

Final Declaration Youth Work Ireland AGM, 7 November 2015

2015 was a year that firmly put Ireland on the map in terms of equality becoming the first country in the world to introduce same sex marriage by way of a vote of the people. Ireland can truly be proud of this achievement. The fact that young people were to the fore in this change is most notable. The campaign and the focus on the country as a beacon for equality is refreshing and needs to be embraced. It is all far removed from a far less tolerant and caring place people once knew. However, there are still many challenges remaining in becoming a country with equality at the centre of who we are and these challenges are particularly important for young people.

As a country we need to fully embrace the concept of equality in its formal legal sense but also beyond this in a deeper philosophical way. In the law the nine grounds of equality are clear and everyone is required to honour them in employment policies and in the provision of services. Such commitments are important but cannot be realized without a deeper set of beliefs amongst organisations and people of the importance of equality in everything that we do. As with the referendum young people are often way ahead on these issues.

There are clear issues where we believe movement is necessary by policy makers to enhance and further equality in Ireland and we can commit here today to promoting equality in all of our work.

We have come a long way in terms of provision for LGBT young people but we must recommit to analyzing all of our provision and activities to ensure we are still relevant and responding to this critical need. This work has often been done in partnership perhaps now we need to ensure this fully part of our mainstream offer. Changes to equality legislation and particularly section 37 of the Employment Equality Acts would be very symbolic by Government.

We need to examine all our provision and governance to ensure we provide full and equal treatment for young men and young women. As services we have been to the fore in providing for young travelers and recent tragic events only serve to remind us that this group is still in need of huge support. We support the recognition of the Travelling community as a separate ethnic group. Our services are open to all regardless of race or religion and we have reached out as best we can to new communities. We urge the Minister with responsibility in this area to produce an integration strategy which recognizes the critical role youth services play in this field. The removal of exemptions for schools in equality legislation in terms of admissions is also necessary here. Ireland will rightly accept refugees who have been seeking a better life in Europe. We are willing to play our part in providing the suite of services necessary locally to ensure integration of these communities.

Disability is a field where we can all do more. We are a rights based organisation and this is the proper starting point for working with young people with disabilities. We must ensure our programmes and premises are accessible and where this is not the case produce concrete plans to address this. As in other areas we know from working with young people that a balance of targeted and integrated work is best. We urge the Government to redouble its efforts to ratify the UN Convention on Rights of People with Disabilities

Age is naturally an area of discrimination we work on all the time. Whether it is cuts to welfare rates or the minimum wage unfortunately age discrimination is very real for the young people we work with. While there may be many different approaches or solutions the most wide-ranging would be an extension of the franchise to 16 year olds to ensure their issues are heard, we renew our commitment to this here today.

One area not covered by the formal law on equality is people's social and economic status. Yet we know the background in to which somebody is born determines a huge amount about their life chances. Our services work with some of the most disadvantaged young people in our communities. Numerous well documented approaches are needed to foster greater social and economic equality. Employment and quality public services including youth services are critical in this field. An accelerated programme of investment in disadvantaged areas will be critical to ensure Irelands economic recovery is felt equally by all.

At its annual assembly today Youth Work Ireland members call on the Government to adequately resource our Integrated Youth Services Model which has proved effective and cost efficient in delivering on the equality agenda for youth people envisaged in the Five National Outcomes identified in Better Outcomes Brighter Futures.