

Shaping the Future: Voluntary Youth Work in Northern Ireland

May 2024



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NETWORK
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A group of ten people, five men and five women, are posing for a group photo in front of a massive, ancient-looking tree with a thick, gnarled trunk. The group is arranged in two rows, with some people standing slightly behind others. They are all smiling and looking towards the camera. The setting appears to be a park or a wooded area with other trees in the background. A purple speech bubble graphic is overlaid on the left side of the image, containing text. The ground is a mix of dirt and grass, and a paved path is visible on the right side.

Some members of the
Voluntary Youth Work
Sector Co-ordinating
Committee

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Executive summary

Youth work in Northern Ireland has a positive impact on the lives of children and young people, supporting thousands of young people through a range of organisations, including regional and local organisations as well as a strong uniformed sector. Moving into the next decade the voluntary youth work sector is working to collaborate and secure the sustainability of the sector. This is being partly driven as a response to the increasing challenges faced by this sector, including declining structures for communication and coordination, over-reliance on limited funding streams, diminished workforce capacity, and frayed relationships between different stakeholders.

This work set out to gain an insight into current voluntary youth work provision in Northern Ireland, and to begin the conversation on the transformation of this sector. It has been funded by Dormant Accounts Fund (The National Lottery Community Fund).

It is being led by a collaborative group of voluntary youth work organisations including – Youth Action, Youth Work Alliance, YMCA Ireland, Girl Guiding Ulster, Network Youth NI, Catholic Guides of Ireland, The Bytes Project, Scouts NI and Playboard. The group does not claim to be fully representative of the sector, but rather it is a group of likeminded individuals who have a common goal: a shared commitment to supporting children and young people, regardless of the size or nature of the organisation.

The coordinating committee procured NICVA through a competitive process, to independently facilitate conversations across the voluntary youth work sector and write up this corresponding report.

The process of engagement took an assets-based approach, encouraging participants to consider what is working well, what can be built upon and what is needed to achieve transformation. Six workshops were hosted across Northern Ireland in Belfast, Derry, Lurgan, Ballymena, Newry and one was hosted online. These events were attended by 153¹ staff and volunteers from across the voluntary youth work sector. This provided space for open conversations and revealed a strong desire for change and transformation within the voluntary youth work sector.

Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this research, a set of recommendations have been made. The recommendations listed below have been curated from the direct feedback of over 150 participants from across the diversity of the voluntary youth work sector.



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¹ See Appendix 1 for a list of the organisations that took part in each workshop.

The voluntary youth work sector must collaboratively co-design the system that can secure the future of the sector

- There is a need to recognise the significant role the voluntary youth work sector plays in supporting children and young people and how this is integral to any future transformation of the system.
- There is a need to collaboratively develop a collective vision and voice for youth work in the voluntary youth work sector with agreed communications.
- A transformative change process should consider ways to promote the value of the voluntary youth work sector.

Strategic investment for the voluntary youth work sector in Northern Ireland should be prioritised

- There is a desire for a structural change in approach to funding of the voluntary youth work sector.
- Any transformation process will require an investment in the workforce (including staff and volunteers), and the development of a Workforce strategy.
- The process identified a need to promote and share good practice models in voluntary youth work that will support transformation.
- There is a need to access further funding to advance the desired process of change and transformation.

The voluntary youth work sector should focus on supporting ongoing and sustained collaboration that will be key to transformation

- There is a need to create more opportunities for the sector to come together to network, learn and grow as a voluntary youth work sector. Transformation should create opportunities for the voluntary youth work sector to come together.
- It would be useful to support and promote champions of change in this process.
- There should be opportunities through collaboration to build capacity, and in turn improve support available to children and young people accessing services in the voluntary youth work sector.

These recommendations were developed from the core consultation findings, which will be highlighted throughout this document. The committee has also outlined its plans to take these recommendations forward. Key to this process, will be active collaboration across the voluntary youth work sector. The desire will be an inclusive approach to co-designing a system that can deliver transformation.



Section 1.0: Background

1.1 Introduction: the journey so far

Stage 1 of the process: sectoral representative meetings

This process started in 2021 with online meetings between 12 voluntary sector representatives who had the courage to convene to reflect on the state of youth work and to build trust and hope for a more coordinated voluntary youth work sector. This 'committee' has guided the process to date. There is a desire to rebuild trust, celebrate the diversity of provision, and develop a shared vision for voluntary youth work.

Stage 2 of the process: seeking a mandate

In autumn 2022, each of the voluntary youth work sector representatives sought wider support through their membership groups by exploring the possibilities of collaboration in growing a more flourishing sector; this was endorsed and provided us with a clear mandate to move forward.

Stage 3 of the process: sectoral engagement

In February 2023, a sectoral conversation was held on 'the economic value of youth work' with further opportunities to explore collaboration through youth work. This seminar was hosted independently by Ulster University.

Stage 4 of the process: departmental engagement

In January/February 2023 voluntary youth work sector organisations met with Department of Education (DE) and Education Authority (EA) regarding concerns and expectations for the future development of youth work policy, strategy, implementation, and review.

In 2023 those involved started to refer to this group as a committee. Throughout 2022/2023 the group focused its energies on a proposal to the Dormant Account Fund (TNL Community Fund) to advance wider engagement across the sector; securing £50,096. The purpose of this investment was to widen conversations across the full voluntary youth work sector and discuss the possibilities of a shared vision.

NICVA was independently procured by this group to provide facilitation to these wider discussions, and to compile the key findings in a summary report.

Voices and opinions were sought from across the diversity of the sector, including resident groups offering weekly youth clubs, uniformed organisations with structured programmes, church groups with frequent activities and holiday events, regional services for youth in care, to youth centres providing extensive support services.



1.2 Methodology

NICVA planned, promoted, and facilitated six workshops across Northern Ireland (with one being online) in partnership with the committee and through a newly formed social media platform known as Voluntary Youth Work Sector NI.

The workshops were designed to offer people working and volunteering in the youth work sector an opportunity to join the conversation on the future sustainability of voluntary youth work in Northern Ireland. The decision to host workshops across Northern Ireland, with the timings of four of the events being in the evenings, was to maximise accessibility.

A session was initially planned to be in Omagh, but due to lower responses in this area, the session was moved online and this had a positive impact on numbers attending. **153** people attended all six workshops.

Date and time	Workshop
6 March 2024, 6pm-8pm	NICVA, Belfast
7 March 2024, 6pm-8pm	Waterside Shared Village, Derry-Londonderry
13 March 2024, 7.15pm-9.15pm	The Jethro Centre, Lurgan
19 March 2024, 11am-12noon	Online session
20 March 2024, 7pm-9pm	The Braid Art Centre, Ballymena
26 March 2024, 11am-1pm	The Canal Court, Newry

At each event, the following context was outlined, and goals for sector-wide conversations were stated.

It was acknowledged that there is a problem with the way things are now. The voluntary youth work sector in Northern Ireland faces a reality that is characterised by fragility, vulnerability, unsustainability, fracture, disempowerment, demotivation, disjointedness and unrepresented.



In particular,

1. **There is no longer an effective structure** for the coordination, communication, effective representation and influence of the voluntary youth work sector in informing, shaping and monitoring youth work policy.
2. **There has been an over-dependence on one funding provider.**

This has been all-consuming for many voluntary youth work providers.
3. **There is a diminished capacity for youth work sector** growth and development. The projections for the workforce across youth work in 5 years' time are very alarming as two of the largest funding sources will have ended (ESF ended 2023 and ERDF Peace Plus ends 2027).

However, there remains a pride and confidence in the sector with a common goal and a shared commitment to supporting children and young people. The sector owns this collective transformation that seeks to contribute to:

- **A process** is underway to overcome any negativity from the past and to improve relations.
- **Conversations** are taking place at many levels. There is a need to collaborate; a need to reconcile and to determine a joint vision.
- There is a desire to protect the **diversity and richness** of the voluntary youth work sector.
- This work was presented as a pivotal **opportunity to reframe and take ownership of a re-imagined vision for youth work.**
- It was presented as an opportunity to lead, rather than be led; to **be agents of change; to transform and co-design** the roadmap rather than being informed of the road ahead.
- The committee is dedicated to **creating a transformational voluntary youth work sector** that is strong, collaborative, more resilient and sustainable.

1.3 Facilitated discussions

The six workshops provided space for facilitated and asset-based discussions with participants. The research focused on the following areas:

- What is working well – (opportunities for young people, workforce) and what can be built upon for your organisation/the voluntary youth work sector?
- What might transformation look like for the voluntary youth work sector in terms of a vision/outcome in 10+ years' time?
- What are the key challenges for your organisation/the voluntary youth work sector?
- What processes and supports need to be embedded to achieve the transformation- short, medium, and long term?

1.4 Appointment of a Communications Intern and key functions

A proportion of The Dormant Accounts Funding is to provide communications and PR support to the project. The committee valued an independent vehicle that could be used to help repair, build trust, and promote the value of the voluntary youth work sector throughout the year.

The committee agreed that it would be known as Voluntary Youth Work Sector NI. In the first instance, these platforms were used as another way to promote the workshops across Northern Ireland. In addition, they offered a vehicle to highlight key feedback from each event, to provide Vlogs of the events in action, as well as enabling participants to provide further feedback on their experience of engaging in the conversation.

Profiles



@vol youthworksec



@vol youthworksec



@voluntary.you.w

Social Media Testimonials

Participant of Lurgan Workshop

“

“Really interesting positive and challenging conversations tonight about the future of voluntary youth work in NI. It’s so important this space is provided for all voices across the sector to be heard”

”

Participants of Belfast Workshop

“

“It was lovely to reconnect with colleagues. It will be interesting to see what emerges from this process”

“A very good first session. Let’s hope this is the spark to effect positive change for the sector”.

”

Participant of Derry Workshop

“

“Last night our collective regional engagement event took place in the North West where our colleagues from across the sector engages in a collective conversation on the transformation of the sector and how we can best support this.”

”



WHERE TO FIND US

INSTAGRAM

@vol youthworksec

Follow us here to see when our events are on, reels of our workshops and updates on our partner organisations.

X/TWITTER

@vol youthworksec

For live tweeting from sector events and updates on how our project progresses.

TIKTOK

@voluntary.youth.w

To see videos of our workshops, interviews and sector wide events.

EMAIL

rachel@youthaction.org

If you have further enquiries about the project or would like support in promoting events/campaigns please do reach out!



Section 2: Key findings

This section of the report has been constructed from the feedback provided directly by 153 people who engaged in this process. All participants were also asked to complete post-event evaluations, and this information too has been incorporated into this report and examples of feedback given via social media.

The findings highlight the key areas where stakeholders involved in this sector view their strengths and their aspirations for a transformed sector, as well as what processes and support is needed to achieve positive change. The analysis also lists the challenges identified, which transformation aims to address.

The passion and commitment of the voluntary youth sector was evident across all workshops. There is a strong acknowledgement it is not enough to rely on passion, and it is time for change. It is felt that a clear vision for the sector will aid this process, and this will be possible by an investment in collaborative processes to make the most of resources available and to seek innovative solutions that are fit for the future.

These findings should be viewed as only one part of the puzzle; the committee will use this information to engage further with key stakeholders including a range of policymakers and funders. In the next phase of the process, young people will be directly involved in areas of transformation that informs the strategic development of youth work.

Section 2.1 What is working well and what can be built upon

These sessions were an opportunity to reflect on what is working well, as well as the key strengths of the voluntary youth sector. The fact that in a three-week period, during March 2024, over 150 people turned out and actively participated in events across Northern Ireland is evidence of the commitment, passion and desire to co-design and influence change for the better.

As an independent facilitator NICVA witnessed dynamic, energetic rooms where people brought skills and experience and their critical feedback has shaped this report.

An appreciative inquiry approach was applied to this process: this is where people were encouraged to explore firstly what was working well, what could be built upon and to be solution focused in looking to a transformed future.

Identified below are the key strengths of this sector, that will act as the foundation in a process of change and transformation.

"The voluntary youth sector must be protected and invested in, in a climate of increased precarity for children and young people. This event is crucial in laying the foundation for a stronger sector." (Participant evaluation feedback, Belfast workshop)

2.1.1 Commitment, passion and knowledge of staff and volunteers

The commitment, passion and knowledge of staff and volunteers is seen as the cornerstone of this diverse sector. All voluntary youth work organisations rely on the commitment of volunteers; this is particularly the case in the uniformed sector, where volunteers make up most of the workforce. Numerous examples were given of staff and volunteers going the extra mile to provide support for children and young people.

The passion for voluntary youth work and the difference it makes in the lives of children and young people could be observed directly in very animated rooms as we facilitated these conversations. There is a pride in the work, with various examples of lives changed, and a passion and a desire to achieve so much more.

"We are all committed to this conversation on transforming the voluntary youth work sector." (Evaluation feedback, Belfast)

"Great to get everyone working together. Our voice is stronger when we work together." (Evaluation feedback, Derry)

2.1.2 Ability to build effective relationships with young people

The ability to build effective relationships with young people is a key strength. Participants often referenced the importance of meeting young people 'where they are at,' taking the time to build relationships and be flexible in the approach to engagement. Examples were given of how flexibility within the sector means there is time to build meaningful relationships that in turn can identify and support the holistic needs of the young people, for positive outcomes.

2.1.3 Progressive pathways including participation and flexible accreditation processes

At every event there were participants who are involved in voluntary youth work organisations as volunteers or staff who started initially as young people accessing youth work services. Young people accessing services engage with mentors often with lived experience, and it cannot be under-estimated the importance for young people to be able to 'see it, believe it and achieve it' and that there can be a pathway for them too. It is this organic support of lived experience within these services which ensures that staff and volunteers remain ever responsive to the needs of the young people they serve.

A strength of the pathway is the flexibility in the approach to accreditation, where a more informal and interactive approach to learning is available for young people.

2.1.4 Networks embedded in the community and partnerships of potential

In all the events, participants echoed the importance of local networks to support young people. Informal local networks with other community groups and youth groups are increasingly viewed as important to meet young people's needs. Within these networks, there were examples of sharing local training or referring young people to other services.

These voluntary youth work organisations by their nature are embedded within local communities

"[Voluntary youth work organisations are] helping communities thrive, improving perceptions of young people, breaking down silos and making Northern Ireland a better place to live." (Participant at the Belfast event).

More strongly identified was the strength of partnership working to meet the needs of young people. Recurring positive feedback of the benefit of supporting structured collaborative working, such as those funded by the UK Shared Prosperity Fund. The coming together of multiple youth organisations, large and small, has widened opportunities for young people, staff and volunteers.

"People are starting to take a different approach - there is more collaboration." (Online session)

Participants acknowledged that a strength is the increasing openness and desire within this sector to build effective partnerships but felt this could only make a real difference with additional support.

2.1.5 Openness for and a desire for transformation

A strength of the voluntary youth work sector is the very openness for and a desire for transformation. It is generally accepted that to meet the needs of children and young people, and strategically be able to grow as a sector, it is time to come together and seek transformation.

The desire for transformation was a unified theme that ran throughout these workshops. Participants expressed the desire for transformation, one that would ensure a hopeful future with children and young people at the forefront.

Participants expressed that collaboration and trust would be key, along with a trusted voice to enable transformation.

"There is a clear hunger to improve the youth sector for the benefit of young people. More collaboration is key."
(Evaluation feedback, Derry)

"Great opportunity to join as one voice to create change." (Evaluation feedback, Lurgan)

"Great to be part of a conversation with such a wide range of youth work and voluntary organisations - very insightful."
(Evaluation feedback, Ballymena)

"Delighted to attend the voluntary youth work sector event in Canal Court, Newry this morning! Great opportunity to meet with colleagues across the sector as we input into shaping the future of voluntary youth work in NI". (Social media feedback after Newry workshop)

"A very good first session. Let's hope this is the spark to effect positive change for the sector". (Social media feedback after Belfast workshop)

Section 2.2: The current challenges that transformation seeks to address

Through an appreciative inquiry approach conversations were facilitated and solutions were sought. It was important to provide space for participants to highlight key challenges impacting on services provided to children and young people within Northern Ireland. These challenges were framed by asking what would improve things to assist with the transformation process. Listed below were the key challenges identified across the workshops, and following on from these is analysis of how transformation can seek to address these issues.

- There is a lack of vision for the voluntary youth work sector.
- Resourcing of the sector is perceived as not fit for purpose.
- Short-term funding makes it difficult to strategically plan.
- Running costs and impact of cost-of-living crisis on delivering services.
- The need to diversify funding sources.
- A general frustration of the difficulty to get collective voice for the voluntary youth work sector.
- To date it has been difficult to demonstrate the value of the sector.
- Management committees across the voluntary youth work sector are struggling to meet the suggested JNC Scale, and as a result there can be variations in terms and conditions.
- There is a need for investment in a Workforce Strategy that supports volunteers through to professionals.
- Silo working is not making the most of available resources.
- Pressure on volunteers.
- Buildings are not always fit for purpose, and it is difficult to access funding to upgrade buildings.

Participants expressed that it was time for change, in which the work was promoted, valued and recognised through significant investment.

These issues will be discussed in more detail overleaf.

Section 2.3: What might transformation look like?

This process sought to gain an insight into aspirations of what a transformed voluntary youth work sector could look like in 10 years. The themes identified below resonated throughout all the events. Interestingly, participants were keen that this was only the start of the process, and it would be through sustained and supported collaboration that transformation can be realised.

"We are all committed to this conversation on transforming the voluntary youth work sector." (Participant evaluation feedback, Belfast workshop)

These facilitated conversations specifically targeted people volunteering and working in the voluntary youth work sector. At the events many of the people around the tables had started their own journeys as a young person accessing a youth club.

Through appropriate support they were able to progress to become volunteers or staff members in the sector. However, we must acknowledge that this initial consultation has not directly engaged young people themselves and it is envisaged that the next stage will provide for appropriate engagement.

The voluntary youth work sector, like all of society in Northern Ireland has been feeling the impact of the cost-of-living crisis, which has led to increased running costs. It is almost the perfect storm, because with these increased costs, post-COVID-19 has witnessed an increased demand for voluntary youth work services. Participants reflected that they often find themselves in demand to deliver more with less. It is felt that the passion of staff and volunteers going the extra mile is the only way that they have been able to meet demand, but equally this 'good will' is not sustainable in the long-term. It is with this backdrop that many participants expressed that it is time for change, and they welcomed the opportunity to come together and strategically begin the process that could both transform the sector and make better use of available resources.

Suggested thematic areas are identified below, with some description of how they can assist with a transformative process.

2.3.1 Collective voice

It was widely acknowledged that there is a lack of a collective voice for the voluntary youth sector, and in turn there has not always been a clear vision for the sector. Participants, however, stressed that it is vital that this has changed over the next ten years. There needs to be a strong collective voice for this sector, one that can lead to a positive vision of the importance and value of youth work. Feedback at the sessions acknowledged that there will always be diversity, and this should be welcomed. However, there are key areas that the voluntary youth work sector could come together and devise a collective vision for the overall voluntary youth work sector that will enable them to speak with a united voice. This will only be possible if there is support to build and sustain relationships across this sector.

"Shared voice can develop really positive change." (Evaluation feedback, Ballymena event)

"As a voluntary sector we need one voice that can champion our cause." (Participant feedback, Belfast workshop)

"Imagination and Innovation today in Newry as we progress our collective transformational plans for the voluntary youth work sector." (Social media feedback, after Newry workshop)

This shared voice of the voluntary youth work sector will be critical to ensuring young people are at the forefront of all policy considerations.

2.3.2 Sustained collaboration becomes the cornerstone of the voluntary youth work sector

Sustained collaboration will build trust, provide opportunities for all, and strengthen the sector. There is an aspiration that in ten years' time collaboration will be the cornerstone of this sector in which a collective approach secures a more sustainable and innovative sector.

"A great opportunity to start breaking down barriers between organisations and begin to work together towards mutual goals for the young people we work with."
(Evaluation feedback, Ballymena)

"There is a clear hunger to improve the youth sector for the benefit of young people. More collaboration is key."
(Evaluation feedback, Derry)

"More collaboration; openly communicate how we can help each other. Regular coming together – what support needed / sharing skills. Helping diversify funding and how best to use skills." (Participant feedback, Newry)

"Really interesting positive and challenging conversations tonight about the future of voluntary youth work in NI. It's so important this space is provided for all voices across the sector to be heard."
Social media feedback after Lurgan workshop)

Participants at the workshops highlighted good practice examples of collaboration and partnership working within the voluntary youth work sector, which will include learning that could aid this transformation process. See Appendix 2 for details on some collaborative working examples within the voluntary youth work sector.

2.3.3 Clear understanding of the value of youth work in the voluntary youth work sector

"Youth work has shaped my life over 30 years+. The impact of this is for me and others like me isn't valued but it needs to be championed more across society."

Youth work works." (Evaluation feedback, Newry)

Voluntary youth work plays a key role within society in Northern Ireland, and indeed actively shapes the lives of many of our young people.

However, despite the importance of this work, it does not often translate into sustainable funding relationships or a wider understanding of the value of this work. As a result, many aspects of the voluntary youth work sector continue to be funded on a short-term basis. Indeed, as these workshops were carried out in March 2024, several participants stated they were on protected notice. It was reported that the current funding model is somewhat influenced by the limited understanding of the value of youth work has on our young people.

Participants expressed a desire for significant transformation that will enable them to have the tools and ability to demonstrate the value of their work. It is felt that this can be aided through an investment in active collaboration and sharing best practices. It was expressed that it is hoped transformation would be one where not only collaboration is encouraged, but it is actively supported.

2.3.4 Opportunity for voluntary youth work to sit centrally within Government

Standout feedback from across the six facilitated events within Northern Ireland, is the current funding and delivery model that dominates voluntary youth work provision is not working. Feedback stressed that it is not working effectively for young people, for voluntary youth work providers, nor for their staff and volunteers.

Participants hope that as the needs and outcomes for young people and children cut across all departments, in the future, the policy, associated funding, and delivery model could sit centrally. Suggestions were made that either The Executive Office or an independent body to become the key provider of youth provision would enable transformation to be realised.

The current funding and delivery model of voluntary youth work provision in Northern Ireland, overseen by the Education Authority, provides multiple challenges as they too deliver front line youth services. It was expressed that the current model

is one where they find themselves as procurer of services as well as the deliverer of services and indeed can be in competition with voluntary youth work providers.

There is a strong feeling that this has made it difficult to build any effective collaborative arrangements, and indeed it limits the ability to strategically consider what is best needed in terms of meeting the needs of children and young people now and in the future.

There is an aspiration that this is the beginning of a process, where through active collaboration, the current model of youth provision is reviewed and co-designed. It is hoped that transformation would bring a more holistic approach to youth work. Participants stressed the opportunity to learn from elsewhere.

2.3.5 Equitable approach to youth work provision

Throughout the workshops a recurring theme was the perception of an inequitable approach to youth work provision within Northern Ireland, with financial support currently imbalanced in favour of statutory service provision. Participants expressed that as we look to transform the voluntary youth sector, a more equitable approach to youth provision across the board would be achieved.

2.3.6 A more fit for purpose approach to funding and support to diversify funding

Transformation of this sector will require investment and a more sustainable approach to funding. The current model, where short-term and piecemeal funding is the norm, must be replaced with a minimum of at least three-to-five-year funding schemes. Participants stressed that there must be a much more collaborative approach and agreement of the stipulations put in place with funding. The current approach largely focuses on quantitative outputs, with little space for reflection and learning of what works, what should be built upon, and what learning can be shared with others.

In addition, participants expressed a desire to diversify their funding, seeing in the future more opportunities to formalise their offering to other sectors including the private sector.

2.3.7 Effective workforce strategy in place

The commitment and passion of volunteers and staff was highlighted as a strength of this sector, but often this is not matched with consistent investment in the workforce. There was very strong feedback that for transformation to be achieved an effective workforce strategy will need to be co-designed, in place and supported within the next ten years.

Throughout the workshops it was acknowledged that there is much diversity in Terms and Conditions (T&Cs) offered to staff and volunteers across the voluntary youth work sector, but this is particularly stark when compared to the Education Authority that can offer much better T&Cs for similar roles. Participants expressed the need to better for government to better recognise the value that youth work brings to wider society in Northern Ireland.

"Passion doesn't pay the bills." (Participant feedback, Newry workshop)

An effective Workforce Strategy will ensure that volunteers and staff are rewarded and recognised for their work and supported throughout their careers.

Participants acknowledged that while organisations currently ensure that mandatory training is completed, and aspire to offer other training opportunities, an increasingly difficult funding environment means that a systematic approach to training can be lacking. This transformation has the potential to ensure this is a thing of the past.

2.3.8 A re-imagined pathway approach

Participants acknowledged there is a role for the pathway approach of supporting young people from accessing voluntary youth services, to gaining qualifications with the opportunity to also volunteer or work in the sector. This was viewed as a strength of this sector, but it was also expressed that in a transformed sector, this pathway approach should be valued with continuous professional development opportunities supported. The pathway should be available for all who want to access it, with support to assist young people to move beyond the sometimes viewed 'glass ceiling' of OCN Level 3, with a desire for consistent support to Level 4 and beyond.

The pathway approach offers an opportunity to obtain a Youth Work degree. As part of the transformation process of a re-imagined provision of youth work, it would be very important to work in partnership with Ulster University to ensure that training may need to evolve to meet future needs. Indeed, the committee has engaged Ulster University to carry out a piece of desktop research to explore best practice models in terms of support, structure and function. The findings will feed into the next stage of this work.

Participants across several events acknowledged that the current pathway of support is inequitable. Staff accessing the Youth Work degree as Education Authority staff will have all their fees paid, yet individuals working in the voluntary youth sector accessing the same degree must pay all their fees. In any transformed approach to youth work within Northern Ireland, it is suggested that there should be a fair and equitable pathway available to all.

2.3.9 Systematic support for volunteers

Volunteers play a key role in the voluntary youth work sector; this is particularly significant within the uniformed sector.

A recurring theme from the events was the need to balance the demands on volunteers between frontline delivery and administration requirements. Feedback at the sessions highlighted that post COVID-19 the context of volunteering has changed, with fewer volunteers available and in turn a perception of more pressure put on them. There was an acknowledgment that in any transformed voluntary youth work sector, there is a need to reflect on how volunteering has changed and what is needed to support sustainability and growth in the future.

2.3.10 Opportunities to learn internationally

Throughout the sessions, participants called for the need to work collaboratively to find solutions, but also to think bigger beyond Northern Ireland. It was expressed that it would benefit all, if regularly there were ways to learn across island of Ireland, as well as UK partners, and beyond internationally.



Section 3 - What is needed to assist transformation

This section of the report draws from the research of what is needed to support the process of transformation, as well as recommendations of how to take action to move this process forward.

3.1. The voluntary youth sector must collaboratively co-design the system that can secure future of the sector

The voluntary youth work sector needs to collaborate and decide what will be the key elements required to achieve transformation. To do this effectively, they will need investment to support collaboration.

3.1.1 Collaboratively co-design a future system fit for purpose

Throughout the workshops there was a strong emphasis on the need for systematic analysis of the current system, and the opportunity to collaboratively co-design for the future. Participants expressed the need to improve the landscape of the current voluntary youth sector; there are issues of silo working and a lack of vision. While there are some good examples of collaborative working, there is a desire for wider collaboration within and across sectors.

"I think the value is bringing the whole voluntary sector together to explore what does our future look like and as a voluntary sector do we have a future."
(Participant feedback, Belfast workshop)

It will be through further collaboration and engagement that the voluntary youth work sector can map out a clear idea for the future system, as well as explore what structure would be appropriate to represent it.

"The current system needs to change if we are genuinely committed to improving outcomes for change in youth work."
(Participant evaluation feedback, Derry workshop)

A recurring theme was the hope that this was the beginning of a regular coming together to share experiences and best practices, to co-design solutions, and to secure the development of the voluntary youth work sector. For this to occur, there would need to be resources available and a trusted facilitator to establish these processes and begin to embed the journey of change.

"An informative event highlighting the need for an holistic youth service based on collaboration not competition."
(Participant evaluation feedback, Derry workshop)

"A great opportunity to start breaking down barriers between organisations and begin to work together towards mutual goals for the young people we work with."
(Participant evaluation feedback, Derry workshop)

Participants expressed that it is time for a root and branch analysis, and actively working together to create change.

"Moving forward not pretending everything is okay. How do we build trust with each other? We need spirit of good practice – everyone coming together quarterly for example...a process of ongoing engagement." (Participant feedback, Newry workshop)

"Having a Common Narrative and cohesive message; youth work works and we need to brand and market the Voluntary Sector together and champion each other. Not just giving attention to the loudest shouter!!" (Participant feedback, Lurgan workshop)

Recommendation:

There is a need to recognise the key role the voluntary youth work sector plays in supporting children and young people in any future transformation and co-design of the system.

3.1.2 Collaboratively develop a collective voice

As an independent facilitator, NICVA observed across all events a desire for the profile and value of youth work and the voluntary youth work sector to be increased. Participants regularly gave examples of how lives are transformed, and communities strengthened because of the work of the voluntary youth work sector. But equally, there was as strong an expression that too often this goes on quietly and under the radar.

It was felt that the wider public and government know youth work exists but do not easily recognise the key part it plays in society. There was a desire to raise the profile of the value of the sector and the difference it makes. Participants believed that this would need to be coordinated and supported with a conscious effort and investment for the transformation roadmap.

At all events, participants stressed that this work would be vital to inspire future generations to get involved in youth work, but also by sharing stories that 'Youth Work Works'.

"The services we provide for young people are always going to be essential. We need to ensure that going forward we have supports in place for our organisations, whether that be from having more secure and accessible funding or having more volunteers to provide help to us, so that we can focus on providing the support & opportunities for young people so that they can be happy, and feel that they are part of a community that they can have a rapport with." (Participant evaluation feedback, online workshop)

"Looking forward to having one voice for youth service; young people should be held at the heart of our conversations." (Participant evaluation feedback, Derry workshop)

Participants expressed a desire for collective voice for the voluntary youth work sector. This could be aided by collaboratively agreeing communications of the key areas where they align, as well as using the collective voice to celebrate diversity within this sector.

Recommendation:

There is a need to collaboratively develop a collective voice for youth work in the voluntary youth work sector and agreed communications.

3.1.3 Understanding the value of this work

Investment and support are required to assist organisations to provide evidence, to demonstrate and promote the value of the sector. At all workshops, participants expressed frustration that while they know this work makes a difference, reporting mechanisms can mean that this work can be reduced to raw numbers of people engaged. It was expressed that if there were more opportunities to come together and learn together it could make it easier to collectively find models that can be used to demonstrate the value of this work in everyday services. In addition, there is a recognition of the importance of making it easier for key stakeholders and the wider public to understand the critical role youth work in the voluntary youth work sector plays in shaping the fabric of society in Northern Ireland.

Recommendation:

A transformative change process should consider ways to promote the value of this sector.

3.2. Structural change and need for a new approach focused on strategic investment for voluntary youth work in Northern Ireland

This process of engagement identified a strong desire for structural change within the voluntary youth sector. Recurring feedback is that structural change is needed to ensure sustainability of voluntary youth work services. Too often, organisations are caught in a cycle of short-term funding. Participants expressed that organisations will only be able to meet current and future needs of children and young people, if there is a new approach focused on strategic investment in this sector.

3.2.1 Structural change in approach to funding

Throughout the workshops there were numerous examples highlighted to illustrate that the current funding system is not working. The often short-term and piecemeal funding makes it almost impossible for voluntary youth organisations to strategically

plan; rather many find themselves in a recurring firefighting cycle. Participants called for the need for strategic investment in this sector that will enable transformation to occur.

"Funding processes need to change, reallocation of money should be easier, more fundraising support, longer funding programmes, no stop-start processes, we need to hear earlier if we have funding or not." (Participant feedback, Belfast workshop)

"The future of youth work is bright as long as the right support, funding and processes are available. Youth work transforms the lives of young people and can help to change the future in a positive way. It deserves its recognition." (Participant evaluation feedback, Newry workshop)

Along with this, the current domination of voluntary youth work funding sitting with the Education Authority, is problematic. As highlighted earlier in the report, the fact that the Education Authority is a funder and a provider of youth services, as well as perceived to being in competition with the voluntary youth sector, has not aided the collaborative approach that is required for transformation.

There is wider work being undertaken to consider the funding model of the youth sector. In a time, when there is both more demand for youth services, and pressure on resources, it has never been more important to consider the whole system of funding for youth services. It is worth noting here the feedback of a desire in the future for a central approach to youth work, and in turn the funding system to meet the needs of all.

Recommendation:

There is a need for a new approach focused on strategic investment for voluntary youth work in Northern Ireland

3.2.2 An investment in workforce

Any transformative process must bring with it an investment in the workforce. Steps should be taken to develop a Workforce Strategy. This will enable lobbying for sustainable and long-term investment in the workforce. An investment in the workforce will ensure the sector is sustainable long-term, in being attractive as a place to meaningfully volunteer or be employed. This will also build the pride and confidence of the sector, to be bold as it looks to the future.

Within the voluntary youth work sector, a pathways approach has worked well in supporting young people, to progress to become volunteers and staff members within the sector. This has been enabled by qualifications that voluntary youth work organisations provide and can access for young people. However, this research revealed the need for these qualifications to go beyond OCN Level 3. As this sector seeks to transform, it will be important to consider what is working well and what can be improved, so children and young people can continue to be supported to become future leaders within this sector.

Volunteering plays a very important role in the voluntary youth sector, but COVID-19 has reduced the number of volunteers and there is a perception of increasing demand placed on volunteers. There is a need to ensure investment in volunteering is effectively considered in any future workforce strategy.

Recommendation:

There is a need for a sustainable Workforce Strategy to be co-developed, as part of any process of transformation.

3.2.3 Further research of good practice models of voluntary youth work

Participants stressed the importance of not trying to 're-invent the wheel', but to learn from other models of good practice of voluntary youth work. It was expressed that this research, along with learning from other good practice models locally and internationally will ensure that the voluntary youth work sector will be in a position to present strong

qualitative and quantitative evidence. Desktop research can support this transformative process, ensuring that the future structure and function of the voluntary youth work sector has a solid footing. The evidence can then be used to influence future policy development that can aid transformation.

Recommendation:

The process identified a need to promote and share good practice models in voluntary youth work that will support transformation.

3.2.4 Access to funding

This piece of work started the process and has demonstrated a desire from staff and volunteers for change and transformation within the voluntary youth sector. There is an acknowledgement that there are further key stakeholders who need to be engaged, including key policy makers and young people themselves. There is some scope within this piece of work to begin these engagements, but it is recommended that further investment of resources will be required to fully engage other key stakeholders in this transformation process.

It is essential that the committee accesses further funding to take forward the suggested areas that will lead to transformation. There is a desire within the voluntary youth work sector for change, but the sector will need to be supported to aid collaboration, define the vision of the sector, demonstrate its value, and make better use of resources. This support will assist to embed changes.

This process has raised expectations and started to build momentum around a desire for transformation. It is important that an appropriate action plan is developed to take forward the key areas for transformation.

Recommendation:

There will be a need for the committee to access further funding to take this work forward.

3.3. Focus on supporting collaboration will be key to make transformation possible

Collaboration will play a crucial role in this process of transformation. The workshops unearthed a strong desire for collaboration to make the most of available resources and strive to innovate. Collaboration will be key to taking this work forward.

"Continue to create spaces for staff, children and youth providers to communicate and share whilst also developing new partnership work. To share their views on future of youth work but also for youth providers to shape this future as it's their service." (Participant evaluation feedback, Derry workshop)

"Need more collaborative working, and need someone to lead it and value someone to independently convene it." (Participant feedback, Belfast workshop)

Participants expressed the importance of collaboratively working together to make the most of resources available and strive for innovation. Conversations across workshops included that in the future will require constructive, and at times difficult conversations to determine the best way to use resources. Feedback stressed the importance of having practical support to firstly create spaces to bring people together, but also to sensitively facilitate these conversations.

This process has demonstrated the power of a collective group of organisations to engage the voluntary youth sector and begin the process of transformation. The coordinating committee offers a vehicle that has the support of the wider voluntary youth sector to lead this process to the next stage.

3.3.1 Create more opportunities for people to come together to network, learn and grow

Over the course of three weeks in March 2024, over 150 people actively engaged in the conversation which focused on the future of the voluntary

youth work sector. Through these conversations, participants regularly remarked on how they were facing similar issues and by coming together they can learn together. There was acknowledgement that in the past there have been some divisions within the voluntary youth work sector, but there is much more that unites people, and now is the time to strategically work together. Participants expressed that this would work best if there were opportunities to come together in a structured way at the strategic and practice levels.

"Bringing all key players around the table to share how we go forward as a united group is critical and will have the potential for great impact and vision for our sector in the next decade." (Participant evaluation feedback, Belfast workshop)

During the workshops, the facilitator observed numerous participants exchange contact details. At every event, there was positive feedback on the opportunity to come together, collaborate, with a desire for more collaboration in the future.

"This event allowed me to connect with other like-minded people who want to be a part of a future for the voluntary sector. Thanks to all involved." (Participant evaluation feedback, Newry workshop)

"It was great to have an opportunity to share thoughts and dreams for the youth sector and to hear from others. The facilitator did a great job of making sure everyone was included which meant we heard from everyone." (Participant evaluation feedback, online workshop).

"This is a positive step to bringing the sector together and advocating for much needed change." (Participant evaluation feedback, Belfast workshop)

*"Everyone at the table had a genuine interest in each other and our work and we are going to keep in contact."
(Participant feedback, Newry workshop)*

Recommendation:

There is a need to create more opportunities for people to come together to network, learn and grow as a voluntary youth work sector. Transformation should create opportunities for the voluntary youth work sector to come together.

3.3.2 Champion for the sector and champions of the change process

A suggestion made at more than one event was the potential of having a champion for the voluntary youth work sector. It was acknowledged that there is a Children's Commissioner within Northern Ireland, but by devising a clear vision for the youth sector, it could aid how a potential 'champion' sector engages with the Commissioner and other key stakeholders in society.

An example was provided, of a 'Future Generations Minister' in Wales, who focuses on long-term thinking. Involvement is at the heart of the well-being of the Future Generations Act. Participants raised the issue that as we consider transformation, models like this one, along with the power of youth work as a policy and funding directorate being considered centrally by all.

"One vision, one voice, one representative body- go to decision-makers and influence change." (Participant feedback, Ballymena)

"Great opportunity to join as one voice to create change." (Participant evaluation, Lurgan)

It is worth noting, feedback stressed the strength in this collective coordinating committee leading this change process. There was regular feedback that it was hoped these workshops were the start of regular coming together to work together and ensure the sustainability of this sector. This collective group has an opportunity to build on this momentum and champion this change process.

As an independent facilitator, NICVA witnessed and must reflect and comment on the commitment of this committee, to ensure any transformative process is one that is fully inclusive, collaborative and one that can inspire others to get involved and step outside their comfort zones, as they look to transform this sector.

The coming together of this committee to begin collaborative transformation has sparked interest, raised expectations, and helped people begin repairing and rebuilding in this sector. The fact that this committee brings together organisations from regional, local, and uniformed organisations across the voluntary youth and play sectors has been welcomed. This collective is the champion of change, and further investment will enable them to take this process to the next level of action.

The collective has been using social media to promote the value of a collaborative approach to transformation under the banner of the Voluntary Youth Work Sector NI, and have set up corresponding social media platforms. As this work unfolds, the journey should continue to be tracked, promoted and through sharing stories to help promote the sector's value.

Recommendation:

It would be useful to support and promote champions of change in this process.

3.3.3 Building capacity to support transformation

Participants expressed a desire that in any change process, it would be essential to build in practical training and support, so organisations were ready to embrace new ways of working. There was strong agreement that if there was support for regular coming together of groups within this sector, these

times could also be used to share good practice, learn together and build capacity. Listed below are some of the areas identified that could assist organisations. This is not an exhaustive list, rather highlights a potential starting point for future opportunities for more coordinated shared learning.

- More sharing of information and good practice of what works.
- Practical support on making the most of networking opportunities and how to build effective partnerships.
- Training and sharing good practice on fundraising and measuring impact.
- Support to demonstrate value of sector.
- Training and sharing good practice on how to support emerging needs of young people; areas listed included learning difficulties and complex needs.
- Explore new ways of working together.
- Opportunities to collaboratively tender for future work.

The regular coming together, will provide opportunities for wins, as people get to know each other, learn and share together, as well as explore ways to work more together to meet the needs of young people. It will be important to celebrate these wins, as this will in turn support the change process and aid future transformation. Participants said that transformation and building capacity throughout should in turn support the development of children and young people.

Recommendation:

There should be opportunities through collaboration to build capacity, and in turn improve support available to children and young people accessing services in the voluntary youth work sector.



Conclusion, recommendations, and next steps

Conclusion

This piece of work aimed to facilitate conversations across the voluntary youth work sector on what works well and can be built upon; what are the challenges that transformation aims to address; and what support will be needed to aid transformation.

Across a three-week period in the spring of 2024, 153 participants engaged in frank and honest conversations. The fact that these conversations were being led by a collaborative group of organisations from across the from across uniformed, regional, and local community youth and play work organisations, encouraged far and wide engagement in the voluntary youth work sector.

Staff and volunteers who engaged in these conversations, displayed an overwhelming openness and desire for transformation that will ultimately lead to a more hopeful sector that can deliver the highest quality of services for children and young people.

The key findings from this research highlighted that the strength of the voluntary youth work sector is the passion and commitment of staff and volunteers to deliver a wide range of services for young people that make a difference. Yet, it is a sector that has increasingly felt the pressure of short-term funding, increased demand for services and a strong feeling that there could be a better way to use resources. There is a demand for the voluntary youth work sector to be transformed to ensure that the system can meet the future needs of children and young people.

It was strongly felt that transformation can only be achieved if there is an inclusive and collaborative approach to determining what the system, structure and vision will look like.

This research identified the need to re-evaluate the approach to funding and resourcing of the voluntary youth work sector.

Participants expressed a desire that this was not a one-off activity, rather these conversations should be the start of collaboratively beginning to shape and embed transformation.

The recommendations devised from this work are listed below, and importantly are the next steps.

Recommendations

Drawing from the findings of this research, a set of recommendations have been made. The recommendations listed below have been curated from the direct feedback of over 150 participants from across the diversity of the voluntary youth work sector.

The voluntary youth sector must collaboratively co-design the system that can secure the future of the sector

- There is a need to recognise the significant role the voluntary youth work sector plays in supporting children and young people and how this is integral to any future transformation of the system.
- There is a need to collaboratively develop a collective vision and voice for youth work in the voluntary youth work sector with agreed communications.
- A transformative change process should consider ways to promote the value of the voluntary youth work sector.

Strategic investment for the voluntary youth work sector in Northern Ireland should be prioritised

- There is a desire for a structural change in approach to funding of the voluntary youth work sector.
- Any transformation process will require an investment in the workforce (including staff and volunteers), and the development of a Workforce strategy.
- The process identified a need to promote and share good practice models in voluntary youth work that will support transformation.
- There is a need to access further funding to advance the desired process of change and transformation.

The voluntary youth work sector should focus on supporting ongoing and sustained collaboration that will be key to transformation

- There is a need to create more opportunities for people to come together to network, learn and grow as a voluntary youth work sector. Transformation should create opportunities for the voluntary youth work sector to come together.
- It would be useful to support and promote champions of change in this process.
- There should be opportunities through collaboration to build capacity, and in turn improve support available to children and young people accessing services in the voluntary youth work sector.

Next steps – The Roadmap ahead

The next steps of the Dormant Accounts funding is to commission Ulster University to carry out an independent piece of desktop research on support, structure and functions required for the voluntary youth work. This research will be carried out in Summer 2024.

In September 2024, everyone who is engaged in this process will be invited to come together again and discuss key findings. At these events, Ulster University will also facilitate conversations with participants about what the future function and structure could work in a transformed voluntary and youth work sector.

This piece of work, along with the research carried out by Ulster University will also be used to engage other statutory sector representatives and key stakeholders, including the Education Authority, Department for Education, Cross Departmental Programme Body Group, The National Lottery Community Fund and others.

It is the expectation of the committee that this work will provide a strong foundation to apply for appropriate funding and investment to make transformation within the voluntary youth work sector possible to be delivered within the next ten years.

Work to deliver transformation will be one where collaboration is at its heart, and through appropriate support to embed change, this sector will be better placed to articulate a vision for the sector, as well as ensure the supporting structures and delivery mechanisms are fit for purpose.



Appendix 1: List of organisations that participated in workshops

In the lists below, where an organisation is named more than once, it represents the number of representatives from the organisations that attended the workshop.

Belfast (6th March 2024)

Ballysillan Youth For Christ
Belfast YMCA
Belfast YMCA
Boys and Girls Clubs
Children's Heartbeat Trust
Circusful
Clonard Monastery Youth Centre
Clonard Monastery Youth Centre
Extern Northern Ireland
Fóram na nÓg
Fóram na nÓg
Girlguiding Ulster
Holy Family Youth Centre
Holy Trinity Youth Centre
Holy Trinity Youth Centre
Hollywood Family Trust
Hollywood Family Trust
John Paul II Youth Club
Kids Together West Belfast
Kids Together West Belfast
Lagmore Youth Project
Lagmore Youth Project
Lagmore Youth Project
Larne YMCA
Ledley Hall Boys and Girls Club Trust Limited
MACS Supporting Children & Young People
MACS Supporting Children & Young People
Monkstown Boxing Club

NI Youth Forum
NI Youth Forum
Politics in Action
St Peters Immaculata Youth Club
Star Neighbourhood Centre
Star Neighbourhood Centre
Star Neighbourhood Centre
Streetbeat Youth Project
The Bytes Project Head Office
The Bytes Project Head Office
ThirtyOne:Eight
YMCA Ireland - National Council Of YMCAs Of Ireland
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
Youth Initiatives NI
Youth Link NI
Youth Work Alliance Ltd
Youth Work Alliance Ltd
Youth Work Alliance Ltd

Derry-Londonderry (7th March 2024)

Disability Equality Group NI
Ballymagroarty Youth Club
Ballymagroarty Youth Club
Bogside & Brandywell Health Forum
Disability Equality Group NI
Hillcrest Trust
Include Youth
Include Youth
Leafair Community Association
Leafair Community Association
Liberty Consortium
Liberty Consortium
Lincoln Courts Youth and Community Association
Long Tower Youth & Community Centre
Long Tower Youth & Community Centre
MyBnk
Northwest Youth Services
NWYS-Engage
NWYS-Engage
NWYS-Engage
NWYS-Engage
On Street Community Youth
REACH Across
Roe Valley Residents Association
Roe Valley Residents Association
St Mary's Youth Club
Street Doctors
The Bytes Project Head Office
The Bytes Project Head Office
The Churches Trust
The Churches Trust
The Rainbow Project
YMCA Londonderry
YouthAction NI
Youth Initiatives NI
Youth Work Alliance Ltd

Youth Work Alliance Ltd

Youth Work Alliance Ltd

Lurgan (13th March 2024)


Co-operative Ireland
Drumgor Detached Youth Work Project
incredABLE
Keep NI Beautiful
Mencap In Northern Ireland
Seagoe Youth Group
St Mary's Youth Club
Third Sector Connect
Ulster University
Volunteer Now
YMCA Lurgan
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
Youth Initiatives NI

Online session (19th March 2024)

Boys Brigade NI
Catholic Guides of Ireland (Northern Region)
Girlguiding Ulster
Girlguiding Ulster
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI

Ballymena (20th March 2024)

1st Cullybackey Brownies
All Saints Scout Group
Carrickfergus YMCA
Dreamscheme Northern Ireland
Evolve Northern Ireland
Koinonia John the Baptist Ireland
Larne YMCA



Monkstown Amateur Boxing Club
The Bytes Project Head Office
Volunteer Now
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
Youth Work Alliance Ltd

Newry (26th March 2024)

Bosco Youth Club
Girlguiding Ulster
Greenhill YMCA (Newcastle)
Kilkeel Parish Bridge Association Ltd
Kilkeel Parish Bridge Association Ltd
Magnet Young Adult Centre
Newry & District Gateway Club
Newry & District Gateway Club
PlayBoard N.I.
Portadown YMCA
Portadown YMCA
REACT Armagh (Reconciliation, Education And Community Training)
REACT Armagh (Reconciliation, Education And Community Training)
Scout Foundation NI/Scouting Ireland
St Oliver Plunkett Youth Club
The Scout Association
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI
YouthAction NI

Appendix 2: Examples of voluntary youth work sector partnerships within Northern Ireland

Peace Plus 3.2 Youth Call (Amplify project)

AMPLIFY (involving 7 youth work partners) will engage young people who are disadvantaged, excluded or marginalised and who are aged 14-24 yrs across defined regions and communities in Northern Ireland and the border counties of Ireland. Through meaningful, purposeful and ongoing cross-community and cross-border contact young people will form effective and positive relationships that support their place and role in creating a more cohesive, united and shared society. AMPLIFY will provide meaningful cross-community and cross border programmes, 3-4 contact days per week over a 6-9 month period embedding the core elements of personal development, good relations, citizenship, employability skills and positive progression will be explicit throughout all programming.

Peace Plus 3.1 Shared Learning call (Shared Agenda for Peace project)

SHARED AGENDA FOR PEACE (involving 10 youth and community work partners) promotes good relations and enhances young people's skills to contribute to a cohesive society, through non-formal education (youth work). A SHARED AGENDA FOR PEACE will provide whole-organisational approaches with local youth groups involving local committees/boards, workers/volunteers and young people through a Shared Learning Partnership. This Shared Learning Partnership will engage young people from diverse backgrounds, who experience socio-economic deprivation and who are aged 11-25yrs across defined regions and communities across the 11 Northern Ireland Local Council Areas and Irish Border counties. 240 youth work organisations, 432 youth workers/volunteers will benefit from Shared

Learning Partnerships (joint training schemes) as they embark on a co-designed journey for shared learning, understanding and skills development. 5,280 participations of young people aged 11-25yrs (4,752 completers) will engage in shared learning youth work interventions in youth settings over a 4-year period.

Faith Based Networks

There are ongoing networks within the faith-based sector including, under the banner of Together, leaders within key faith-based orgs who have gathered on several occasions over recent years for mutual encouragement/support, focus/input around relevant issues, and reflection on practice. These organisations have included (but are not limited to) Love for Life, Youth Initiatives, Urban Saints, Youth for Christ, Scripture Union, Crown Jesus Ministries, Reach Mentoring, Exodus, Summer Madness, CAST Ministries, Young Life, church youth departments, uniformed organisations.

The Journey of Collaboration: A Case Study in Voluntary Youth Work (ACCORD)

The journey of collaboration between Boys & Girls Clubs NI, Bytes, YMCA Ireland, Youth Action NI, Youth Initiatives, and Youth Work Alliance exemplifies good practice in the voluntary youth work sector with a specific focus on transforming local youth services.

Background and Formation

Collectively, the group recognised the need for a collective approach to maximise existing resources and improve outcomes for children and young people. This group supports all EA area-based funding groups (82 groups in total). By November 2023, they had formalised their collaboration, setting

common objectives and agreeing to share their journey with the broader Voluntary Youth Work Sector to ensure transparency and inclusivity.

Objectives and Proposals

Four key proposals were identified to transform the utilisation of the Department of Education (DE) budget for youth work:

1. **Strategic Prioritization:** Advocate for the Minister of Education to prioritise the voluntary sector for DE-funded youth work.
2. **Budget Review:** Urge a comprehensive review of how the DE budget is allocated and spent.
3. **Reduced Bureaucracy:** Simplify the EA financial vouching process to enhance efficiency and flexibility.
4. **Policy Symposium:** Conduct a symposium with the voluntary sector to discuss the Priorities for Youth policy.

These proposals aimed to ensure that the voluntary sector receives adequate support and resources, enhancing their capacity to deliver high-quality youth services.

Collaborative Approach and Impact

The collaboration between these organisations is rooted in their shared vision of improving youth services across Northern Ireland. These asks are focused on supporting local groups delivering DE-funded youth work, but we are limited to supporting only these youth groups.

These local groups are of diverse status, ranging from part-time, limited capability groups to highly professionalised services, which allows them to represent a broad spectrum of youth work providers. This diversity ensures that their collaborative efforts are inclusive and considerate of the varied needs within the community.

One critical aspect of their collaboration has been their collective ability to influence policy and funding decisions. By presenting a unified voice, they have effectively engaged with the DE and EA, advocating for changes that benefit the voluntary sector. Their proposals are designed to streamline operations and allocate more resources directly to frontline youth work.

This collective has committed to openly sharing information about their activities and decisions, building trust within the community and with policymakers. Their efforts to conduct a symposium on youth policy further underscore their commitment to inclusivity and collaborative development of policies that reflect the needs and insights of the voluntary sector.

Conclusion

This collective's collaboration journey is a powerful example of good practice in the voluntary youth work sector. Their unified approach, strategic proposals, and commitment to transparency and inclusivity have set a benchmark for how voluntary organisations can effectively collaborate to influence policy and improve service delivery. This case study highlights the potential for collaborative efforts to drive meaningful change and enhance the impact of youth work across regions.





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