

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

**Topic: Youth Work**

**Date: 18<sup>th</sup> April 2023**

**Opening Statement by: Dr. Sinead McMahon, Maynooth University**

### **Opening**

I would like to thank the Chair and Committee not only for our invitation to speak here today but also for creating this space to publicly discuss issues impacting on youth work. My colleague Professor Maurice Devlin and I both work in the Department of Applied Social Studies at Maynooth University. As part of our commitment to the promotion of human rights, social justice and equality we are the longest established provider of professional education and training in youth and community work in Ireland.

The Committee will have received our submission paper, it provides more details on the following points.

### **Distinctiveness, Value and Relevance of Youth Work**

Youth work is a way of working with young people that is quite distinctive because though it based on relationships between adults and young people, it is always about making young people the centre of that relationship. In Ireland and across Europe we refer to youth work as 'informal education'. This sets it apart from formal education because youth work does not have an imposed curriculum or mandatory attendance system. A core principle is that young people get to decide if they want to be involved and what they want to get from their involvement in youth work.

Given that youth work has a 150-year history very clear evidence exists, and many books, reports and research studies have been written about, the value and contribution of youth work to young people, communities and society. The committee has already heard personal testimony directly from practitioners on the value of youth work to young peoples lives. Youth work continues to be relevant to young people today. This was acknowledged by Minister Roderic O'Gorman when he said in the Dáil that: *'Youth organisations were the unsung heroes of the Covid-19 pandemic' and that their ability to 'adapt quickly' enabled them to provide 'vital support' to young people* (O'Gorman, Dáil Debates, 14<sup>th</sup> October 2020).

However, there are challenging issues facing Irish youth work right now and I have a short time to point to just some of them here.

### **Youth Work Beyond Dublin and Targeted Schemes**

Looking back at the discussions held so far by this Committee I note an emphasis on Dublin based as well as 'targeted' youth work. I want to remind the Committee that Irish youth work is more expansive than this. As someone who grew up in and now lives in a rural area as well as supports rural youth work organisations, I think there is a lack of understanding about the particular challenges faced by rural young people in relation to social issues, isolation and lack of services. NYCI

completed an important study on Youth Work In Rural Areas in 2019 that outlines these challenges. A specific strategy for improving the funding and delivery of rural youth work needs to be considered.

While youth work is often recognised for the ‘targeted’ work it does particularly with young people who have complex needs, this work does not fully define the purpose youth work. Universal, open access youth work that happens in youth clubs, youth information centres, uniformed youth groups and participation initiatives provide informal education opportunities to all young people. However, this type of youth work is underfunded. Universal youth work needs improved investment.

### **Limitations of ‘Value for Money’ Governance**

The reformed youth funding scheme – UBU Your Place Your Space (<https://ubu.gov.ie/about>) has brought significant changes to youth work practice. Based on a value for money approach there are now strict governance rules that youth workers must abide by, including time ratios and ‘allowable’ interventions as well as pre-set outcomes to be achieved. The new governance rules seek to enhance the quantitative value for money performance of youth work but there is little space given to discussion about quality. Good quality youth work practice is about more than just ‘value for money’ and youth work requires appropriate governance that supports quality as well as quantity.

### **The Muted Position of “Youth Work” in Contemporary Youth Policy**

Since the abandonment of the *National Youth Work Development Plan* in 2008 youth work occupies a much more muted position in Irish youth policy today. For example, *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures: The overarching policy for children and young people* published in 2014 gave only fleeting attention to youth work. The value and contribution of youth work needs to be amplified at a policy level and should be more fully integrated into Irish youth policy such as in the emergent new *Policy Framework for Children and Young People*. In addition youth work requires a specific policy framework of its own to harness and protect its distinctive contribution.

### **Crisis in Recruitment and Retention in Youth Work**

The Committee has already heard this from other speakers on this but I want to add our observations. There is now a crisis in the recruitment and retention of youth workers. This is evidenced anecdotally through our connection with youth work organisations. It can also be seen in continuous readvertising of posts on Avelink. At a policy level, while the North South Education and Training Standards Committee (NSETS) oversees professional programme endorsement processes on behalf of the DCEDIY and the Department of Education in Northern Ireland, there is no coordinated approach to workforce planning south of the border. Youth work organisations needs the support of government to help address this crisis in a coordinated way. A review of NSETS own work in relation to professional education and training standards and associated matters is also needed urgently.

**Conclusion:** Youth work remains as relevant and necessary today as it was 150 years ago. However, it needs the support of policy makers and funders to continue to realise the actual and potential contribution of youth work in supporting the diverse range of needs of young people in a rapidly changing Irish society.