

**CHILDREN'S
RIGHTS
ALLIANCE**

**Submission to the Department of Children,
Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth
on Youth Services**

July 2023



Founded in 1995, the Children's Rights Alliance unites over 140 members working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services.

Accompaniment Support Service for Children (A.S.S.C.)
Alcohol Action Ireland
Amnesty International Ireland
An Cosán
Anew
Anne Sullivan Foundation
Aoibhneas
Archways
AsIAM
Association of Occupational Therapists of Ireland (AOTI)
Association of Secondary Teachers Ireland (ASTI)
ATD Fourth World – Ireland Ltd
Atheist Ireland
Barnardos
Barretstown Camp
Bedford Row Family Project
BeLonG To Youth Services
Bodywhys
Catholic Guides of Ireland
Child Law Project
Childhood Development Initiative
Children in Hospital Ireland
Children's Books Ireland
Children's Grief Centre
Clarecare
COPE Galway
Cork Life Centre
Cork Migrant Centre
Crann Centre
Crosscare
CyberSafeKids
Cycle Against Suicide
Dalkey School Project National School
Daughters of Charity Child and Family Service
Dental Health Foundation of Ireland
Department of Occupational Science and Occupational Therapy, UCC
Disability Federation of Ireland
Doras
Down Syndrome Ireland
Dublin Rape Crisis Centre
Dyslexia Association of Ireland
Dyspraxia/DCD Ireland
Early Childhood Ireland
Early Learning Initiative (National College of Ireland)
Educate Together
EPIC
Equality for Children
Extern Ireland
FamiliBase
Féach
Focus Ireland
Foróige
Gaeloideachas
Galway Traveller Movement
Good Shepherd Cork
Grow It Yourself
Helium Arts
Immigrant Council of Ireland
Inclusion Ireland
Institute of Guidance Counsellors
Irish Aftercare Network
Irish Association for Infant Mental Health
Irish Association of Social Workers
Irish Congress of Trade Unions (ICTU)
Irish Council for Civil Liberties (ICCL)
Irish Foster Care Association
Irish Girl Guides
Irish Heart Foundation
Irish National Teachers Organisation (INTO)
Irish Penal Reform Trust
Irish Primary Principals' Network
Irish Refugee Council
Irish Second Level Students' Union (ISSU)
Irish Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
Irish Traveller Movement
Irish Youth Foundation
iScoil
Jigsaw
Katharine Howard Foundation
Kerry Diocesan Youth Service (KDYS)
Kids' Own Publishing Partnership
Kinship Care
Leap Ireland
Let's Grow Together! Infant and Childhood Partnerships CLG.
LGBT Ireland
Meath Women's Refuge & Support Services
Mecpaths
Mental Health Reform
Mercy Law Resource Centre
Migrant Rights Centre Ireland
Mothers' Union
Museum of Childhood Ireland
Music Generation
My Mind
My Project Minding You
National Childhood Network
National Council for the Blind of Ireland
National Forum of Family Resource Centres
National Parents Council Post Primary
National Parents Council Primary
National Youth Council of Ireland
New Directions
Novas
One Family
One in Four
Parents Plus
Pavee Point
Peter McVerry Trust
Prevention and Early Intervention Network
Psychological Society of Ireland
Rainbow Club Cork
Rainbows Ireland
Rape Crisis Network Ireland (RCNI)
Realt Beag/Ballyfermot Star
Respond Housing
SAFE Ireland
Saoirse Housing Association
SAOL Beag Children's Centre
School of Education UCD
Scouting Ireland
Sexual Violence Centre Cork
Simon Communities of Ireland
SIPTU
Social Care Ireland
Society of St. Vincent de Paul
SPHE Network
SpunOut.ie
St. Nicholas Montessori College
St. Nicholas Montessori Teachers' Association
St. Patrick's Mental Health Services
TASC
Teachers' Union of Ireland
Terenure College Rugby Football Club
The Ark, A Cultural Centre for Children
The Irish Red Cross
The Jack and Jill Children's Foundation
The UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, NUI Galway
The Wheel
Transgender Equality Network Ireland
Traveller Visibility Group Ltd
Treoir
UNICEF Ireland
Variety – the Children's Charity of Ireland
Women's Aid
Young Ballymun
Young Social Innovators
Youth Advocate Programme Ireland (YAP)
Youth Work Ireland

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1. Introduction

The Children's Rights Alliance unites over 100 organisations working together to make Ireland one of the best places in the world to be a child. We change the lives of all children in Ireland by making sure that their rights are respected and protected in our laws, policies and services. We identify problems for children. We develop solutions. We educate and provide information and legal advice on children's rights.

The Children's Rights Alliance welcomes the opportunity to make a written submission to the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth on the new action plan for youth services.

2. Access to Youth Services

Ireland has among the highest levels of young person involvement in youth organisations in the European Union, 20 per cent higher than the EU average.¹ Despite high levels of involvement, barriers to access and inclusion persist in the youth service space.

Certain cohorts of young people are routinely underrepresented, not catered to, or face impediments to inclusion. An estimated 380,000 young people are involved in youth work organisations annually,² of that number 53 per cent come from economically or socially disadvantaged communities.³ Young people from the LGBT community, young people in care, young people from ethnic minorities, and young asylum seekers and Ukrainian refugees can face additional hurdles in accessing youth services. Based in local communities, youth services facilitate unique engagements with young people outside of formal education and family structures.⁴ Youth services provide an environment for social cohesion and integration of different groups in society. By offering solutions and opportunities to the issues facing young people through targeted interventions, the provision of advice, support, and developmental programmes, youth services are an important third space for young people. The provision of a mixture of universal services and targeted interventions for those who need them can act as a panacea to access and inclusion issues. It is important to foster inclusive practice across the board and engaging marginalised young people in universal youth work is critical in order to avoid siloing and the risk of further entrenching stigma.

The Bonn Declaration under the German presidency of the EU and the Council of Europe proposed the principle of a basic youth work offering for all young people all over Europe.⁵ Universal youth work has been associated with positive outcomes across relationships and connection, personal development and growth, civic values and behaviour, health and well-being, and education, career and hard skills.⁶ An emergent theme in youth work policy and practice is that of integration and interculturalism.⁷ A 2017 report examining the views of minority ethnic young people in Ireland on

¹ EU Eurobarometer Number 478, March 2019, <https://europa.eu/eurobarometer/surveys/detail/2224>.

² DCEDIY, *First Five Annual Implementation Plan 2019* (2019) 82.

³ Assessment of the Economic Value of Youth Work by Indecon Economic Consultants (November 2012) 49.

⁴ Children's Rights Alliance, *Child Poverty Monitor 2023* at 146.

⁵ Final Declaration of the 3rd European Youth Work Convention Signposts for the future, 10 December 2020, [3rd EYWC final Declaration.pdf \(bonn-process.net\)](#).

⁶ Brady, B., Silke, C., and Shaw, A. (2022) *A Rapid Review of the benefits and Outcomes of Universal Youth Work*. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway at 47.

⁷ *ibid* at 16.

the role of youth work in their lives found engagement predominantly took place in mainstream groups.⁸ For this cohort, involvement in mainstream youth services played an important role in integration and provided a ‘normalising’ experience by participating in the wider community around a common interest.⁹ Ukrainian refugees could benefit from targeted funding to support participation in such mainstream services to enable integration into communities in the longer term. As part of this funding, education and outreach in the community could be provided as to the needs and experiences of refugees and asylum seekers to build community capacity to support integration. In line with the Council of Europe’s Youth Sector Strategy 2030 priority to extend access to youth services to benefit a wider population of young people,¹⁰ a greater focus on universal youth services should be prioritised in the new action plan for youth services.

One of the eleven European Youth Goals under the EU Youth Strategy 2019 – 2027 is to ‘move rural youth forward.’¹¹ Geographical location can act as a further barrier to access and inclusion with service provision in rural areas being more patchy or untenable in certain areas. In this regard, digital and hybrid youth work options can provide a solution. The EU Youth Strategy encourages Member States to incorporate digital youth work into youth workers’ training and competence standards and to use ‘technological and pedagogical practices to increase access.’¹² Foróige ‘GoVirtual’ programme, which encompasses a virtual reality programme ‘which engages young people in youth work in immersive online spaces’¹³ as well as online clubs and e-mentoring provides a best practice model. The GoVirtual programme reaches and has the potential to reach cohorts of young people for example those on the Aran Islands, children in hospital, and young carers who would not otherwise have access to youth services, increasing access nationally in line with the EU Youth Strategy recommendation to reach out to all young people, in particular those with fewer opportunities.¹⁴ Such programmes have the capacity to reach young people who face other challenges in participation also including social anxiety, disability, chronic ill health, young people in residential settings such as care, long-term hospital stays and international protection accommodation settings. Funding for capacity building in digital youth work and training is required in the new action plan to roll out similar programmes nationwide

Key Recommendations

- A focus on universal service provision with a mix of targeted measures where necessary to extend access to youth services to benefit a wider population of young people in line with the Council of Europe’s Youth Sector Strategy 2030.
- Increase funding for evidence and capacity building in digital and hybrid youth work options, in turn increasing access in rural areas in line with the EU Youth Strategy 2019 – 2027.
- Targeted budget for Ukrainian and refugee youth services to facilitate integration and understanding in local communities, and a feeling of belongingness.

⁸ Walsh, A. (2017) *Make Minority a Priority: A Research Report on Insights from Minority Ethnic Young People in Ireland*. Dublin: National Youth Council of Ireland.

⁹ *ibid* at 107.

¹⁰ Council of Europe, Youth Sector Strategy 2030 – Engaging young people with the Council of Europe’s values, at 16.

¹¹ Council of the European Union, The European Union Youth Strategy 2019 – 2027 (2018/C456/01) C 456/14.

¹² Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The European Council, The Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, *Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy*, COM (2018) 269 at 7.

¹³ Foróige, GoVirtual [GoVirtual | Foroige](#).

¹⁴ Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, The European Council, The Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of Regions, *Engaging, Connecting and Empowering young people: a new EU Youth Strategy*, COM (2018) 269 at 7.

3. Quality in Youth Services

At European level, the EU Youth Strategy 2019-2027 refers to the development and dissemination of toolkits for quality youth work,¹⁵ however these are intended to act as starting points rather than fully adaptable templates.¹⁶ A number of different mechanisms support quality youth work including: organisational, self and peer assessment, reflective practice, quality dialogue and feedback.¹⁷ We hear from our members that diversity and choice of provision in the sector is hugely positive and important, and is a key indicator of quality youth service provision. Members have emphasised to us that there are various ways to achieve great youth outcomes and that it is essential to protect against a homogenous youth service that will not be able to respond as effectively to the needs of different cohorts of young people.

The youth work sector in Ireland has undergone a number of key reforms in recent years with regards to management and governance.¹⁸ Through the introduction of the National Quality Standards Framework for Youth Work (NQSF) in 2010, youth organisations were given a metric to assess their practice and evidence their outcomes through data.¹⁹ Poor data and the variation in metrics and measurability across the sector were identified as barriers to evaluating the impact of youth work by the then Department of Children and Youth Affairs' 2014 value for money review.²⁰ Greater funding and support is needed to enable organisations to conduct research and evaluation of their work, as well as an adjustment to the framework for measuring impact and outcomes to focus more heavily on qualitative data. Youth work is unique in that its impacts are individual rather than figure driven and adjusting the metric of analysis could reflect better such impacts.

High quality services are young person centred, foster equality and diversity, and promote and champion youth participation. Our members have highlighted that high quality provision is enabled through funding opportunities for continuing professional development (CPD) enhancement so that youth workers can continue to meet new and emerging needs of young people, and multi-annual funding to support work planning and staff retention. Many universal services are run by trained volunteers, and volunteer youth services have been shown to be particularly active in supporting young people from disadvantaged groups.²¹ The unique and essential role of volunteers in the youth work sector should be acknowledged and supported in the new action plan.

Key Recommendations

- Support greater diversity of services through targeted supports and funding to recognise, commit to and maintain the value of a diversity of provision across the sector and protect the principle of choice for young people. To facilitate this the Action Plan should recognise and name the extensive variety of what comes under the banner of 'youth services.'
- Increase funding and support to enable youth services to conduct research and evaluation into their work, and an adjustment of the NQSF to focus more on qualitative data to reflect the true impact of the sector.
- Create multi-annual funding streams to support work planning and staff retention.

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ O'Donovan, J. (2020) *Promoting Quality in Youth Work Practice in Europe* European Commission – Council of Europe Youth Partnership at 34.

¹⁷ Brady, B., Silke, C., and Shaw, A. (2022) *A Rapid Review of the benefits and Outcomes of Universal Youth Work*. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway at 18.

¹⁸ *ibid.*

¹⁹ *ibid* at 19.

²⁰ *ibid* .

²¹ Children's Rights Alliance, *Child Poverty Monitor 2023* at 146.

- Greater funding opportunities for CPD enhancement so that youth workers can continue to meet new and emerging needs of young people.

4. Collaboration and Co-operation in the Youth Sector

Young people have the right to express their views freely in matters affecting them under Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC).²² Young people are fundamental actors within the youth work space and should be fully enabled to co-produce and inform national strategies and action plans. Collaboration in this way encourages child centred policy and engagement as well as upholding the participatory rights of young people under Article 12 of the UNCRC.²³ From our consultation with members it is evident that there are great opportunities for enhanced collaboration and co-operation in the sector between services, and between services and government departments as well as many examples of best practice to draw from including: the Rainbow Awards, the National Participation Office within the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY), Peace and Reconciliation programmes, and meitheal style approaches adopted by Jigsaw and Pieta House.

Several core barriers to collaboration between service providers and between service providers and DCEDIY have been emphasised by our members. Members drew attention to issues of competition for funding and this process becoming more territorial in turn decreasing collaboration, staff burnout and retention, and protectiveness over IP brought on by competition for funding as inhibitors of collaboration. Partnerships and collaborations are most effective when they are strategic.

There are additional barriers to collaboration for smaller organisations that may be struggling to meet basic costs of running their services. A considered model of coordination and incentivised collaboration in the sector, and between the Department and the sector, developed with youth work services could lead to shared facilities and resources, improve access to funding, in turn generating greater collaboration. Such a model recognises the complementarity of different approaches and the value of diversity in the sector.

Good collaboration requires capacity, knowledge, and a strong evidence base. Our members have highlighted that research and collaboration in this area is often carried out by individual organisations on an ad hoc basis and is lacking a whole of sector approach. A sector wide approach to building an evidence base and capacity to support collaboration is necessary to increase innovation in the area.

Key Recommendations

- Enhanced inter-departmental coordination, and collaboration by DCEDIY and other funders in the sector to promote a greater understanding of youth work practice across government and the cross pollination of ideas.
- A considered model of coordination and incentivised collaboration supported by funding for partnership development to enable a collaborative rather than a highly territorial environment.
- Promote and support a whole of sector approach to research and collaboration through leadership and capacity building to enable a better research and evaluation environment driving evidence-based results and funding models.

²² UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989), Article 12.

²³ *ibid.*

4. Strengthening the role of Youth Services in supporting young people's rights

The Council of Europe's Youth Strategy 2030 refers to the need for youth work policy and practice to attend to the 'trilogy of rights, knowledge, and participation.'²⁴ Young people's access to rights is one of the key thematic priorities of the Council of Europe's Youth Strategy with special emphasis placed on 'increasing capacity building and resources for youth organisations to provide human rights education and advocate access to rights'²⁵ and 'improving institutional responses to emerging issues affecting young people's rights and their transition to adulthood.'²⁶ Youth services are ideally placed to support young people in promoting and understanding their rights and form safe environments for the realisation of young people's participatory rights under Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC)²⁷ and the right to engage in play and leisure activities under Article 31 UNCRC.²⁸ There is strong evidence that involvement in universal youth services increases youth civic engagement and volunteering as well as having positive outcomes related to equality and diversity.²⁹ Studies demonstrate that as a result of youth work participation, young people are exposed to people from different backgrounds and cultures which improves their awareness of issues related to quality and diversity and increased cultural competency.³⁰ A key enabler of organisations that promote human rights and equality is training staff in human rights based approaches. Funding and supporting further human rights-based education in youth work practice could strengthen the role youth organisations play in promoting young people's rights and ensure consistency of practice nationally.

With the ratification of the UNCRC in 1992, Ireland committed to ensuring the voices of young people are heard and given due weight in matters that affect them. At a national level, government policy since 2000 has been transformative in promoting, protecting, and fulfilling this right from the establishment of Comhairle na nÓg, wide ranging consultation with young people on policy matters, to the more recent addition of the National Participation Office within DCEDIY. The Department is a key enabler and collaborator in this space with youth services. Against this backdrop of positive reform and innovation, the mutually reinforcing actions of the government and youth services could be strengthened through increased collaboration drawing on the experience of youth work organisations to embed best practice into policy and encourage cross sectoral understanding and engagement. Recognising the crucial role youth services play in facilitating consultation with young people, increased funding and capacity support could enable greater participation and outcomes.

Key Recommendations

- Support and fund human rights-based education and training in youth work practice in order to strengthen the role youth organisations play in promoting young people's rights and ensure consistency of practice nationally.

²⁴ Council of Europe, Youth Sector Strategy 2030 – Engaging young people with the Council of Europe's values, at 28.

²⁵ *ibid* at 14.

²⁶ *ibid*.

²⁷ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989), Article 12.

²⁸ UN Convention on the Rights of the Child, A/RES/44/25 (20 November 1989), Article 31.

²⁹ Brady, B., Silke, C., and Shaw, A. (2022) A Rapid Review of the benefits and Outcomes of Universal Youth Work. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway at 54.

³⁰ *ibid*.

- Continue to actively collaborate through regular consultations with young people and the youth sector on policy development in the child participation space to encourage cross sectoral understanding and engagement.
- Increase funding support for capacity for youth services to attend consultations and organise youth consultations.

5. Ensuring Sustainable and Effective Youth Services

Goal 3 of the EU Youth Strategy 2019 – 2027 is to ‘enable and ensure the inclusion of all young people in society.’³¹ In order to achieve this, the EU have specified targets including providing more spaces to foster social cohesion and combat discrimination as well as ensuring all marginalised young people have equal access to non-formal learning environments.³² Youth services have the potential to foster peaceful and inclusive societies. An investment in youth services is an investment in social cohesion. Youth work has a demonstrated impact on young people’s civic values and behaviour, increasing critical consciousness of social issues, understanding of equality and diversity, promoting civic engagement and leadership as well as social responsibility values, and fostering community connectedness.³³ In a time of political fragmentation characterised by social unrest and far right sentiment, investment in youth services is more critical than ever before.

Investment in youth services decreased by 31.8 per cent from €73.1m in 2008 to €49.8m in 2014.³⁴ Over the course of the last three Budgets incremental increases have been allocated to youth work services and funding now stands just below that of over ten years ago.³⁵ At the same time, the youth population is expanding significantly along with rising levels of inflation for service providers. In order to ensure effective and sustainable youth services and to expand the reach of universal programmes to all young people, predictable and secure funding streams that meet demand are required.

In order to facilitate the effective allocation of funding, our consultation with members emphasised the importance of conducting an independent review of the sector to inform a data driven approach. Such a review could uncover the level of unmet need and pressure points in the system so as to enable the future proofing of the sector. Crucial to this is ensuring that it does not create a more burdensome reporting and compliance environment for organisations without further core capacity to address it. The response of youth services to the Covid-19 pandemic demonstrated the agility and innovation in the sector. Services maintained provision to some of the most marginalised groups despite facing major challenges. The most fundamental resource of the youth sector is its dedicated and passionate workforce. However, our members have highlighted that without adequate workforce planning and scoping of the youth work sector, they will not be able to sustain services into the future. Data collection around staff attrition rates from the sector and the creation of a workforce development plan in collaboration with the sector are essential to ensuring a sustained and effective youth services. Additionally, protecting volunteer-led universal youth work services is of crucial importance to our members and in this vein the new Action Plan should seek to uphold and champion volunteer-led youth work.

³¹ Council of the European Union, The European Union Youth Strategy 2019 – 2027 (2018/C456/01) C 456/12.

³² *ibid.*

³³ Brady, B., Silke, C., and Shaw, A. (2022) A Rapid Review of the benefits and Outcomes of Universal Youth Work. Galway: UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre, University of Galway at 55.

³⁴ NYCI, *Budget 2022 “Progress on Youth Work but Youth Issues ignored again”* (NYCI 2022).

³⁵ Children’s Rights Alliance, *Child Poverty Monitor 2023* at 147.

Key Recommendations

- Predictable and secure funding streams that meet demand.
- Conduct an independent review of the sector to inform a data driven approach. Caution should be exercised so that more burdensome reporting requirements are not created without further core capacity to address it.
- Collect data to understand staff attrition rates and work with the sector to create a workforce development plan.
- Uphold and champion volunteer-led universal youth work in the new Action Plan.