaged young people and young people's Facilities and Services Fund (YPFSF) which focused on drugs related issues in communities. It is suggested that the goal was to reduce administration and to increase accountability which was challenged by one witness who argued that youth work organisations have had to report on their funded spending since the 1970s. While the scheme may have reduced administration in dispersing funding, witnesses shared that it has increased the administrative burden and restrictions for groups that avail of it and workers are spending more and more time on reporting and paperwork that is taking them away from working with young people. It was acknowledged that this work is important, but too onerous in its current form and a suggestion was made that an IT solution is also

⁹ <https://ubu.gov.ie/>

required to streamline the reporting process and increase financial and governance accountability while minimising administrative work for youth workers.

The Committee heard from most stakeholders that the nature of UBU funding restricts and constrains the work of youth workers and is having a detrimental impact on young people. It was argued that the rigidity of UBU undermines the informal nature of youth work that is driven by the young person with diverse needs and is increasingly directing practice. UBU dictates which young people are targeted based on their circumstances and risk level. The scheme has 146 rules based on 7 predetermined outcomes that are to be the objective of the work. This brings what some witnesses described as restrictive rules on the “types” of young people services should target and overlooks the complexity of the lived experience of young people. This includes a percentage-based ratio of which young people services should be targeting, how much time youth workers spend on different types of work and how this work is performed.

The Committee also heard about how indicated schedules required through the UBU, where services have to account for what services a youth worker would be running at given times, prevent responsive casework-style youth work from happening. Concern was expressed by multiple participants that this goes against the values at the core of youth work, which are to meet young people where they are and listen to and respond to the needs young people are expressing. The Committee heard that building and maintaining trusting relationships with young people was the most important element of the work but one that is very difficult to quantify on reporting forms. Witnesses expressed concern that some of the promoted outcomes under UBU work towards young people accepting structural issues such as poverty and marginalisation, and place responsibility on young people to develop coping mechanisms with no focus on helping young people to challenge these structures as is a principle of youth work as a social movement. Another issue raised is that there is no allocated time for reflective practice.

Stakeholders argued that youth workers are the experts in working with young people and we need to trust them to guide this work in a way that is best for the young people and the community they are working in. There was an acknowledgement and acceptance that governance, documentation and some quantitative measurements

are necessary but that the current situation is completely quantitative focused and is detrimental to young people. One stakeholder requested that a value-for-money report be conducted on the Misuse of Drugs Act's impact since 1970, under which billions of euro has likely been spent on criminal justice measures. They suggested that if that money were to be invested in youth work there would be better outcomes and value for money.

There was a strong sense across witnesses that youth work cannot be measured in quantitative terms. Multiple witnesses felt that UBU is rooted in a framework that is created to measure economic output and is rooted in an economic growth mindset which is fundamentally oppositional to the values and principles of youth work. One witness said:

“Youth workers and young people are not involved in deciding the metrics, goals, outcomes, or performance indicators of youth work. Pre-determined goals and outcomes often come from the top down, and do not fit with the reality of young people’s lives.”¹⁰

Stakeholders suggested that funding schemes are set up to be competitive and this creates conflict within a sector that relies on collaboration. Services can feel in opposition with each other and young people, who can often be portrayed as a threat or a danger, but are just trying to access a service, are the ones who lose out.

When stakeholders were asked about youth work with minority groups and culturally appropriate interventions within the youth, one stakeholder spoke of the difficulty they have in building relationships with young Muslim women who are not allowed to attend their service and argued that if they were allowed to spend 10% of UBU-funded time in schools when required, they could build trust and relationships with young people who for many reasons cannot or will not attend their service. Similar issues were communicated in reaching young people in gated communities, in homeless hubs and where cultural barriers prevented a relationship from forming when arguably these young people might benefit greatly from engaging in youth work.

¹⁰ Mr. Gerard Roe, Bluebell Youth Project, meeting of 21 March 2023.

13. Recruitment and Retention in the Youth Work Sector

Many written submissions and Committee contributions spoke to the evidence that underpins the value of youth work both in terms of its impact on the lives of young people and its economic benefits. The professionalisation of the sector to recognise the value and professional nature of youth work was quoted as being important, along with remuneration packages and benefits to be brought into line with public sector pay grades. One witness referenced common re-advertisements for the same position on Activelink, as positions are not being filled, while other stakeholders spoke of their service having vacancies unfilled going back to last year as a result of the issues in filling positions.

There was an acknowledgement that youth work is a vocation and there can be a feeling that that is exploited as workers are willing to put up with low pay and lack of resources because they care deeply about and believe in the power of youth work. The Committee heard that along with pay and conditions, a parity of recognition is required as stakeholders communicated feeling undervalued in interagency work although they are often the only person in a meeting who may actually have a relationship with the young person and be supporting them through significant life challenges. The need for a coordinated approach to education, training, recruitment, and retention of youth workers was discussed.

The Committee heard that the NSETS (North South Education and Training Standards Committee) is responsible for endorsing professional programmes on behalf of the DCEDIY and the Department of Education in Northern Ireland. Witnesses told the Committee that the Department had previously indicated an intention to conduct a review, however, it has been delayed almost two years. It was noted that political stasis in the North has contributed to this delay, as Northern approval for a review process cannot be secured. It was suggested that the Department could and should conduct a review within its own area of remit, addressing provision and requirements regarding youth work education and training standards, and associated matters such as workforce issues.

Witnesses spoke about how youth workers know how youth work works, or how it should work. They see the impact it has on young people and whole communities and despite a lack of funding and resources and the barriers in their way, they continue to show up for young people and engage in youth work that is true to the values and principles of youth work and led by and in development of young people themselves. However, it was repeated across the Committee meetings and submissions that the structure of youth work in government policy, the restrictions of UBU and funding rules are making it even harder for youth workers to do the work they know is needed.

One witness spoke of how youth workers are going against funding restrictions and working with young people in ways they aren't funded for because the work is crucial, often time-sensitive and with young people in crisis and there are no other alternatives for the young people. Youth workers are doing the work despite all of this, but people are becoming burnt out and moving to positions that have more resources, better pay, conditions, and stability. Although Ireland has a reputation for our youth work degrees and training, youth workers are being recruited into different sectors directly from university as a result of the poor conditions for workers within the sector. It was suggested by multiple witnesses that the commitment of youth workers is being exploited and that if youth workers were to only do the work they are funded to do, the outcomes would severely impact young people and the many crises they face would likely be exacerbated.

The Committee heard about the importance of diverse routes into youth work and the importance of apprenticeships in youth work. It was acknowledged that this work is in progress, but it was suggested that it has stalled as the relevant department could not commit to funding the four-year programme. It was suggested that a government department needs to take responsibility for implementing these apprenticeships and provide the relevant multi-annual year funding and that it should be implemented as soon as possible. It was important that youth workers trained through apprenticeships are treated equally to those who enter through university education.

APPENDIX 1 Transcripts and Submissions

TRANSCRIPTS

[Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth debate - Tuesday, 21 Mar 2023 \(oireachtas.ie\)](#)

[Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth debate - Tuesday, 18 Apr 2023 \(oireachtas.ie\)](#)

SUBMISSIONS

[Connect 4 Project](#)

[Bluebell Youth Project](#)

[St Ultan's Cherry Orchard – Framework](#)

[St Ultan's Cherry Orchard – Prospectus](#)

[National Youth Council of Ireland](#)

[NUI Maynooth](#)

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