



Opening Statement to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on European Union Affairs on the European Year of Youth.

Mark McNulty, NYCI Youth Representative to the European Youth Forum

23rd of February 2022

Chairman, Deputies and Senators, on behalf of the National Youth Council of Ireland, I want to thank this committee for the invitation to speak to you today concerning the European Year of Youth. The National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) represents 57 voluntary youth organisations in Ireland and our member organisations support more than 380,000 young people across Ireland, with the help of 40,000 volunteers and 1,400 paid staff. We have formal and informal relationships with national youth councils, international non-governmental youth organisations and representative bodies across the EU, which informs our works and allows for regular exchange on European issues.

NYCI's primary means of working with young people in democratic engagement around the European Union is 'Young Voices – EU Youth Dialogue'¹ process, a programme developed by NYCI that creates opportunities for young people from age sixteen to thirty years who have an interest in change making. It brings young people into the policy-making process at a national and European level. Young Voices is a model of youth democratic participation which allows young people to grow and develop capacity, as well as fostering key skills towards achieving long term outcomes which address the policy concerns of young people.

NYCI consistently engages in advocacy at a European level, including through sending delegations of young people to the European Youth Conference and engaging with the European level with the European Youth Forum to represent the voice of Irish youth to the European Commission, Parliament and all other relevant fora.

¹ Further information available from: <https://www.youth.ie/programmes/projects-initiatives/young-voices/>

NYCI has recently been particularly focused on the Conference on the Future of Europe (CoFoE) and as one of NYCI's representatives to the European Youth Forum, I have been keenly following this process. NYCI is a partner with the European Youth Forum on the 25% Project, an innovative project to engage young people and collect ideas from young people across the EU. The project is so named because 25% of the EU's population is made up of young people, but their voices are not equally heard and their opinions not equally represented in political structures and institutions. This project has collected more than one thousand ideas in Ireland.

I think this very clearly illustrates that Irish young people remain thoroughly engaged with the European Union. It is incredibly important that the European Year of Youth is something which increases this engagement with the EU and makes sure young people are heard as we come out of the pandemic, leaving a lasting legacy of the year which benefits young people and the European Union as a whole.

The initial announcement of the Year of Youth was something of a surprise. Speaking to other youth organisations around Europe, nobody expected the announcement for 2022 and it was met with a degree of cynicism in some quarters. However, I think the youth sector have quickly adapted and developed hopes or expectations, for the year. NYCI are members of the steering group for the European year of Youth and will work alongside Léargas as the national coordinator of the Year and the other members to ensure meaningful engagement of young people. We welcome the focus on young people particularly due to impact of the COVID -19 pandemic on young people. The youth work sector plays a pivotal role in supporting young people and in mitigating the negative impact of COVID-19 on their lives. It also emphasised the importance of face-to-face youth work for young people and highlighted that those most at risk were the most disconnected during the pandemic².

I was speaking to a group of MEPs in recent weeks and I summed up the views of young people from recent young voices and 25% events and the view of most young people engaged in EU issues around the European Year of Youth. That is, simply, that young people want to feel they are involved in shaping the EU. It is important that the

² Full version of NYCI's 'Covid-19 and Youth Work, A Review of the Youth Work Response to the COVID Pandemic' report is available here: <https://www.youth.ie/articles/covidreport/>

EU doesn't exist in a Brussels 'bubble' to young people. Instead, it must be something which visibly impacts their lives and something that they can be involved in shaping.

We would hope for a concrete way forward at the end of the year which empowers young people and offers change across all policy spheres and not just within the confines of traditional 'youth' policies. Since 2018 Young Voices have been advocating for a 'Youth Check'³ and more recently the European Youth Forum are proposing a 'Youth Test'⁴ which would require an assessment of how young people are impacted by all EU policies, this is just one way where policy makers could show a commitment to young people. The EU and our own government should seek to consult youth regularly, online and offline, and take the outcomes of these consultations into account.

It is also important that opportunities exist for young people to experience the EU, either through working or studying in other member states or other means, and that these opportunities are available to all young people. We must strengthen these opportunities this year and we would really hope that would involve Ireland developing a plan around the Reinforced Youth Guarantee and implementing it⁵.

Finally, before I conclude, it is hugely important that we ensure youth organisations, large and small are empowered to make sure young people to take advantage of this year. We need buy-in from politicians and every department to ensure that they look to how they can empower young people. The pandemic has shown that young people are a key part of society, we made huge sacrifices, it is important that young people are shown that they matter and are heard throughout this year and into the future.

Thank you for your attention, I welcome any questions or comments you may have on what I have said this morning.

³ Full version of NYCI's Youth Check Report is available here: <https://www.youth.ie/documents/youth-check-report-for-web-final-june-2018/>

⁴ Further information on the European Youth Forum's work around the European Year of Youth is available here: <https://www.youthforum.org/topics/european-year-of-youth>

⁵ Further information on the Reinforced Youth Guarantee is available from the European Commission here: <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=1079&langId=en>