

Mary Cunningham, CEO, National Youth Council of Ireland.

Opening Statement to Oireachtas Committee on Children, Disability, Equality, Integration and Youth

Thank you to the Chair and Committee members for inviting the National Youth Council of Ireland here today. My colleague Paul Gordon and I are grateful to the members for their continued focus on youth work and its impact.

Youth work changes lives.

This is the title of a campaign we at the National Youth Council of Ireland have run over many years to raise awareness of the very significant personal and societal value of youth work and the need to adequately resource the sector so it can continue to support almost 400,000 young people it serves.

This is much more than an empty slogan, however. Youth work is a truly transformational process for young people the length and breadth of Ireland.

Every day, we hear from our members, youth workers and young people about young people finding a safe space for the first time in their lives, about the sense of belonging young people, some with traumatic backgrounds, find in youth work, and about the fundamental feeling of openness that enables them to develop the confidence and resilience needed to flourish as young people in the here and now, and not as some staging post to adulthood.

Defining youth work

This kind of work happens in many settings, and broadly speaking, the longstanding principles which underpin youth work include young people engaging as partners, a focus on the needs and experiences of young people as individuals and meeting young people where they are at.

In an Irish context, youth work is viewed as a non-formal educational and developmental process based on the voluntary participation of young people. Voluntary youth organisations are the primary providers of youth work in Ireland. This is enshrined within the Youth Work Act of 2001, which also recognises the NYCI as the National Representative Youth Work Organisation.

Value of youth work

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 this recognition from people in all walks of life, including from members of these Houses.

This means that the impact of youth work can be hard to measure in the here and now, but Irish and international evidence reviews clearly demonstrate lasting and meaningful positive outcomes for individual young people and society as a result of youth work.

These outcomes include:

- Personal development and growth, including increased confidence, openness to feedback, motivation and identity development.
- Improved physical and mental health and wellbeing, including enhanced ability to manage anxiety and depression, and a reduction in risky behaviours around drug-taking, smoking and engagement in sexual activity.
- Improved education and career skills, including showing greater motivation, engagement, connection in school and enhanced career aspirations, as well as
- Enhanced social responsibility and positive peer connections and connections with adults^{iiiiiv}.

While youth work is not focused on narrow or defined economic outcomes, evidence from Ireland and the UK demonstrate the significant contribution youth work makes to national economies^{vi}. 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^{vii}.

Underfunding

Despite this, youth work organisations in Ireland are underfunded. Only in 2023 has funding recovered to pre-financial crash levels, but it has not risen sufficiently to meet youth population growth, the impact of successive crises of COVID, the war in Ukraine and rising cost-of-living on resources, and importantly, the recruitment and retention of volunteers and qualified youth workers.

In 2023, youth work received only 1.2% of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth budget^{viii}.

This is despite having the second highest participation rates in youth work organisations in the European Union^{ix}, and being recognised as having one of the strongest youth work networks, quality standards and education pathways to youth work careers in Europe^x.

We believe this reflects youth work's position as the poor relation of formal education, despite its outsized impact on the lives of young people and the strength of this largely voluntary sector.

The youth work sector not only builds resilience in young people but has demonstrated its own resilience in responding to young people's need with stretched resources. Despite being a standard-bearer in Europe, the sector has been forced to do more with less.

We believe that in facing significant challenges in recruitment, retention and learning and development, it cannot be expected to continue in this vein without a more robust and sustained financial commitment from Government.

Vision for Youth Work

NYCI's vision for youth work is that all young people living in Ireland have access to high-quality, well-resourced youth work services, which meet their expressed needs, and is delivered by paid professionals and well-supported volunteers.

To achieve this and to ensure our sector models best practice in Europe, we ask the Committee to consider our recommendations to:

- Call for increased investment and multi-annual funding streams for the youth work sector in Budget 2024 and beyond;
- 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, career pathway and retention needs, including terms and conditions of service and short-term contracts;
- Recommend that Government address the breadth of social and economic challenges facing young people in the forthcoming National Youth Strategy and position youth work organisations as a key delivery partner.

We believe that these structural improvements and investments will allow for the sustainable youth work sector we need to ensure that youth work changes lives now, and for decades to come.

Thank you for your time and Mr. Gordon and I are happy to take any questions members may have.

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- ⁱ Brady, B., Silke, C. and Shaw, A. (2022) A Rapid Review of the Benefits and Outcomes of Universal Youth Work. Galway: National University of Galway. Available from: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/242329/bb74ad5d-e471-46b3-b6c0-9f34beae4dc2.pdf#page=null>
- ⁱⁱ Council of Europe (2017a) Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers to member States on youth work. Available from: <https://rm.coe.int/1680717e78>
- ⁱⁱⁱ Dickson, K., Vigurs, C.A., and Newman, M. (2013) Youth work: A systematic map of the research literature. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs.
- ^{iv} Hill, P. (2020) Open Access Youth Work: A Narrative Review of Impact. Centre for Youth Impact. London. King's College London.
- ^v UK Youth (2022). The Economic Value of Youth Work. Available from: <https://www.ukyouth.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/09/Economic-Value-of-Youth-Work-Final-260822-STC-clean75-1.pdf>
- ^{vi} YouthLink Scotland (2016). Social and economic value of youth work in Scotland: initial assessment. Available from: <https://www.youthlinkscotland.org/media/1254/full-report-social-and-economic-value-of-youth-work-in-scotland.pdf>
- ^{vii} National Youth Council of Ireland (2012). The Economic Benefit of Youth Work. Available from: <https://www.youth.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/Economic-Benefit-Youthwork-2012.pdf>
- ^{viii} Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (2022). Further Revised Estimates for Public Services. Available from: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/251753/327bfbe1-6d7f-4950-835f-c554afc8a1ec.pdf#page=null>
- ^{ix} Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (2023). Young People's Participation in Youth Organisations. Available from: <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/248594/9cb2c650-d859-4375-b270-e24d7c4ca6fb.pdf#page=null>
- ^x Council of Europe (2020). Promoting Quality in Youth Work Practice in Europe. Available from: <https://pjp-eu.coe.int/documents/42128013/47262613/Promoting-quality-in-youth-work-practice-in-Europe.pdf/4b1c66a0-65e6-bddd-fbe3-ed244a0acd76>