

Gerard Roe - Written submission to Joint Committee on Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth.

Introduction

Thank you chair, deputies, and senators for the invitation to make a submission 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. I have worked in a number of youth services both local and national where I have developed my experience and expertise in youth work, drug education, outreach, campaigning, and advocacy.

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. The difficulties and challenges I mention are not necessarily the young people themselves, but more due to the issues they are presenting with - poverty, hunger, poor mental health, homelessness, family breakdown, reduced school timetable, drug use and addiction in the family, violence and intimidation, waiting lists for assessments, the list goes on.

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 workers and young people are not involved in deciding the metrics, goals, outcomes, or performance indicators of youth work. Pre-determined goals and outcomes often come from the top down, and do not fit with the reality of young people's lives. 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. It is understandable for funders to want a return on their investment, but if you look closely, you can see that it is government policies that are undermining the outcomes youth work is striving for.

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, making the work increasingly more difficult. 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.

The State has a responsibility to all children and young people. Children and young people need consistency and continuity, yet after every election cycle the goal posts keep changing. Youth work finds itself in more precarious situations after each cycle, depending on what Government we have, what priorities they place on children and young people, and what Department we are moved to.

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 is vital that the sector is prioritised and given the resources it needs to retain valued workers. It is time for the State to take responsibility for developing an interdepartmental, whole-of-Government approach to youth work, and addressing poverty and inequality.

1. **Pay and conditions:** Pay, conditions, and pensions need to be improved in order to address issues of recruitment and retention. We need pay parity for youth workers and youth justice workers, and work to address the variance in pay across the country.
2. **Funding restoration:** A real terms restoration of funding for youth work is necessary - funding needs to be increased to pre-2008 levels, plus additional increases for population growth and inflation in the intervening years. Anything less than this is a cut in real terms.
3. **Voices of youth workers:** Youth workers and young people should be given a more central role in developing the policy that affects them, and their perspectives should be reflected in policy.
4. **Interdepartmental approach:** The current disjointed approach whereby services are split across Government Departments and statutory services such as Tusla is not working to address overarching class inequality. An interdepartmental plan or national strategy is needed to drive cooperation and big picture thinking.
5. **Recognition of youth worker profession:** Currently there is a lack of recognition for the role of youth work, despite so many statutory services being absolutely reliant on the support of youth workers. We need to establish a youth worker qualification as a benchmark for employment, and provide full access (no financial barriers) to qualifications. There needs to be better recognition of the role played by youth workers, and more resources spent on data collection and metrics which capture the impact of youth work.