

National Youth Council of Ireland briefing to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on Youth Work.

About the National Youth Council of Ireland

The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) is the representative body for 54 voluntary youth organisations in Ireland. Our member organisations work with, and for, up to 380,000 young people in every community in Ireland, with the support of 40,000 volunteers and 1,400 paid staff.

NYCI functions to represent the interests of young people and youth organisations and its role as the National Representative Youth Work Organisation is recognised in legislation (Youth Work Act, 2001). The work of NYCI is based on principles of equality, social justice and equal participation for all. In achieving these aims, the NYCI seeks the emergence of a society in which young people are valued and supported to achieve their full potential.

Overview

The NYCI welcomes the opportunity to brief the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on youth work.

As the umbrella body that represents and supports the interests of voluntary youth organisations, we understand the breadth of challenges facing the young people our members work tirelessly to support and the practical, financial and strategic challenges facing the wider sector and individual youth work organisations.

Youth work provision in Ireland has changed significantly in the 22 years since the introduction of the Youth Work Act 2001, which provided a statutory framework for the provision of youth work programmes and services.

While the sector's foundation is based on voluntary participation by young people and the support of tens of thousands of volunteers, since 2001 it has increasingly professionalised by adapting to and informing best practice, quality and training standards through the [National Quality Standards Framework](#), [North-South Education and Training Standards](#) and [National Quality Standards for Volunteer-led Youth Groups](#), and through the development of degree-level courses in youth work.

Ireland is one of only six European countries of 41 surveyed by the Council of Europe, to have such courses in place, and is viewed very favourably internationally in terms of the development of the sector, despite low levels of expenditure on youth work¹.

Meanwhile, the sector has continued to prove its resilience, through its successful efforts to provide non-formal educational experiences that have been demonstrated to transform young lives, in the face of underfunding, increasing reporting pressures and demands from funders, a growing youth population, an important role in delivery of national policy frameworks, successive crises of COVID, the war in Ukraine and the rising cost-of-living, and the additional supports entailed in supporting young people - especially those facing disadvantage - to cope with these challenges.

It is in this context this submission aims to give members of the Committee an understanding of:

- [Defining youth work in Ireland and how it is funded;](#)
- [How youth work changes young lives;](#)
- [Challenges facing youth work organisations and the young people they serve;](#)

- [NYCI's recommendations.](#)

Defining youth work in Ireland and how it is funded

Youth Work in Legislation

Youth work has been enhancing the lives of young people and adults in Ireland for more than 100 years. It was given formal statutory recognition in the Youth Work Act 2001, and defines youth work as:

“A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement, and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training.”

This legal definition was formed in the context of a commitment to partnership between the state and the voluntary sector in the design and delivery of youth work programmes and services. The Act recognises that youth work is provided primarily by voluntary organisations, with statutory support from the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY) and Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

The Irish definition, Irish youth work organisations and policy frameworks (National Policy Framework for Children and Young People and National Youth Strategy) have been influential in helping to guide the emerging consensus across the European Unionⁱⁱ and the Council of Europe^{iiiv} on the nature, values, principles and purposes of youth work, and continues to prove a sound statutory basis for youth work that is flexible enough to support the diversity of and changes in youth work.

Youth Work in Practice

Youth work is above all, an educational and developmental process, that is based on the fundamental principles of young people’s voluntary participation, starting from “where young people are at” and recognising young people and youth workers as partners in a learning process.

Youth work is often referred to as ‘non-formal education’ and provides transformational opportunities for young people to engage in diverse programmes and activities across areas including arts, recreation, global citizenship, rights and equality issues, health and wellbeing, and life skills such as leadership, teamwork and decision making, among many others.

It takes place in a wide range of settings, including youth clubs and youth centres, outreach and detached projects, youth cafes, youth arts groups, youth action and participation groups and drug and alcohol projects. Effectively, wherever young people are at.

“One of the young people we worked with was only 18 when he found himself homeless.

He had nowhere to go, but the youth workers in our service helped him to find a hostel bed. He comes to us every day at 11am and is involved in a few of our projects. Because of youth work, he has a hot meal every day and a place where he can come and feel at home.

Without us, he’d have nowhere to go and nothing to do during the day. We encouraged him to stay in education, so he’s just started a course at Youthreach. His future was uncertain, but it’s so rewarding to see him on a good path now.

- Jason, Youth Worker in Donegal

How is youth work funded in Ireland?

Youth policy is funded through DCEDIY. Its Youth Justice, Adoption, Youth and Participation Division is responsible for the administration of youth service funding, along with the reform of youth funding programmes.

Funding for youth services is provided in two main ways, under a universal scheme termed the *Youth Services Grant Scheme* and under targeted schemes.

With a small number of exceptions, all funding is managed through intermediary bodies on the Department's behalf. In the case of targeted schemes, funding is administered through Education and Training Boards to local youth services and clubs. In the case of the Youth Services Grant Scheme, funding is administered through Pobal to national youth organisations.

The majority of funding is directed at **targeted schemes**, with 62% of funding in 2022 (€44.8m) put toward to the *UBU - Your Place Your Space* targeted youth funding scheme.

The scheme began in July 2020 and works in conjunction with local service providers, who offer young people a dedicated 'place' and a 'space' in their local community. UBU replaced four existing schemes and arose from the results of a 2014 'Value for Money and Policy Review' of the Youth Programmes that target disadvantaged young people^v.

The scheme's arrangements assigned a role to local statutory bodies, the Education and Training Boards (ETBs), as intermediaries between DCEDIY and national voluntary youth services providers.

Targeted youth work is designed to meet the specific needs and requirements of young people aged 10-24 who may be facing particular challenges, including marginalisation and social exclusion. This can include young people who are experiencing poverty, discrimination, mental health issues, or other forms of disadvantage, and it aims to enable young people to identify and achieve their personal, social and educational goals through interventions that are tailored to their needs^{vi}.

The second largest funding scheme is the *Youth Services Grant Scheme* which accounted for 18% (€12,886,597) of funding made available to youth organisations and services in 2022. This funding historically has contributed to the 'core' costs of national youth organisations.

Funding is provided on an annual basis to 30 national and major regional voluntary organisations. The continued funding of voluntary youth organisations through the Scheme is intended to ensure the promotion, growth, and development of youth organisations with distinct **universal youth work** philosophies and programmes aimed at the social education of young people.

Universal youth work is intended to provide services and support to all young people in a particular area or community, regardless of their individual needs or circumstances. Universal youth work is open to all young people, and its purpose is not pre-determined or aimed at addressing specific issues or problems as defined by policy makers^{vii}.

Universal youth work also tends to be volunteer led, whereas targeted youth work is mostly staffed by professional youth workers^{viii}.

Despite not adopting a focus on pre-defined outcomes, a recent rapid review of evidence in respect of the benefits and outcomes of universal youth work by academics in NUI Galway on behalf of DCEDIY^{ix}, showed lasting and meaningful outcomes for individual young people and society by engaging in universal youth work, across a range of areas from development to wellbeing, employment, skills development, social cohesion and provision of safe spaces, among many others.

Volunteer-led youth clubs are crucial for many young people in communities where there is little or no provision to allow young people to come together outside of school. This is particularly true in rural communities where the infrastructure and demand is not present to support targeted groups.

Local youth clubs are where young people gather to have free, unstructured, safe spaces to be with their friends with the support of adult volunteers.

Universal youth work was impacted by COVID, particularly in respect of volunteer recruitment and retention. Additional funds for volunteer training and expenses, and to support local and national youth work recruitment campaigns are much needed, and unless universal youth work funding keeps pace with other funding streams, it faces threats in terms of delivery of services to young people who engage with it.

Funding for the YSG scheme thankfully rose by 12.1% over the period 2020 to 2022 but did not keep pace with growth in the UBU scheme (15.5% increase). NYCI believes that investment in Budget 2024 is required so universal youth work can keep pace with that in targeted youth work.

Other funding schemes and sources

Funding is also provided to youth work organisations through:

- Funding for Youth Information Centres;
- Local Youth Club Grants Scheme to support volunteer-led youth work with small grants up to €3,000 through ETBs;
- Funding for LGBTI+ Youth Strategy.

Local youth work organisations are also reliant on local fundraising and philanthropy.

The total funding available for Youth Organisations and Services in 2023 is €75,648,000.

This represents a 3.9% increase (€2,853,000) on 2022, but only 42 cent of every €1 of that increase will go towards current funding for youth work organisations. While an increase in capital funding is helpful for one-off capital needs, ultimately youth work organisations need significant additional current funding on a multi-annual basis to ensure sustainability, as they cope with a range of challenges, including recruitment and retention of both staff and volunteers, increased costs of operating and a growing youth population, which will be addressed later in this document.

In 2023, youth work received only 1.2% of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth budget^x, which NYCI believes reflects the lack of priority placed on a sector that delivers a significant impact on young lives.

How Youth Works Changes Lives

NYCI hears consistently from its members, youth workers and young people who engage with their services about how truly transformational youth work experiences can be in young lives.

Youth work has an intrinsic, but often intangible societal value. Often, it is only years later that young people pinpoint their engagement with youth work as a turning point in their lives and journey to uncovering hidden talents, finding their voice and overcoming adversity. We frequently learn of such realisations from people in all walks of life, including from members of the Oireachtas.

“I was a Traveller girl from Labre halting site in Ballyfermot and I was involved in youth clubs from a young age. I didn’t like school and I was at risk of dropping out. My mother died before I started secondary school and then I was in a horrible accident that put me in a wheelchair for a while. I was angry and I couldn’t understand why all these bad things had happened.

Youth club was a space I could go after school to do my homework. It was a space where I could just go and have a bar of chocolate and a cup of tay. When you’re 12 or 13, you don’t really know that you’re poor, but there’s no way I would have finished school without youth work. I never felt judged. Youth work didn’t take away my culture as a Traveller, but instead gave me the tools to live as a free young person exploring the world.

I wouldn’t be the person I am today without the youth club.”

- Senator Eileen Flynn.

Youth work can sometimes feel like a concept that is hard to measure, but Irish and international evidence reviews clearly demonstrate very positive outcomes for individual young people and society from youth work, and well-developed national youth work sectors.

These outcomes include:

- Personal development and growth, including increased confidence, openness to feedback, motivation and identity development;
- Improved physical and mental health and wellbeing^{xi}, including enhanced ability to manage anxiety and depression, and a reduction in risky behaviours around drug-taking, smoking and engagement in sexual activity;
- Provision of a safe space, where young people can be themselves;
- Improved education skills, including showing greater motivation, engagement, connection in school, improved formal educational attainment, the development of hard and soft skills for the workplace and enhanced career aspirations and entrepreneurialism, as well as;
- Enhanced social responsibility and positive peer connections and connections with adults^{xixxiiiixv}.

While youth work is not focused on narrow or defined economic outcomes, evidence from Ireland and the UK demonstrates the significant contribution youth work makes to national economies^{xvixvii}. Research carried out for NYCI in 2012 made a conservative estimate that every €1 invested in youth work, was worth €2.20 to the Irish economy^{xviii}.

Additionally, Ireland has the second highest participation rates in youth work organisations in the European Union^{xix} with 23% of 16–30-year-olds having joined a youth organisation at some point in their lives. This is compared to the EU average of 14%.

Ireland is also recognised in as having one of the strongest youth work networks, quality standards and education pathways to youth work careers in Europe^{xx}.

All of this demonstrates the strength and resilience of voluntary youth organisations in Ireland.

Ireland is a hub of positive policy, practice and academic development, and viewed as leaders in Europe.

We have high participation rates in youth work, extensive reviews demonstrating the significant impact and outcomes of youth work, a wealth of qualitative evidence and the lived experience of

young people to speak to its personal impact, along with economic evidence in support of the value of investment in youth work. Despite this, youth work remains underfunded.

Challenges facing youth work organisations and the young people they serve

Only in 2023 has funding for youth work organisations recovered to pre-financial crash levels, rising from €73.1m in 2008 to €75.65m in 2023.

Current funding, however, remains at €72,948,000, while funding for the YSG Scheme which funds universal youth work is still below 2008 levels^{xxi}, and despite welcome increases in recent years, these have not kept pace with investment in targeted youth work.

The overall funding package has not risen sufficiently to meet:

- Youth population growth. The 2016 Census estimated the youth population would rise to just under 1 million in 2023^{xxii}, a rise of over 115,000 (13%) on the 2011 Census^{xxiii}, which doesn't account for the significant increase in young people as a result of the war in Ukraine;
- Additional pressures on youth work organisations following the war in Ukraine, to meet growing demand for services and provide trauma-informed practice and upskilling for youth workers to respond to the needs of adverse childhood experiences;
- The need to support to youth work organisations to empower young people to understand and challenge racism;
- The legacy of Covid for so many young people and
- The impact of COVID and closures of in-person work on the sector, which is still being felt in challenges found in the return of volunteers to youth work since COVID, and broader volunteer recruitment issues.

Along with this, youth work organisations are struggling to cope with the cost-of-living crisis, and this is manifesting itself in a myriad of ways.

NYCI conducted a survey of its members in August-September 2022 and found youth work organisations facing huge challenges in dealing with additional costs due to inflation. Among the most common issues raised were operational costs, including increased heating costs (72% of members), additional outlay on food and snacks (65%) and rising insurance costs (62%).

Comments from our members showed that increased costs were leading to potentially impossible decisions between redirecting funds to keep youth work centres and buildings operating and supporting young people.

“Given the rise in cost of Living (Heating, Fuel etc.) Much of the budget is being redirected to these costs taking away from the cost that could directly and should be used in the provision of direct youth work.”

“We have not reduced staff hours at the moment to cover the rising costs but it maybe something we may have to consider or implement in 2023.”

“We cannot offer as much diversity in what we deliver because we cannot afford the materials. We are spending majority on just keeping the building running. As a result, the 'fun' in youth worker has been vastly minimized, and inflation has reduced us to just providing a basic service. Our numbers have increased, so therefore service demand has increased but the funding has not increased to reflect this.”

- Selected youth workers and service managers, August-September 2022.

In October, DCEDIY and the Department of Rural and Community Development opened the Community and Voluntary Energy Support Scheme (CVESS) to youth work organisations, and this has proven a lifeline for some.

However, more investment will be required to tackle ongoing challenges in the sector. 72% of our members had experienced an 'increase in demand for services in the last 6 months', at a time when almost 3 in 4 agreed they had seen an increase in deprivation amongst young people in the communities they work in, because of the rising cost-of-living.

Recruitment challenges

The sector is doing "more with less", as a result, and this is bearing out in the twin challenges of retaining staff in a low-paid sector amid a cost-of-living crisis which is squeezing incomes, while dealing with greater deprivation, food poverty and reports of homelessness among young people.

Recruitment and retention of youth workers has been a challenge in recent years, but recent months have seen this problem exacerbated. A repeat survey of our members of the impact of the cost-of-living crisis is currently live and preliminary feedback suggests recruitment challenges are becoming more severe, while pressures on youth workers are growing:

"The sector is finding it hard to hire youth workers as there are better incentives elsewhere, if this is addressed, the youth workers can do more quality work with the young people with less fear of burn out."

"Attracting new staff to lower paid jobs is difficult in a time of rising costs."

"Hard to recruit and retain staff due to location of service in a high cost of living area. Salaries do not reflect rise in cost of living."

"Youth work is moving more into social care as a result of the rising cost of living."

- Selected youth workers and service managers, April 2022.

Additionally, while NYCI is hearing first-hand reports of the loss of many youth workers to the sector, there is limited data available to understand current, let alone future, workforce challenges, both for paid staff and the large numbers of volunteers which form the foundation of the sector.

NYCI believes a workforce planning review is needed to identify current and future education and career pathways and recruitment and retention needs.

Meanwhile, a report commissioned by NYCI in 2012, and prepared by Indecon^{xxiv}, is the latest available evidence of the size and scale of the sector, including its workforce, volunteering rates and numbers of young people involved in youth work. While this report was influential and provided a robust evidence basis, eleven years on policymakers are still reliant on this to inform funding decisions and NYCI believes DCEDIY must fund an independent review of the scale of the sector, to inform a data-driven approach to funding need.

Impact of cost-of-living on young people

Our surveys of members have also demonstrated the devastating impact of inflation on young people, their communities and families. In August/September 2022, 73% said they saw an increase

in deprivation amongst young people in the communities they work in, and rising costs for youth work organisations were affecting their ability to deliver for young people.

The cost-of-living is being borne out in communities in troubling ways with reports of food poverty and homelessness from our members. Youth workers are at the coalface in addressing these issues and are crucial in the identification of policy challenges and addressing these challenges by supporting delivery of national strategies. Youth work organisations need additional financial support to achieve this by addressing acute short-term challenges and to deliver transformational youth work and experiences for young people in the long-term.

“Huge numbers of young people living in emergency accommodation/ homeless accommodation/ overcrowded conditions.”

“Not being able to afford education and the cost of accommodation has already seen a few of our young people decide to drop out, go to work for a source of income and in a few cases, we have young people choosing to emigrate abroad to seek both financial and home/shelter security. In three specific cases in the recent months, we have had three young people made effectively homeless due to the rising cost of living and inability to afford accommodation.”

“We have young people struggling to fuel and consume adequate food and using “food banks” as well as shelter dinners just to have enough to eat without being left hungry”.

“Most young people are experiencing food poverty at home and come to the centre hungry. When a young person’s basic needs are not being met at home its very hard to deliver youth work. We are finding we are tending to these basic needs first before any youth work can take place.”

“Young people in the community are asking more to eat and cook meals at the youth centre than ever before. They are also bringing home more food each time for their families.”

- Selected youth workers and service managers, April 2022.

What our members are seeing in their communities is reflected in national statistics. CSO figures for 2022 show increasing numbers of children at risk of poverty, rising rates of children and young people experiencing deprivation and rising levels of consistent poverty (table below)^{xxv}, while research from Barnardos showed 3 in 10 have witnessed child food poverty first-hand^{xxvi}.

At risk of poverty, deprivation ¹ and consistent poverty rates by demographic characteristics and year										
	At risk of poverty rate			Deprivation rate ¹			Consistent poverty rate			%
	2020	2021	2022	2020	2021	2022	2020	2021	2022	
Age group										
0-17	16.4	13.6	15.2	18.9	17.0	19.9	7.2	5.2	7.5	
18-34	12.9	8.7	7.8	14.2	15.2	19.8	3.9	3.4	4.0	

¹Deprivation Rate: The share of persons who experience two or more of the eleven deprivation items.

Likewise, the number of young people aged 18-24 in emergency accommodation rose 26% between February 2022^{xxvii} and February 2023^{xxviii}, while the number of children in emergency accommodation also increased by 26% in the same time period.

Meanwhile, a survey conducted for NYCI last August by RED C demonstrated the crippling impact of the cost-of-living crisis on young people aged 18-24, highlighting high expenditure on accommodation and educational costs and public transport.

8 in 10 respondents said that they are fearful for the future and 1 in 2 reported worse mental health in the context of the rising cost-of-living, while almost 1 in 2 said they are struggling to make ends meet. This is compounded by the concerning figure that more than 7 in 10 young people aged 18-24 are considering moving abroad because they think they would enjoy a better quality of life elsewhere, which reflects recent anecdotal evidence shared with NYCI.

Many of these material challenges need to be addressed in the context of cross-Governmental work to address poverty through the new Child Poverty Unit, and the forthcoming new Policy Framework for Children and Young People to be published by DCEDIY this year. The youth work sector is a ready and willing partner to support implementation.

Conclusions and recommendations

Despite welcome increased investment in youth work in recent years, NYCI believes that strategic and multi-annual investment, along with structural improvements will allow for the sustainable youth work sector we need to ensure that youth work changes lives now, and for decades to come, while closer cross-Government coordination is needed to tackle the serious challenges facing young people.

NYCI recommends the Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth:

- Call for increased investment and multi-annual funding streams for the youth work sector in Budget 2024 and beyond to address the challenges outlined in this submission;
- Propose that investment levels in universal youth work keep pace with targeted youth work;
- Ask DCEDIY to invest in an independent review of the scale of the sector, to inform a data-driven approach to funding need, and;
- Fund the sector to carry out a workforce planning review to identify current and future education and career pathway and recruitment and retention issues including terms and conditions of service and short-term contracts;
- Ask DCEDIY to ensure additional supports are provided to support volunteer recruitment and training;
- Recommend that Government address the breadth of social and economic challenges facing young people in the forthcoming National Policy Framework for Children and Young People and National Youth Strategy and position youth work organisations as a key delivery partner;
- Call for detailed multi-agency engagement to drive delivery of those plans and ensure close collaboration with the Child Poverty Unit in the Department of Taoiseach;
- Seek support for youth work organisations through adequate resourcing of initiatives aimed at empowering young people to understand and challenge racism, as set out in the National Action Plan Against Racism.

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- ⁱⁱⁱ Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on youth work. <https://rm.coe.int/1680717e78>
- ^{iv} Council of Europe, Youth Work [accessed 12 April 2023]. <https://pip-eu.coe.int/en/web/youth-partnership/youth-work1#>
- ^v Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2020). Introductory Material for Minister. <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/83571/61c3d819-c6c8-468d-91f5-30945993593b.pdf#page=null>
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- ^x Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2022). Further Revised Estimates for Public Services. <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/251753/327bfbe1-6d7f-4950-835f-c554afc8a1ec.pdf#page=null>
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- ^{xv} Hill, P. (2020) Open Access Youth Work: A Narrative Review of Impact. Centre for Youth Impact. London. King's College London.
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