

YOUTH WORK IN RURAL IRELAND

A Qualitative Research
Study Exploring the
Provision of Youth Work
in a Rural Context



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**An Roinn Forbartha
Tuaithe agus Pobail**
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Community Development

YOUTH WORK IN RURAL IRELAND

A QUALITATIVE RESEARCH
STUDY EXPLORING THE
PROVISION OF YOUTH WORK
IN A RURAL CONTEXT

RESEARCHED, WRITTEN
AND EDITED BY
MARIE-CLAIRE MCALEER

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GLOSSARY OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATA - Access to Apprenticeship.

BOBF - Better Outcomes Brighter Futures.

CAMHS - Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service.

CAP - Common Agricultural Policy.

CEDRA - Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas.

CGI - Catholic Guides of Ireland.

CLÁR - Ceantair Laga Árd-Riachtanais, or CLÁR, exists to provide investment for small-scale infrastructural projects in depopulated rural areas. CLÁR supports the development of identified areas by attracting people to live and work there.

CPA - Child Protection Awareness.

CSO - Central Statistics Office.

CV - Curriculum Vitae.

DART - Dublin Area Rapid Transit.

DCYA - Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

EU - European Union.

ETB - Education Training Board.

EWO - Education Welfare Officer.

FDYS - Ferns Diocesan Youth Service.

GAA - Gaelic Athletic Association.

HQ - Head Quarters.

HSE - Health Service Executive.

IT - Institute of Technology.

LGBTI+ - Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex.

LUAS - Is a tram/light rail system in Dublin.

NBS - National Broadband Scheme.

NFTE - Network for Teaching Entrepreneurship.

NQSF - National Quality Standards Framework.

NYCI - National Youth Council of Ireland.

NYS - National Youth Strategy.

OECD - Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development.

SAN - School Attendance Notice service.

SOLAS - State organisation with responsibility for funding, planning and coordinating Further Education and Training in Ireland.

TD - Teachta Dála - is a member of Dáil Éireann, the lower house of the Oireachtas.

TENI - Transgender Equality Network Ireland.

TU - Technological University.

VMPR - Value for Money and Policy Review.

YWI - Youth Work Ireland.

YWIT - Youth Work Ireland Tipperary.



FOREWORD

FOREWORD



I welcome the publication of this research, which provides a valuable insight into the issues affecting the provision of youth work for young people living in rural Ireland. The study highlights the key challenges encountered by youth workers, many of which are structural in nature. It also highlights the need to invest greater resources in youth work services to support the sector's capacity to respond to the needs of young people living in rural areas. Although the focus of the study is an exploration of youth work provision from the perspective of the youth worker, the study also gives a voice to rural youth and explores what it is like to grow up in rural Ireland and what participation in youth work means to young people living in rural parts of the country.

As this report highlights, the youth work setting provides an enabling, supportive environment for young people to develop valuable social and personal skills. Youth work serves to build resilience and empower young people with the skills to survive and withstand the challenges of day to day life. Although this work is not without its challenges, as this report demonstrates, youth workers and youth organisations work tirelessly on a daily basis to overcome these challenges. The research demonstrates how youth workers adopt innovative and creative approaches to engage with young people in rural parts of Ireland, and to overcome some of the barriers to youth participation. It also provides examples of best practice in youth work, which if adequately funded, could be replicated in other parts of the country to respond to the needs of rural youth, where no such support currently exists.

Despite the excellent youth work that is currently taking place throughout rural Ireland, this report also highlights practical barriers to youth work provision and some of the key challenges facing Ireland's rural youth. It makes a series of policy recommendations to address these challenges and to enhance youth work provision. I hope the research findings and policy recommendations contained in this report will help to inform and shape the formulation of the next action plan for rural policy for the period 2020 – 2025. If adequately funded and implemented, these policy measures will help to improve life in rural Ireland, not just for young people, but also for their families and the wider communities in which they grow up.

Mary Cunningham,

Director, National Youth Council of Ireland.



AUTHOR'S ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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It has been a pleasure to undertake this research and to travel throughout rural Ireland to conduct the fieldwork. The research journey brought me to some of the most beautiful and remote parts of Ireland. I feel fortunate to have had the opportunity to speak with youth workers providing valuable and life-changing support to young people living in rural Ireland and to have had the pleasure to interview young people engaged in youth work about their experiences of youth work participation and of life in rural Ireland.

Research of this nature provides a real insight into youth work practice and how it impacts on the lives of young people. It also highlights the important role youth work volunteers and youth workers play in young people's lives. It would not be possible without the support of NYC's member organisations and the many youth workers and youth organisations who contributed to this study. In this regard, I would like to thank the volunteer youth leaders and youth workers from counties Wicklow, Mayo, Waterford and Tipperary, for very generously and thoughtfully contributing to this research study. To the young people from Mayo Comhairle na nÓg and the Rangers from Rathnew Catholic Guides of Ireland in County Wicklow, a big thank you for your warm welcome and for participating in the focus groups.

I would also like to thank Macra na Feirme, the Catholic Guides of Ireland, Spunout.ie and Crisis Text Line, Ferns Diocesan Youth Service, Youth Work Ireland Tipperary, and Foróige for contributing to the study.

Finally, I would like to thank the Department of Rural and Community Development for funding this research study, and my colleagues – James Doorley, for his support throughout the research process, and Daniel Meister, for overseeing the design and publication of the report.

Marie-Claire McAleer,

Head of Research and Policy, National Youth Council of Ireland.

SECTION 1

EXECUTIVE
SUMMARY

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

This research explores the nature and scope of youth work provision in rural Ireland. Although the focus of this study is to capture the experience of youth work provision from the perspective of the youth workers, young people were also consulted as part of this study about their views and experiences of living in rural parts of Ireland and of engaging in youth work.

REPORT STRUCTURE

Section 2 of the report outlines the research strategy and methodology employed to address the following research questions

1. How does youth work respond to the needs of young people living in rural Ireland?
2. How does it contribute to their lives?
3. What are the issues and concerns facing young people living in rural Ireland?
4. What barriers to youth work participation currently exist for young people living in rural areas?
5. What are the current challenges facing the youth work sector in rural Ireland?
6. How do these inhibit the rolling out of high-quality youth work provision in Ireland?
7. How can these challenges be adequately addressed in public policy?

Section 3 provides a background to the research topic. It sets out the social and economic context in Ireland and highlights the persistence of a rural-urban divide in Ireland, which is reflected across the European Union. It discusses the process of 'rural restructuring' that is in train in Ireland and across Europe. It also discusses the reasons for the persistence of a declining youth population in rural Ireland. The prevalence of sustained rural to urban migration of young people, coupled with the prevalence of an ageing population have contributed to a declining youth population in rural Ireland and this is reflected in the most recent Census of Population data (2016). This changing demographic has a tendency to perpetuate a continuous decline in the youth population in rural Ireland unless significant investment is made to ensure the availability of services and specialised supports in rural areas. Access to education, training, apprenticeships and employment opportunities for young people in rural Ireland is also imperative.

Section 4 of the report provides an overview of the policy context and the legislative framework underpinning rural development issues in Ireland and the policy context in relation to children and youth, and youth work.

Sections 5 and 6 discuss and analyse the qualitative data collected on the provision of youth work in the Republic of Ireland in rural localities and highlight challenges that exist in relation to the provision of quality youth work in each of the regions included in the study.

Section 5 of the report presents an analysis and discussion of the research findings from the focus groups with volunteers and youth workers. The findings are presented according to each region where focus groups were conducted. Section 5.1 presents the findings from the perspective of the volunteer and Section 5.2 presents the findings from the focus groups with youth workers.

Section 6 presents an analysis and discussion of the findings from the focus groups with young people in counties Mayo and Wicklow. Drawing from the empirical research and literature available, section 6 explores some of the key issues affecting young people growing up and living in rural Ireland. It highlights the prevalence of the inequality of access to support services. It also shines a spotlight on the need for greater resources to be invested in youth work provision in rural Ireland to ensure that the needs of young people living in rural localities are met. It highlights some of the challenges young people experience living in rural Ireland and captures their thoughts on how these barriers to participation can be addressed in public policy. It also documents young people's views on the positive and negative aspects of living in rural Ireland. Their ambitions and hopes for rural Ireland in the future are also explored in this section of the report.

Section 7 of the report profiles two initiatives to engage and support rural youth with specific needs, namely Ferns Diocesan Youth Service and Crisis Text Line. It also profiles the work of Macra na Feirme. The case studies profiled provide examples of best practice to support youth living in rural Ireland.

Section 8 provides a summary of the research findings and proposes seven policy recommendations to respond to the issues raised by research participants in the study. The policy recommendations contained in the report, if implemented, would serve to support and enhance the provision of youth work in rural Ireland and to address the needs of rural youth.

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS

KEY CHALLENGES IN YOUTH PROVISION IN RURAL IRELAND, IDENTIFIED BY YOUTH WORKERS

- > Lack of adequate funding for the provision of youth work services in rural localities.
- > Inadequate funding to support youth work practice in rural communities where young people experience specific needs.
- > Lack of access to a broad range of specialised youth support services such as mental health and counselling services in rural areas.
- > Lack of accessible, affordable public transport for rural communities.
- > Difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers.
- > The challenge of an increasingly regulated youth work sector, which has imposed on a volunteer's time and on levels of volunteer retention.
- > The absence of adequate interpreting services to support new communities living in rural Ireland who have English language difficulties and experience challenges engaging with youth work services.
- > The need for an increased allocation of resources to support new communities integrating into life in rural Ireland.
- > The need for more investment in a National Apprenticeship Scheme with the allocation of dedicated resources and spaces for young people living in rural and remote areas in Ireland.
- > Lack of broadband which inhibits young people's access to the internet and their ability to access social and digital media platforms, access information online and communicate with friends and youth work services online.

SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES AND NYCI POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. RESOURCING AND RECOGNITION OF YOUTH WORK

- > NYCI recommends that in recognition of the lack of youth work funding to meet the needs of the sector to respond to rural youth, that the Government increase the overall investment in rural youth work.
- > NYCI recommends that in the reform of the Youth Service Grant Scheme the specific needs of delivering youth work in a rural context are considered and the objectives and criteria of the scheme facilitate voluntary youth organisations to enhance their provision in rural locations.
- > NYCI recommends that the objectives and criteria of the new Targeted Youth Funding Scheme consider and facilitate the delivery of youth work in a rural context. The scheme should include support for the extra and additional costs of providing rural youth work, for example transport costs for young people travelling to the youth work setting or for youth work activities that are not covered under the existing programme funds.

2. THE CHALLENGES OF RECRUITING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS IN YOUTH WORK

- > NYCI recommends that Government should include proposals and actions to support volunteering and other measures to recruit, train and retain volunteers in rural Ireland, in the National Volunteer Strategy, which is currently being developed.
- > NYCI recommends that Government commission a feasibility study on introducing a tax rebate for volunteers, in recognition of their contribution to youth work and to encourage more people to volunteer their time.

3. PUBLIC TRANSPORT

- > Government to introduce a subsidy for people under 18 to reduce the cost of travelling on public transport for young people.
- > Resource and implement the key actions identified to promote access for children and young people to public transport in rural areas, contained in the Local Link Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018 – 2022.
- > Adequately resource and implement the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Regional and Rural Transport Policy.
- > Provide community buses for rural counties and a fund to provide for the cost of insurance and fuel.

4. ACCESS TO BROADBAND

- > Roll out the National Broadband Scheme as planned to ensure the provision of a functioning, country-wide broadband system that meets the targets set in the Digital Strategy for Europe.

5. LACK OF SPECIALISED SUPPORT SERVICES FOR RURAL YOUTH

- > Increase funding for a range of outreach services (including mental health and counselling for young people) in rural communities.
- > HSE to further invest in public awareness campaigns to increase awareness for counselling supports available to people living in rural Ireland.

- > Increase funding to ensure the availability of free online counselling supports to engage with young people in crisis.
- > Increase funding for additional LGBTI+ youth workers in rural counties across the Republic of Ireland.

6. ACCESS TO A NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP SCHEME FOR RURAL YOUTH

- > NYCI recommends the inclusion of rural youth as a target group in the roll out of a national Access to Apprenticeship scheme, to support the uptake and inclusion of young people in apprenticeship programmes in Ireland.

7. INVEST IN A NATIONAL INTERPRETING SUPPORT SERVICE FOR THE YOUTH WORK SECTOR

- > Invest in the establishment of a national interpreting service for the youth work sector to utilise in their work with young people and their families experiencing English language difficulties in rural areas.
- > Increase investment to support the integration of new communities in rural Ireland.

SUMMARY OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT

- > Provide additional investment for youth work services and facilities in rural localities in Ireland.
- > Provide an accessible rural public transport system.
- > Invest in a subsidised rural transport scheme for young people like the Local Link transport service available to pensioners.
- > Foster greater investment in the regions to provide improved educational and employment opportunities located in rural parts of Ireland and incentivise farming as an occupation.
- > Increase the minimum wage for people under 18.
- > Invest in the apprenticeship model and promote it to young people of both genders, who do not want to pursue a further or higher education, as an alternative career option.

RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGY

RESEARCH STRATEGY AND METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

Section 2 outlines the rationale for undertaking this research and the research aims of the study. It also outlines the research strategy and methodology employed to undertake the research.

RATIONALE FOR STUDY

There has been very little contemporary empirical research done on rural youth work in Ireland. Indeed, the lack of attention given to youths living in rural localities in research has given rise to rural youth being described as one of the 'neglected others' (Philo, 1992). The aim of this research study is to explore the nature and scope of youth work provision in rural Ireland. The study addresses the research objectives by employing qualitative research methods to interview youth workers and volunteers working in youth work provision in rural Ireland, about their experiences of delivering youth work in a rural context. By interviewing youth workers and youth work volunteers about their work, the research documents the variety of youth work provision currently taking place throughout rural Ireland in response to the needs of rural youth. The study profiles examples of best practice in rural youth work provision. It also highlights perceived barriers to youth engagement and participation in youth work and challenges to youth work provision in rural localities. Although the primary focus of the research is to explore youth work provision from the perspective of the youth worker, the research also captures the voice of young people living in rural Ireland and engaging in youth work, by conducting focus groups with young people from counties Mayo and Wicklow. The deliberations from the focus groups with young people engaged in youth work is documented and discussed in Section 5 of this report.

RESEARCH AIM

The research seeks to explore youth work provision in rural Ireland and to address the following research questions:

1. How does youth work respond to the needs of young people living in rural Ireland?
2. How does it contribute to their lives?
3. What are the issues and concerns facing young people living in rural Ireland?
4. What barriers to youth work participation currently exist for young people living in rural areas?
5. What are the current challenges facing the youth work sector in rural Ireland?
6. How do these inhibit the rolling out of high-quality youth work provision in Ireland?
7. How can these challenges be adequately addressed in public policy?

RESEARCH STRATEGY

The research approach adopted to explore this study is three-fold – exploratory, descriptive and explanatory. The study seeks to explore the experience of youth workers, youth work volunteers or youth work managers working in the youth work sector, to get an insight into the nature and scope of their work with young people, throughout the Republic of Ireland. The aim of the research is to profile imaginative and innovative practice currently taking place to engage with young people, to identify challenges youth workers encounter in the delivery of their work and to highlight possible solutions to address the policy deficit and gaps in youth work practice that exist.

DEFINING 'RURAL'

At the research design stage of this study, consideration was given to the sampling framework for the study and how to define the term 'rural.' How 'rural' is defined is important in research and in the formulation of public policy, as it determines the data collected and the comprehensiveness and extent to which public policy responds to the needs of those residing in rural areas. There are various definitions used to define a 'rural' population. For example, the CSO defines the rural population as those living outside settlements of 1,500 people. The OECD uses a definition relating to population density.¹ The Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) defines rural as those areas outside the administrative boundaries of the five main cities (Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford) and includes some large urban settlements like Ennis, Dundalk and Kilkenny. The Government's current rural policy Realising our Rural Potential – the Action Plan for Rural Development, 2017 – 2019 refers to the CEDRA definition and provides a map of population densities but does not specify a definition of rural. The National Planning Framework (NPF) Ireland 2040 - Our Plan defines rural as all areas outside towns of 10,000, unless they are within the immediate or 'metropolitan' catchment of a city. For the purposes of this study, the CEDRA definition of 'rural', which defines rural areas as outside the administrative boundaries of the five main cities (Dublin, Cork, Limerick, Galway and Waterford) and includes some large urban settlements like Ennis, Dundalk and Kilkenny, is adopted and applied.

METHODOLOGY

The study combines the use of documentary and qualitative research methods to investigate the provision of rural youth work. A comprehensive review and evaluation of related literature was conducted to gain a better understanding of the topic under investigation. It was also helpful in terms of identifying important sources of data related to the research topic and guided *"the development of explanations during the data collection and analysis in studies that seek to explain, evaluate and suggest linkages among events"* (Marshall et al., 1995: 35). Sherman and Webb describe qualitative research as directly concerned *"with experience as it is lived or felt or undergone"* (Sherman & Webb, 1988: 7). Qualitative research tends to focus on exploring in as much detail as possible, smaller numbers of instances or examples, which are seen as being interesting or illuminating and aims to achieve depth rather than breadth (Blaxter, Hughes & Tight, 2001: 64). It can offer the policymaker a theory of social action grounded on the experiences – the world view – of those likely to be affected by a policy decision (Walker, 1995).

QUALITATIVE DATA COLLECTION METHODS AND PROFILE OF RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS

This study involved extensive consultations with youth workers, youth work volunteers, youth work managers and young people participating in youth work. In total six focus groups and six in-depth interviews were conducted as part of this study.

FOCUS GROUPS WITH YOUTH WORKERS AND YOUTH WORK VOLUNTEERS

By conducting three focus groups with youth workers in counties Mayo, Waterford and Tipperary, and one focus group with youth work volunteers working in County Wicklow, the research sought to capture both the experiences of youth work volunteers and youth work professionals, in responding to the needs of rural youth and in delivering youth work in a rural context. The focus groups with youth workers and youth work volunteers were exploratory and facilitated engaging and lively discussion amongst participants about their experience in delivery of youth work in rural areas and the sort of youth engagement and participation encountered. The focus groups generated substantial information on the sorts of challenges they encountered delivering youth work and engaging with rural youth. Invaluable insights into the barriers to youth engagement and participation were provided in all of the focus groups conducted. In general participants were enthusiastic about telling their stories and energized by having the opportunity to identify challenges and to propose solutions to address these deficits in policy and practice. Based on their experiences, participants advised and proposed practical recommendations, which if

¹The OECD methodology classifies local administrative units level 2 with a population density below 150 inhabitants per km² as rural.

implemented, would help to enhance the provision of youth work in rural locations throughout the country. The findings of the focus group with youth work volunteers working in County Wicklow is presented in Section 4.1 of this report and the findings of the focus groups with youth workers working in counties Mayo, Waterford and Tipperary is presented in Section 4.2 of this report. The conduct of each focus group with youth workers and youth work volunteers was governed by a discussion guide, a copy of which is included in Appendix A.

FOCUS GROUPS WITH YOUNG PEOPLE

Two focus groups were conducted with young people from counties Mayo and Wicklow on their experiences of growing up in rural Ireland and their views on engaging and participating in youth work. In County Mayo, a focus group was conducted with 11 young people aged between 13 – 18, of both genders, who were participants in the Mayo Comhairle na nÓg. In County Wicklow, a focus group was conducted with five young people who were participants in the Catholic Guides of Ireland. All participants were 16 years old. These focus groups explored with the young people their experience of participating in youth work, what it meant to them and how their experiences of youth participation had contributed to their lives. The focus groups also explored with the young people their experiences of being a young person living in rural Ireland, their hopes for rural Ireland and their thoughts on how life in rural Ireland could be improved. The conduct of the focus groups with young people was governed by a discussion guide, a copy of which is included in Appendix B. The analysis of the findings of the focus groups with young people is presented in Section 5 of this report.

IN-DEPTH INTERVIEWS

Six in-depth interviews were conducted as part of this study – three with youth workers working in the youth work sector in rural Ireland and three with representatives from national youth work organisations providing youth work in rural Ireland. The interviews were very insightful and generated rich data on the nature and scope of youth work provision in rural Ireland, the challenges that exist, and the supports required to address existing barriers to youth engagement and participation. The information obtained through the interviews complemented and substantiated many of the key findings arising from the focus groups. The interviews also contributed to and further informed the development of some of the conclusions and report recommendations.

ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS AND CONSENT

Prior to conducting focus groups and interviews, participants were briefed by the researcher about the project. Participants were also issued with an information sheet about the project in advance of the focus groups and interviews and invited to sign a consent form to participate in the research study. All interviews and focus groups were audio recorded and transcribed verbatim. All data was anonymised, and the research participants were given a pseudonym in the report.

In relation to the focus group with young people, these were arranged in cooperation with the youth organisations attended by the young people in counties Mayo and Wicklow. Two consent forms and information sheets about the research were disseminated to the young people and their parent(s)/guardian(s) via the youth organisation, prior to the focus groups. A consent form for the young person to review and sign and a consent form for the young person's parent or guardian to sign, was used. A youth worker from each youth organisation was also present during the focus groups conducted with the young people.

CASE STUDIES

In this study, case studies were used to profile examples of engagement with rural youth through different channels, to support and to respond to specific needs. The first case study profiles an initiative taking place in the Ferns Diocesan Youth Service to respond to the needs of LGBTI+ Youth in County Wexford. The second case study documents the work of a national organisation

Macra na Feirme and highlights how this organisation supports and responds to young people living in rural Ireland. The last case study is an initiative that illustrates the supports available in the virtual or online world to those in crisis, regardless of their geographical location. Although not exclusively a youth service, Crisis Text Line is an example of how rural youth, who have limited access to counselling, can access a free, confidential text messaging service, if they want to talk through a problem with a Crisis Text Line volunteer. It also provides signposts to other online counselling supports available.

SECTION 3

SOCIAL AND
ECONOMIC
CONTEXT

“Rural regions will play a central role in meeting the major global opportunities and challenges of the 21st century. This includes developing new energy sources that meet our climate challenge, innovation in food production for a growing population, and the provision of natural resources that will enable the next production revolution. Some rural areas are performing well and are in a position to grasp these opportunities. Other rural regions have not been as successful and have less capacity to adapt. Structural shifts in manufacturing and natural resource based industries combined with population loss and ageing mean some rural communities are being left behind, which fuels discontent. The capacity of governments to effectively address these challenges and opportunities will impact future national cohesion and prosperity”

(Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, 2018: 4).

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC CONTEXT

INTRODUCTION

This research is primarily focused on exploring the provision of youth work in rural Ireland. In doing so, the research highlights the excellent youth work that is currently taking place in rural parts of the country. The study also documents some of the challenges youth workers encounter in their work and the barriers that impede youth participation and engagement. Pertinent to the study is the identification by research participants of the prevalence of structural barriers in rural Ireland, which impede access to youth work in rural and remote localities, and access to specialised youth services in more urban localities. These structural barriers relate to issues such as the lack of public transport in rural areas and access to broadband. These fall under the remit of the Department of Rural and Community Development.

RURAL RESTRUCTURING

Although rural Ireland holds many attractions and is a place of beauty, attracting tourists from all over the world, it has suffered a declining youth population for various reasons. The main reasons relate to the prevalence of 'rural restructuring', which has been in train in rural regions across Europe for many years. Rural restructuring is a term that has been used to refer to a series of economic and social changes in rural areas. These changes have emerged as a result of the decline in primary sector employment in agriculture, fisheries and forestry. They have also arisen as a result of changing migration and demographic trends and the emergence of new consumption patterns and interests in tourism and residential property in the countryside and other lifestyle values (Ilberry, 1998; Marsden et al., 1993; Marsden, 1998; Commins, 1990; McGrath 2001). As a result of the changing patterns, there has been social and economic differentiation of rural areas and the unequal redistribution of opportunities and life chances among rural households (McGrath, 2001). McGrath (2001) in his exploration of rural youth in the west of Ireland, focused on the three critical spheres where young people often make substantive choices and decisions – employment, housing and education. Focusing on the implications of these critical spheres for rural youth in terms of their life chances and opportunities, the substantial experiences and difficulties encountered by young people in remote locations, undergoing rural economic restructuring was explored. The study found that social practices and relations impact on young people's capacity to draw on resources in the areas of education, employment and housing. It also explored how this problematises and constrains the lives of many young people living in rural localities and how this in turn affects *"their life chances, options and room for manoeuvre"* (McGrath, 2001: 482). Unfortunately, little has changed and although young people from rural areas do well and progress in life, many still have to leave their home counties and migrate to urban localities in search of better life chances and opportunities.

THE PERSISTENCE OF A RURAL-URBAN DIVIDE

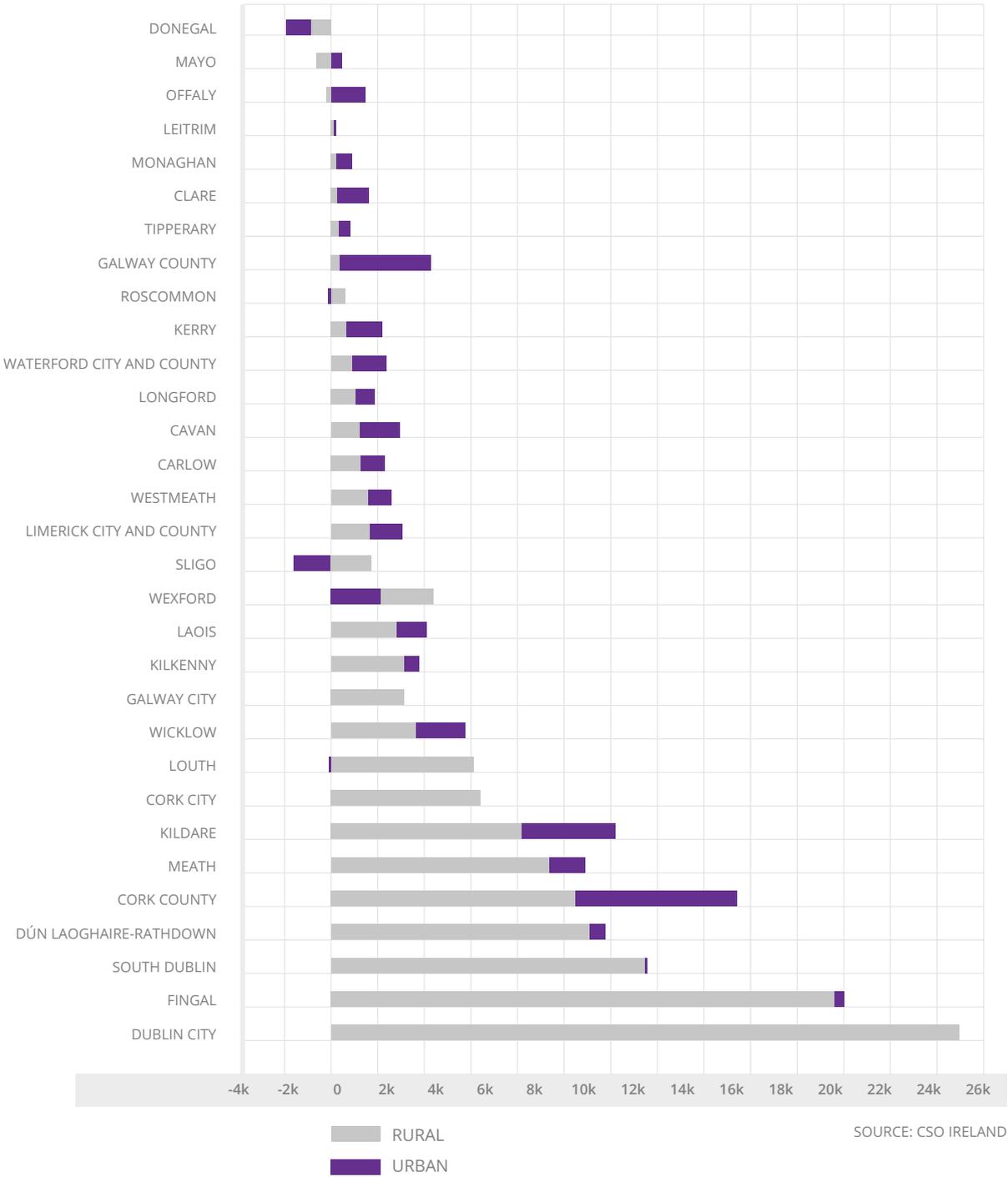
Recent research conducted by European Foundation for the Improvement of Living Conditions (2019) highlights the persistence of a rural-urban divide across the European member states. This research provides interesting data on quality of life and quality of society across the life cycle. It examines both objective and subjective aspects of quality of life and explores how Europeans perceive the quality of their societies. Overall, the Eurofound data highlights incidences where rural dwellers are doing less well than the urban population, focusing on three topics - financial security, connectedness and life satisfaction. Of interest is the data on the social situation of young people and the differences in quality of life between young people living in rural and urban areas. This European data provides an insight into the differences between rural and urban residents

in terms of; a sense of belonging in their community, their views on public transport and their internet usage. The Eurofound data reveals that rural residents feel a stronger sense of belonging in their community than urban residents. The data also found that rural dwellers rated the quality of public transport lower than their peers in urban area. Also of interest is the data indicating that although more pronounced amongst older people (who exhibited 70% of non-internet use), there was a higher rate of non-internet users amongst young people in rural areas compared to their peers in urban areas. This European data reinforces the findings of NYCI's research, which highlights dissatisfaction amongst youth workers and young people alike, in relation to the accessibility of quality public transport in rural areas and the absence of quality broadband infrastructure. The absence of quality broadband was highlighted by many young people as a significant issue. The lack of connectivity in black spots inhibits their access to the internet for connecting with friends or completing homework and leaves them at a disadvantage compared with their peers living in urban centres. In relation to the issue of belonging and having a strong sense of belonging within one's community, this issue also emerged as a dominant theme in the focus groups with young people from rural areas in Ireland.

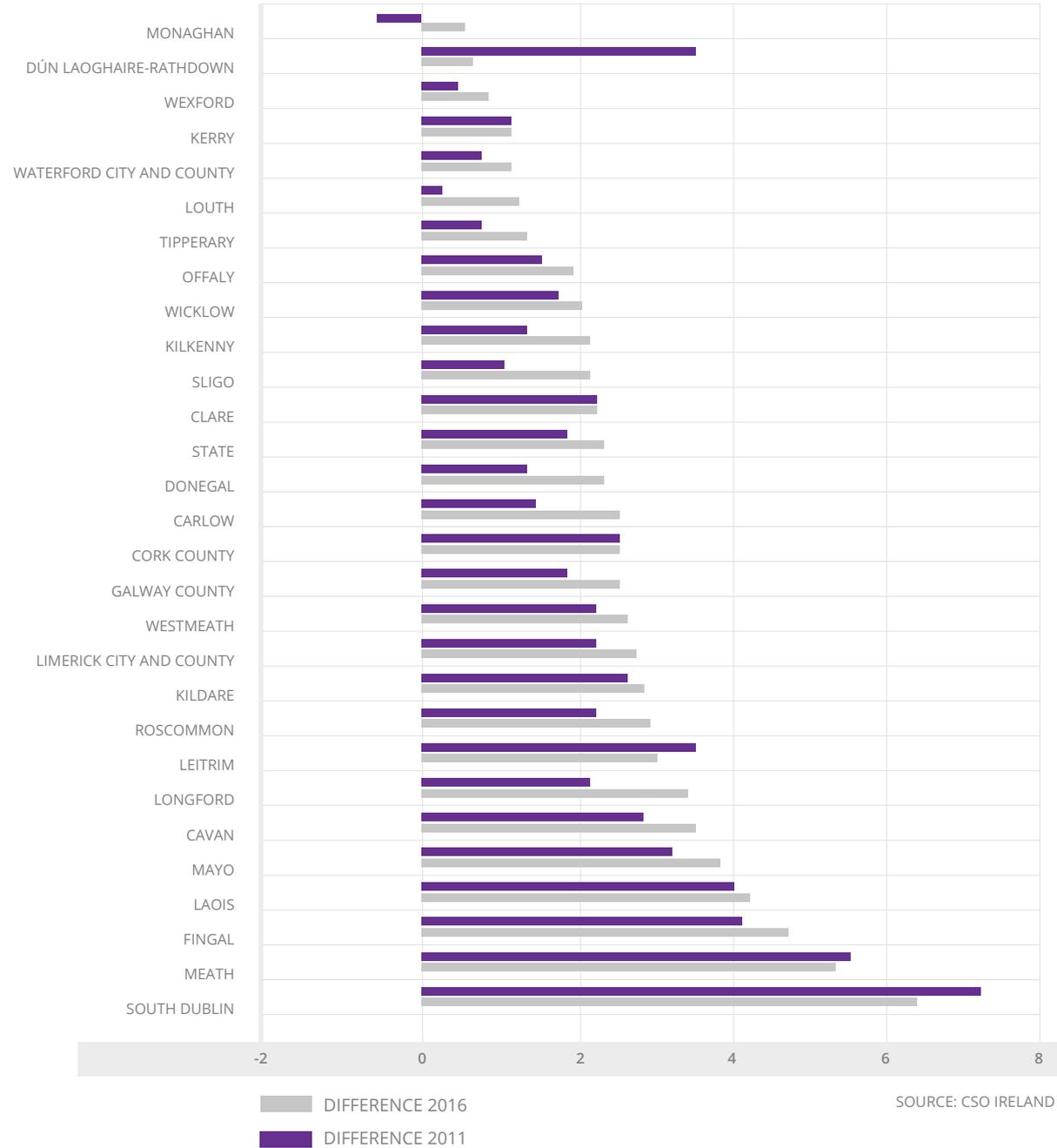
DECLINING YOUTH POPULATION IN RURAL IRELAND

A defining trend in rural localities across Europe is the persistence of a declining population. The root cause of this phenomenon is the migration of young people to towns and cities to study and to work. This is further complicated by the prevalence of an ageing population. In 2016, less than one-fifth of Europe's population lived in rural areas. In Ireland, the Census of Population (2016) also indicated a striking difference in the age profile in rural and urban populations. The urban population peaks at 36 years of age. At the same time, the census data also shows a decline in those aged 19 – 25 years of age in rural areas, reinforcing the contention that young adults are migrating to the cities from rural Ireland to study and work. Between 2011 and 2016, the difference in average age between rural and urban areas increased. In 2016, the average age of the population living in rural areas was 2.4 years older than the population in urban areas, compared to a difference of 1.9 years in 2011. In 2016, CSO data highlighted the emergence of a shift towards an increasingly urban population, where youth migrate to the cities and towns for education and job opportunities and the age profile of rural Ireland is growing older. The statistics show counties Kerry and Mayo exhibiting an average age of almost 10 years older than Fingal, the country's youngest administrative area. The report states that rural counties such as Leitrim, Galway, Donegal and Roscommon tend to have fewer young adults and proportionally more older people.

CHANGE OF URBAN AND RURAL POPULATION, 2011 - 2016



AVERAGE AGE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN RURAL AND URBAN AREAS OF EACH COUNTY BETWEEN 2011 - 2016



CONCLUSION

The issues of ageing demographics, youth population decline and youth migration from rural to urban Ireland, have received significant attention by Irish policy makers and this is reflected in various government strategies and policy documents in relation to rural development. At the heart of any strategy to revitalise rural Ireland is the need to retain young people. Indeed, ensuring rural Ireland is an attractive place for young people to live is in many ways integral to the revitalisation of rural Ireland. At present, the opportunities for young people living in rural Ireland are limited. Furthermore, there is perception among many of the research participants in NYCI's study that a rural-urban divide exists. The view was expressed by youth workers interviewed that investment of resources tends to be heavily concentrated in urban localities, to the detriment of those dwelling in rural Ireland. Taking on board the findings from the interviews with youth workers and young people in this study, it is evident that more resources are required to ensure the provision of quality youth work, and specialised support services for young people living in rural localities. Greater investment in apprenticeship schemes in rural Ireland and in the public transport infrastructure is also required. As is the need to expedite rolling out the national broadband scheme to ensure connectivity and social inclusion for those living in rural Ireland.

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY CONTEXT

“Decline in traditional industries combined with a general inability to retain or attract sufficient population has denuded the critical social and economic capacity of these places, particularly through the process of youth migration. It has left them with relatively weak industrial structures, exposed to consolidation of various economic sectors, e.g. farming and food processing, high levels of persistent unemployment and emigration”

(Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, 2014: 36).

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY CONTEXT

Rural development and quality of life for people living in rural areas has become a key political issue for governments across Europe. One of key drivers of this policy agenda has been the attempts to reform the Common Agricultural Policy, as part of the Multi-Financial Framework for the period 2021 – 2027. In Ireland, the issue of rural development has been a key policy for many years and substantial work has been done to develop a strategic and informed public policy response achieve rural and regional economic development. In the last decade, significant work has been done in publishing government reports and cross-cutting strategies to set out an ambitious vision for rural Ireland. While it is evident there is commitment to revitalise rural Ireland and progress has been made in some aspects of this policy agenda, progress in other areas has been slower. In presenting the findings of research on challenges to youth work provision in rural Ireland, it is important to acknowledge the existing policy context in relation to the provision of rural public transport and the development of broadband infrastructure, which were identified as key impediments to youth work provision in terms of access to services both physically and virtually. Other significant issues which emerged in the research relate to resourcing and recognition of youth work, which comes under the remit of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

LEGISLATIVE AND POLICY FRAMEWORK FOR CHILDREN AND YOUTH AND YOUTH WORK

‘Better Outcomes Brighter Futures’ (BOBF), the national policy framework for children and young people 2014 – 2020, outlined a vision for young people in Ireland:

“...to be one of the best small countries in the world in which to grow up and raise a family, and where the rights of all children and young people are respected, protected and fulfilled; where their voices are heard and where they are supported to realise their maximum potential now and in the future’ (DCYA, 2014: vi).

BOBF sets out five national outcomes in which to realise this vision. BOBF was followed swiftly by the publication of constituent strategies such as the ‘National Strategy on Children and Young People’s Participation in Decision-Making, 2015–2020’ and the ‘National Youth Strategy 2015 – 2020.’ The ‘National Youth Strategy 2015 – 2020’ sought to coordinate policy and services across Government and other stakeholders to enable all young people aged 10-24 years to realise their maximum potential (DCYA, 2015). Since the publication of the National Youth Strategy, LGBTI+ young people have been identified as a specific group to be considered in the context of focused provision for marginalised young people. In 2018, a LGBTI+ National Youth Strategy, 2018 - 2020 was published to respond to the specific needs of LGBTI+ Youth in Ireland and *“to ensure that all LGBTI+ young people are visible, valued and included in Irish society”* (DCYA, 2018).

OVERVIEW OF KEY STRATEGIES FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT

The Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA)

In November 2012, the government established a Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA). The commission was comprised of independent experts to examine and report on the medium-term economic development of rural Ireland to 2025. CEDRA was an initiative of the Departments of Environment, Community and Local Government and Agriculture,

Food and the Marine. The CEDRA process was underpinned by extensive public consultation to ascertain the views of the public on issues facing the rural economy. In addition, a comprehensive programme of research was carried out to inform the process and published as an accompanying paper by the Commission. The CEDRA Report (2014) acknowledges the aforementioned challenges and recommended to government a programme of action to revitalise rural Ireland in the period 2013 - 2025. The Report of the CEDRA noted that:

“Decline in traditional industries combined with a general inability to retain or attract sufficient population has denuded the critical social and economic capacity of these places, particularly through the process of youth migration. It has left them with relatively weak industrial structures, exposed to consolidation of various economic sectors, e.g. farming and food processing, high levels of persistent unemployment and emigration” (2014: 36).

In April 2014, the Commission published a report entitled *Energising Ireland's Rural Economy*. The report made 34 recommendations to Government, which the Commission argued would support the further development of the rural economy, and create a dynamic, adaptable and outward-looking multi-sectoral economy. Following the publication of the CEDRA report, the Department of the Environment, Community and Local Government was tasked with formulating the Government's response. Since the publication of the CEDRA report, work has been done to implement the recommendations and a subsequent review of the work of the Commission has been published which contains a progress report, outlining the status of each recommendation in the report. In the most recent report of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas, reporting on the status of its recommendations, states that any CEDRA recommendations that had not been implemented were addressed under the existing action plan for rural development entitled *Realising our Rural Potential*. It states that the existing action plan:

“...builds on, and goes further than, the CEDRA report in that it seeks to address not just the economic development of rural areas, but also seeks to address the social and cultural development of rural communities across the country” (2019: 5).

REALISING OUR RURAL POTENTIAL: ACTION PLAN FOR RURAL DEVELOPMENT 2017 – 2019

Programme for a Partnership Government 2016 identified rural development as a key priority for the current Government and committed to several cross-cutting policies across a range of Government departments to revitalise rural Ireland. In January 2017, *Realising our Rural Potential*, the Government's action plan for rural development, was launched. The plan is a whole-of-government initiative and contains over 270 actions across five related pillars, to be delivered by Government departments, State agencies and other groups. The plan sets out to support sustainable communities, support enterprise and employment, maximise our rural and recreation potential, foster culture and creativity, and improve rural connectivity. In July 2017, rural development policy became the responsibility of the newly formed Department of Rural and Community Development and a senior Cabinet Minister for Rural and Community Development was assigned responsibility to oversee this policy brief. Now coming to the end of its timeframe, *Realising our Rural Potential: Action Plan for Rural Development*, acknowledged the challenges facing rural Ireland and sought to improve the quality of life for those who live and work in rural communities. While it is important to acknowledge that there are supports and protections for the most vulnerable in society, there also needs to be more support for younger people living in rural Ireland, to address the issues highlighted in Sections 5 and 6 of this report. While this whole of government policy approach to revitalising rural Ireland is welcome, there remain substantial challenges that need to be addressed. Furthermore, there needs to be more emphasis placed on allocating resources to fund transport initiatives and youth facilities and services in rural and remote parts of Ireland. Commitments and actions to improve public transport in rural areas are

contained in various public transport strategies, but progress in this regard has been extremely slow. In addition to the issue of public transport, broadband infrastructure and connectivity remain problematic. Public transport and broadband infrastructure lie at the heart of the social and economic development and progress in rural Ireland. These two issues remain fundamental barriers to inclusion and participation for young people and are critical to the wider population of rural Ireland. Indeed, they form two of the central issues in NYCI's research on barriers to the provision of youth work in rural Ireland. While it is evident that a lot of preparatory work has been done to scope out and commission the delivery of high speed broadband in Ireland, under the National Broadband Plan (NBP), it is imperative this work is prioritised and rolled out immediately to ensure rural Ireland is an attractive place for young people to continue to live, study and work.

CONCLUSION

As the current action plan for rural development comes to the end of its timeframe, Government is currently engaging in consultations to inform the formulation of the next phase of rural policy for 2020 – 2025. It is hoped the new policy action plan will reflect the key issues highlighted in this research and commit to addressing the existing deficits in policy and practice, which continue to inhibit the lives of rural youth and their access to youth work participation and specialised youth support services.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.1 | YOUTH WORK PROVISION - THE VOLUNTEER'S PERSPECTIVE

“Everything is in the city...there is nothing here for the kids. There is no support for us...”

(Volunteer Youth Leader, County Wicklow).

“...because we are viewed as so close to Dublin, a lot of people say, ‘well you know, just go to Dublin, go in the car to Dublin,’ everything is Dublin ‘... You can’t just go to Dublin... people think that we can pop on a DART, you know. We can’t, you know, it’s not it’s a commuter train that runs at half six, half seven, half nine and half one and half four and that is it....So to somebody sitting in an office in Dublin and you look at the map and you go your forty five minutes away by car, for God’s sake I may be forty five minutes away but we are a world away”

(Volunteer Youth Leader, County Wicklow).

5.1 YOUTH WORK PROVISION - THE VOLUNTEER'S PERSPECTIVE

THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUTH WORK VOLUNTEERS IN COUNTY WICKLOW

CATHOLIC GUIDES OF IRELAND

Now in its 90th year, the Catholic Guides of Ireland (CGI) is a National Organisation working with girls and young women and is based in both the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland. CGI work on a local basis in villages, towns and cities, usually meeting within school or community halls. It provides services in rural localities in Donegal, Cavan, Meath, Louth, Wicklow, Wexford, Waterford, Tipperary, Cork, Kerry and Northern Ireland.

The ethos of the association is from a Catholic and Christian background. The mission statement of the association is to provide a challenging guiding programme within a safe environment, to enable all girls and young women to develop their full potential. The vision of the organisation is that all girls and young women in CGI are empowered to recognise the contribution they make to society and are inspired to make a difference in the world. CGI's values are equality, loyalty, volunteerism, fun, friendship, open communication, trust, service to others and respect.

Volunteer guides provide girls and young women with frontline services on a local level including weekly meetings, weekend outings, camping trips, events and activities. Other services are provided such as national events and international guiding opportunities, all based around the guiding programme. CGI also recruit and train adult volunteers through a number of different training courses to become competent and safe guiders.

The six strategic aims for CGI are:

1. Programme Development: to provide young people with a challenging and vibrant programme of events and activities.
2. Training: to provide adults and young people with a range of dynamic training programmes.
3. Recruitment and Retention: to maintain and grow membership of CGI.
4. Voice of Young People: to empower young people to actively shape the future of the organisation and of the world they live in.
5. Partnerships: to enhance the guiding experience by working with other youth and community organisations.
6. Developing the Organisation: to ensure the continuous growth and development of the organisation.

HOW DOES CGI RESPOND TO THE NEEDS OF YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN RURAL IRELAND?

CGI operates on a section basis. A section can be made up of Cygnets aged 5 and 6, Brigins aged 7 to 10, Guides aged 10 – 14 and Rangers aged 14 to 19. Each section is run by the appropriate number of trained adults and there are different ratios for each of the sections, with a requirement to have a minimum of three adults at all meetings and events. Sections are then grouped together to form a Unit and each Unit is part of one of the five regions within CGI. CGI run a programme called 'CHOICES' - Creativity, Health, Outdoors, International, Community,

Environment, Special Project, and all youth members from the age of five have a dedicated programme for their section. Each region has a Regional Commissioner, who is a member of the National Executive Board and this facilitates the two-way communication from National, and back to National, from members at local level. Each Unit has a Unit Leader who attends a monthly meeting in region, chaired by the Regional Commissioner and this is an opportunity to receive information, but to also air any issues that they may be experiencing in their own Unit or Section and where support from the Region or National will be required.

This National Office, based in Dublin, looks after the administrative function for the organisation Guiders, who are all adult volunteers, supported by staff in the National Office by telephone, through the online Guide Manager system and by regular communication in the CGI quarterly magazine and monthly newsletter. Regions organise events to bring the Units together and also training is provided for the adults in their localities. At a national level, CGI organise All Sections Days, which are subsidised so that all members have an opportunity to attend.

RATHNEW, COUNTY WICKLOW

INTRODUCTION

This section presents the findings from the focus group with volunteer youth leaders working in Rathnew, County Wicklow. This focus group generated interesting insights and perspectives on the challenges encountered in providing youth work in a rural community. It also provides an insight from the perspective of the volunteer. The section addresses the value and contribution youth work makes to the lives of young people and to the volunteers interviewed. It captures important insights into establishing a new unit in a rural area and highlights some of the logistical issues that research participants overcame. It identifies concerns volunteers have about inaccessibility of resources and specialised services for rural youth. It also highlights similar structural barriers to youth work provision, to those identified by youth workers who participated in focus groups in Mayo, Tipperary and Waterford. These structural barriers centre around funding and resources, the provision of a better public transport infrastructure to support young people trying to access youth organisations in rural and remote areas, and the absence of youth centred services and mental health and counselling supports for young people living in rural areas.

BACKGROUND

The Catholic Guides of Ireland established a new project in Rathnew in County Wicklow, in 2017. The project is in its infancy but has gone from strength to strength since it was established two years ago. As a new initiative it helps to give an insight into some of the challenges of establishing a youth work service in a rural community, in terms of overcoming logistical issues such as securing premises and recruiting volunteers, complying with the regulatory framework and securing community support. As the focus group participants in County Wicklow comprised exclusively of volunteers, it also provides valuable qualitative data on the provision of youth work in a rural setting from the perspective of the volunteer. Of the focus group participants, all were parents of young people who had previously been participants in guiding or were currently participating in the guides. They were all committed to guiding and spoke about how much volunteering in guiding enriched their lives. Most of the participants had a long tradition of guiding in their families and invested significant time to volunteering. While their involvement in the unit emerged in different ways, all shared a common motivation to 'give back' to the guides. They described the experience of volunteering through guiding to be 'immensely enjoyable' but they also spoke about the challenges they encountered as volunteers in youth work provision in contemporary society.

The CGI unit in Rathnew officially opened in September 2017 in response to a demand for youth services in the area. A founding youth leader explained that impetus to establish the unit stemmed from the fact that there was "there is nothing in the village for girls."

SETTING UP A NEW UNIT

Prior to the official opening, a lot of preparatory work was done by volunteers to lay the foundations for the opening of the new unit. The first step was to advertise the intention to establish a CGI unit in Rathnew on social media and invite anyone who was interested to come to a meeting. One of the volunteers recalled that it was evident from the very first meeting that there was a real appetite in the community for such a youth work group. A key factor in the success of establishing the group was to secure the support of the community. As one of the founding leaders recounted:

"Lots of people were kind of enquiring, you know, and that, and then we came and we actually viewed the premises and the premises...We are so lucky so, so lucky because we have the indoors, which we can use for space. We have the kitchen area, where we have done cooking with the kids. We have done so many different nights, you know, candle-making whatever...a projector screen, fold out tables... we have the outdoor area. The committee here have been absolutely fantastic and I would like to say...only for them we wouldn't be here and the supports of the local councillors and stuff like that. They really got behind us. I suppose I was wondering would it work you know, would we have the interest? But we knew when we came in that night and we had the amount of people and even from the whatsapp message... that we knew we had the interest" (Volunteer Youth Leader).

The volunteers involved in establishing the Rathnew unit felt strongly that they wanted to provide the young people living in this disadvantaged rural community the opportunity to engage in guiding, to broaden their horizons and to expose them to the many opportunities open to them in County Wicklow and beyond.

"We felt strongly about opening here that we needed to show the girls the bigger picture of CGI. That there is not just the village, that there is Dublin, the North, there is Cork... to show them that they are part of something bigger, because I do think sometimes you know, kids they can feel isolated. They can feel, you know, 'I am on my own. I am the only one that does this. I am the only one that is like this. I am the only person.' But when they come to guides, you know, they might all have different abilities, different, you know, different interests or whatever but we try to cater for everything that is coming. They go to school within the village but when we go to the likes of the zoo day, we had a thousand members of CGI in the zoo, about three or four weeks ago. Our girls got to see girls who were like them from all around, from Cork and from Belfast and from everywhere else and 'they look like me, they act like me and they are just the same. And I am just as good' and to us that is a big thing, that our girls can see they are no better than me, they are the exact same as I am. They have the same uniform. Their leaders look the same, you know, we are all in it together. We all have the same songs. We do the same things. You are part of something bigger and you know... they are as good as anybody else and I really think that the things like the zoo day, the national events, are hugely powerful for the children" (Volunteer Youth Leader).

RECRUITING VOLUNTEERS

Recruiting volunteers can be difficult. The volunteers stated the old adage that 'it's only an hour or two a week,' in reality is a myth. Volunteers are required to undertake training courses and contribute to planning the programme of work. For some, these additional demands can be off-putting. As one focus group participant stated the reality is that it is more than just a few hours every Wednesday evening, there are so many other aspects to it.

"It's scouring shops looking for bargains (laughs)...it's hopping in your car and driving to Blessington to pick up a tent. It's going into Dublin to get stuff in the CGI head office. It's going down to Tesco's to buy you know the pizzas and whatever else. It's the training course that we all do...it's the CPA training, the first aid course, the challenging behaviour course. There is so many courses that CGI give out and it's great to be able to do them but they do take time and then the additional days like the zoo day...it's all that kind of stuff so there is a lot, you know (Volunteer Youth Leader)."

In reality there is often a challenge attracting and recruiting volunteers from the community to support the work. In Rathnew, a lot of personal contacts were drawn upon to recruit volunteers. A pool of volunteers with a long track record of guiding, over generations, continue to provide a source of youth leaders in CGI and this is reflected in the composition of volunteers who supported the CGI unit in Rathnew. One of the volunteers had been involved in guiding over 30 years ago. She had been a guide and her daughter had also been involved in the guiding tradition and now her granddaughter attends. Her story was a common one and reflected an intergenerational commitment to guiding and volunteering in CGI, where people who had previously been involved in guiding either as a young person themselves or as a parent, volunteered their time, in recognition of the value of the youth work and to *'give something back.'* This commitment to volunteering and to *'giving back'* to guiding is a recurring story amongst volunteers. A youth leader who volunteered at Rathnew had a similar story in terms of her journey as a volunteer. She started out as a leader though her children's involvement with the organisation and then returned as a volunteer later in life. She stated:

"I was a leader and then life gets in the way and I had my own children and then...I said if you are ever stuck give me a shout and I am here now" (Volunteer Youth Leader).

Another focus group participant recounted how she became involved as a volunteer from bringing her autistic daughter to guiding. She was highly complimentary of how involvement and participation in guiding had been tremendously beneficial for her child. She stated it had played an integral part in her child's personal and social development and engagement with other children. She said that her daughter greatly enjoys attending and she can see a great change in her behaviour, which she attributes to her involvement in guiding.

"I would see a huge change in her behaviour since she has come here ...that is something that should be shouted from the rooftop. It's fantastic for kids on the spectrum because these kids see her and now they know her, they know her name, and one of them started doing this hand-clapping thing and because social interaction is a huge difficulty for kid on the spectrum and she is accepted here. You know she is sensitive to sound. We were at the parade on Sunday. She had her hands over her ears but none of the kids said a word...so from that point of view it's wonderful and it's only going to get better, so that is why I said I would I have to...get involved in because it pays back in spades" (Volunteer Youth Leader).

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERING

It was evident from the stories relayed by focus group participants that these volunteers were extremely committed to youth work and to the young people in their care. Although some told of stories of returning to guiding initially as a bit of sojourn, once back in the fold they became much utilised and relied upon youth leaders. They described volunteering in the guides as a privilege. Many spoke of *'getting back what you put in,'* and of greatly enjoying the work with the young people. They also expressed the view that they felt like they were contributing in an enriching way to young people's life journeys, growth and personal development. The following quotations from focus group participants capture the volunteer experience and their feelings about the role they play in young people's lives and the sense of enjoyment that they get from volunteering their time to guiding:

"...what happened was another leader got sick and had an operation and I got a phone call could I come in and help out from September to October, October became December and then December was up. 'She is not coming back could you stay on?' So that was me, so then that was just coming up to six years ago...I enjoy it immensely you know I actually...I actually enjoy some parts more now with the kids than I did...I mean I hated camping when I was a kid but I love it now. I actually really enjoy the camping outdoors now more than I did when I was younger" (Volunteer Youth Leader).

“To see them coming through is just fantastic and you know...and it’s great to get them at the ‘Cygnet’ age and...to give them that support in their life and to bring them through it and it is, in some ways, it is easier with the younger ones, because they are a bit more, you know...a bit more understanding and listening whereas with Guides they are a harder age to kind of get on board and to deal with, you know what I mean, but and again it’s like...what they know from home is what is coming in here. So you are trying to, you know, not shadow it but you are trying to kind of air certain ways to develop a sense of respect, a sense of belonging, a sense of achievement, a sense of worth for some kids...” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

VOLUNTEER CAMARADERIE AND COMMITMENT

It is evident that there is a great sense of camaraderie and mutual respect amongst the volunteers interviewed. Everyone is equal and decisions are taken together. When asked about this dynamic in their working style, they agreed that without this element of friendship, respect and equality, which prevailed amongst them, it would not work. They also added that volunteer commitment was crucial to effective youth work practice. Emphasising this point, one participant stated:

“There is no point in being here if you are not committed...it’s as simple as that... It’s vital. We wouldn’t be here without it...You can’t just kind of be here this week and not come the next week” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

‘Commitment’ is important but to be able to get on with each other and to foster a rapport amongst volunteers were also highlighted as key ingredients to the success of the youth work provision. As one focus group participant stated:

“I mean we are very lucky that we all get on very well. We are all very similar personalities you know, similar minds you know, similar you know, same kind of beliefs and you know, mindsets. But I think we are also, we are friends...” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

RECOGNITION OF THE VALUE OF YOUTH WORK

Volunteers felt outside the youth work sector there was a lack of recognition of the value and contribution youth work brings to young people, communities and society at large. Notwithstanding this lack of external recognition, youth work vis-à-vis guiding meant a tremendous amount to them personally and had played an integral part in their lives, both as young guides themselves and now in their volunteering roles within the organisation. Some of the benefits they have gained from volunteering, include forging personally rewarding friendships with other volunteers and the pleasure from ‘seeing a child’s face light up’ in appreciation of a guiding activity or experience.

FUNDING

Rathnew was described as a ‘disadvantaged rural community’ by participants and whilst the volunteers utilised all the contacts at their disposal to provide a lively, fun and engaging programme of activities for girls of all age groups attending, the need for additional funding was emphasised. There were activities that the volunteers would love to provide for the guides, but they were often cost-prohibitive, and they did not want to ask the parents for additional money. Unfortunately, this issue of costs is a recurring theme throughout the research and was raised in all of the focus groups conducted as part of this study. Reflecting on the value of the work and the need to adequately resource it and invest particularly in socio-economically disadvantaged rural communities, one of the focus group participants stated:

“I looked at the kids yesterday from the other group, from Wicklow and they had the big hats and the whole lot and I thought that would be lovely for our girls but you can’t ask parents for money you know and from that point of view I think that if there was a budget to make them feel as good as the rest” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

Another volunteer reiterated the importance of investing in youth work, which is in so many ways life-changing and transformative and can make a big difference in the path a young person will take in their life. She stated:

“These are like little seeds that want to grow... just a little statement to them could be the thing that starts them on the road to really feeling good about themselves” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

DEALING WITH CHALLENGING BEHAVIOUR

Despite the value the volunteers ascribe to the work, youth work can be demanding and challenging and some of the young people coming through the doors come with a range of needs. Some of the needs can be complex and hard to address in the youth work setting and require referrals to more specialised supports provided by other professions or agencies. The volunteer youth leaders stated that these needs can often be reflected in the young person’s behaviour, which on occasion can be disruptive and attention-seeking. The youth work sector is an enabling and supportive environment where any young person can go, but at times it can be difficult work. Youth work has the capacity to change lives and to support a young person through their life, through the good and bad moments. It can also help to change mindsets and help guide a young person in the right direction, but it was emphasised that the earlier this intervention the better to ensure optimum impact.

BUILDING TRUST WITHIN THE COMMUNITY AND CHILD PROTECTION ISSUES

The focus group participants felt it was vitally important to build trust within the community that youth work is provided. Some of the volunteers had the benefit of local knowledge or local contacts and they felt that this invariably gave them a degree of ‘validation’ in the eyes of the parents of children attending the unit. They also felt it helped to foster a sense of trust in terms of who would be working with their children. The view was expressed that parents were more aware of issues of child protection because of the recent scandals of historic cases surrounding national youth work organisations and this had left its mark both in terms of a wariness amongst parents and volunteers alike.

From a volunteering perspective, the participants in the focus groups felt that they were much more aware of boundaries and as a result exercised caution when working with the children and young people. Reflecting on the shift that had taken place in terms of child protection towards a very regulated system, although they recognised its importance, they also expressed a sadness about it. The volunteers stated that there is a constant need to protect yourself as a youth worker or volunteer working with children and young people.

One volunteer stated said that as a mother her instinct would be to comfort a child if they fell over but now *“if a child falls you can’t go pick that child up give them a hug and tell them they will be alright”* (Volunteer Youth Leader).

Another volunteer reflecting on the child protection safeguarding policies and practices stated:

“It’s very sad that you have to protect yourself, like even to giving a child a lift home, you have to have somebody else in the car with you. It might only be down the road, but you still have to. Oh it has happened where I would be coming through Rathnew and I had two girls who were in Rathnew, but I had one girl who was in Wicklow where I live, but I had to go to Wicklow and drop her first... then drop those two together home from here and then go back to Wicklow because I couldn’t be in the car from Rathnew to Wicklow with one girl on my own. That is the way you have to do it, or you know you have to have someone else in the car. It’s a terrible way to be but no, that is, yes you have to, you have to think that way all the time. It’s very, very sad” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

RURAL TRANSPORT

The absence of a reliable, interconnected and affordable public transport for rural Ireland was highlighted as a significant issue impeding young people's access to the youth work provided in rural communities. It also impedes young people's access to the range activities and supports that the young people can access. Even though Rathnew is close to Wicklow, the youth leader stated that the absence of an accessible transport system meant that they were not accessing the youth work provision in Wicklow.

"A lot of them don't have access to transport to go in the Local Link either between the two towns that would even, for a reduced fee would bring them in and out" (Volunteer Youth Leader).

In the focus group, the youth leaders provided countless examples of how due to lack of an accessible and affordable rural transport system, they encountered difficulty accessing events or arranging activities for the young people. One such example provides a powerful illustration of such a situation:

"We brought 'the Cygnets' and 'the Brigins' on their first trip at Christmas. We brought them to Rathwood - a Christmas village. Some of those kids had never been on a bus, even though they were in a school, they had never been on a bus ride. They had never been on a day trip and like that, you know and again we were ringing around to try and get reduced prices buses. And I mean the excitement here that day and it I think...when you look back at the comments on our Facebook page from parents...it's you know, so and so had such good fun to great day, hadn't stopped talking since she got into the car and that to us that is the pay back for us. We made a difference in that day in so many girls' lives, do you know what I mean. They got to be together, they got to be with other kids and we actually joined another unit we met there so they got to see other girls from a different area. They got to see girls from Ballybrack, which would be again another deprived area. They have met girls from Malahide at different things we have gone to. The biggest thing for us when we want to do something is the cost of buses you know to go anywhere with a group of girls, it's a bus. Like there is regional events in Harrington Street which are free for us to attend but we have to get a bus up because we can't drive all the girls up, there is not enough cars so a mini bus recently was three hundred and twenty euros and that is a tenner for a child to go...If you are in Dublin you just jump on the bus. You get on the bus and you pay one fifty or one ten" (Volunteer Youth Leader).

There are so many national events organised by CGI for different age groups at the weekends and training days. Events in the eastern region are free to attend, and there are events in the regional HQ in Dublin 2, which is relatively close but securing funding to travel to these is difficult and often prohibitive.

"Transport is for everything. I mean you know to get the kids to services, to get the kids to any days out or to anything, it's, for our children, it costs a lot more. So they are not the same as the girls in Dublin because like the girls from Dublin can hop on a Dublin bus or a LUAS...We have to ask our parents for a tenner a head to get the kids to the same free event..." (Volunteer Youth Leader).

It was highlighted that young people living in urban localities or close to urban centres could avail of various events and activities, but those in rural communities were at a disadvantage in this regard. It was argued that this geographical difference should be recognised by introducing a fund to cover transport costs and by the provision of a community bus for each county, which the youth workers in rural communities could use. The youth leaders stated that while some units had access to a community bus, it was not available in County Wicklow. Such a facility, they felt, would be of tremendous value to improving the opportunities young people living in rural Ireland could avail of.

"A community bus, yes, it would be fantastic...You know if we got X amount of money, like if we got a grant to buy a bus, because we would have it on the road every week. We could bring our girls to so many places..." (Volunteer Youth Leader).

LACK OF YOUTH SUPPORT SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS COMPARED TO URBAN AREAS

The focus group participants highlighted that in rural communities like Rathnew, there is a lack of adequate support services. Given its proximity to Dublin, there tends to be an expectation that people will travel to the city, but this is expensive for parents and young people and is further compounded by the lack of an affordable, accessible and reliable public system servicing rural Ireland.

One youth leader stated that *“Everything is in the city...there is nothing here for the kids. There is no support for us...”* (Volunteer Youth Leader).

In terms of accessing specialised services such as counselling or mental health supports, the focus group participants stated that it is a real problem. They had encountered situations in their work where young people required such supports.

As youth leaders volunteering their time, they highlighted that there was only so much they could do in the time they allocated, and they recognised that they were not qualified to deal with complex mental health cases. In this regard, they feel vulnerable and ill-equipped to respond to such needs when they present in the youth work setting. Another issue raised was the lack of outreach support available in rural communities for young people struggling with their sexual identity. Although there are a lot of online resources available and the Belong To Youth Service provides outreach training, one volunteer stated that it was hard to access training or supports in rural communities in the evenings. A youth leader stated that last year they had a few young people questioning their sexuality and both the Guides and the Rangers proposed that an outside speaker would be invited to come in and speak to them about sexuality. Unfortunately, due to their location and the fact that they meet on a Wednesday evening, this was not possible.

The youth leaders reiterated that all the supports and services were in Dublin or Cork and that there is a perception that everyone can travel to Dublin to access these supports, but this is not the case. It very much depends on one’s socio-economic status and access to a car and a driver.

One of the focus group participants stated:

“...because we are viewed as so close to Dublin, a lot of people say, ‘well you know, just go to Dublin, go in the car to Dublin,’ everything is Dublin...You can’t just go to Dublin... people think that we can pop on a DART, you know. We can’t, you know, it’s not it’s a commuter train that runs at half six, half seven, half nine and half one and half four and that is it...So to somebody sitting in an office in Dublin and you look at the map and you go your forty five minutes away by car, for God’s sake I may be forty five minutes away but we are a world away” (Volunteer Youth Leader).

SUMMARY OF THE FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION WITH VOLUNTEER YOUTH LEADERS IN COUNTY WICKLOW

The focus group with volunteers providing youth work in Rathnew County Wicklow through the Catholic Guides of Ireland, provided valuable insights into the issues that volunteer youth leaders encounter, in rural Ireland. Although volunteering was described by research participants as a tremendously enriching experience, it was not without its challenges. Such challenges include the following:

- > Lack of adequate funding for the provision of youth work services in rural localities.
- > Lack of an accessible, affordable public transport for rural communities.
- > A lack of recognition of the value and contribution of youth work.

- > Difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers.
- > The burden of compliance with an increasingly regulated youth sector and impact on a volunteer's time.

The overriding issues impacting on the provision of youth work in rural Ireland identified by the volunteers who participated in the focus group in County Wicklow, emerged as key issues in all of the other focus groups with youth workers in Tipperary, Waterford and Mayo. Although there were nuances and slight variations in the focus group findings, there is a lot of commonality in terms of the issues raised by youth workers and volunteers providing youth work in a rural context.

SUMMARY OF KEY CHALLENGES PROVIDING YOUTH WORK IN COUNTY WICKLOW

LACK OF ADEQUATE FUNDING FOR THE PROVISION OF YOUTH WORK SERVICES IN RURAL LOCALITIES.

"I looked at the kids yesterday from the other group, from Wicklow and they had the big hats and the whole lot and I thought that would be lovely for our girls but you can't ask parents for money you know and from that point of view I think that if there was a budget to make them feel as good as the rest" (Volunteer Youth Leader).

"A community bus, yes, it would be fantastic...You know if we got X amount of money like if we got a grant to buy a bus, because we would have it on the road every week. We could bring our girls to so many places..." (Volunteer Youth Leader).

LACK OF AN ACCESSIBLE, AFFORDABLE PUBLIC TRANSPORT FOR RURAL COMMUNITIES.

"Transport is for everything. I mean you know to get the kids to services, to get the kids to any days out or to anything, it's, for our children, it costs a lot more. So they are not the same as the girls in Dublin because like the girls from Dublin can hop on a Dublin bus or a LUAS...We have to ask our parents for a tenner a head to get the kids to the same free event..." (Volunteer Youth Leader).

THE BURDEN OF COMPLIANCE WITH AN INCREASINGLY REGULATED YOUTH SECTOR AND IMPACT ON VOLUNTEER'S TIME.

"It's the training course that we all do...it's the CPA training, the first aid course, the challenging behaviour course. There is so many courses that CGI give out and it's great to be able to do them but they do take time and then the additional days like the zoo day...it's all that kind of stuff so there is a lot, you know (Volunteer Youth Leader)."

LACK OF SPECIALISED YOUTH SUPPORT SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS

"Everything is in the city...there is nothing here for the kids. There is no support for us..." (Volunteer Youth Leader).

RESEARCH FINDINGS

5.2 | YOUTH WORK PROVISION - THE YOUTH WORKER'S PERSPECTIVE

5.2 YOUTH WORK PROVISION - THE YOUTH WORKER'S PERSPECTIVE

INTRODUCTION

This section presents the findings of the focus groups held in counties Mayo, Tipperary and Waterford with youth workers. In each focus group the same topic guide was used with youth work professionals in each of the regions to explore; their experiences of providing youth work in rural Ireland and to identify examples of best practice and impediments to youth work provision and youth engagement and participation in rural Ireland. In the focus groups, youth workers were asked to consider the challenges they had identified, and to provide solutions to help overcome some of the challenges they experienced delivering youth work in a rural context.

Although there was significant commonality across the country in terms of the challenges youth workers encountered in the design and delivery of youth work, there are notable regional differences and nuances, and to ensure that these are captured, this section presents the findings from each region and provides a brief summary of key issues, which emerged in each focus group.

“In Mayo we are really lucky as we have a strong Comhairle na nÓg and a strong history of Comhairle in the county. We have one of the biggest in the country...I suppose because we have such a big Comhairle again transport is a big issue and representing young people from the whole county. We tend to meet in Castlebar as it is central for everybody and most public transport goes through Castlebar, but you are talking about young people from Belmullet, Achill, Lacken, the most rural areas of the county. It could be an hour to get here for the meeting. There is a high demand to get on it, so people make the effort but it’s a big ask of parents”

(Youth Worker, County Mayo).

THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUTH WORKERS IN COUNTY MAYO

The participants of the focus group comprised of Foróige staff working in a variety of different types of youth work provision, throughout County Mayo. During the course of the focus group, the youth workers spoke about the nature of the youth work they provided and highlighted models of good and innovative practice, that they were trialling or currently employing to engage effectively with young people from all walks of life. They highlighted the benefits of this work and relayed stories of their experiences, to illustrate how good youth work can change young people's lives. They also spoke of some of the challenges they encounter in their work. In many cases, the difficulties they highlighted were not insurmountable, but require additional funding to address. Interestingly, the findings of this focus group were echoed strongly in other regions of the country. While there were notable regional differences in terms of barriers and challenges to the provision of rural youth work, there is also a lot of commonality in terms of the obstacles youth workers experience in providing youth work to young people living in rural Ireland.

Foróige has a strong profile and presence in County Mayo. In 2018, there were 72 clubs in 46 locations in the county, reflecting the demand for youth work services amongst young people. Volunteers play a key role in providing the Foróige clubs in the county. Without their support, it would be impossible to provide Foróige clubs. Foróige engages young people in a variety of services including Foróige Youth and Family Support Services, Creative Community Alternatives, Big Brother Big Sister Programme and Ballyhaunis Youth Service. It also offers programmes in entrepreneurship, youth leadership, citizenship and youth participation and advocacy and the opportunity to participate in The Clubhouse, and the Mayo Comhairle na nÓg.² The work is very much youth led and directed. Examples of the sort of citizenship work done in Foróige, range from visiting the local hospitals and providing entertainment for the residents, performing in a national talent competition, contributing to the tidy towns competition to advocating for improved facilities for the local community.

"...it's about giving back to the community. So the essence of Foróige is young people making a difference for themselves and for their communities. An example would be Ardagh Foróige Club visiting their local hospital. The members visit the local hospital, spend time with the patients and provide entertainment for example organising bingo. The members and volunteers also give up part of their Christmas Day to visit the hospital and again provide entertainment for the patients and families..." (Youth Worker, Mayo).

"Every year, Foróige organise a national talent competition called "Foróige's Got Talent" In the Mayo heat of the competition organised completely by volunteers, there will be up to 40 acts performing in front of 600 people in a state of the art facility in Claremorris. This is an example of the amazing opportunities being offered to young people because of the hard work of volunteers. (Youth Worker, Mayo).

Foróige, through the Tusla funded services, supports young people who are experiencing adversity in their lives. These young people are often referred to the organisation by Tusla services via social work, psychology, Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service (CAMHS), school completion or the EWO. In these instances, the young people referred to the youth work sector can present with a range of needs. All referrals that may warrant a Family Support Worker are assessed and the Family Support Worker works intensively with the family in the home. This is a demanding role which requires the post-holder to hold a case from between 6 to 12 months and requires interagency collaboration with the family. This sort of work reflects how youth work engages with other professionals to help support the young person and their family. The Family Support Worker works with the child, not in isolation from the family, but as part of the whole system. The main premise of this type of work is that the post-holder works with the parents and the parents are seen as the agent of change. In this way the work has the potential to transform the relationships between the parents and the child within the family setting of the home. This work can be very effective in improving relationships and helping improve life for the young person.

MAYO COMHAIRLE NA NÓG

Foróige coordinates the Comhairle na nÓg in County Mayo with the support of Mayo County Council. This takes place in Castlebar and engages with elected young people from all backgrounds from the across the county. The Mayo Comhairle na nÓg is one of the biggest in the country. Although it is a representative body for the county, it is less needs-led than other types of youth work. The Comhairle operates as a way of engaging young people and provides a forum for them to highlight issues and develop a response to these issues and to address the challenges young people in Mayo are experiencing. Comhairle na nÓg is a good example of youth engagement and participation of young people from across county Mayo, by successfully engaging rural youth and providing them with a forum to learn in a youth work setting. Speaking of the success of the Mayo Comhairle na nÓg, one youth worker stated:

"In Mayo we are really lucky as we have a strong Comhairle na nÓg and a strong history of Comhairle in the county. We have one of the biggest in the country...I suppose because we have such a big Comhairle again transport is a big issue and representing young people from the whole county. We tend to meet in Castlebar as it is central for everybody and most public transport goes through Castlebar, but you are talking about young people from Belmullet, Achill, Lacken, the most rural areas of the county. It could be an hour to get here for the meeting. There is a high demand to get on it so people make the effort but it's a big ask of parents."

At the moment, the Mayo Comhairle na nÓg has around 45 young people. At the annual general meeting, the young people select a topic they want to work on. This year the theme is inclusion. The Comhairle breaks into subgroups and works on projects related to the theme of 'inclusion.' This forms the main piece of work for the year but the young people also receive talks from a variety of different people and engage in fundraising projects as well. Some of the projects they have worked on this year range from working with the Old People's Council on a skills sharing day, work on road safety and a big project on Mayo and Mayo Day. The aim of the Mayo Day Project is to capture the voice of Mayo people and the diaspora from Mayo through the production of a book. The project is called 'Pride of Mayo.' The young people are also involved in 'Mayo Day.' This initiative is a campaign spearheaded by the Mayo County Council to promote Mayo as a destination, not just for tourists but as the best place to live and to set up business. In many ways, work of this nature evokes a sense of pride of being from Mayo, amongst the young people. It also portrays what it is like to live in Mayo, from the perspective of a young person. In some respects, their portrayal of Mayo life reflects all of the positive aspects of being from rural Ireland, despite the negative aspects of Mayo life that young people might complain about.

CHALLENGES ENCOUNTERED BY RURAL YOUTH

Youth workers interviewed about the sorts of challenges young people in Mayo present with in, the youth work setting, stated that they tend to change from time to time but that a significant issue currently, is anxiety.

"Anxiety is a big issue at the minute for young people. That comes up a lot, and school attendance. A lot of times it comes back to social skills that they don't have. The social skills they need to make it through day to day life, so it comes out as anxiety or in friendships. So that would be some of the stuff we are coming up against at the minute. But that changes, some years it is drug-based stuff and alcohol and drinking and it just seems to come in waves." (Youth Worker).

Another issue highlighted was the lack of specialised support services for young people living in rural areas who may require access to mental health or counselling and the lack of resources to meet this need. One youth worker stated:

"The ratio of money per child going into Dublin versus the rural areas is exponentially more...I'm not saying it shouldn't be. But the challenge in rural Ireland is if you're a young person that is any ways alternative, you're going to struggle, because you don't have that access to something that will meet

your needs. So, an example would be if you're a young person who is LGBTI+ living in rural Ireland, where do you access the support...we do have a Chairde network night of LGBTI+ groups. One in Ballina, Ballinrobe and Castlebar...but if it's not in your local area you may still struggle to access this support..."

PUBLIC TRANSPORT

Lack of adequate public transport in rural area was highlighted as a big issue impeding youth work provision and young people's ability to access youth work and youth services. Foróige projects operate in County Mayo from urban centres. This is the most efficient way of providing a central base for young people in the region. If the organisation received a request to go out and meet a young person, they will try to accommodate this, but in these instances outreach work would entail going into the community setting and running a group in the locality. It is not the norm and only happens occasionally but is extremely time consuming.

"...for Mayo the projects are based in urban centres. So if they can't get to us at the times we are running it is much more difficult and time consuming for the youth worker because you are going out to one or two young people. That could take three hours, an hour there and an hour of work and an hour back" (Youth Worker).

The issue of public transport was discussed at length during the focus group and a number of proposals were suggested by youth workers as to how to address this barrier to participation in youth work. One of the focus group participants suggested the creation of a Local Link transport scheme, which would provide a community bus service for rural areas to collect the young people attending Comhairle na nÓg meeting, on a monthly basis. While such a facility would require funding to resource the bus, and running costs such as insurance and the cost of a driver, it would help to alleviate the public transport barrier that currently exists.

THE ROLE OF VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers and the contribution they make to youth work was acknowledged, however, youth workers interviewed also highlighted that there are aspects of youth work where volunteer involvement would not be appropriate, such as the family support work. As one youth worker explained:

"A child might be referred and part of your plan is to get them involved in group work, but then there could be a case conference and report, you can't expect a volunteer to take on that role or to take on the responsibility of providing interventions to fulfil the needs of that child."

The youth workers stated that Foróige values the role of volunteers in the youth services and involves volunteers in an effective way to support young people. For instance, a volunteer with a certain skills set might be invited to provide a few sessions using these skills. An example of this was given where the youth worker recalled how a male volunteer who had expertise in kickboxing was invited to provide personal safety classes for the young people. On other occasions, beauticians have attended the youth services and provided sessions related to this area of interest - effectively these individuals are volunteering their skills rather than their time.

THE BIG BROTHER, BIG SISTER PROGRAMME

The Big Brother, Big Sister programme is an example of how volunteers can play an invaluable role in the lives of young people. Recruitment of volunteers to participate in this programme can be challenging in rural areas. One major challenge is recruiting and matching volunteers in the same area as the young person. You may have a volunteer and young person that would be very well-suited but live miles apart. Often the young person may not have the practical supports to get them to meet the volunteer, so it would be up to the volunteer to get to where the young person lives. This often is just not possible due to the volunteer not driving, no suitable public transport or the financial costs of driving to meet the young person every week.

“A major challenge is receiving a referral for a young person who would benefit hugely from having the support of an adult role model. However, this young person lives a 20-minute drive to the nearest village or town. It is extremely difficult to recruit a suitable volunteer to support this young person due to their rural isolation” (Youth Worker).

This relates to the issue of resourcing and reimbursement of volunteers for such expenses and the youth workers are generally very creative about how they overcome such issues. One youth worker stated:

“We have to be creative in trying to identify clever ways to cover costs of activities. We would have sourced free cinema tickets and vouchers for coffee shops, but again there is work to get sponsorship. What you don’t want is putting financial pressure on parents of young people to provide them with the money to do an activity, but you don’t want to ask the volunteer to pay for the young person every time. So it is that little nuance in supporting the match. It would be invaluable if there was a budget to support matches, where you could say to the volunteers every time you go out there is x budget there to do X, Y or Z with” (Youth Worker).

INVESTMENT IN INTERPRETING SERVICES IN RECOGNITION OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE DIFFICULTIES

One of the youth workers highlighted that an emerging issue was the need for interpreting services to respond to the increase in new Irish communities, where the parents do not have a fluency in the English language.

“I’ve a good few families coming in who have moved here from a city. The cultural differences and the way of life, the way of parenting is so different. When you arrive in Ireland you don’t know what the rules are or what the local lay of the land is. How you even interact with services, what school to choose or getting appropriate childcare. But I noticed the lack of service that provides interpretation or translation services. We have to go to Galway, you have to book in online, it’s very expensive. We do use Diversity Mayo here when it is appropriate, but a lot of the communities are quite small that it could be their friend who is translating for them.”

There is no fund for translating services and it is not easy to access translation services. Interpreting services are essential in this regard, not only in terms of the family support service, but also for communication in relation to child protection cases and in terms of providing essential information. As one youth worker highlighted, the existing system is not suitable, especially in rural Ireland, because it does not provide adequate confidentiality to the young person or their family.

“If you are going along as an interpreter and your friends’ children are going to be taken into care you don’t want to be the translator, you shouldn’t be privy to that information and really, you know, the boundaries are blurred there. So it is a massive gap in services” (Youth Worker).

Another youth worker added there was no additional funding to support youth workers in rural Ireland to provide adequate support to new communities in terms of helping them integrate into life in Ireland and to become acquainted with the cultural differences that exist.

“I think even with families who are coming to live in Ireland they are coming from an entirely different culture. You arrive here and you encounter the problems. If you are part of a resettlement or you are part of an integrated or a government scheme you know there might be a resettlement worker assigned...but the funding is not near adequate enough” (Youth Worker).

“If you are going to put somebody right in a rural area you might be the first Middle Eastern family that has ever lived in that area, you’ve no transport, you’ve no way of bringing the kids to anything. You’ve no way of communicating...All direct provision...it’s so difficult and you would wonder why

didn't they put them into Castlebar town or Westport and Ballina...So they put them where there mightn't be a library, mightn't be a citizens information, mightn't be all these supports that they need on their journey" (Youth Worker).

It was emphasised that some of these families have experienced trauma and to be able to assist them adequately, there needs to be additional resources to provide an interpreter service for the youth work sector.

INVESTMENT IN APPRENTICESHIP SCHEME FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN RURAL AREAS

Another point that was highlighted by youth workers in the Mayo youth workers focus group was the need for investment in an effective apprenticeship scheme, which offered young people who do not wish to pursue higher education an alternative career pathway via an attractive apprenticeship scheme. It was argued strongly that such a scheme would 'keep them enticed' and offer them a viable alternative education. One youth worker in favour of the establishment of an apprenticeship scheme stated that as early as Junior Certificate there should be an opportunity to engage in an apprenticeship scheme.

"There is no step for young people who have been out of the education system and you are trying to get them back into something. It is actually very difficult to get the step between sitting at home all day on the Xbox or full-time education. There is nothing in the middle, because I know we did before the leadership programme with the 17 to 23 year olds, it was only done with a couple of kids but one of them that was what he needed. He needed it once or twice a week and then he went on to Youthreach and now he's gone to college. But that isn't there, that's definitely not there"
(Youth Worker).

SUMMARY OF THE FOCUS GROUP WITH MAYO YOUTH WORKERS

The focus group with youth workers in County Mayo was an energised and informative discussion, which provided valuable insights into the nature and scope of the work Foróige does at a county level in county Mayo to engage and support rural youth. It highlighted the vast array of activities that young people in rural parts of Mayo can avail of through Foróige and the variety of needs, the organisation seeks to respond to. It also provided rich and illuminating data on some of the key challenges encountered by youth workers in the delivery of quality youth work in County Mayo. Many of these challenges are structural in nature and result from:

- > The absence of a reliable, affordable and accessible public transport system in rural Ireland.
- > The lack of adequate funding for youth work services throughout the country and inadequate funding to support youth work practice in rural communities where young people experience specific needs.
- > Lack of access to a broad range of services such as mental health and counselling services.
- > Challenge of recruiting, supporting and retaining volunteers to support youth work practice.
- > The absence of an adequate interpreting service to support new communities living in rural Ireland who have English language difficulties and cultural differences and experience challenges engaging with youth work services.
- > The need for additional resources to support new communities integrating into life in rural Ireland.
- > The need for more investment in a National Apprenticeship Scheme with the allocation of dedicated resources and spaces for young people living in rural and remote areas.

SUMMARY OF KEY CHALLENGES PROVIDING YOUTH WORK IN COUNTY MAYO

INADEQUATE RESOURCES FOR YOUTH WORK PROVISION

"We have to be creative in trying to identify clever ways to cover costs of activities. We would have sourced free cinema tickets and vouchers for coffee shops, but again there is work to get sponsorship. What you don't want is putting financial pressure on parents of young people to provide them with the money to do an activity, but you don't want to ask the volunteer to pay for the young person every time. So it is that little nuance in supporting the match. It would be invaluable if there was a budget to support matches, where you could say to the volunteers every time you go out there is x budget there to do X, Y or Z with" (Youth Worker).

LACK OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT

"...for Mayo the projects are based in urban centres. So if they can't get to us at the times we are running it is much more difficult and time consuming for the youth worker because you are going out to one or two young people. That could take three hours, an hour there and an hour work and an hour back" (Youth Worker).

THE NEED FOR NATIONAL INTERPRETING SERVICES

"If you are going along as an interpreter and your friends' children are going to be taken into care you don't want to be the translator, you shouldn't be privy to that information and really, you know, the boundaries are blurred there. So, it is a massive gap in services" (Youth Worker).

THE NEED FOR INVESTMENT IN A NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP SCHEME

"There is no step for young people who have been out of the education system and you are trying to get them back into something. It is actually very difficult to get the step between sitting at home all day on the Xbox or full-time education. There is nothing in the middle, because I know we did before the leadership programme with the 17 to 23-year olds, it was only done with a couple of kids but one of them that was what he needed. He needed it once or twice a week and then he went on to Youthreach and now he's gone to college. But that isn't there, that's definitely not there" (Youth Worker).

“...in broad terms, for the young people I am working with, lack of access to facilities and lack of access to transport would be huge issues. A lot of Portlaw, Kilmathomas and then the surrounding towns would be very rural and have very limited transport and that is a huge thing for us...Transport to be able to get to the bigger towns like Dungarvan, Waterford, Carrick-on-Suir”

(Youth Worker, County Waterford).

THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUTH WORKERS IN COUNTY WATERFORD

A focus group was held in Lismore County Waterford with a group of Foróige youth workers working in rural parts of the county. They provided valuable insights into the nature and scope of the youth work provided by Foróige in the Waterford region. They highlighted the gaps in services and supports for young people living in the county and emphasised the lack of opportunities for rural youth, and lack of specialised youth mental health and counselling services, available in the region. They also spoke about the structural barriers impacting on young people's access to youth work services and supports and the costs associated with young work participation, especially for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. The focus group participants spoke about their experiences of youth engagement and participation with young people, but also highlighted the challenges and difficulties they encountered in their work. A number of recommendations on how youth work provision in rural Ireland could be enhanced were proposed by focus group participants. The proposals for improving youth work provision in County Waterford, echoed many of the findings from the focus groups conducted with youth workers working in rural youth work programmes and projects in Tipperary, Mayo and Wicklow. Indeed, there is a lot of commonality in terms of the challenges the youth work sector experiences in delivering supports and services to young people living in rural Ireland. Many of the challenges are structural in nature and require additional resources to address.

INADEQUATE RESOURCING TO PROVIDE YOUTH WORK IN RURAL AREAS

A key barrier in the provision of youth work in rural Ireland identified by the youth workers is the actual cost of youth engagement and participation in youth work. Youth workers highlighted that the grants available have generally decreased in a lot of areas and that youth workers who work in the provision of mainline or universal youth work services have noticed a decline in the number of clubs running.

"...Like a number of clubs would support very disadvantaged young people and it is a challenge for them. There is no doubt about it. They really don't have...if they don't have it, we do our very utmost to ensure that they can engage in all the activities and different things. But I do think that it can be a barrier, because a young person won't join a club or a group if they know they don't have the money to pay for their activities. So, we might not be getting these young people and so it can automatically be a barrier..." (Youth Worker, Waterford).

The cost of activities is an inhibiting factor for many young people and even though the organisation has waived membership fees, when appropriate, it is a challenge. Youth workers are conscious of the costs associated with youth work activities and tend not to ask for money from the young people or their parents. Instead they identify activities that are not cost prohibitive. At the same time, it is really important that the youth work provided is attractive to the young people and that it is offering something that is going to entice young people to engage and participate. In terms of actually accessing the service, there is an additional cost to the young person, depending on where they are travelling from in the county. Furthermore, there is a gap in youth work provision in west Waterford for young people with specific needs. It was argued by youth workers in the focus group that to address this deficiency requires additional funding. At present establishing a youth project in west Waterford, which has been identified as an area of need, is an absolute priority to address the needs of young people in this area.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS

Foróige recognises the importance of volunteerism and invests resources in personnel to recruit, train and support volunteers. In this way, the focus is on supporting volunteers to establish sustainable clubs. Currently Foróige supports 60 volunteer clubs and offers four different models to the community, which are tailored to suit the particular age cohort of the young people engaging in the youth work. Despite the organisation placing a lot of emphasis on recruitment and training of volunteers, it continues to be a challenge.

"I look at trying to recruit volunteers up as far as kind of Fethard, Cashel and right around down to Waterford city and county...So it's a pretty broad area and yes, plenty of challenges and recruiting volunteers..." (Youth Worker, Waterford).

While there are many committed volunteers who dedicate their time to youth work, recruiting and sustaining dedicated volunteers is not without its challenges.

"Generally speaking the best way to I suppose start growing the club for volunteer services is when the volunteer contacts you from an area and asks to come in and do it. Then you automatically have buy in, you know and generally speaking that actually works very well..." (Youth Worker, Waterford).

Often there is a significant amount of work done to recruit Foróige volunteers. Recruiting youth work volunteers requires organising information sessions and 'knocking on doors.' A lot of the publicity to generate support for the work and recruit volunteers is done online, using social media channels or by using contacts in the community to spread the word. Of course, while this generates interest, there are always competing interests, depending on the time of year. As one youth worker explained:

"There is silage being collected at the moment, people are preparing for communions and confirmations, previously there was confirmations or is there is exams happening. There is different things like this...so you try and you try again...and then before Christmas I had something like four nights and four nights nobody came. So you get those nights, where you just, you put all this effort in and you are contacting people and you might have one..."

At times, the youth workers said this experience of recruiting volunteers can be 'frustratingly hard' but when you recruit a volunteer 'it's great.' One youth worker stated that a key aspect of engaging and supporting a new volunteer is slowly introducing them to the work.

"It's first about kind of getting them on the side of doing committee meetings and getting them to make sure that young people's voices are heard in the club, and that their opinions and what they want to do matters and then the direction rotates and then gradually moving onto...next the next step and next step and eventually you get them to the point where they can apply for an ETB grant ... and try and plan what they want from the ETB, from the grant, what the young people actually want, so that they are actually getting a say in the direction the club takes."

Speculating on the issues that put people off volunteering, youth workers felt that there were concerns about the whole area of child protection. These concerns, it was felt, were more acutely experienced by male volunteers and this results in youth work attracting more female volunteers. Another issue that discourages volunteering, is the issue of increased regulation and compliance with the increasingly regulated charity sector. This was also cited as one of the reasons it is harder to attract and retain volunteers. Reflecting on the impact of the compliance with the regulatory framework, one youth worker felt that it had impacted on volunteerism and as a result people were thinking twice about giving their free time to youth work. The nature of volunteering has changed in many ways in that it is no longer about spending time working with young people. Volunteers now need to undertake a training course and meet the standards outlined in the regulatory framework underpinning the youth work sector. While it was acknowledged that regulation is important in terms of child safeguarding, it was also noted that this had become a burden to volunteers.

"They (volunteers) have day jobs, you know...they are doing this for whatever reasons and they want to give back generally and they are normally very involved in their community you know, so it is something that they don't envisage when they are signing up to work with young people...that they have to do all of this administration stuff" (Youth Worker, Waterford).

“You know they have to be trained they have to be vetted...a volunteer doesn't happen until they are finished the training. And I suppose you know...they don't know what they are signing up to initially like until they do the training so they have an option and I always at the start of training say if this is not for you that is absolutely fine. It's not for everybody so you know and they need to be able to take responsibility for someone, that is one of the big things, you can't have someone who is domineering or dominating or you know wants to be in charge...” (Youth Worker, Waterford).

A significant proportion of the pool of volunteers is drawn from parents of young people who are participating in Foróige. As one youth worker stated:

“I would say probably about maybe sixty per cent of them would be parents. Then they might stay on as volunteers when their kids are no longer involved in the club. So then you know that might be the reason initially that they get involved, but they kind of become Foróige. I don't know, they fall in love with the organisation and it becomes part of them and part of what they do... they love what they do here. They really get into it.”

One youth worker said that buy in from volunteers comes with a strong sense of commitment to the work and a feeling that if they do not commit fully they are letting a group down. The ‘love of volunteering’ in the youth sector, as one youth worker put it, sustains volunteers and ‘keeps them doing it.’

ACCESSING SPECIALISED YOUTH MENTAL HEALTH AND COUNSELLING SERVICES

Youth workers in Waterford highlighted the fact that there was an absence of mental health and counselling services in rural Ireland to meet the needs of young people living in rural Ireland. The issue of anxiety amongst young people is one that has been observed by youth workers working with young people engaging with youth work services in County Waterford. The youth workers felt that there was a lack of specialised services to respond to these needs. Such services are centrally located in more urban localities.

“...a lot of our young people come in with issues around anxiety and trying to find I suppose services to work with that...more than information, like you know...then you wonder what kind of access, what kind of information they are accessing...they are in the city, they would all be based in the city” (Youth Worker, Waterford).

Furthermore, these city-based services have a large waiting list. Cognisant of the challenges this presents, the youth workers in Waterford try to work around the current system and use their own resources to provide support.

LACK OF ACCESS TO FACILITIES AND LACK OF ACCESS TO TRANSPORT

Once again issues in relation of lack of access to facilities and lack of public transport to travel to more urban localities to access specialised youth services, supports and facilities, emerged as significant challenges in County Waterford.

As one youth worker in County Waterford stated:

“...in broad terms for us, for the young people I am working with, lack of access to facilities and lack of access to transport...would be a huge issue. A lot of Portlaoighaire, Kilmathomas and then the surrounding towns would be very rural and have very limited transport...that is a huge thing for us... transport to be able to get to the bigger towns like Dungarvan, Waterford, Carrick on Suir.”

The youth workers in Waterford also highlighted the lack of opportunities for young people to continue to live in rural Ireland. Indeed, the lack of opportunity for rural youth in Ireland was a concern expressed by research participants working in counties Mayo, Tipperary and Wicklow, as well.

LACK OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The lack of public transport is a significant issue in west Waterford. As one youth worker stated:

“There is a huge need for it you know, talk about transport like all the services that would be in west Waterford are generally based in Dungarvan and Dungarvan is too far...There isn't a suitable bus that is in and out of Dungarvan in the evening time, so there is very, very little services in that particular area” (Youth Worker, Waterford).

The cost of using public transport is also an issue.

“The cost of transport would be huge in Tramore. The bus fare from Tramore to Waterford is two seventy each way...I have heard that it is the most expensive bus route per mile” (Youth Worker, Waterford).

One youth worker working in the Waterford region recalled that in the past there was an ETB mini-bus providing transport for the county.

“A couple of years ago there was an ETB mini bus available if you could provide a driver and you just had you get it with a full tank of diesel and you had to refill it and we had a volunteer who had their licence for a while so we were able to use it...” (Youth Worker, Waterford).

LACK OF BROADBAND

Like so many parts of rural Ireland, there is need for a more efficient broadband system and Waterford is no exception in this regard.

“There would be certain pockets of Waterford that would have this very challenging internet and that is very isolating when the rest of the world is out there” (Youth Worker, Waterford).

SUMMARY OF THE FOCUS GROUP WITH WATERFORD YOUTH WORKERS

Many of the issues highlighted by youth workers in County Waterford in relation to: the need for additional investment in rural youth work; the difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers; lack of public transport and broadband infrastructure impeding young people's access to youth work services and supports; the costs of youth work participation and the lack of specialised youth mental health and counselling youth services for rural youth, have emerged in the other focus groups with youth workers throughout the country. These are significant issues, which are largely resource dependent and require immediate attention to ensure young people living in County Waterford and other parts of rural Ireland have access to quality youth work provision.

SUMMARY OF KEY CHALLENGES PROVIDING YOUTH WORK IN COUNTY WATERFORD

INADEQUATE RESOURCES FOR YOUTH WORK PROVISION

“...Like a number of clubs would support very disadvantaged young people and it is a challenge for them. There is no doubt about it. They really don't have...if they don't have it, we do our very utmost to ensure that they can engage in all the activities and different things. But I do think that it can be a barrier, because a young person won't join a club or a group if they know they don't have the money to pay for their activities. So, we might not be getting these young people and so it can automatically be a barrier...” (Youth Worker, Waterford).

DIFFICULTY RECRUITING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS

"I look at trying to recruit volunteers up as far as kind of Fethard, Cashel and right around down to Waterford city and county I suppose. So, it's a pretty broad area and yes, plenty of challenges and recruiting volunteers..." (Youth Worker, Waterford).

LACK OF SPECIALISED MENTAL HEALTH AND COUNSELLING SUPPORT SERVICES FOR RURAL YOUTH

"...a lot of our young people come in with issues around anxiety and trying to find I suppose services to work with that...more than information, like you know...then you wonder what kind of access, what kind of information they are accessing...they are in the city, they would all be based in the city" (Youth Worker, Waterford).

LACK OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT

"There is a huge need for it you know, talk about transport like all the services that would be in West Waterford are generally based in Dungarvan and Dungarvan is too far...There isn't a suitable bus that is in and out of Dungarvan in the evening time so there is very, very little services in that particular area" (Youth Worker, Waterford).

"The cost of transport would be huge in Tramore the bus fare from Tramore to Waterford is two seventy each way... I have heard that it is the most expensive bus route per mile" (Youth Worker, Waterford).

LACK OF BROADBAND

"There would be certain pockets of Waterford that would have this very challenging internet and that is very isolating when the rest of the world is out there" (Youth Worker, Waterford).

LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES

"...there is a large population of people who don't want to leave home, they don't want to...but it's just where are those opportunities if you want to live in rural Ireland, or if you want to live in Cappagh or you want to live in Tallow - where are those opportunities...to live there" (Youth Worker, Waterford).

“Opportunity for work is a big one, and I mean we’ve put an awful lot of emphasis on youth unemployment over the last few years...and one of the key things that we see is that our young people are afraid to or don’t have the ability or the motivation to move beyond their local town to get work. So, they need work locally and the opportunities for employment aren’t great sometimes. Especially for young people who maybe haven’t finished secondary school...So, it is opportunity, particularly around employment and then opportunities for training. I mean, if you are living in the city or a bigger town there will be a wide range of training opportunities there, whereas sometimes in small towns you just have to put up with what’s available and you mightn’t want to be a hairdresser, or you mightn’t want to do childcare or you mightn’t want to do mechanics or the usual courses that are there. So that opportunity and then opportunity from like the whole social and personal side of things, just to get involved in stuff”

(Youth Worker, County Tipperary).

THE PERSPECTIVE OF YOUTH WORKERS IN COUNTY TIPPERARY

A focus group was conducted with youth workers working in the Tipperary region. The focus group was held in the offices of Youth Work Ireland Tipperary in Cashel. It provided an insight into the nature and scope of youth work provision for young people living in the locality. The research participants highlighted creative and innovative best practice, but also highlighted some challenges youth workers in this region encounter. During the focus group, the sort of issues the youth work sector is responding to in the region and the challenges encountered by the youth workers in their work with young people were highlighted and discussed. The focus group participants also proposed solutions to address these issues and to enhance youth work provision in rural Ireland.

Youth Work Ireland Tipperary was established in the late 1960s in Tipperary town by a group of volunteers who were concerned that young people living in rural communities were at risk of being left behind. They were motivated by a desire to ensure that young people from Tipperary were exposed to the same opportunities as young people living in urban localities and not at a disadvantage because they were living in rural Ireland. At the time, the key concerns prompting the volunteers to establish the youth service related to issues of potential social isolation, lower access to education and training, economic factors and family situations. The service was established in recognition of the variety of needs and challenges that each young person engaging in a youth service experienced. Although a relatively new concept at the time, such youth work meant the young people in Tipperary had a centre to meet in and were supported in the decisions and choices they would make in life. Gradually this service developed programmes of work and grew into a dynamic and innovative provider of youth work for young people living in County Tipperary and East Limerick.

In 2019, Youth Work Ireland Tipperary is progressive and creative in its approach to youth work. The youth workers working in this region provide a service that places young people at the centre of the work. They are constantly striving to secure funding and use resources in a creative way to ensure flexible, high quality youth work, which is responsive to the challenges young people encounter living in rural Ireland in counties Tipperary and Limerick. While the focus is on national youth work provision and responding to local need, Youth Work Ireland Tipperary also has a strong track record of linking with national and international practices to provide best practice in the field of youth work.

THE GEOGRAPHICAL REACH OF YOUTH WORK IRELAND TIPPERARY

Youth Work Ireland Tipperary has seven youth centres located in six small rural towns. It operates a youth centre in Cashel, two youth centres in Thurles and a building in Templemore, in Killenaule, in Fethard and in Tipperary Town. There are a number of projects operating out of each youth centre. The service tries to cluster a number of projects together in order to provide an integrated service for young people. It also supports rural clubs around the county and provides a service throughout the mid-Tipperary area. A number of county-based projects also operate out of the youth centres. The Youth Work Ireland Tipperary projects are generally area based, for example in Cashel there is a neighbourhood youth project, which specifically works with Cashel and its environs. Other projects are spread out over the Youth Work Ireland Tipperary region. The Community Based Drugs Initiative is one such project. It operates in the mid-Tipperary area. The Rural Outreach Project, which centres around youth clubs, also provides youth work around the Tipperary region. County-based projects include the ABILITY youth employment project, which has the county remit. The Comhairle na nÓg project is also a county-based project. The service also runs a family support substance misuse project, which is based around the south Tipperary county area.

CHALLENGES OF PROVIDING YOUTH WORK IN RURAL IRELAND

Provision of youth services and supports to young people living in rural localities, particularly those with complex needs, is much more challenging than in an urban locality. There are several reasons for this, but one of the principal reasons is the remote nature of the service and the need for transport to access it. Indeed, the issue of lack of public transport in rural Ireland is a recurring issue in the research and is highlighted as a barrier to access to and participation of young people in youth work provision in rural Ireland.

In Tipperary, a youth worker elaborated on how transport can impact significantly on the provision and accessibility of youth work services by giving the example of a project that spans a couple of counties and requires transportation to ensure it provides for young people across a geographical catchment.

"We've an LGBTI+ group, which is funded through Healthy Ireland and Belong To. It is our 'Outstanding' group and we call it our pop-up group, because it actually travels from town to town on a monthly basis and we literally put them all on a bus and we go to Cashel one month and Thurles another month and Templemore another month, so they get to travel around, and we also get to go into the local communities then as well" (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

This type of youth work provision requires resources to ensure that a bus is available and to cover insurance and other costs, including having a youth worker on the bus. It is an example of a practice that adopts a flexible outreach service, in order to address the large number of areas in the county that have no youth work provision, because they are too small to manage a project. The young people living in these parts of the county are likely to have the same needs as other young people, but there are not enough resources to provide a youth work service to meet their needs. If they lived in an urban locality, they would have greater access to specialised and/or universal youth work services but, by virtue of their location, they are disadvantaged compared to their peers living in urban centres.

LACK OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The issue of transport is a real problem in terms of the accessibility and provision of youth work in rural Ireland. The cost of bus hire, insurance and fuel and the cost of staffing is exorbitant. The following quotes from youth workers illustrate how the lack of affordable and accessible public transport in rural areas impacts of the provision of youth work in County Tipperary:

"It's hugely resource intensive. €300 a bus every time you do it" (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

"It's a huge challenge and everyone keeps going 'why don't you use the rural link buses?', you know, but like they only operate at certain times and only have certain routes, and also have limited funding...And to connect, they are in rural, rural youth clubs...You are over an hour on a bus to go from one side of the county to the other...so if you are bringing them together like it's a minimum of two hours possibly more like three, an hour and a half, actually if you were to go to all the youth projects never mind the clubs and pick up young people. An hour and a half will get you from one side of the county to the other. I mean you would be in Dublin faster. And even on the motorway it would be a better road. Like we can go to Thurles in 20 minutes but when we are going to Thurles in the summer and we are picking up in Fethard, our young people are one hour on the bus possibly an hour and twenty minutes to get to Thurles, where we can be over there in 15, 20 minutes on the motorway. But when it is to save money, we are trying to, you know connect and then like Cashel would be saying why, why do we have to do this with the other projects?" (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

"In Youth Work Ireland Tipperary they have a junior board that meets every six weeks. The board members are from different parts of Tipperary and so to ensure they can access the meetings they are collected on a bus" (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

"Like if we didn't do it, it wouldn't happen. Because they are not going to be driven by their parents"
(Youth Worker, Tipperary).

Funding the provision of transport for young people to access youth services in rural Ireland at present is problematic and is challenging across the board. Where transport is organised, it requires youth workers to be creative and to link the cost of the transport to specific projects or pay for it out of the youth organisation's own resources. There is no central funding to provide transport for young people to access youth work services in rural areas.

There needs to be more recognition of the lack of accessible and affordable transport to ensure young people can connect and access youth work services in rural Ireland. This requires additional funding to be ringfenced for youth services to cover this additional cost.

As one youth worker working in rural Ireland stated:

"Everyone talks about youth participation and it is amazing...but nobody resources it. DCYA are looking at a pilot project at the moment through Hub na nOg that we are involved in with three other youth services, but they are training youth workers. They are not talking about an actual project. Tusla have all these lovely youth participation awards but they don't resource it. DCYA do not resource it...So if we want to do this, it is things like building it around a trip or building it around some of our development education stuff or...health promotion stuff in the past. We are looking at another piece of funding that I want to apply for, you know. It has to be built around something, or else we pay for it ourselves, which we do" (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

Youth Work Ireland Tipperary brings the north and south of the county together to provide county-wide rural events, but it is impossible to cover transport costs, without additional resources. A lot of imagination and creativity is employed to ensure that youth events are cost neutral, but this means that clubs need to cover their own transport.

"...We are not taking them paintballing or go-karting or anything. Instead we'll do a hike going out to nature, going to do fun activities there. Because we couldn't give them the cost of that and the transport. So, you have to be really creative" (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

The lack of affordable, accessible transport for rural areas is a significant issue and inhibits the provision and accessibility of youth work in rural Ireland. As one youth worker highlighted, the costs of provided transport absorbs their budget:

"...all of our programme costs go on buses, or a lot of our program costs go on buses."

In an urban setting the public transport infrastructure is much more advanced than in rural Ireland. In many rural localities, the services that do exist are unreliable and infrequent. In recognition of the absence of rural transport for youth services, it was proposed that a subsidy scheme should be established to resource a youth rural transport initiative. This funding scheme could be administered by DCYA and provide funding for youth organisations to provide transport for young people to access their services, programmes and clubs.

The lack of reliable transport presents a barrier to young people's access to education and progression on to further or higher education, training or employment in rural localities. Rural transport is *"not aimed at young people's educational opportunities and where they can go if they are not ready to move to the city and want to stay local to get further education...or jobs, the buses don't run at a time that if you wanted to be in Clonmel at 9 o'clock in the morning for work your buses aren't going to facilitate that"* (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

The point was made by youth workers that this also has implications for rural Ireland in terms of losing young people to more urban areas to access education, training and employment and in terms of retaining the vibrancy of youth in rural Ireland. Coupled with the need for greater investment in the regions, an efficient, reliable and accessible transport system is integral to ensuring rural Ireland is an attractive place to live, work and return to for young people.

RECRUITING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS

Another challenge is recruiting and retaining volunteers to support the work. Volunteers are a key part of sustaining the youth clubs, which provide supports for young people in small villages. Currently this is a challenge. There is a lot of work happening to re-invigorate the model of youth clubs, but to survive and prosper they require volunteers to support the work. One of the challenges in recruiting and retaining volunteers relates to the requirements that volunteers are expected to comply with and the requirements that are set out in the NQSF. The traditional model of youth clubs has become much more structured and, according to the youth workers interviewed, is not well regarded nationally anymore.

Another challenge to attracting volunteers relates to child protection issues and the recent historic scandals which have dogged the bigger national youth work organisations. The youth workers felt this had damaged the sector and impacted on volunteerism, making prospective volunteers reluctant to volunteer in youth clubs.

“There is like all the issues that have come up with other national organisations and like that has kind of put I suppose...a little sour taste in some people’s mouths about clubs in general, not just youth clubs... To be honest with you, people aren’t as interested in getting involved in clubs anymore either...Plus, I think people are weary about getting involved with other people’s kids to an extent as well and kids can be difficult and other parents can be difficult too, and the expectation they have of volunteers...” (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

Another issue, which also emerged in the focus groups with youth workers in other regions and indeed by the volunteer youth leaders, is the amount of time volunteers have to invest over and above the time they spend working directly with young people. This additional time is required to satisfy the regulations in respect of child protection training and other training they are compelled to undertake to volunteer in the sector, as well as the paperwork requirements now tied to small amounts of funding. It was felt that the emphasis on additional regulations is time-consuming and has ‘put people off volunteering’.

“If they (prospective volunteers) are interested in doing the one and a half hour with the young people and then you are like, okay well you have to do a child protection training and you have to do induction training and you know ongoing training and support in terms of your own development of working with young people, and then there is, you know the need for day training and you know it’s like this extra, or there is some admin or you know, even to apply for a grant, it is not that it is difficult but it is not what your full-time job is....It is at what point, if you are willing to volunteer an hour and a half, does it outweigh if you are doing an hour and a half with training or admin... like when does it become, actually I was willing to volunteer an hour and a half, but I’m actually spending four hours a week with this” (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

Another youth worker said that the primary motivation of a volunteer is to work with young people, not to fill in paperwork, but the increased emphasis on regulations has become overly bureaucratic and off-putting and has made it increasingly difficult to attract volunteers. The issue of attracting and retaining volunteers in youth work is a recurring theme in the research and was highlighted by youth workers interviewed in other rural parts of the country as a challenge in the provision of youth work in rural Ireland. In addition to the increased emphasis on regulating the sector, a youth worker stated that there were increasing demands placed on youth workers and volunteers working with young people, which make it challenging.

THE IMPACT OF THE VALUE FOR MONEY AND POLICY REVIEW

The impact of the value for money and policy review (VMPR) of youth programmes is having an impact on the provision of youth work in rural Ireland. One youth worker stated that the VMPR is making it more difficult to provide a flexible and responsive youth work service because it is shaping the direction, nature and scope of youth work and emphasising a more targeted approach. This targeted approach to youth work was described by a youth worker as *“being very specifically focused at young people who are most at need, which is right and fair and just and all the rest. But then it’s a whole gang of young people out there who don’t have any services.”*

The implications of the VMPR on youth work provision, it was felt, could impact on the provision of universal youth work and leave many young people living in rural Ireland without youth services. Cognisant of the policy direction that the VMPR is pursuing, a youth worker stated that they are constantly exploring a variety of funding opportunities to ensure that young people continue to have access to youth work, irrespective of their socio-economic status and background.

“...we’ve kind of looked at other ways to support them through the likes of music and through like, we are doing a large piece around development education at the moment and youth participation and that social change you know. We are trying to look at those kind of opportunities to target those young people who we are not actually allowed to work with anymore” (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

Of course, sourcing alternative funding requires a lot of dedication from youth workers on top of an already demanding job. In Youth Work Ireland Tipperary, the organisation engages and participates on a lot of Erasmus funded programmes to provide an alternative to the targeted projects and to ensure that those young people who do not fit the criteria of the targeted projects are not excluded from youth work provision.

KEY YOUTH ISSUES YOUNG PEOPLE PRESENT WITH IN RURAL AREAS

In relation to key or emerging issues that youth workers encountered amongst youth living in rural areas, a youth worker interviewed highlighted the issue of ‘lack of opportunities’ compared to young people living in urban localities.

“Opportunity for work is a big one and I mean we’ve put an awful lot of emphasis on youth unemployment over the last few years...and one of the key things that we see is that our young people are afraid to or don’t have the ability or the motivation to move beyond their local town to get work. So, they need work locally and the opportunities for employment aren’t great sometimes. Especially for young people who maybe haven’t finished secondary school...So, it is opportunity, particularly around employment and then opportunities for training. I mean if you are living in the city or a bigger town there will be a wide range of training opportunities there whereas sometimes in small towns you just have to put up with what’s available and you mightn’t want to be a hairdresser, or you mightn’t want to do childcare or you mightn’t want to do mechanics or the usual courses that are there. So that opportunity and then opportunity from like the whole social and personal side of things, just to get involved in stuff” (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

Lack of opportunity for young people in rural Ireland was regarded as a significant barrier to their social and personal development and career progression options. This is reinforced in the literature (Black et al, 2018). In previous studies in rural Britain young people are found to become integrated into two distinct labour markets – the national and the local. The former tends to offer well-paid jobs with career progression options, while the local, in contrast tends to be poorly paid, insecure and affording fewer prospects (Shucksmith, 2004; Jentsch and Shucksmith, 2003, 2004). Indeed, the interplay between wage levels and the accessibility and affordability of transport and opportunities were significant issues for rural youth in terms of them achieving their future aspirations, career wise. Social class and gender were also a critical dimension (Storey and Brannen, 2000). Furthermore, education and social networks played a key role in terms of employment paths.

KEY CHALLENGES IN YOUNG PEOPLE'S LIVES

Interestingly, the issue of anxiety was cited as a significant and emerging issue amongst many young people engaging with the youth services in Youth Work Ireland Tipperary. Anxiety was also highlighted in the focus group conducted with youth workers working in counties Mayo and Waterford. One youth worker stated that there are young people in the Tipperary region that struggle with anxiety, but who do not meet the criteria for targeted youth projects. They depend and rely on the support of the youth work services and this requires a way of facilitating their access through other avenues, whether it's through the Development Education Project or by trying to reach out and engage through initiatives like Music Generation,³ which is establishing a presence in County Tipperary. These types of youth initiatives provide another means to support young people living in rural parts of the country.

ANXIETY AND SOCIAL ISOLATION

Anxiety and isolation have become prevalent issues amongst young people engaged with youth work services in the Tipperary region. One youth worker stated that the prevalence of anxiety was common amongst young people. They felt in many instances this anxiety was symptomatic of isolation and, in their view, 'isolation that leads to that anxiety.' The view was expressed that in more rural localities there is increased likelihood of social isolation amongst young people who may have specific needs, but due to their locality do not have the same network of supports available to those in urban localities. This lack of adequate, youth-specific supports can contribute to a feeling of having a lack of control. Depending on the geographical location, tailored youth-specific programmes and/or youth clubs are not necessarily available for young people in rural areas and this can trigger higher levels of anxiety and mental health problems.

As one youth worker stated:

"I think you know if you were in a town and for example say we were running a programme around sexuality you can access us, you know what I mean. You can engage with us, whether we are running special programme on music or mental health or sexual health, but like if you are in a rural village, like you know, the volunteers are not necessarily going to be stepping up and running a sexual health programme So where do you get that information? Where do you get that access, where do you get that support, if there isn't a youth project or even where we have a youth project but they are open two days a week? You can't say to a young person, sorry you can only have a problem on a Wednesday or a Friday, you know what I mean? And for more rural, rural like they have a youth club once a week or once a fortnight..." (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

THE STIGMA ASSOCIATED TO ACCESSING SERVICES IN RURAL AREAS

Although the prevalence of physical youth work services provides essential and valuable services for young people, particularly vulnerable youth, youth workers highlighted that there can be a stigma attached to accessing specialised supports in a rural locality. In a rural area, where everyone knows everyone, and there is very little anonymity, accessing specialised supports can be difficult for a young person.

"We even see that and it's probably a rural thing as well like our projects would have a stigma attached to them in some places like because they are for that type of child....you know, it's very much they know who is who in a small town and they know who is involved..." (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

Urban centres are different in this respect and provide more anonymity to young people engaging with the youth centres. In rural localities, this is not the case and as a result the young people are known to the services and this means that it can inhibit vulnerable young people requiring help and specialised supports and services from accessing it. The view was also expressed by youth workers that there are a lot of assumptions at play in rural areas about young people based on

³Music Generation is a National Music Education Programme for children and young people. It is an initiative that provides participants access to high, It offers participants, a rich and diverse way to engage in vocal and instrumental tuition delivered by skilled professional musicians, across all musical genres and styles. Initiated by Music Network, Music Generation is co-funded by U2, The Ireland Funds, the Department of Education and Skills and Local Music Education Partnerships. For further information see www.musicgeneration.ie

their family backgrounds, whether or not you are from a wealthy background or perceived to be disadvantaged. The intimacy of rural Ireland can often give rise to contradictions and perceptions about the young people who engage in the youth services.

"I think then there's a lot of assumptions, like also if you came from a family business, you come from a more affluent area there's an assumption that you don't have issues or needs. But that doesn't mean there couldn't be alcoholism in your family, divorce, mental health issues, like there's so many issues but it's kind of like it's brushed over because you know, the assumption is sure they'll be grand" (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

The shift towards more targeted youth work means that some young people, who technically are not eligible to participate on particular youth programmes, also require supports regardless of their background, because as one youth worker stated, "they have needs as well." The move away from universal youth work towards more targeted youth work is at one level about ensuring that funding is directed to meet specific needs, however this model of youth work overlooks the distinct value of universal youth work and reflects an increasingly neoliberal restructuring of youth work services (McMahon, 2018: 143). The implications of this shift in youth work funding and delivery means:

"...at level one, you know we are going to target level two and three, if you have ten young people walking in the door, like you are going, you know, there is one person with mental health issues... You have to build a relationship to figure out their needs or to know what the best way is to support them" (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTERAGENCY COLLABORATION

Youth Work Ireland Tipperary exemplifies youth work practice at its best. The staff are constantly engaging with other agencies to enhance youth work services for the county. For example, securing additional support from the ETB to source another avenue to access support for young people or working with organisations like Jigsaw⁴ to provide mental health and counselling services for young people in the county. It is evident that there is a lot of creativity and thinking outside the box employed by the youth workers, to respond to the needs of the young people using the service. Furthermore, there is recognition of the value and importance of working collaboratively and adopting an interagency approach to respond to the needs of young people, by responding to referrals from other agencies or referring young people on to specialised services.

As one youth worker stated, "interagency collaboration is also essential as the youth work sector has limited capacity and expertise to deal with all the issues that a young person may present with." Referring a young person to another service is "...another way to work with young people that we can't work with, plus the other side of it as well, is all of our projects are small projects. So, capacity around what we can actually do is limited as well."

THE URBAN - RURAL DIVIDE

Youth workers felt that there was an urban-rural divide when it came to allocation of funding for youth services. While there is recognition of the need to direct funding to urban centres like Limerick city where there are high levels of deprivation, it was argued that there needs to be more resources allocated to rural areas as well. The specific needs of young people living in rural Ireland and the absence of infrastructure and facilities that exist, coupled with the high cost of providing services for a regionally dispersed youth, needs to be recognised and adequately resourced.

"...Even though the staff might be higher in an urban area, but the demands are there and as well in rural areas and there needs to be some sort of weighting around that as well" (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

⁴Jigsaw is The National Centre for Youth Mental Health. It is a charity that strives to ensure that no young person feels alone, isolated and disconnected from others around them. It provides vital supports to young people with their mental health by working closely with communities across Ireland.

The view was expressed that there needs to be “some sort of weighing of resources” and where they are allocated in recognition of the needs of providing youth work in rural and remote parts of the country. At present, there are not enough youth workers to respond to the need in Youth Work Ireland Tipperary. To contextualise the capacity issue and the challenge for youth workers working in rural localities one youth worker stated:

“The school here in Cashel has the population of 800 or 900 young people going, that’s one school alone and for a one worker project here I mean at full capacity the most we can really do in a week is 120 young people and that’s just the secondary school. The primary schools you are talking probably 300 or 500. I mean there is a demand for these projects. It is a one worker project and then you go to rural and like there’s 75 kids engaged in Templederry youth club on a Friday night, but the volunteers, they only meet with them once a month...They run the senior club once a fortnight and the junior club the other fortnight and you know...there is a need, there’s 75 kids and 50 to 60 junior kids, 15 senior kids rocking up to their doors...that could be engaged in a lot more. So, there is the demand rurally...” (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

PROFESSIONALISATION OF THE YOUTH WORK SECTOR

It was highlighted that allocation of additional resources to provide youth work in rural areas is just part of the solution. It is also about recognition of the youth work as a profession and an acknowledgement about the value of youth work. It is about recognising the skills and quality of youth workers and running a promotional campaign which highlights youth work as a profession. Often the solution and debate around meeting the demands of youth work, centres around volunteerism and the need to recruit, train and retain volunteers. Volunteers play an integral role in the youth work profession and for many organisations are the backbone of youth organisations, but one youth worker stated that there needs to be more emphasis placed on youth work as a profession and investment in this profession, in recognition of its value and contribution. The idea behind a promotional campaign is to attract suitable candidates to the profession. One youth worker stated that whilst volunteers played an important role in the provision of youth work, there tended to be an overreliance on volunteerism to provide youth work services and a perception that anyone can provide youth work, when in reality it requires a certain type of person, with a particular skillset and disposition.

“There is a core skills set that youth workers have and we are not counsellors, we are not social workers, we are a sector in ourselves and I think there needs to be some value or recognition of what it is that we do or what our skills set is...To staff your GP surgery you wouldn’t go ah yeah get a volunteer in there, you know. So, it’s like...it’s accepted that sure anyone can do it. But actually, it isn’t for everyone” (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

There are different skillsets required for different posts depending on the type of youth programme being delivered. As one youth worker explained:

“Like we have workers who work with our youth employment group, which works with people with disabilities...Their skillset is very different to say we have a Syrian homework club and the traveller project. That is two very different skillsets. So even within the organisation or the family support project, the drugs project as opposed to the rural club project...there is a huge variety... you could do serious damage to a young person if you are not doing the right thing or saying the right thing or acting in the right way...” (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

UNDERSTANDING THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH WORKER

It was highlighted that there needs to be a greater understanding of the role of the youth worker and what is expected of them. The role of youth work as a profession should receive greater acknowledgement and recognition in public policy and this should also be reflected in the

resources allocated to the sector to support professionalisation of the sector and also to financially support youth workers vis-à-vis continuous professional development and reflective practice.

“They are putting X number of euro into the sector every year for a little bit more they could really put a polish to it and a professionalisation to it...” (Youth Worker, Tipperary).

SUMMARY OF THE FOCUS GROUP WITH TIPPERARY YOUTH WORKERS

The focus group with youth workers from Youth Work Ireland, Tipperary highlighted the recurring issues youth workers in other parts of rural Ireland are experiencing. The same challenges were identified by youth workers in Tipperary in relation to inadequate resources for youth work provision to meet the needs of rural youth, the challenge of recruiting and retaining volunteers, the inadequate public transport system and the lack of opportunities, specialised support services and facilities for rural youth. The view was also expressed that there is a lack of recognition of the youth work profession and the need for greater professionalisation of the youth work sector. Although excellent youth work practice is taking place throughout the region, the lack of adequate resources and accessibility to public transport greatly impede youth work engagement and participation.

SUMMARY OF KEY CHALLENGES PROVIDING YOUTH WORK IN COUNTY TIPPERARY

INADEQUATE RESOURCES FOR YOUTH WORK PROVISION TO MEET THE NEED OF RURAL YOUTH

“The school here in Cashel has the population of 800 or 900 young people going, that’s one school alone and for a one worker project here I mean at full capacity the most we can really do in a week is 120 young people and that’s just the secondary school. The primary schools you are talking probably 300 or 500. I mean there is a demand for these projects. It is a one worker project and then you go to rural and like there’s 75 kids engaged in Templederry youth club on a Friday night, but the volunteers, they only meet with them once a month...They run the senior club once a fortnight and the junior club the other fortnight and you know...there is a need, there’s 75 kids and 50 to 60 junior kids, 15 senior kids rocking up to their doors...that could be engaged in a lot more. So, there is the demand rurally...” (Youth Worker).

LACK OF RECOGNITION OF THE ROLE OF THE YOUTH WORK PROFESSION

“There is a core skillset that youth workers have and we are not counsellors, we are not social workers, we are a sector in ourselves and I think there needs to be some value or recognition of what it is that we do or what our skillset is...To staff your GP surgery you wouldn’t go, ‘Ahh yeah. get a volunteer in there’, you know. So, it’s like...it’s accepted that sure anyone can do it. But, actually, it isn’t for everyone” (Youth Worker).

RECRUITING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS

“If they (prospective volunteers) are interested in doing the one and a half hour with the young people and then you are like, okay well you have to do a child protection training and you have to do induction training and you know ongoing training and support in terms of your own development of working with young people, and then there is, you know the need for day training and you know it’s like this extra, or there is some admin or you know, even to apply for a grant, it is not that it is difficult but it is not what your full-time job is...It is at what point, if you are willing to volunteer an hour and a half, does it outweigh if you are doing an hour and a half with training or admin... like when does it become, actually I was willing to volunteer an hour and a half, but I’m actually spending four hours a week with this” (Youth Worker).

LACK OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT

"It's a huge challenge and everyone keeps going 'why don't use the rural link buses', you know, but like they only operate at certain times and only have certain routes, and also have limited funding... And to connect, they are in rural, rural youth clubs... You are over an hour on a bus to go from one side of the county to the other... so if you are bringing them together like it's a minimum of two hours possibly more like three, an hour and a half, actually if you were to go to all the youth projects never mind the clubs and pick up young people. An hour and a half will get you from one side of the county to the other. I mean you would be in Dublin faster. And even on the motorway it would be a better road. Like we can go to Thurles in 20 minutes but when we are going to Thurles in the summer and we are picking up in Fethard, our young people are one hour on the bus possibly an hour and twenty minutes to get to Thurles, where we can be over there in 15, 20 minutes on the motorway. But when it is to save money, we are trying to, you know connect and then like Cashel would be saying why, why do we have to do this with the other projects?" (Youth Worker).

LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES, SERVICES AND FACILITIES

"Opportunity for work is a big one and I mean we've put an awful lot of emphasis on youth unemployment over the last few years... and one of the key things that we see is that our young people are afraid to or don't have the ability or the motivation to move beyond their local town to get work. So, they need work locally and the opportunities for employment aren't great sometimes. Especially for young people who maybe haven't finished secondary school... So, it's opportunity, particularly around employment and then opportunities for training. I mean if you are living in the city or a bigger town there will be a wide range of training opportunities there whereas sometimes in small towns you just have to put up with what's available and you mightn't want to be a hairdresser, or you mightn't want to do childcare or you mightn't want to do mechanics or the usual courses that are there. So that opportunity and then opportunity from like the whole social and personal side of things, just to get involved in stuff" (Youth Worker).

THE STIGMA ATTACHED TO ACCESSING SPECIALISED SUPPORTS IN A RURAL LOCALITY

"We even see that and it's probably a rural thing as well like our projects would have a stigma attached to them in some places like because they are for that type of child.... you know, it's very much they know who is who in a small town and they know who is involved..." (Youth Worker).

THE
PERSPECTIVE
OF RURAL
YOUTH

“Most people don’t know, don’t have a clue what any young person wants, and that’s usually a problem. They’re assuming it’s the same as it was for them, whereas a lot of those problems have been solved and it’s different now...The people that make the big decisions, have no idea what’s happening, like with young people” (Young Person, County Mayo).

“You see adults and parents giving out about children getting into the wrong things when they are growing up but, like, there is nothing to do...If you are hanging out on the streets, people get the wrong idea when they see you, but there is nothing else to do...They go ‘oh there is a group of teenagers on the streets again,’ ‘what are they getting up to?’” (Young Person, County Wicklow).

“...Like in Castlebar there is more to do, but you wouldn’t find a bowling alley in the countryside and I have to come here (Castlebar) which is about 40 mins drive from my home to go to a bowling alley or to the cinema or anything like that...” (Young Person, County Mayo).

“In Rathnew, there is a main street, which just has pubs, a Chinese restaurant and one other shop...a lot of shops have closed down and there is also a hotel” (Young Person, County Wicklow).

THE PERSPECTIVE OF RURAL YOUTH

6.1 INTRODUCTION

Drawing from the empirical research and literature available, this section of the report explores some of the key issues affecting young people growing up and living in rural Ireland at present. It seeks to provide a context to a study of youth work provision in rural Ireland and to highlight the salient issues that the youth workers in rural Ireland are currently encountering in their work with young people. It also shines a spotlight on the need for greater resources to be invested in youth work provision in rural Ireland to ensure that the needs of young people living in rural localities are met.

One of the biggest challenges facing young people living in rural Ireland is limited public transport, which hinders contact with others, impedes access to services available in urban settings and reinforces a sense of social isolation. Limited public transport has massive implications for young people in terms of access to education, training and employment opportunities, and access to mental health or sexual health services available in urban settings. Without public transport, accessing services in urban settings is not feasible and this coupled with the poor broadband infrastructure inhibits young people's access to vital supports and information available online. Although some youth services provide transport to ensure young people are brought to and from services and programmes when required, due to cuts in resources this can often be challenging.

6.2 INEQUALITY OF ACCESS TO SUPPORT SERVICES

A recent European study exploring young people's access to information and support services, highlighted concerns about young people's equal access to opportunities and resources (Eurofound, 2019). The research focused on young people aged between 12 and 24 across EU member states and found that of particular concern was lack of access to supports for some young people experiencing social or health problems, particularly those living in rural areas. Indeed, in terms of young people's access to health services, the data indicates that apart from country differences within the EU, regional inequalities in access also exist within countries. A rural-urban area distinction (based on the respondent's own classification of whether they live in the open countryside, a village, a large town or a city) reveals significant disparities in access to healthcare. The main difference relates to the distance of travel to services, with 24% of young people in rural and 13% in urban areas finding this to be a problem (Eurofound, 2019: 25). In order to address the sort of inequality of access identified in the European data, a number of proposals were made in the report. Two suggestions were the need for greater adaptability of services and professionals to adopt new tools to connect and engage with young people. Another proposal was to establish supports grounded in national programmes to ensure greater accessibility to quality social and health services for young people (Eurofound, 2019). Although not specifically mentioned in the focus groups with young people, youth workers interviewed as part of NYC's research highlighted the emergence of anxiety as a big issue young people were presenting with, in the Irish youth work setting. Indeed, the emergence of anxiety is a significant problem amongst young Europeans. According to data for 2016, 14% of Europeans aged 18–24 were at risk of depression. In 2014, the data revealed that 4% of Europeans aged 15–24 were chronically depressed. The highest rates were in Ireland (12%), followed by Finland (11%), Sweden (10%) and Germany (9%) (Eurofound, 2019: 1).

6.3 FINDINGS FROM THE FOCUS GROUPS WITH RURAL YOUTH

Two focus groups were conducted with young people living in counties Mayo and Wicklow. For detail on the composition of the focus groups and the profile of participants see Section 2 of this

report. The findings of the focus groups with rural youth are analysed and presented in a thematic manner, highlighting the common themes which emerged in both focus groups. The aim of the focus groups was to explore with the young people their experience of youth work provision in rural parts of Ireland and to elicit what life is like for them growing up in rural Ireland. Many of the issues that emerged during the focus group discussions are echoed in the body of research and literature on rural youth. There is a lot of commonality in terms of the challenges both groups encountered and in terms of their experiences of youth work and what it means to them. There were also a lot of common themes emerging from both focus groups in terms of their views on how youth facilities and services could be improved in rural Ireland to enhance the environments in which they live.

6.4 DESCRIPTIONS OF RURAL LIFE

Rural Ireland for many of the young people interviewed was described in many ways as an idyllic place to grow up. While young people in both focus groups talked with great affection about their home counties, they also emphasised how there was very little to do in terms of recreational facilities and places to 'hang out.' They were critical of the lack of youth spaces to go to after school and the absence of youth-friendly services outside urban localities. For young people with particular needs requiring acute services, for example counselling or mental health supports, the absence of such services was regarded as a significant deficit in their lives. In this regard, the provision of the youth work services they availed of were highly regarded and valued by them. Many of the young people relied on these services and spoke of the value they placed on youth work and the contribution it made to their lives. They also spoke with great affection about the youth workers who worked in the services they attended. While it was evident that the young people who participated in this research greatly enjoyed participating in youth work, they identified gaps that currently exist in relation to infrastructure and resources and had constructive proposals on how policy-makers could address these deficits in youth work provision to enhance youth work in rural Ireland. Their recommendations extended beyond youth work per se and included ideas about improving rural transport, broadband, road safety and the provision of additional education and employment opportunities for the regions they lived in. The improvement of opportunities they regarded as vital for rural Ireland so that living and remaining in rural Ireland could be a reality for them in the future.

6.5 SENSE OF BELONGING

Many research participants stated that they felt a strong sense of belonging to their home counties. It was part of their identity and they expressed great pride in being from there. Despite this strong emotional attachment with home, they recognised that the opportunities available to them were limited and for many, they anticipated that they would have to leave home in the future to study or for work. While this evoked a mixture of feelings for the young people interviewed, many had a strong desire to remain close to home, to be able to travel back at weekends or to return to live there eventually. In keeping with this theme of remaining in rural Ireland, the young people expressed the view that it was a good place to grow up and to live, but proposed a number of recommendations that they felt Government could implement to improve living conditions for young people and their families living in rural parts of the country. These policies it was felt, if implemented, would help *"to make rural Ireland a more attractive place for young people to live in and to stay or to return if they do leave"* (Young Person, Mayo).

6.6 PRIDE OF BEING FROM RURAL IRELAND AND PERCEPTIONS OF CITY LIFE

The young people from both counties expressed a sense of pride in being from rural Ireland and felt fortunate to grow up in a small place. Like the young people in Mayo, there was a sense of pride expressed by the young people living in Wicklow towards growing up in their home county and an appreciation of living in a small community rather than in a city. Rural youth perceived city life to lack a sense of community and to be dangerous.

"I like it, because its small and you know...seems like a community but then if you were in a city, they are so big and not everyone knows everyone and I feel safer in a small place than in a bigger place" (Young Person, Wicklow).

"The first things people always say to me is it's the 'garden county' and 'it is really beautiful..." (Young Person, Wicklow).

"Cities are too big, and you hear about how dangerous it is" (Young Person, Wicklow).

Apart from one participant in the group, all wished to remain living in Wicklow in the future. While there was an acknowledgement of the limited employment opportunities for people in Wicklow, they all expressed a reluctance to leave their home county. One stated she had travel ambitions but would always return home.

"I'd love to travel. I'd love to always come back and I could never go very far away I think" (Young Person, Wicklow).

One participant wishing to pursue a career in teaching, stated that she hoped to study in Dublin but could never leave Wicklow permanently. Instead she would consider commuting to and from Dublin.

In many ways these conflicting and contradictory feelings of positivity and belonging expressed by both young people in counties Mayo and Wicklow, coupled with their comments about the negative aspects of rural life, is reflected in the literature on rural youth (Leyston, 2008). In a study of young people and how they imagine, define and create discourses about the countryside, Leyston challenges previous constructions of the relationship between young people, 'the rural idyll' and 'cultural marginality' and contends that often these discourses are conflicting and paradoxical.

6.7 LACK OF YOUTH ACTIVITIES AND RECREATIONAL FACILITIES

In terms of what life is like in Mayo and Wicklow as a young person, descriptions were very similar regardless of the different geographical setting. For Mayo youth, although very much advocates for County Mayo, they felt that there wasn't much to do in Mayo if you were a young person and you weren't into sport, as the main attraction in county Mayo was the GAA. One participant said:

"There's not much if you don't play sport...If you're not into Gaelic football you're automatically down on things to do" (Young Person, Mayo).

All the participants agreed with this statement and added that in the very remote parts of Mayo, Gaelic football was all that was on offer. One of the participants from a very remote part of the county stated:

"...Like in Castlebar there is more to do, but you wouldn't find a bowling alley in the countryside and I have to come here (Castlebar) which is about 40 mins drive from my home to go to a bowling alley or to the cinema or anything like that..." (Young Person, Mayo).

Another participant from a very remote part of the county stated that she would be 10 minutes' drive from even a small shop.

In Wicklow, similar views were expressed.

"We have nothing to do in town... there are no facilities for us" (Young Person, Wicklow).

"In Rathnew, there is a main street, which just has pubs, a Chinese restaurant and one other shop...a lot of shops have closed down and there is also a hotel" (Young Person, Wicklow).

"There is a lot of space where they could put some more stuff in...like years ago there was an old cinema and it closed down and they haven't reopened it...a cinema would be great!" (Young Person, Wicklow).

6.8 LACK OF PUBLIC TRANSPORT

As none of the young people were car drivers, they relied on their parents to transport them as the public transport system in rural Ireland was described 'virtually non-existent' and 'unreliable,' 'irregular' and 'expensive.' Lack of adequate public transport was a big issue of concern for the young people in counties Mayo and Wicklow. The following statements from young people reflect the level of frustration they experience as a result of the absence of a reliable, efficient and affordable public transport system in rural Ireland:

"I usually get a lift here, because even if you could, say get a bus, then I would have to get a lift to the bus, like I'm that rural, Like I couldn't walk to the bus stop or anything like that" (Young Person, Mayo).

"It is not just that there aren't enough buses, it's that a lot of the time it's pouring rain and you're not like you're in Dublin or Belfast where you have the cover, so you're absolutely drenched. The buses are always late. They're either there 5 minutes late or 10 minutes early, never on time" (Young Person, Mayo).

"I need my mum and dad to be there to get me to the bus and in that case they can actually bring me here like. Yeah most of the times they just haven't shown up, I was waiting outside Mr. Price for like 2 hours, but like three elderly ladies who, firstly I didn't have any credit to call anyone and their phones only called, they have special services, like they'd only all like households, 088 numbers. And they had no way of getting home and it was raining. And they were asking me if I could drive them, I can't drive, I have to take the bus. So, we were stuck in the cold and rain for 2 hours..." (Young Person, Mayo).

Speaking of the unreliable bus service, a young person from Wicklow stated:

"They sometimes go every hour, but they are often late and it can be expensive, like its €11 to Dublin return."

Public transport and road safety were deemed to be significant issues for young people. The public transport was regarded as cost prohibitive and unreliable and cycling was not an option as the young people regarded the roads as unsafe to cycle on. These concerns were echoed by the young people in County Wicklow, who were also heavily reliant on their parents for transport and bemoaned the lack of public transport. Although the Wicklow youth lived in closer proximity to the capital city, they described the transport system in the same way as their Mayo peers and felt it could be integrated in a better way.

6.9 LEARNING TO DRIVE

While some of the research participants were eligible or close to the age to start learning to drive, they said the cost of lessons coupled with the cost of motor insurance for young drivers made it cost prohibitive to learn to drive and to afford to run a car. Speaking about the cost of learning to drive and the prospect of running a car, one young person stated:

"Lessons and insurance is very expensive, insurance could be up on like €2000, €3000 for the year and then then like for lessons, like you have to go to Castlebar...Its very expensive. Half of the driving instructors in Castlebar come from Ballina" (Young Person, Mayo).

Given the current lack of an adequate rural transport system, they agreed that there is a real necessity to be able to drive in rural Ireland, but the cost of insurance for young drivers is a deterrent.

“Most of the cheap insurance for young people is black box system so you have a box put in the car that monitors how you drive. But with all those you have limited mileage and that limited mileage can be used going from, going to school every day” (Young Person, Mayo).

6.10 THE ABSENCE OF RELIABLE BROADBAND IN RURAL IRELAND

The absence of reliable broadband in rural Ireland was also cited by participants in Mayo as an issue of concern. It inhibits them communicating on social media with their friends, but also impinges on their ability to use the internet to access information. One of the participants emphasised how frustrating this was and said it had an impact on school work too, in that he required access to the internet for school work and assignments. One young person referred to how slow and ineffective broadband is in rural parts of Ireland, stating *“if you’re trying to send something it could take like at least an hour in some cases...”* (Young Person, Mayo).

6.11 ACCESS TO ONLINE INFORMATION

The issue with broadband affects capacity to access online information, which many young people interviewed said was the main source of information. They tended to use their smart phones to access information online. A preferred website for youth-specific information was the Spunout.ie website, which they found to be ‘very user-friendly’ and provides a comprehensive source of information on a broad range of youth issues. One participant said, *“if I wanted to find out something about young people, I’d go onto Spunout”* (Young Person, Mayo).

The young people said they sourced most information online or through talks facilitated through youth work. There is accessible information in school, but it was felt that the content of the information is very determined by the school. As most information was sourced online, the importance of a decent and reliable broadband infrastructure was emphasised by the young people. At present the young people in Mayo were very critical of the existing service.

“There was a stage where my wifi was going down the whole time. If you need to be on the internet you have to go into town. Like it would nearly be easier to do 4G coverage than the WIFI. It is not really going ahead, the 20/20 play or the fibre isn’t working. Most people won’t have fibre” (Young Person, Mayo).

6.12 LACK OF THEMATIC GROUPS, RECREATIONAL AND YOUTH FACILITIES

Over the last decade, youth work services have suffered a significant decline in state funding, which has placed a tremendous strain on the facilities available to young people, particularly in rural areas. Young people in Mayo and in Wicklow highlighted the need to invest in more thematic youth groups and youth-oriented recreational and youth facilities. In Rathnew, County Wicklow, there was a complete vacuum in terms of youth facilities for young people, prior to the establishment of the Catholic Guides of Ireland unit in 2017. In County Mayo, Foróige has a strong presence and provides youth work in the Foróige Hub in Castlebar. Outside of sporting activities and the GAA, young people stated that Foróige was the only youth resource in the county. In Mayo the young people said all the activities are centred around sports. One interviewee said, *“if you don’t like the GAA there is very little...in Ballina there is the rugby club but outside of that...there is golf.”* This lack of youth facilities means that often there were very few places for the young people to socialise with friends and they said that in many instances, particularly if they were in a big group, they were moved along if they were hanging about a street.

“If you go anywhere to town you’re considered to be loitering. You can’t go to any shop or anything, because they don’t really want big groups hanging around. And then like parents don’t want a big group of friends in their house. So, it is like, where to go, unless you are out but then there is also kind of a gap between where discos are to where there is none and all that. But even so, like that’s only ...like once a month” (Young Person, Mayo).

Another participant described the experience of being 'moved along' when she was in the park with her friends.

"A few months ago, I just went to a park and we were sitting outside on benches and a woman with her child comes and starts screaming at us, saying we had to leave until she leaves, and we weren't doing anything. There was only like 6 of us and just chatting and she is saying you know teenagers shouldn't be here. We weren't even in the park, she screamed at us and said you wait out there until we leave and then you can come back" (Young Person, Mayo).

While this experience of being 'moved along' and berated by adults for hanging around, may not be unique to young people in rural Ireland, the young people interviewed felt the limited access to youth facilities and services compared to more urban centres, exacerbated the situation and left them with little to do and nowhere to go.

6.13 YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON FACILITIES AND SERVICES

The young people had very definite views on what they would like to see happening in their communities to improve rural life for young people. They felt additional resources should be provided to the youth work sector and a state-of-the-art building should be built for young people, where they could go to and socialise with friends and play games. One young person said it should be modelled on the youth cafés.

One of the young people who had been active in youth work for a few years recalled discussions about funding such a building in Mayo, but unfortunately resources were a problem. Reflecting on the past, the young person recalled that lack of resources was a key impediment to progressing with a building for young people in County Mayo and to recruiting staff and volunteers to service it.

"We were having meeting for, like 1 or 2 years ago, because they kind of, I think they got funding for it but they never went through with it because they couldn't find a building or something...They had a building; they just couldn't get enough funding...It was the old post office I'm pretty sure. Yeah, they just, like they lost funding like a decade ago. They tried to raise funding again, but it just never went through, they never got enough, there wasn't enough people to run it or, volunteers to run it" (Young Person, Mayo).

Focus group participants from County Wicklow said that with the exception of sports, the church choir and the school orchestra, there was nothing else to do for them to do, until CGI established a presence in Rathnew. Lack of facilities means that they have very few places to 'hangout' and as result tend to assemble on the street, which causes adults to view them in a negative way and perceive them to be troublesome.

"You see adults and parents giving out about children getting into the wrong things when they are growing up but, like, there is nothing to do...If you are hanging out on the streets, people get the wrong idea when they see you but there is nothing else to do...They go 'oh there is a group of teenagers on the streets again,' 'what are they getting up to?" (Young Person, Wicklow).

6.14 VIEWS ON IMPORTANCE AND VALUE OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION IN YOUTH WORK

The view was expressed by the young people in both focus groups that most people don't have a clue what young people want and because of this lack of awareness, adults make assumptions and overlook the needs that are there. It was felt that this was particularly true of those with the power to make decisions about how money is spent.

"Most people don't know, don't have a clue what any young person wants, and that's usually a problem. They're assuming it's the same as it was for them, whereas a lot of those problems have been solved and its different now...The people that make the big decisions that have no idea what's happening like with young people" (Young Person, Mayo).

The young people felt that the youth work setting is different however, in that the youth work sector and the youth workers who work there “understand youth and the issues affecting young people’s lives” (Young Person, Mayo). Another young person stated that “youth workers listen and respond to youth needs” (Young Person, Mayo). A young person attending Comhairle na nÓg stated that his participation made him feel like he had influence over decisions in his community and that he felt by participating that it “might actually make a difference, even for my sister who is only a few years younger than me” (Young Person, Mayo).

One participant in the Mayo focus group stated that participating in youth work made him feel listened to. He stated that it is a very democratic system in relation to how money is spent and how it operates.

“We have the AGM and then we get like our projects for the year based off them, and then we kind of like do the work ourselves more or less...It works really well” (Young Person, Mayo).

6.15 BENEFITS OF PARTICIPATING IN YOUTH WORK

The young people attributed many social and personal skills they had gained to their participation in youth work. One element that was emphasised in particular was how it had contributed to increasing their confidence and self-belief and helped them ‘to find a voice.’ For some, it sparked an interest in politics and inspired them to consider further engagement in political life. Those who had participated in the Mayo Comhairle na nÓg, referred to numerous high-profile Mayo TDs from across the political spectrum who they had the opportunity to speak with about their lives and the issues they wished to put forward on behalf of young people in their county. They also talked about the friendships they had forged through participating in youth work. Friendships that may otherwise never have been made with people from different schools or different backgrounds and traditions from across the county.

In relation to young people from Wicklow, of the many great things they attributed to their participation in youth work and in guiding, were the friendships they made as a result. One said that if it wasn’t for coming to CGI they would never have become friends with the others as they attended different schools. CGI meant a lot the young people interviewed. They valued the opportunity to attend CGI every Wednesday evening and to hangout with their friends in an open and ‘welcoming’ environment, where they felt respected and felt they could express themselves.

“You can be here and be who you actually are, and you don’t have to impress anyone and talk about anyone...Like none of us judge each other” (Young Person, Wicklow).

“When I started out, I was only 6 or 7. It is privilege. It is like something I look forward to coming to on Wednesday night and to hang out...” (Young Person, Wicklow).

“We go to different schools so getting to come here every week to help out with the younger clubs and then to go and get food and hangout and come back and meet the rest of them for ‘Rangers’ is really good” (Young Person, Wicklow).

All the participants emphasised how much they enjoyed CGI and how fortunate they felt to be guides and to be involved in the organisations.

Speaking of her first impressions of guiding, one of the focus group participants stated:

“My impression was how amazing it (CGI) is and I was like, overwhelmed by it and like, now that we are older we get to see the work that goes on and it shows how hardworking the organisation is” (Young Person, Wicklow).

Another stated that CGI was a very welcoming organisation, where she had made friends and felt like part of a family.

"It is all so welcoming. I have made a lot of friendships and gained confidence. Everyone gets on so well. It is like a big family" (Young Person, Wicklow).

One young person stated that in many ways participating in CGI had kept her out of trouble:

"There aren't that many groups around for people our age. I only joined last year, and I really enjoy it cause it gets me out of doing bad things...that's the only way I can put it" (Young Person, Wicklow).

Other participants talked about the skills they had acquired as a result of their participation in CGI, such as being creative, developing public speaking skills or becoming more self-confident.

The following quotations capture some of the experiences of participation in the CGI that the focus group participants spoke about:

"I've made a lot of friendships, built confidence" (Young Person, Wicklow).

"If I wasn't in the guides I wouldn't be able to do half the things I do...because of going to events and speaking at different events and having to speak there and speak to different people ...so I think I have gained confidence but also creativity...cause coming up with different events or different things to help organisation... creativity is a big thing" (Young Person, Wicklow).

6.16 IMPROVING LIFE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE IN RURAL IRELAND

In terms of suggestions for how to improve life for young people living in rural Ireland, the young people suggested increasing funding to resource a purpose-built, state-of-the-art youth building and to provide a subsidised rural transport scheme for young people similar to the Local Link transport service available to pensioners. At present the only discount available to young people is for third-level students so it does not apply to young people at second level.

Growing up in rural Ireland has its benefits and disadvantages. From the perspective of the young people who participated in the research living in counties Mayo and Wicklow, there was a lot of commonality in relation to their views of living in rural Ireland.

The young people from Wicklow also referred to the emergence of a more multi-cultural community with the increase of immigration to Ireland. They felt that the arrival of new communities to Wicklow has been embraced by the locals and brought greater diversity to their county, which was positive and enriching.

"We get to see all these different people coming with different backgrounds and it's kinda changing the town. You can see like, everyone is trying to help and there is more of a closer community and I think it's really great to see" (Young Person, Wicklow).

The following quotations taken from the focus groups with young people from both counties convey what it is like to grow up in rural Ireland - the good and bad aspects.

"You know everyone...and you're related to everyone" (young person).

"You can't do anything without everybody knowing" (young person).

"I think in Dublin you just wouldn't see the same person twice, whereas in Castlebar you see someone 4 times in the same day. I'm not joking" (young person).

"Like you meet somebody, go home and you tell your family and they'd be like oh yeah they're your cousin" (young person).

"You have to be on your best behaviour the whole time. Everyone knows pretty much everything" (young person).

"I'm from a street with a lot of older people and like if they're not sitting outside watching you and seeing what you're doing, they're sitting inside, I'm not kidding, looking at the surveillance cameras. So, like everyone kind of knows everything that's going on like" (young person).

As the quotes convey, rural Ireland affords a strong sense of community, where there is little anonymity and where everyone knows your business and if they don't, they make it their business to find out. Such an environment, while young, can be inhibiting and stifling, but the downsides can be outweighed by the benefits of having a sense of being from somewhere and having a sense of belonging. It was very evident that growing up in a small rural community provided a sense of identity and many felt that this 'sense of community' was sometimes lacking in city life. They elaborated on what they meant by this by saying it related to knowing there were always people around and neighbours were close by that you could always rely on.

"There's people you can rely on always, like if your family aren't close, like your neighbours will always be there for you" (Young Person, Mayo).

6.17 FEELINGS FOR HOME AND INTENTIONS TO REMAIN

While growing up in rural Ireland could feel a bit repressive at times, the young people acknowledged that it also afford so many positive aspects of life and they all felt very proud to be from Mayo and from Wicklow and had a strong attachment to home and to their home counties.

"I love being from Mayo, I wouldn't like to be from anywhere else to be honest, I just it's just where I've grown up and I've had a positive upbringing here..." (Young Person, Mayo).

Living in rural Ireland was described as providing *"...a sense of community, it's always like positive, like a positive atmosphere. It's like you know everyone, like you're never going to go somewhere where you don't know someone"* (Young Person, Mayo).

6.18 LACK OF OPPORTUNITIES

Despite the strong ties with home, many identified a lack of opportunities to study to progress in particular careers. To advance in education, training and employment, about half of the young people who participated in the Mayo focus group and only one young person in the focus group with young people from Wicklow said it was their intention to leave their home county to study or work. Although the young person from Wicklow said it was her intention to return to Wicklow eventually to work once she had completed her studies.

For those young people who intended to leave their home counties, the reasons were due to limited opportunities in rural Ireland. One young person from Mayo stated:

"I think it's a good place to grow up but for me personally not to stay your entire life because you don't really get, like especially if, like you've a niche interest or like variety of people, like I know myself I travel a lot just to meet people with the same interests as me..."

Another participant stated:

"It is a nice atmosphere to grow up in but personally I like seeing more, you know..." (Young Person, Mayo).

Others acknowledged the lack of opportunities would influence their decision whether or not to remain but expressed a strong desire to remain near home.

“There aren’t that many job opportunities at all in Mayo, I’d probably try my very best to stay in Ireland, even if I have to move to Dublin” (Young Person, Mayo).

“There is only one college, an IT but I mean they don’t have a big range of courses there. The campus isn’t that nice, it’s just not attractive. Most people would want to leave to go study, like go somewhere else to go to college” (Young Person, Mayo).

Half of the focus group participants from Mayo stated that the lack of educational courses would influence their decision to stay or to leave. Some said leaving evoked a mixture of feelings of excitement and trepidation at the prospect of moving to a big city or being too far from home (Young Person, from Mayo).

“I want to go to Galway because I want to be home at the weekends, but my course isn’t there so, I actually have to go to Maynooth, and I really don’t like the thought of going even that far. Like I know that’s not even that far but for me personally that’s far” (Young Person, Mayo).

Lack of opportunity was also cited by the young people from Wicklow. They acknowledged that there were limited opportunities for them to live in rural Ireland. Only one of them had secured a summer job and accessing employment was exceptionally difficult unless you had a contact.

“It is so hard for people our age to get work. There is a veterinary clinic, a doctors’ surgery and a few shops” (Young Person, Wicklow).

6.19 HOPES FOR RURAL IRELAND

In response to the question about their hopes for rural Ireland, the young people said they hoped it would be ‘more youth-friendly’ in terms of greater investment in youth work services and facilities for the county. They also hoped for an improved, reliable and subsidised rural public transport system.

6.20 – YOUNG PEOPLE’S RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT

In terms of proposals for government to improve living conditions for young people and their families living in rural Ireland. The following recommendations were proposed by the young people who participated in the focus groups in counties Mayo and Wicklow:

- > Provide additional investment for youth work services and facilities in rural localities in Ireland.
- > Provide an accessible rural public transport system.
- > Invest in a subsidised rural transport scheme for young people similar to the Local Link transport service available to pensioners.
- > Foster greater investment in the regions to provide improved educational and employment opportunities in rural parts of Ireland. In particular incentivise farming as an occupation.
- > Increase the minimum wage for people under 18.
- > Invest in the apprenticeship model and promote it to young people of both genders, who do not want to pursue a further or higher education, as an alternative career option.

CASE STUDIES
OF YOUTH
WORK
PROVISION
IN RURAL
IRELAND

7.1 RESPONDING TO THE NEEDS OF LGBTI+ YOUTH IN RURAL IRELAND

As the research highlights, growing up in rural Ireland has many advantages, but it can also present challenges, particularly for young people with a range of specific needs. One such group highlighted in the focus groups with youth workers are LGBTI+ young people. Although there are supports available nationally for young people from the LGBTI+ community, the challenges experienced by young people living in rural Ireland can be particularly acute compared to those residing in more urban localities, because of difficulty accessing specialised supports and counselling in rural localities.

For young people struggling with issues around their sexual orientation or identity, there remains the prevalence of a rural-urban divide. In Dublin, charity organisations like BeLonG To Youth Services and the Transgender Equality Network Ireland (TENI) provide supports for those residing close to or in the greater Dublin area and there is also information available on-line via youth information websites like Spunout.ie, in many instances there is no replacing the one to one support available in the youth work setting. This one to one support is not as widely accessible to LGBTI+ youth in rural Ireland. Indeed, there is a lack of access to counsellors who deal with LGBTI+ issues in mental health services in rural Ireland. The difficulty rural youth experience trying to access the supports that are available is further compounded by the lack of adequate, affordable and accessible transport in rural Ireland.

FERNS DIOCESAN YOUTH SERVICE (FDYS), COUNTY WEXFORD

An example of best practice to reach and engage with LGBTI+ young people in County Wexford, is an initiative operating in the FDYS. Established seven years ago, FDYS established an LGBTI+ group to respond to the needs of young people up to the age of 24 living in the County Wexford area. Initially this group was exclusively for participants who were from the LGBTI+ community. The rationale behind the establishment of this initiative was to provide a group for young people who were struggling with their sexuality. Although initially established as a group exclusively catering for those from the LGBTI+ community, in recognition of the importance of integration and normalisation, this work has evolved and has now been integrated into a Senior Youth group. The thinking behind integrating the LGBTI+ group into a wider context where all young people meet, was to provide an environment where all young people could feel comfortable attending and to counter any stigma associated with attending a group labelled as LGBTI+. By integrating the work, the organisation can ensure that young people who have not yet 'come out' feel at ease attending a senior youth group, where they can meet with young people from their community, but also interact with those young people who are not. It also dispels the stigma that may still exist amongst communities in rural Ireland, by integrating the group within mainstream youth work. The senior youth group meets in the youth café and provides a supportive, enabling environment for young people. It also makes it easier for young people to attend a support service in confidence, who require parents to drive them to a youth services but may not have disclosed their sexuality or sexual orientation to their parents.

FDYS employs an LGBTI+ worker who works on part-time basis. This post-holder is funded by the HSE for 10.5 hours a week. The post-holder supports and responds to the needs of young people from the LGBTI+ community, providing one to one support. Much of the work entails responding to referrals from parents, teachers, social workers or counsellors and also from self-referrals from the young people themselves. Some of this work entails supporting young people who may be struggling with their sexual identity and orientation. Often it involves supporting those who are in the process of 'coming out,' through this journey and providing support to those who may

be unsure of their gender identity. The LGBTI+ group facilitator and youth worker provides a point of contact for young people and adults. This work requires interagency collaboration. The post-holder works with other support agencies as appropriate, to support the young person she comes into contact with. A key part of the role is to make the young person aware of the supports available and to establish referral pathways for them. For example, there is a counsellor on site who the LGBTI+ worker can refer a young person to, if required and other agencies, like Pieta House, close by that she may suggest the young person contact. The post-holder provides support to the young person to access specialised supports that may help them. One of the biggest challenges for this type of youth work is that there are never enough resources to ensure the provision of a comprehensive service to respond to the needs of all young people. Currently there are two part-time LGBTI+ workers providing outreach services for County Wexford. Although this work is of great value, the role is demanding and there is a lot to do within 10.5 hours a week. This type of work is of critical importance in terms of responding to the needs of LGBTI+ young people living in rural Ireland.

DETACHED YOUTH WORK

FDYS also employ a detached youth worker. These youth workers work on the streets in areas where young people locate, to engage with young people who are less likely to attend a youth service in a localised setting. Detached youth workers meet young people where they are in 'hot spots' in the community. This work is of critical importance in terms of engaging with young people aged 14 – 24 years of age who are vulnerable and socially isolated. The detached youth workers work with the Gardaí in terms of planning routes and responding to needs. Notwithstanding the value of detached youth work in terms of responding to young people with specific and complex needs, one youth worker providing detached youth work stated:

| *"It takes a lot more time to build a trusting relationship with young people"* (Youth Worker, FDYS).

Detached youth work provides support for young people who may be engaged in substance misuse or may shy away from attending youth organisations. This is another mechanism to reach out to young people living in rural localities.

"I think from a rural point of view...a bit like broadband. I don't think you can put wired broadband into every house in the country but you should be able to create a critical mass in places where it justifies it. I think if we are going to create a critical mass of people in different places in rural Ireland and have small urban or you know collections of houses rurally you have to have employment opportunities or infrastructure you know, because you talk about isolation, first the Garda station closes, the post office closes and then the shop closes and each one closing forces more people to move away. But they have closed because people have already moved away. It's a downward spiral...like broadband is probably critical to keeping people in rural Ireland but also as I said... they all come to Dublin to get educated. None of them go back because the employment is in Dublin and you have to give people a reason to come back to rural Ireland. You listen to the radio and they say oh people don't want to live in rural Ireland but they do...you might want to live at home but if there's no jobs there there's no job there and you know. Also I think Dublin could fall into the sea with the weight of people that live there"

(James Healy, Former President of Macra na Feirme, 2017 – 2019).

7.2 MACRA NA FEIRME

In 1944, Macra na Feirme was founded by a group of 12 agricultural advisers, rural science teachers and farmers. Over the last 75 years, over 250,000 young people have passed through the ranks of Macra na Feirme. It continues to thrive to this day, providing representation for young people aged 17 – 35 years of age living in rural Ireland and a social outlet to many young people living in rural parts of Ireland. The organisation serves to provide its members with broad range of activities to engage in and to develop their social and personal skills and forge friendships. The mission of Macra na Feirme is to contribute to the sustainable development of rural communities in Ireland by supporting the social, economic, cultural, personal development and well-being of young people who have a rural connection including young farmers, by representing their interests in the development and implementation of relevant policies, programmes and services at national, regional and local levels and by advocating on their behalf.

Most of Macra's members are in their early to mid-20s and it is this age group that tends to interact with the activities of the organisation most. The organisation is membership-led, and the policy agendas pursued by Macra na Feirme reflect the issues and challenges young people in this age group experience in rural communities throughout the Republic of Ireland.

“There are approximately 180 clubs around the country, which engage in varying levels of activity and size...around 7000 members are really active and around maybe 4,000 are interacting with the organisation on a regular basis” (James Healy, Former Macra na Feirme President, 2017 - 2019).

Macra na Feirme embraces the youth club model. The club model forms the base unit of the organisation. Clubs operate at county level and from each county, a candidate is nominated to the National Council. The National Council has three Vice Presidents, a President and Past President. The organisation has recently undergone a change in the governing body of the organisation. In the last year, there were governance changes, which introduced subcommittees, which deal with policy, rural youth and agri-affairs. The work of the subcommittees is guided by the National Council, who are the ultimate decision makers in terms of formally adopting policy. The position of President and the three Vice Presidents are elected by a ballot of the clubs. They are accompanied on the board by three external independents board members.

ACTIVITIES OF THE ORGANISATION

Many of the clubs operate at a community level and meet on a monthly basis, holding an event for at least two weeks in every month. The sort of activities they engage in include sporting events or the competitions programme. The main pillars of activity are in the performing arts such as drama and light entertainment, public speaking, impromptu public speaking, debating and impromptu debating. Through its programme of activities, Macra na Feirme aims to reach young people at all levels of ability and engage with them to promote and encourage their participation. Macra na Feirme also offers national training for clubs and county officers every year and coordinates national consultations. The national consultations are a way of engaging with members to ascertain their views on topics of interest and to inform the development and formulation of the organisation's policy. Most of the interaction with members, however, continues to be through the club structure within the organisation. Macra employs seven Training and Development Officers who work throughout the country to support and engage at a county level with counties under their remit. They support the clubs and counties to deliver a comprehensive and responsive programme of work. In terms of recruitment of Macra members, the organisation adopts a few strategies but the main way of attracting members is through word of mouth.

“One of the main ways is word of mouth and people will bring their friends but what you tend to get a lot is that somebody that was in Macra before or they knew of Macra or they’ve heard of it and they look at what we do and they go that would be great for my child or my young person and they might send them on” (James Healy, Former Macra na Feirme President, 2017 - 2019).

There may be a tradition of family engagement with the organisation, where parents were involved and encourage their child to join. This parental support for the organisation extends to the parents providing transport to and from the events, which means that often members do not have the challenge of accessing public transport in rural areas.

Reflecting on his own engagement with the organisation, the Macra na Feirme President 2017 – 2019, James Healy recalls:

“The club in my area had lapsed for a couple of years and they were trying to start it up again. And I was coming out of mass one morning and this girl came up to me and said we are trying to get Macra going and I had some vague recollection of what Macra was but didn’t have much of an idea. She said would you get involved and I said yeah, yeah, so I went home and asked what Macra was and they said yeah, yeah, you know Dad said in my day I was involved. So, I went along, and I was made club chair.”

From this initial exchange he was invited and encouraged to join and from then became an active member and in time was elected President of the organisation. He contends that Macra na Feirme provides an outlet for young people living in rural localities to meet each other and to ensure in a programme of events and activities which build confidence and enhance their social and personal development. Such youth work, Healy believes remains an integral part of a young person’s development. Despite a trend towards digital youth work and an apparent reliance on smart phones and social media for communications amongst young people, Healy maintains Macra na Feirme provides a central location to meet and socialise and this remains relevant, especially for rural youth where there are fewer facilities and places to go. In a generation of change, where young people interact more in the virtual world, he argues that as a youth work organisation, it is important to constantly monitor and review how they use different mechanisms to reach out to young people and to engage with them.

“I think young people are changing or certainly their outlook on life is changing and it is about us changing to meet them where they are and making sure that we are reaching them and showing them an organisation that is inclusive and is going to welcome them in no matter who they are” (James Healy, Former Macra na Feirme President, 2017 - 2019).

In this regard, Jennifer Arthur, Macra na Feirme’s Training and Development Officer, states that one way the organisation is interacting with young people is by upgrading the way they communicate online and in the virtual space.

“We are developing an app which people can use to check out our calendar of our events and our competitions calendar and we have a lot of them clubs themselves doing stuff with Google documents instead of depending on the county secretary sending out a text to each of the clubs... They can go in the night before the club meeting to see what is happening” (Jennifer Arthur, Training and Development Officer, Macra na Feirme).

CHALLENGES

Macra na Feirme operates a club-led structure. This means that clubs are led by young people and while this model continues to work well, one issue which is emerging as a challenge is that while young people are willing to join and participate in the clubs, there is less enthusiasm to assume a club officership positions.

"It is getting harder to find those people. They are willing to sign up, they are willing to be members, but I think maybe we need to change how we are operating because there's much more competition for people's time now..." (James Healy, Former Macra na Feirme President, 2017 - 2019).

"These days everybody is busy. Young people have lots of stuff going on and it's challenging to get people to commit and to take on a volunteer role themselves such as an officership" (Jennifer Arthur, Training and Development Officer, Macra na Feirme).

In addition to the issue of young people dedicating their time to assuming leadership positions in the organisation, the increased emphasis on regulatory compliance was also highlighted as an additional burden on a volunteer's time.

"I think that's a huge part of it, because I suppose you don't join to fill in pieces of paper and to fill in forms and I think...there's lots of social activism now where young people go out and they'll march for the...the 8th amendment or you know the marriage equality referendum and all these things and it is very easy to go to a march but if you are stepping up to be a leader within a club or whatever that's a 12-month commitment or a two-year commitment. Then it is scary to people and they go, 'oh I don't have the time' and whereas you ask them to go out for a day for a cause that they are really, really passionate about" (James Healy, Former Macra na Feirme President, 2017 - 2019).

He stated that while regulatory compliance is important, there is a need to ensure that adherence to regulations is less cumbersome and time consuming. Furthermore, the increased emphasis on measuring the value of youth work and the contribution it makes to the lives of young people and linking this to funding, presents challenges to the youth work sector. Not only is it extremely time consuming, it is important to mitigate the implications of an overly bureaucratic system of measurement, which has the potential to jeopardise the value of youth work which is youth-led. The NQSF has been criticised for seeking to govern youth work activities by introducing an overly rigid measurement framework to measure outcomes from the youth work the youth organisation is undertaking. Critics of this move towards measurement argue that it views young people as units and seeks to fund initiatives that are targeted, to ensure it provides youth work to meet the needs of a set number of people. Not only does this objective change the nature of youth work from a youth-centred approach led by young people, it also makes an already underfunded sector engage in work to satisfy this funding requirement. This impacts on the time and capacity of youth workers and is also challenging to do as it views youth work in a different manner. Traditionally youth work has been output-focused and led by the expressed needs of the young people. The inherent challenge of moving towards an outcome-focused approach, as identified by Macra and others is that it requires a change in mindset and a different approach to the work. Rather than reporting on the work and the impact of it, Healy argues it is about quantifying what this means and how many people it reaches. For the young people themselves he believes the practice has traditionally been primarily *"about matching the young people with the opportunity"* and not excluding anyone who wishes to participate in the activity or opportunity. In the rural context, this universal youth work model is vitally important to maintain, as young people tend to be removed from the sort of services that would be plentiful and easier to access in a city.

Compared to an urban locality, *"rural Ireland is so vast that you need that national structure...because you are covering such a huge amount of ground...Like if you are young and you are into drama in Dublin there is probably a drama group or something like that within reasonable commuting or walking or cycling distance to you. But if you are in rural Ireland the nearest one to me is half an hour but if you go more rural it is probably an hour or more and as a young person that distance is a barrier to you and if you don't, if that's what you're interested in and you don't have other interests you are just not going to go and you are going to be isolated"* (James Healy, Former Macra na Feirme President, 2017 - 2019).

Jennifer Arthur, Macra's Training and Development Officer for counties Louth, Meath, Cavan and Monaghan, contends that there is a lot of rural isolation and a lot of young people, especially in regions such as Cavan and Monaghan have left rural Ireland to work in Dublin, because of the lack of opportunities or services available to them. This decline in the youth population can exacerbate the challenge of youth engagement and participation.

"Lack of opportunity is a barrier to them developing as people and you have the same range of issues that you would have in urban areas and fear of coming out but they don't have the same level of support and services in the rural areas and that's where Macra is fantastic in these areas because it give people an outlet and engagement. They can make friends and they can develop and learn to maybe go and look for these opportunities and bring them to the rural areas" (Jennifer Arthur, Training and Development Officer, Macra na Feirme).

2019 marks Macra na Feirme's 75th anniversary. During this time, it has provided a form of youth work that engages young people living in rural Ireland in so many activities and social events. To engage with rural youth, it is important to use all channels available to promote the broad range of activities, opportunities and supports available to young people in rural Ireland. Macra na Feirme continues to do this by providing the face to face engagement and interaction to foster and support the personal and social development of members, but also strives to reach out to new members and engage with young people throughout rural Ireland via online communication.

Summing up the value and contribution its work makes to the individual, James Healy, former Macra President, contends that it is through Macra na Feirme that lifelong 'friendships are forged' and where 'connections are fostered.' The organisation also promotes and encourages youth participation, engages at all levels of society and provides its members with skills they can take with them through life.

Healy also jokes that Macra na Feirme has a longstanding reputation as acting as 'the marriage bureau of rural Ireland' confirming that many couples have met through the organisation over the years.

Reflecting on facilities and opportunities for young people to grow up in and to remain or return to live in rural Ireland, Healy states:

"I think from a rural point of view...a bit like broadband. I don't think you can put wired broadband into every house in the country, but you should be able to create a critical mass in places where it justifies it. I think if we are going to create a critical mass of people in different places in rural Ireland and have small urban or you know collections of houses rurally you have to have employment opportunities or infrastructure you know, because you talk about isolation, first the Garda station closes, the post office closes and then the shop closes and each one closing forces more people to move away. But they have closed because people have already moved away. It's a downward spiral... like broadband is probably critical to keeping people in rural Ireland but also as I said...they all come to Dublin to get educated. None of them go back because the employment is in Dublin and you have to give people a reason to come back to rural Ireland. You listen to the radio and they say 'oh people don't want to live in rural Ireland' but they do...you might want to live at home but if there's no jobs there is no jobs there...Also I think Dublin could fall into the sea with the weight of people that live there."

7.3 CRISIS TEXT LINE



Funded by the HSE, Crisis Text Line is a free, 24/7, confidential messaging service for people in crisis, which was launched in Ireland during summer 2019. Although intended as a service for all age groups, it provides a useful support service for young people experiencing a crisis in their lives, wherever they live in the country.

The concept of a crisis text line originated in the USA and now operates in Canada and the UK, with plans for it to be rolled out in New Zealand, South Africa and South America. The service is manned by crisis volunteers who have been trained in reflective listening, collaborative problem solving, crisis management and crisis counselling skills. They have also been reference checked and Garda vetted. Crisis volunteers answer texts from people in crisis, bringing them from a 'hot moment' to a 'cool calm,' through active listening, collaborative problem solving, and safety planning.

Crisis Text Line uses a toolbox of options to signpost service users to appropriate supports available to them, such as online resources published on the spunout.ie website, good applications providing information and advice, or by referring them to alternative mental health resources and services available, such as Jigsaw, mymind.org and turntome.org. In more serious cases, where the texter may be suicidal, Crisis Text Line will pass the service user's contact number on to the Ambulance service, who will then intervene and try to contact the texter to ensure their safety and check they are okay.

Partially funded by the HSE, turntome.org provides access to free and low-cost online counselling. One caveat in relation to online counselling is that accessibility is problematic for those in remote or rural parts of the country where there may be poor broadband coverage. If there is good broadband access, however, turntome.org provides a useful online counselling resource.

Evidence shows that texting is the preferred form of contact for young people experiencing a tough time. A spunout.ie survey of young people aged 16 – 25 years of age living in Ireland, found that of a sample of 2000 respondents, 68% of those surveyed preferred texting as a helpline medium to reach out and talk to someone if they were having a tough time. While 32% of the sample stated that they preferred to email, call or not to make contact with anyone (Spunout.ie, 2017).

Currently Crisis Text Line is fully funded by the HSE based on projected figures on the number of service users. It is expected that as the service becomes more prominent and there is greater public awareness of its existence, the demand for the service will increase. It is important that the funding for the Crisis Text Line service is sustained and increased as required, to ensure it continues to remain free of charge and to meet the needs of all service users.

SECTION 8

SUMMARY OF
RESEARCH FINDINGS
AND POLICY
RECOMMENDATIONS

“Agriculture and rural development are cornerstones of our economy, supporting thousands of jobs in increasingly diverse areas. Challenges facing our rural economy, such as Brexit, globalisation and climate change, will necessitate adaptation over time. This is why the Government is investing nearly €2 billion in rural Ireland in 2020. This includes an additional €51 million for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and €17 million for the Department of Rural and Community Development. Within this, I am allocating €3 million in order to pilot new agri-environmental schemes in 2020. These schemes will help to reduce emissions from the sector, while improving biodiversity and water quality, and supporting farm incomes. Conscious of the particular impact that a No Deal Brexit will have on our rural economy, Government stands ready to further increase the level of investment already in place”

(Paschal Donohoe, Minister of Finance, Budget 2020 speech, 8 October, 2019).

SUMMARY OF RESEARCH FINDINGS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

All the focus groups and in-depth interviews provided rich and valuable insights into the youth work taking place in rural Ireland and highlighted the challenges impeding young people's access to youth work in their areas. The research shines a spotlight on some of the key issues affecting the lives of young people in rural Ireland and from the perspectives of youth workers and youth work volunteers, highlights gaps in existing supports for young people exhibiting specific needs.

OVERVIEW OF POLICY CONTEXT

Many of the challenges highlighted by research participants in the research relate to structural issues, which have already been aired nationally and are reflected in a broad range of government strategies published over the last decade, such as the Report of the Commission for Economic Development of Rural Areas (2014) and the Government's current rural policy action plan for rural development, *Realising our Rural Potential*, 2017 – 2019. *Realising our Rural Potential*, set out an ambitious vision for rural Ireland with the inclusion of 270 actions to address current challenges and to enhance the "huge untapped potential in rural Ireland" and contribute to rural development (2017:4). It is an important document to reference in the context of this research, as many of the challenges highlighted in this research are acknowledged in this action plan. Although progress has been made to develop and improve life in rural Ireland, there are aspects of *Realising our Rural Potential* Action Plan that have not been delivered on. Issues relating to access to public transport in rural areas and broadband infrastructure remain outstanding and require urgent investment and implementation. As it is now coming to end of its three-year timeframe, the Department of Rural and Community Development is currently engaging in a process of consultation to inform the next action plan. The new rural policy to succeed the *Realising our Rural Potential* Action Plan, is to adopt a longer term timeline of five years and will focus on enhancing rural communities and economies, taking into account; emerging economic, societal and international developments, including changing demographics within rural communities, climate change adaptation, diversification in the agri-food sector, the next version of rural funding schemes, new ways of working and the changing nature of jobs and Brexit (Department of Rural Development, 2019).

This is an opportune time to influence the development of the new rural policy and to highlight the key challenges for youth workers and young people in rural Ireland as outlined in this research. The policy recommendations contained in this report reflect the views of youth workers, volunteers and young people and it is important they are incorporated into the new rural policy and additional resources are invested to address the current barriers and to make rural Ireland a youth-friendly place, not only to grow up in, but also to remain.

CHALLENGES IN THE PROVISION OF YOUTH WORK IN RURAL IRELAND

There is a lot of commonality in terms of the sorts of issues that were highlighted by youth workers and volunteer youth leaders as obstacles in the delivery of youth work to young people living in rural areas. In summary, these relate to structural issues, such as lack of access to public transport to access youth work services and lack of broadband and connectivity in parts of rural Ireland. These issues were highlighted by youth workers and the young people interviewed, as barriers to engagement, participation and inclusion. Young people stated that lack of good broadband inhibited their access to online information, support services and communications with friends online and for some, it reinforced a sense of isolation. Key challenges and issues in youth work provision in rural Ireland, highlighted by youth workers throughout the country relate to:

- > Lack of adequate funding for the provision of youth work services in rural localities.
- > Inadequate funding to support youth work practice in rural communities where young people experience specific needs.
- > Lack of access to a broad range of specialised youth support services, such as mental health and counselling services in rural areas.
- > Lack of accessible, affordable public transport for rural communities.
- > Difficulty recruiting and retaining volunteers.
- > The challenge of an increasingly regulated youth work sector, which has imposed on a volunteer's time and on levels of volunteer retention.
- > The absence of adequate interpreting service to support new communities living in rural Ireland who have English language difficulties and experience challenges engaging with youth work services.
- > The need for an increased allocation of resources to support new communities integrating into life in rural Ireland.
- > The need for more investment in a National Apprenticeship Scheme with the allocation of dedicated resources and spaces for young people living in rural and remote areas in Ireland.
- > Lack of broadband, which inhibits young people's access to the internet and their ability to access social and digital media platforms, access information online and communicate with friends and youth work services online.

SUMMARY OF KEY ISSUES AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

1. RESOURCING AND RECOGNITION OF YOUTH WORK

Resourcing the youth work sector, particularly in rural areas, was emphasised by research participants. Youth workers throughout the country stated that funding was 'never enough' and there needed to be greater recognition of the importance of funding youth work in rural Ireland. The issue of resourcing was linked to the need to recognise the youth work profession and the contribution it makes to young people, their families and the wider community.

Youth work is substantially underfunded and currently stands at 15% below 2008 levels. Since 2011 overall government spending has increased by 12% but funding of the youth work sector has only increased by 0.3%. In fact, since 2014, youth work has only received 2% of the additional budget for Department of Children and Youth Affairs. The 2019 funding of the Youth Service Grant Scheme is just above 2005 levels, not taking inflation into account.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- > NYCI recommends that in recognition of the lack of youth work funding to meet the needs of the sector to respond to rural youth, that the Government increase the overall investment in rural youth work.
- > NYCI recommends that in the reform of the Youth Service Grant Scheme the specific needs of delivering youth work in a rural context are considered and the objectives and criteria of the scheme facilitate voluntary youth organisations to enhance their provision in rural locations.
- > NYCI recommends that the objectives and criteria of the new Targeted Youth Funding Scheme consider and facilitate the delivery of youth work in a rural context. The scheme

should include support for the extra and additional costs of providing rural youth work, for example transport costs for young people travelling to the youth work setting or for youth work activities that are not covered under the existing programme funds.

2. THE CHALLENGES OF RECRUITING AND RETAINING VOLUNTEERS IN YOUTH WORK

Youth workers and volunteer youth leaders highlighted the issue of volunteering. Both argued that it was extremely challenging to recruit suitable volunteers and to retain them, principally because of the time required due to additional demands of an increasingly regulated framework. The view was expressed by youth workers and volunteer youth workers that with the increased emphasis on compliance with regulations, there were increasing demands placed on a volunteer's time. Some research participants felt this deterred those considering volunteering an hour or two a week. Furthermore, volunteering in rural areas can be particularly challenging because the young people and their parents are likely to be known to the volunteer and as a result, the expectations of the volunteer's role can be subject to greater scrutiny.

In relation to the impact of compliance on volunteer retention, youth workers considered compliance work to be particularly impactful in terms of affecting volunteer retention in their organisation. Some felt that volunteers didn't sign up to do paperwork and that this aspect of their volunteering was off-putting and had resulted in them leaving the organisation. In other cases, respondents felt that paid staff had taken on an increased administrative burden and as a result the level of support offered to volunteers had diminished causing them to reconsider volunteering their time. Some reinforced that the increased emphasis on compliance was demanding.

On a more positive note, the focus group discussion reaffirms the valuable role volunteers play in youth work provision, particularly in the club-model of youth work. Volunteer youth leaders elaborated on the valuable and enriching contribution volunteering makes to them personally. While volunteers provide an important contribution to youth work provision, it was pointed out by some youth workers interviewed, that an overreliance on volunteering to support the youth work sector should be avoided. There are aspects of the work that cannot be done by volunteers and there needs to be recognition of the importance of investing adequately in the youth work sector to support the appointment of youth work professionals to increase the capacity of the sector to respond to the needs of young people.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- > NYCI recommends that Government should include proposals and actions to support volunteering and other measures to recruit, train and retain volunteers in rural Ireland, in the National Volunteer Strategy, which is currently being developed.
- > NYCI recommends that Government commission a feasibility study on introducing a tax rebate for volunteers, in recognition of their contribution to youth work and to encourage more people to volunteer their time.

3. PUBLIC TRANSPORT

The lack of a public transport infrastructure to support rural Ireland was highlighted throughout the focus groups as a key barrier to access to youth work and youth services. It greatly inhibited access to supports and facilities in urban centres. Youth workers emphasised the costs of providing additional transport to supplement an inadequate public transport system. There were very good examples of how they provided buses to events or encourage parents to 'car share' but they were at pains to say that the lack of public transport was very significant challenge.

The National Planning Framework Ireland 2040 provides a vision for infrastructural development but in relation to the plan for public transport it is heavily concentrated on the main urban centres and neglects to adequately address rural development and socio-economic inclusion. In March 2018, the National Transport Authority published its first strategic plan for the Local Link Rural Transport Programme. This plan sits within the overarching framework of the Authority's Statement of Strategy, 2018 - 2022.

In July, the Houses of the Oireachtas published a Report of the Joint Committee on Regional and Rural Transport Policy. The report highlighted the need for increased funding to ensure access to rural transport and connectivity, to and from rural areas, to address the uneven distribution of public transport services in rural areas. It also recommended the implementation of the other recommendations of the report, which include:

- > Increasing funding for national, regional and local roads to ensure access to rural transport and connectivity to and from rural areas.
- > Developing synergies between all Government Departments with rural transport responsibilities to ensure the rural transport agenda is kept to the fore and that funding, rather than just planning is provided.
- > Providing morning to midnight commuter services linking rural towns to urban areas with third level colleges, hospitals and major employers.
- > Changing the subsidies system for public service operators (PSO) to ensure train and bus fares are the same per km in urban and rural areas.
- > Identifying and funding new infrastructural developments to resolve over-concentration of road development and public transport in the east the country.
- > Developing expansion plans for Local Link services.
- > Including in national transport policy an assurance that services, where appropriate, are strategically provided to create demand rather than purely to respond to demand.
- > Expanding rural, local and regional bus networks.
- > Increasing Government funding to the Western Development Commission.
- > Inclusion of the Western Rail Corridor in any Government policy as a significant component of any transport development in realising the full potential of the western region.
- > Urgently addressing insurance and regulation issues surrounding new rural transport initiatives; for example, the community taxi services.
- > Mapping out bus route services in all counties and regularly update and publish them in consultation with local communities.

NYCI welcomes the recent announcement in Budget 2020 to allocate €2.7 billion to the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in 2020, to include investment in the rural transport network. We recommend that a significant proportion of this budget allocation is used to resource and implement the following public transport policy recommendations.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- > Government to introduce a subsidy for people under 18 to reduce the cost of travelling on public transport for young people.
- > Resource and implement the key actions identified to promote access for children and young people to public transport in rural areas, contained in the Local Link Rural Transport Programme Strategic Plan 2018 – 2022.
- > Adequately resource and implement the recommendations of the Joint Committee on Regional and Rural Transport Policy.
- > Provide community buses for rural counties and a fund to provide for the cost of insurance and fuel.

4. ACCESS TO BROADBAND

The absence of quality broadband was highlighted by many research participants as a significant issue. The lack of connectivity in black spots inhibits access to the internet and this has implications for accessing information, support services and communicating with peers online. It is imperative the National Broadband Scheme is prioritised and rolled out immediately to ensure rural Ireland is an attractive place for young people to continue to live, study and work.

RECOMMENDATION:

- > Roll out the National Broadband Scheme as planned to ensure the provision of a functioning, country-wide broadband system that meets the targets set in the Digital Strategy for Europe.

5. LACK OF SPECIALISED SUPPORT SERVICES FOR RURAL YOUTH

The issue of lack specialised support services for young people living in rural Ireland was highlighted by youth workers interviewed. Two of the case studies, profiled in Section 7 of this report, highlight examples for youth work practice in response to young people from the LGBTI+ community in County Wexford, and an example of a Crisis Text Line which provides a free texting service for people in crisis.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- > Increase funding for a range of outreach services (including mental health and counselling for young people) in rural communities.
- > HSE to further invest in public awareness campaigns to increase awareness for counselling supports available to people living in rural Ireland.
- > Increase funding to ensure the availability of free online counselling supports to engage with young people in crisis.
- > Increase funding for additional LGBTI+ youth workers in rural counties across the Republic of Ireland.

6. ACCESS TO A NATIONAL APPRENTICESHIP SCHEME FOR RURAL YOUTH

The expansion and growth in apprenticeships in the last number of years has increased from 10445 in 2016⁵ to 16000 in 2019.⁶ Funding has also increased by 131% from €52.7m in 2014 to €122m in 2018.⁷ There has been increased support for apprenticeships from Government with a commitment to increase the number of new entrants to 9000 per annum by 2020 through the introduction of a range of new apprenticeships in areas such as animation, horticulture and healthcare.⁸ While these developments are positive, youth workers highlighted the lack

⁵Dáil Éireann, Parliamentary Questions 114, 117-119, 18th January 2018 <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2018-01-18a.295>

⁶Dáil Éireann, Parliamentary Questions 367-377, May 8th 2019 <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2019-05-08a.1001>

⁷Dáil Éireann, Parliamentary Questions 367-377, May 8th 2019 <https://www.kildarestreet.com/wrans/?id=2019-05-08a.1001>

⁸<https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2017-Press-Releases/PR17-12-08.html>

of education, training and apprenticeship and training opportunities for young people living in rural Ireland and recommended additional investment to provide a national scheme, which would allocate places for young people living in rural localities. This will require investment. In 2019, the funding for SOLAS pre-apprentice programme was € 873, 000, which is less than 1% of the overall apprenticeship budget, with no direct state funding for access to apprenticeship programmes. NYCI endorses programmes such as the TU Dublin Access to Apprenticeship (ATA)⁹ programme funded by the private sector that supports young people aged 16 – 24 from disadvantaged backgrounds, and with limited educational qualifications in Dublin City. The TU Dublin ATA programme supports the participants over a 12-week period to sample a range of apprenticeship opportunities, assists with CV and interview preparation and includes two weeks of work experience. NYCI supports the proposal to implement this model nationwide, including in rural locations involving the key stakeholders, such as the local Education and Training Boards, Institutes of Technology, SOLAS, local employers and the local youth and community sector. This programme provides supports and tackles barriers, which may prevent disadvantaged and underrepresented groups from opting for and being able to sustain an apprenticeship.

RECOMMENDATION:

- > NYCI recommends the inclusion of rural youth as a target group in the roll out of a national Access to Apprenticeship scheme, to support the uptake and inclusion of young people in apprenticeship programmes in Ireland.

7. INVEST IN A NATIONAL INTERPRETING SUPPORT SERVICE FOR THE YOUTH WORK SECTOR

The research highlighted there is a need for a national interpreting service to support youth workers working with young people and their families, who have immigrated to Ireland and have English language difficulties. It was also highlighted that there needs to be greater investment to support the integration of new communities in rural Ireland.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

- > Invest in the establishment of a national interpreting service for the youth work sector to utilise in their work with young people and their families experiencing English language difficulties in rural areas.
- > Increase investment to support the integration of new communities in rural Ireland.

SUMMARY OF YOUNG PEOPLE'S RECOMMENDATIONS TO GOVERNMENT

- > Provide additional investment for youth work services and facilities in rural localities in Ireland.
- > Provide an accessible rural public transport system.
- > Invest in a subsidised rural transport scheme for young people like the Local Link transport service available to pensioners.
- > Foster greater investment in the regions to provide improved educational and employment opportunities in rural parts of Ireland and incentivise farming as an occupation.
- > Increase the minimum wage for people under 18.
- > Invest in the apprenticeship model and promote it to young people of both genders, who do not want to pursue a further or higher education, as an alternative career option.

⁹<https://www.dit.ie/colleges/collegeofengineeringbuiltenvironment/accesstoapprenticeship/>

TOPIC GUIDE
FOR FOCUS
GROUPS WITH
YOUTH WORK
VOLUNTEERS/
YOUTH
WORKERS

TOPIC GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUPS WITH YOUTH WORK VOLUNTEERS/YOUTH WORKERS

TOPIC GUIDE FOR FOCUS GROUP WITH YOUTH WORKERS/YOUTH WORK VOLUNTEERS

The following questions are intended to guide the discussion on rural youth work in Ireland. It is envisaged that the focus group will take approximately 60mins and will be audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

BRIEF OUTLINE 'REMINDER' OF NYCI RESEARCH PROCESS

- > Welcome and introduction to the research.
- > Assurances of anonymity, how data will be recorded and used, process for discussion.
- > Purpose of the research.
Explain purpose of research; to develop a policy response and use the research to advocate for additional funding to improve the quality and provision of youth work for young people living in rural Ireland. Explain the need for the use of a dictaphone during the session and check everyone is okay with this before proceeding.
- > Rules of Engagement – Respect each other's opinion, no cross talking, put phones to one side (on silent) etc.

ROUND TABLE WARM UP

- > Can you tell me a little bit about yourselves? (v. brief to 'warm up' discussion).
 - > Ask everyone to introduce themselves.
1. Can you tell me a little about your organisation and the work it does?
 2. How does youth work respond to the needs of young people living in rural Ireland?
*Where does your organisation provide services in rural localities?
Can you elaborate on the nature and scope of the programme and projects?
What sort of work is taking place?*
 3. How does the youth work provided contribute to young people's lives?
 4. What do you think are the key issues/concerns facing young people living in rural Ireland?
 5. What barriers to youth work participation currently exist for young people living in rural areas?
*Are there gaps in provision? If so, where are the gaps?
How can these gaps be addressed? What needs to be improved in the provision of existing services?*
 6. In your view, is there an effective information service for young people living in rural Ireland?
Can you say a bit more about this? How does it work currently? Is there scope for improvement in this regard? How could the improvements you have proposed be realised?

7. From your perspective, what are the current challenges facing the youth work sector in rural Ireland?
8. How do these inhibit the rolling out of high quality youth work provision in Ireland (as envisaged in the National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, National Youth Strategy, National Qualifications Framework and by the youth work practitioners)?
9. How can these challenges be adequately addressed in public policy?

Thank you for your participation in this interview!

TOPIC GUIDE
WITH YOUNG
PEOPLE
LIVING
IN RURAL
IRELAND

TOPIC GUIDE WITH YOUNG PEOPLE LIVING IN RURAL IRELAND

CHECK TO ENSURE ALL PARTICIPANTS HAVE SUBMITTED THEIR PARENTAL CONSENT AND THEIR OWN CONSENT FORMS.

BRIEF OUTLINE 'REMINDER' OF NYCI RESEARCH PROCESS

- > Welcome and introduction to the research.
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Explain purpose of research; to develop a policy response and use the research to advocate for additional funding to improve the quality and provision of youth work for young people living in rural Ireland. Explain the need for the use of a dictaphone during the session and check everyone is okay with this before proceeding.
- > Rules of Engagement – Respect each other's opinion, no cross talking, leave your phones to one side or put them on silent etc.

ROUND TABLE WARM UP

- > Can you tell me a little bit about yourselves? (v. brief to 'warm up' discussion).
- > Ask everyone to introduce themselves.
- > Age?, where you are from in Mayo/Wicklow, what stage in education are you at?, what your interests are, involvement in youth work? and how long you have been attending the Comhairle?

1. ELICITING WHAT LIFE IS LIKE FOR A YOUNG PERSON LIVING IN MAYO/WICKLOW

- > *What is it like to live in Mayo/Wicklow as a young person?*
- > *What is there to do?*

2. ISSUES FACING YOUTH IN RURAL IRELAND

- > *In your opinion, what are the issues /concerns facing young people living in the area?*
- > *In rural Ireland?*

3. YOUNG PEOPLE'S VIEWS ON FACILITIES AND SERVICES AVAILABLE TO THEM

- > *What would you like to see happening in your community to improve life for young people?*
- > *Have you any ideas about resources that are needed or services that are required for young people?*
- > *Are there any gaps? How could these be addressed?*
- > *Do you have any links with other organisations working with young people in your areas? What organisations?*
- > *Describe what you think would be a quality youth work service to your community?*
- > *Any thoughts on where the service for this area should be based?*

4. INFORMATION SERVICES

- > *Is there an effective information service for young people in your areas?*
- > *Can you tell me a little more about this?*
- > *How do you and your peers access information?*
- > *What sort of information might you be looking for?*
- > *Is the broadband infrastructure efficient?*
- > *How does this inhibit your access to information?*
- > *Have you any suggestions on how information services for young people could be improved?*

5. WHAT WERE YOUR FIRST IMPRESSIONS OF PARTICIPATING IN YOUTH WORK?

6. WHAT DOES ATTENDING COMHAIRLE MEAN TO YOU?

- > *How does it make you feel?*
- > *How does it operate?*
- > *Are there any thing would change about it?*

7. WHAT HAVE YOU GAINED PERSONALLY FROM THE EXPERIENCE?

- > *Friendship?*
- > *Confidence?*
- > *Interpersonal skills?*

8. HOW MANY OF YOU ARE INVOLVED IN OTHER YOUTH WORK INITIATIVES? SHOW OF HANDS, PLEASE.

- > *Can you tell me a little about that? What do you do there? Is it good fun?*
- > *What motivates you to attend and participate in youth work?*

9. EXPERIENCE OF LIVING IN RURAL IRELAND

- > *What is it like living in rural Ireland?*
- > *What are the good things about it?*
- > *Are there things you don't like about living in rural Ireland?*

10. FEELINGS ABOUT HOME – TAPPING INTO THE CONCEPTS OF 'IDENTITY,' HOME AND A SENSE OF BELONGING.

- > *How do you feel about being from Mayo/Wicklow?*
- > *Is it a good place to grow up? Why?*
- > *Are there 'enough' attractive opportunities available for young people in Mayo/Wicklow?*
- > *Are there any downsides? Where are the gaps? How do you think these might be improved upon?*

11. DO ANY OF YOU ENVISAGE A TIME WHEN YOU MIGHT LEAVE MAYO/WICKLOW IN THE FUTURE?

- > *Why and what would you do?*
- > *How do you think you might feel about the prospect of leaving?*
- > *What might you miss?*

12. WHAT ARE YOUR HOPES FOR RURAL IRELAND?

13. IS THERE ANYTHING GOVERNMENT COULD DO TO IMPROVE LIVING CONDITIONS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE AND THEIR FAMILIES LIVING IN RURAL IRELAND?

- > *What can be done (at a national policy level) to make rural Ireland a more attractive place for young people to live in and to stay or to return if they do leave?*

Thank you for your participation in this focus group. It has been very useful, and I have really enjoyed talking to you all and hearing about your experience and thoughts of growing up Mayo/Wicklow.



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