

Gerard Roe - Opening statement to Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Introduction

Thank you chair, deputies, and senators for the invitation to present to the committee on the current issues facing youth work and for considering our recommendations on the future of our profession. As a youth worker, we don't often get opportunities to talk about our work with decision makers so I am grateful to have this opportunity to do this now.

My name is Gerard Roe. I am a youth worker, activist, and father from Dublin. I am a graduate of the Community and Youth Work programme in Maynooth University and have been involved professionally in youth work for the past 15 years.

The current issues facing youth work

I am passionate about youth work and supporting young people to reach their full potential. It is difficult and challenging, but hugely rewarding work.

Often youth workers feel as if we are firefighting, but in reality we are just dealing with symptoms of wider social policy problems. As the country is in the grip of multiple crises - housing, drugs, health, cost of living - there has never been more of a need for youth work, as young people often are the ones who suffer the fallout of policy failures. We are asked by our funders to achieve specific outcomes for young people, and we do to a large degree, but so many of the issues that young people are experiencing are out of their control, and ours. Youth work has become so outcome driven that it often overlooks the complexity of young people's lives and their lived experiences and what it takes for them to engage meaningfully. The effort it takes for a youth worker to build and maintain trusting relationships is difficult to measure or quantify, yet this is the most important aspect of the work. If you have no relationship or trust with young people, you cannot run programmes and therefore you cannot deliver on predetermined outcomes. Decision makers need to realise the importance and value of building and maintaining relationships, and should make funding decisions on this basis.

Since 2008, the youth work sector has experienced successive funding cuts. Funding has never been restored to pre-2008 levels. The landscape has changed over the past decade, newer challenges have arisen, and problems in communities have gotten worse. Youth workers are expected to do more to address these challenges and deliver on outcomes, but we don't have enough funding or resources to do so. These conditions have led to a problem of recruitment and retention of experienced youth workers, and these workers end up transferring their unique knowledge, skills, and value to other sectors where they find better pay, terms and conditions, and pensions. It is disappointing for youth workers to see their sector in decline over the last 10 years. Youth work also keeps getting moved around Departments. We are operating without a National Youth Strategy, and it feels like our sector has become rudderless and lacking in leadership by those who are supposed to be responsible for driving the sector. It is no surprise that the morale of youth workers is at an all time low, and that they are reconsidering their careers.

Recommendations on the future of youth work

Youth work plays a vital role in helping the State to deliver on its responsibility to young people. It's vital that the sector is prioritised and given the resources it needs to retain valued workers. I've made a number of specific recommendations in my written submission. Broadly, it is time for the State to

take responsibility for developing an interdepartmental, whole-of-Government approach to youth work, and to develop a National Youth Strategy to this end. We need meaningful funding restoration, and better pay, conditions, and pensions for the youth workers who play such a vital role in keeping our statutory services going.

Thank you.