



# North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub

A joint initiative between the National Youth Council of  
Ireland and Education Authority Youth Service

## Background & Context

Building Back  
for Better Youth Work  
North and South

October 2021

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## **Foreword**

The Education Authority Youth Service (EAYS) and the National Youth Council of Ireland (NYCI) are pleased to be sharing our proposals for establishing a North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub.

This paper is the result of over a year of engagement, co-operation and the sharing of learning and practice between the Education Authority Youth Service and the National Youth Council of Ireland. Engagement which has included EAYS voluntary sector stakeholders in Northern Ireland, NYCI member organisations in Ireland along with academics, government departmental officials from both jurisdictions. We are grateful for the role of YouthPact in supporting us in this work and to Professor Maurice Devlin for drawing together the background to and context for our proposals.

The proposals in this paper build on the long tradition of north-south youth work partnership and association. Those connections and bonds proved invaluable in the face of the Covid-19 pandemic and the ensuing public health restrictions, which saw the rapid transition to online delivery to meet the needs of young people. The north-south sharing of policy, guidance and practice developments, in what has been a sustained period unprecedented change, helped ensure that the youth work response to the pandemic has been recognised by many, in and beyond the sector, as outstanding.

Learning from this experience, it is our aim through the North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub to strengthen and develop sustainable north-south youth work sector relationships among and between organisations, staff and volunteers; with a focus on enhancing the quality of the learning experience of young people participating in youth services across the island of Ireland.

We look forward to delivering these proposals with our youth work sector partners and stakeholders north and south.

## **2. Introduction**

**2.1** This is a proposal for a practice development hub to support youth work in Ireland, north and south (hereafter NI and RoI) to "build back better" as it emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic, with a particular focus on (a) achieving and sustaining the optimal blend of youth work provision and practice (face-to-face, online, digital) and (b) enabling youth workers to consolidate and further develop networks and methods for peer support and reflective critical practice that proved so vital, and showed such promise, during the pandemic crisis.

## **3. Background - Previous and Existing North South Partnership/Cooperation**

**3.1** Connections between youth work in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland are extensive and deep. There are many reasons for this apart from the obvious fact of sharing a relatively small island.

**3.2** A number of major youth work organisations have histories that go back considerably beyond the creation of Northern Ireland and (what was to become) the Republic of Ireland, meaning that a north-south or all-island identity and approach is integral to their traditions and operations.

**3.3** From the 1960s onwards, the development of European youth work structures and policies, initially through the Council of Europe and subsequently through (what is now) the European Union, provided increasing opportunities for youth workers and youth work organisations from both parts of Ireland to mix in international contexts, highlighting their sense of what they had in common both with each other and with youth work organisations in Great Britain. As funded European youth (and youth work) exchanges developed over the coming years, organisations in the two parts of Ireland were frequently partners in funding applications and exchange programmes, both bilaterally and as part of broader networks. As so many of these programmes were EU initiatives, there is (for the moment at least, pending equivalent replacement opportunities) a major gap in that regard.

**3.4** The decades-long history of the "Troubles", and the subsequent years of peace-making and peace-building, have prompted a number of structural and funding supports for youth work on a north-south (and sometimes east-west) basis, including the work of Cooperation North/Cooperation Ireland, the Causeway programme and the various iterations of the Peace programmes, including the most recent, the EU PEACE IV Children & Young People's Programme, for which YouthPact was the Quality and Impact body.

**3.5** At the start of the 21st century, steps were taken by some major sectoral interests in youth work, both voluntary and statutory, to put in place an infrastructure for developing and supporting partnership across the border. The 'North/South Youth Work Alliance' included representation from, in NI, the Education and Library Boards, the Northern Ireland Youth Forum, the Youth Council for Northern Ireland and Youthnet; and in RoI the Irish Vocational Education Association and the National Youth Council of Ireland. The Alliance members agreed a Development Plan that would 'enhance the contribution that the youth sector makes to the development of young people throughout the island', with the intention that a small staff team would lead its implementation. However, resources were not available at the time and the plan did not come to fruition, although contacts continued to be maintained between many of the stakeholders.

**3.6** Separately, and at around the same time, a north-south partnership approach to the specific area of standards for education and training in professional youth work programmes was agreed by the relevant government departments (respectively the Department of Education for Northern Ireland and the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education and Skills in ROI, now the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth – DCEDIY). It is widely agreed that the work of the North South Education and Training Standards Committee for Youth Work (NSETS) has made an extremely valuable contribution to the quality of youth work programmes, and therefore ultimately to the quality of the youth work practice experienced by young people. It is also widely believed that there are many other ways in which youth work could and should benefit from a north-south partnership.

#### **4. The COVID-19 Pandemic - Young People and Youth Work**

**4.1** Like all other parts of society, the youth work sector was shaken to its core by the sudden onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. It is not an exaggeration to say that it might have seemed at first to pose an existential question for youth work. How could a practice, a service and a movement that relied so much on the "buzz" and "authenticity" of face-to-face interaction survive a significant period of disruption to its usual programmes and activities, such that face-to-face contact was minimal or absent in many cases? How could the concern with reaching out to all young people, and making a special effort to include the disadvantaged, be sustained?

**4.2** In practice, youth work organisations and practitioners, paid and volunteer, responded to Covid-19 with the flexibility, creativity and resolve that have been hallmarks of youth work throughout its long history, doing their utmost to protect young people in as far as they possibly could from the worst effects of the pandemic. They were demonstrably effective in doing so. The ROI Government's *Resilience and Recovery Plan 2020-2021* includes the findings of an online survey that 'young people have been the group most impacted by Covid-19' but also that 'young people who engaged with youth groups/clubs/services tended to be more optimistic and excited about their futures' than those who had not.

**4.3** Nonetheless the difficulties were enormous. This is confirmed by research both north and south which identifies common challenges faced by youth workers and organisations in responding to the pandemic.

**4.4** In ROI, research commissioned by NYCI and conducted some months into the pandemic (Erwin and Thompson 2020) indicated that while the vast majority of youth organisations (more than 4 in every 5) had been able to continue to offer some service, even if reduced, a small but significant minority (14%) had not been able to offer any service at all, most often because of the lack of a digital infrastructure. The numbers of young people with whom it was possible to work fell very significantly (by approximately 70%) but this was somewhat mitigated by an increased emphasis on online provision.

**4.5** Recently published research conducted by YouthPact among youth workers in Peace4Youth projects during the pandemic (McArdle and McConville 2021) makes it clear that there was an increased need for workers to provide very practical supports for young

people (e.g. food parcels, dongles for digital connectivity and a range of other support and care packages) as well as striving to maintain trusted relationships. It found that the continuous presence and actions of youth workers played a significant role in mitigating some of the worst effects of the pandemic on young people, such as isolation, poverty and the potential mental health impact on young people.

**4.6** Both the above studies, and others, highlight the speed with which youth workers adapted to the need for new methods of engagement with young people, specifically online and digital methods, and the very valuable learning that was gained in a short space of time, including learning about approaches that could and should be sustained and developed beyond the pandemic. However, the research also makes it clear that different groups of young people are very differently placed when it comes to both access to technology and their degree of experience, ease and comfort with engagement in digital spaces.

**4.7** One of the key points emerging is also the fact that while their 'repertoire' has been greatly extended to include many more online and digital methods than before, the pandemic has also highlighted very vividly for youth workers the ways in which face-to-face interaction is indispensable in the context of youth work relationships. Not everything can be replicated online. The challenge, and the opportunity, therefore, is to strike the *optimal balance* for the future: 'Creative and innovative approaches made it possible to continue to deliver consistent quality work with young people. However, prudence is required in deciding what is worthy of integrating into work practices in a post-restriction era' (McArdle and McConville 2021: 38).

**4.8** A further point that has consistently emerged in research is how important it has been for youth workers to learn from, and support, each other, and from the process of critical reflection that this makes possible. 'Peer learning, reflective practice and sharing of new skills amongst youth workers enabled the workforce to quickly build capacity and re-design their programmes for the digital space' (ibid: 5)

**4.9** Some organisations are large enough, with sufficiently well established staff development (and volunteer development) practices, for this to be reasonably readily available. But even in larger organisations the research confirms that it cannot be taken for granted and it is certainly a challenge for smaller organisations and/or for youth workers in smaller teams. Furthermore, the pandemic experience has made it clear that support across and between organisations can be particularly valuable:

Factors that enabled organisations to respond effectively included resourcing by organisations with a national headquarters for volunteer-led groups; links, networking and partnerships fostered with other organisations; an effective ICT infrastructure; already established relationships in local communities; support and guidance from external agencies; understanding from funders; flexibility and good communication within organisations.

**4.10** Recent discussions and consultations involving youth work policy-makers, managers, and practitioners, north and south, suggest that the above points can be taken a stage further, to apply at the broadest sectoral level in both parts of the island.

## **5. Developing the North South response**

**5.1** In late 2020 and the early months of 2021 a number of online meetings were held with the joint involvement and support of the Education Authority Youth Service (NI) and the National Youth Council of Ireland (RoI). The first of these took place in November 2020, facilitated by the ARK (QUB/UU social policy hub), and brought together more than 30 participants, including leaders from the youth work sector, academics, policy makers, professionals and government department officials, north and south. The aim was 'to explore the impact of the pandemic from a youth service perspective and to share insights into the evolving needs of young people and youth work responses'. In practical terms the event sought to identify recommendations for north-south youth sector collaboration and for future policy priorities. After considering presentations from northern and southern perspectives and engaging in wide-ranging discussion of experiences and learning during the pandemic to date, the meeting identified the following (summary) recommendations<sup>1</sup>:

1. Investment in North South collaboration
2. Investment in digital strategy for young people
3. Immediate planning and investment to pre-empt the negative repercussions for young people
4. A strategic and operational plan to re-build and re-populate youth service provision

**5.2** A further event, the North South Youth Work Managers' Workshop<sup>2</sup>, took place on 9 February 2021. Attended by 90 participants, the workshop was presented with and discussed some of the research referred to above and also involved an exchange between managers of their views on enabling factors, barriers and challenges, adaptations in response to learning from the pandemic and what participants hoped to bring forward into post-pandemic times. There was a lot of overlap with the research findings, with regard for example to:

- the value of digital and online innovation and creativity (and the impressive arc of learning involved for youth workers and young people), but its inability to fully reach all young people (for multiple reasons - technological, social, cultural, economic) or replace certain key aspects of youth work;
- the remarkable levels of adaptability, agility and resilience shown by youth workers but the unavoidable reality that the pandemic had taken its toll in terms of wellbeing, work-life balance, physical and mental reserves of energy;
- the vital importance of clear and effective communication at all levels;
- the demonstrated potential of, and further need for, systematic opportunities for critical reflection, peer-support and sharing of resources within, across and beyond individual organisations.

**5.3** This latter point was held to be all the more important because the 'fall-out' from the pandemic (for young people, for youth work, for society) cannot yet be properly estimated and will take some time to begin to establish, but in any case will require careful, imaginative planning and adequate resourcing.

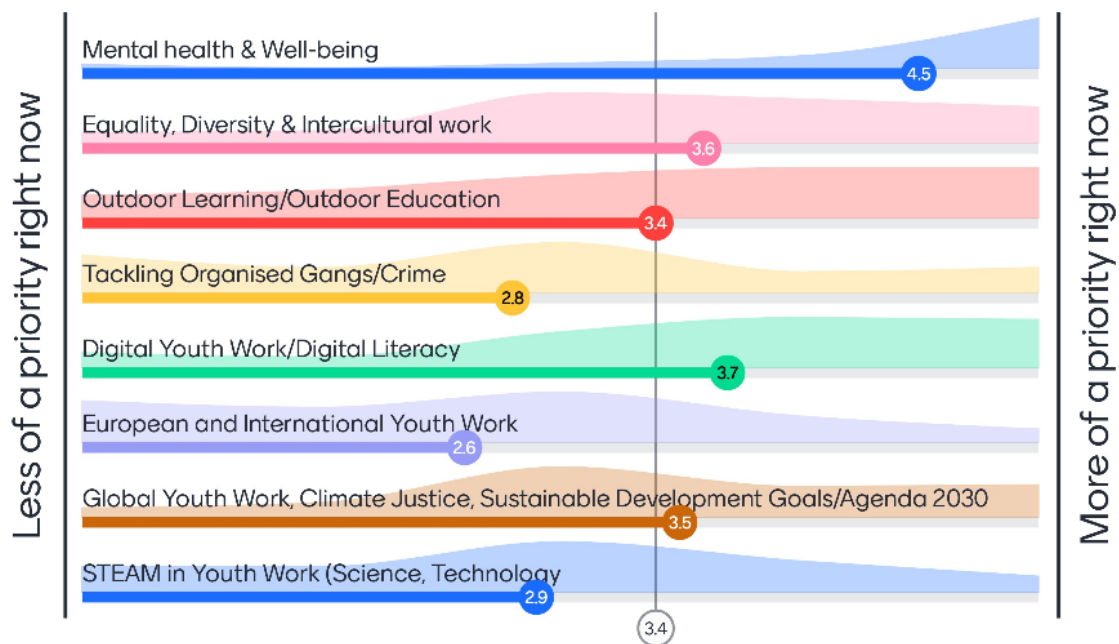
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<sup>1</sup> See Appendix 1 for a link to the ARK Policy Brief - 'Reclaiming youth work: A return to the founding principles of youth work during the COVID-19 pandemic'.

<sup>2</sup> See Appendix 1 for link to full workshop report.

**5.4** Participants also stressed the importance of upholding and maintaining the distinctive values and principles of youth work as we move out of the pandemic, including those relating to personal development and wellbeing; equality, diversity and interculturalism; and social justice, including climate justice and sustainability. These were reflected in the views of participants about areas for future collaboration (see below).

**5.5** As a specific agenda point of the event, youth work managers were asked to respond to a Mentimeter poll which asked them ‘Which of the areas below would you prioritise to meet, share practice and explore collaboration with sectoral colleagues, on a north-south basis?’ The results of the poll are presented below.



The remainder of this proposal is based on a consideration of the contextual considerations, research findings and ideas/recommendations emerging from consultative events outlined above.



## **6. North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub Proposal**

### **6.1 Purpose**

The purpose of the North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub is to strengthen and develop sustainable north-south youth work sector relationships among and between organisations, staff and volunteers, and enhance the quality of the learning experience of young people participating in youth services across the island.

### **6.2 Objectives**

The objectives of the North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub are to:

- Provide a forum and platform for the sharing of strategies, research, policies, publications and resources that enhance the quality and impact of youth work and youth services, in particular, as the sector emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic;
- Create opportunities and spaces (conferences, workshops, seminars, focus groups, etc.) for organisations, staff and volunteers to come together<sup>3</sup> around specific themes and areas of practice, share learning, experience, knowledge and skills;
- Act as a catalyst and conduit for increased cross-border co-operation and collaboration<sup>4</sup> (acting as a point of connection, signposting, bonding, bridging, linking) between youth work organisations and practitioners - including opportunities for young people;
- Distil and articulate (through a series of short briefing papers, reviews and reports) the core elements of effective youth work practice, its contribution to the personal and social development of young people and public policy objectives on the island of Ireland.

### **6.3 Approach**

A dynamic learning approach incorporating reflective critical practice and the social capital concepts of bonding, bridging and linking will be utilised to realise the purpose and achieve the objectives of the Hub. This will be underpinned by experiential and social learning theory.

All of the objectives and activities of the Hub will embody the principle of supporting and enhancing the well-being of youth work practitioners at all levels in the sector.

### **6.4 Activities**

The activities in the Hub work-plan will be informed by the Mentimeter poll taken at and report from the 'Where are we now?' Worksop for Youth Work Managers (9 February 2021), with flexibility to adapt to needs emerging in the sector as we emerge from the pandemic.

The work plan is focussed on consolidating and further developing networks and methods for peer support and reflective critical practice that proved so vital, and showed such promise, during the pandemic crisis.

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<sup>3</sup> Primarily using online platforms.

<sup>4</sup> Some small-scale catalyst sessions may take place in-person subject to the public health restrictions in place in both jurisdictions.

## 7. North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub Work Plan

<b>Area of Action 1</b>	Provide a forum and platform for the sharing of strategies, research, policies, publications and resources developed on the island, across the UK, EU and internationally
<b>Why Are we doing this?</b>	To enhance the quality and impact of youth work and youth services across the island, in particular as the sector emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic
<b>We will do this by:</b>	Distributing information and materials via Hub stakeholder email networks, e-bulletins, online portal, website hosting and social media

<b>Area of Action 2</b>	Create opportunities and spaces for organisations, staff and volunteers to come together around specific themes and areas of practice
<b>Why Are we doing this?</b>	To share learning, experience, knowledge and skills; optimise resources; support the sector to "build back better" as it emerges from the Covid-19 pandemic
<b>We will do this by:</b>	Planning, organising, delivering, and evaluating a series of conferences, workshops and seminars

<b>Area of Action 3</b>	Act as a catalyst and conduit for increased cross-border co-operation and collaboration between organisations with shared ideals, similar goals, comparable approaches to practice, working in and with particular geographic, socio-economic and/or thematic communities of interest
<b>Why Are we doing this?</b>	To help strengthen and develop sustainable north-south organisational relationships that will result in opportunities, programmes, projects and initiatives for young people across the island to take part in/benefit from
<b>We will do this by:</b>	Acting as a point of connection, signposting and facilitating engagement and supporting opportunities for bonding, bridging, linking between youth work organisations and practitioners

<b>Area of Action 4</b>	Distil and articulate the core elements of effective youth work practice - its contribution to the personal and social development of young people and public policy objectives on the island of Ireland
<b>Why Are we doing this?</b>	To capture, disseminate and sustain learning distilled from the Hub's activities
<b>We will do this by:</b>	Producing a series of short briefing papers, reviews and event reports resulting from the Hub's activities

## 8. The North-South Youth Work Sector Practice Development Hub Advisory Group

### 8.1 Terms of Reference

The strategic planning, implementation, oversight and day-to-day governance of the project rests with the NYCI officers and board. However, an advisory group will be established to:

- Ensure the widest possible participation and engagement in the Hub's activities;
- Maintain the relevance and quality of experience offered through the Hub; and
- Maximise the benefits of the Hub for the sector, organisations, workers and young people.

## 9. Appendix 1

**'Reclaiming youth work: A return to the founding principles of youth work during the COVID-19 pandemic'** (24/11/20), is an ARK Policy Brief paper, published April 2021, resulting from the Roundtable session in November 2020 involving over 30 leaders from the youth work sector, academics, policy makers, professionals from the justice system and government departmental officials north and south.

<https://www.ark.ac.uk/ARK/sites/default/files/2021-03/policybrief16.pdf>

### **Report on the 'Where are we now?' Workshop for Youth Work Managers** (09/02/21)

Reflecting on the contribution of the youth work sector in supporting young people to live, work and play - in a pandemic. A joint NYCI-EA Youth Service event in collaboration with YouthPact attended by 90 managers from across the island of Ireland.

<https://cooperationireland.org/content/uploads/2020/10/Where-are-we-now-Workshop-Report-09-02-21-Final.pdf>

### **'Unfolding Narrative from Covid-19: personal and professional wellness in practice'**

(23/03/21), was a follow up event to the February Workshop. It was led by Dr. Breda Friel (UU). Focused again on youth work managers, 52 participants from across the island attended, the vast majority of who had taken part in the February workshop. The session was designed as a reflective space for participants and an opportunity for reflection on, in and about practice, whilst considering signature strengths. To listen back to Dr. Friel's presentation, her analysis of the impact of the pandemic to us personally and professionally, her ideas around recovery, use of language and the unfolding narrative, click the link below.

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1jm1LeeOnBZwmxFIK5KjhhLUSKv4b6KGGH/view>