

Review of the National Development Plan Submission



Youth Work Ireland

Introduction

Youth Work Ireland is a Federation of 20 Member Youth Services and a National Office who work together to support, empower, inspire and educate young people through the delivery of best practice youth work services. Our Vision is an Ireland of equality, access and participation for all young people. We are an inclusive and member-centred organisation. Our work is in service to our membership as they in turn work to develop the potential of young people and strengthen communities in Ireland.

Our 20 Member Youth Services work in practically all rural communities in Ireland and are leaders in rural youth work. They service some of the most rural and isolated communities and engage with over 7,000 volunteers. We are critically aware of the need for enhanced support and engagement with youth work services around the country. The review of the NDP needs to prioritise this group in refocusing investment towards more social objectives. With innovative methods this can also provide returns for our “rainy day” funds while ensuring they support productive development and community life in Ireland.

Youth Services have a unique reach and role in local communities. In many areas they can be one of the few out of school services that young people can engage with. There is tremendous scope for the NDP to enhance its work with this sector in a while range of areas, and we wish to encourage this.

Built Facilities for Young People

There is need for a dedicated strategy for quality built facilities for young people in Ireland. This may lie with the Department of Education and Youth and such a development may also be relevant in the area of housing and planning in providing for new communities and upgrading facilities in more established areas. There are areas of NDP spending that have been utilised by youth and community groups, but these have been used through local initiative and local circumstances. There has not been a co-ordinated and focussed approach focussed directly on the needs for proper facilities for young people with local voluntary youth services leading.

The context for the NDP review is one of an expanding population. This growth will be in younger people often with children which will continue to fuel the growth in our youth population. Opportunities for Youth, the new youth policy, has emphasised the need to focus on the area of safe spaces for young people

Two current areas of the NDP are extremely relevant, education and housing. There has to date been a glaring absence of a dedicated capital budget for youth facilities in Ireland. Current allocations are for very small-scale projects relating to IT, and health and safety and cannot provide for significant youth facilities for large numbers of young people in local communities. Most of this provision by youth services has been based on their own local links, innovative and determined local leadership and local relationships. We have outlined some of these in this submission and while admirable it falls well short of a uniform national strategy which we believe is overdue.

Europe

Ireland clearly lies behind Europe in this field and has not had a clear national culture and priority in this area. Community and religious buildings served a need historically but many of these are in a poor state of repair. Religious groups are indeed taking back facilities in some areas from youth organisations. Many more recently funded community facilities prioritise sport rather than a broader notion of development like that set out in the definition of youth work in the 2001 Act. Our experience with other youth services in Europe is this is historically part of the culture and of the state to support this in a dedicated way. The role of municipalities in providing youth work undoubtedly influences provision too.

The Council of Europe has also prioritised the provision of youth facilities in its member states with the provision and oversight of European Youth Centres and the provision of a quality mark with a focus on quality accommodation-based centres linked to youth programming. This tool was developed as a standard-setting instrument and example of good practice for youth policy from the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe.

In 2016, KCYS, a prominent Youth Work Ireland member, received the Council of Europe Quality Label for Youth Centres for their **EurÓg Youth Centre, Killarney**. **EurÓg**, it is Ireland's only youth centre to have achieved this prestigious quality standard.

Best Practice

We are examining the current types and form of provision of built youth facilities in Ireland in close co-operation with Youth Work Ireland members and others in the broader youth sector. We will identify different models of best practice in provision covering a broad range of issues like the different types of premises and buildings, availability to the public, shared or youth only facilities, and the role of other actors or partners.

Similarly, this is identifying the precise ownership of facilities and the role of the youth sector and young people in their ownership and management. We are also examining freehold, trusts, long lease or other forms of ownership or control including mortgage and funders.

Some early indicative results of this research suggest different models and approaches in existence:

Heritage and History

There is still an issue with dereliction and old state building in many towns in Ireland. We have seen innovative examples of partnership between local youth services, other community groups and bodies like the OPW to provide quality community facilities while maintaining and developing historic and heritage sites. Once more, however, this has often depended on local relationships and initiative

Partnerships - Local Authority

Local Authorities are the main providers of local community infrastructure and there are good models of cooperation and work here. There is once more a need for a more systematic approach particularly linked with an analysis of demography and the current level of provision in relevant areas.

Partnership ETB

ETB's have a role in administering some funding for local youth work projects provided by youth services. Combined with their role with schools, adult and continuing education, they have worked with community providers of youth facilities and have experience in infrastructure provision.

Community Gain - Planning system

This is a familiar concept linked to the planning and development system whereby new developments and other initiatives, which go through the planning system, are required or voluntarily provide some type of facility, space or resource to the local community. This may be a condition of a planning permission or arise from local consultation. Clearly with an emphasis on housing and new communities in any revised NDP there should also be a focus on this with the need for youth facilities at its core. Changes to planning guidelines may also assist here.

Innovative and philanthropic

Not all local initiatives fit into neat categories and indeed several different approaches may overlap or intersect with each other. There are a number of bespoke initiatives which can arise from partnerships, philanthropy, bequests, local business relationships and many other areas. These do need to interact with the state at some stage for example for planning permission and their value needs to be recognised.

Some other features of a successful approach to providing a youth facility by local youth services and partnership observed are;

Voluntary Initiative

The most impactful approaches harness local voluntary initiative via a local youth service. This ensures there is passion and commitment amongst local actors to drive the project and critically maintain it in terms of volunteers and staff when established

Local relationships

Much of the development of local youth facilities in recent years has come from local partnerships between local youth services and local agencies. This is often the best side of Ireland with local knowledge leading to the best solutions for the community. However, it can also lead to a "patchwork" approach with differential level of provision across the country. We want to "level up" this provision across the country drawing on the best practice we have seen locally

Cross sectoral working on voluntary and state side

A genuine commitment to cross sectoral working as opposed to an often siloed approach to state provision is critical. Youth is one of the major cross cutting policy issues and even within the NDP it could be supported by different sub-heads. It is important that the need of the end users is the focus.

The “Two F’s”

There is a diversity of provision arising from local action. It is important to maintain this but to at least introduce some clarity and certainty for those wishing to provide such facilities in the future. Clearly there will be many stakeholders in the future and many diverse models. We would not insist that the youth services own all premises (although there are good models where they do) however two F’s from the Land League still apply, Fair Rent and Fixity of tenure.

Youth services and young people need certainty, and a constant facility can be an important resource there. Providing more certainty and clarity for youth services may mean being anchor tenants or having a greater say in a shared community facility. During Covid it was evident that young people’s needs could be sidelined in more traditional community centres. There are unfortunately examples of this happening in the everyday operation of shared facilities and a lack of clarity about the precise role of a facility and the role of income generation. The concepts of rent and control also need fresh examination.

We would like to examine in light of the above the potential different funding models and sources to quality funding for partnerships, refurbishments, long leases, sub-letting, social enterprises, disposals, community gain, and partnering with developers. We are open to further discussions with the relevant department and others in this area.

NDP Priorities

Education

The transfer of the Youth Affairs section to the Department of Education and Youth offers the potential for new synergies in the area of built factors and infrastructure for young people outside of the school setting. The Department has a track record as one of the major providers of infrastructure in local communities and has demographic forecasting models which can signal the need for new facilities.

Education and Youth is thus one of the priority areas in the NDP review for prioritizing youth facilities

Housing and Planning

A frequent issue with a rapid expansion of housing in the past has been the failure to ensure community facilities keep up with development. Planning guidelines should specifically mention the need for youth facilities in communities and also focus on “community gain” in county development plans, Local Area Plans and SDZ’s

Housing is also one of the priority areas in the NDP review for prioritizing youth facilities

The methods Ireland has developed for the spending of EU funds could also be a methodology for ensuring a cross sectoral issue like youth receives attention. Operational Programmes within overall priorities would be of assistance to promotion and public understanding of the NDP.

Delivery Issues

Early indications from our research suggest the following are issues that may need addressing in prioritising youth facilities for capital spending.

Ownership and control

Youth facilities have suffered from being “bundled” in with other issues such as community and sports facilities. This has not been ideal and often led to a deproteinisation of youth interests. Similarly, this approach was born of a time when the participation of young people and children in decision making was not as well as developed as today.

Management

Linked with the above is the need for proper management of facilities with an understanding of where relevant stakeholders are at and their needs and abilities. Proper governance with the use of charity and CLG structures and a proper constitution would be ideal.

Multiple Use

Multiple use facilities will remain common. We believe local youth services can take a leadership role and often be anchor tenants and indeed this is common in some of the innovative examples of local practice we have been researching

Independence and Governance

Community stakeholders expect a reasonable degree of independence over day-to-day issues. While ownership may often be vested in the state or a local state actor this should be respected and ideally be put in any written governance agreement

Innovative Funding

With substantial capital funds available we need to engage in new thinking on financing capital expenditure. The state provides grant in aid for rent but often frowns on recipients who have ownership or long leases on properties. Longer term, as in the timescale for “rainy day” funds, the state will increasingly want to see returns on its investments and hopefully facilitate some investment in Ireland rather than in global markets.

Long term finance and shared equity with public, private and community partnerships should be examined. Community organizations have utilised social finance and social enterprise approaches in many areas and “rainy day” funds should be open to this.

Recommendations

1. We wish to see the NDP set out an ambition to support local youth facilities across the twin priorities of Education and Youth, and Housing
2. We believe a dedicated “Operational Programme” with the relevant stakeholders could advance this
3. The mapping work done to date by the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education and Youth can assist this work
4. The Voluntary youth sector drawing on existing models of best practice should also be central to this work.