

Pathways to Work Submission 2025

Youth Work Ireland



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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.

Youth work in Ireland is a planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young people through their voluntary involvement, and which is complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations. (Youth Work Act 2001)

Our Youth Work for All model seeks full and adequate funding for youth services in every part of the country, a right to youth friendly dedicated spaces, paid and voluntary youth workers in every community, youth work as an enabler of rights. Youth work is delivered by voluntary organisations, welcomes all young people without exception and is youth led.

Youth Work and Youth Employment

Overall, we believe youth work should be viewed as a resource in the field of employment policy and, naturally, critically so when it comes to youth unemployment. The experience on the ground in this regard is far from uniform. Most of our initiatives are instigated by local youth services. Partnerships with statutory agencies exist but too often are part of local relationships or ad hoc arrangements. There is a lack of a systematic approach, and a dedicated youth employment strategy is needed from Government. Often statutory agencies work on their own, often with pre-determined programmes and approaches with little flexibility. Siloed provision is unfortunately all too common.

The figures for youth employment and unemployment have clearly improved which is good news. However, it is far less clear that this is strongly correlated to employment policy but rather to the overall economic buoyancy in the last number of years. This represents a structural challenge to policy makers. It is clear in our recent economic history, in the economic crash and the Covid era, that in downturns young people are the first to lose their employment while others with stronger experience, networks and labour market networks fare better.

Employment policy for young people has to be viewed far more broadly than the provisions of Public Employment Services. Even at that, the crucial relationships that Youth Services have in this area (as illustrated during the Youth Employment Initiative under the youth guarantee) can add considerable value to such work. This is done by leveraging existing relationships in the youth work process, working on employment preparation in youth projects and separately in delivering actual employment programmes with the state and others in a community setting.

Young people are some of the most vulnerable to economic boom and bust which is a feature of Ireland's exposed open market economic model. It is also probable that over dependence on corporate taxes and the new direction of U.S. policy will lead to further economic turbulence in Ireland. Employment policy then needs to develop programmes to protect young people from economic volatility. In short, we should make hay while the sun shines. This would best be done through a dedicated Government Youth Employment Strategy

Our Work

Youth Work Ireland carries out a number of interventions for young people and employment and very much views these a continuum (Appendix One) across and within all of our work including;

Youth Work Provision

The outcomes of youth projects and clubs are very much in keeping with the soft skills many employers are looking for. The Government should build on the work carried out by the youth sector and its previous Youth Employment Initiative and other initiatives such as Skills Summary from the NYCI.

Youth Information

Youth Information Centres can play a critical role in animating young people's employment journey. They already offer considerable job and training search activity and CV preparation combined with online interaction and support. Given the centrality placed on employment services by the OECD, Pathways to Work, and EU there is even further potential here.

Youth Services as Intermediaries

Many young people who struggle in the area of employment, education and training are distant and alienated from the state. Youth services can bridge this divide. They can reach out to the most disadvantaged young people where they have a relationship with the young person, their friends or the community. They can work with state providers to ensure provision works for this group and make any changes needed to ensure this happens and can even deliver provision in youth work settings.

Formal provision

At the most formal end of provision youth services can deliver actual existing state programmes but, in a community setting such as a youth centre. They can also provide associated support to improve participation and outcomes. Such provision currently exists, and a partnership between state and youth services would be well placed to build on this. Across a number of Youth Service there is already formal educational opportunities delivered in a Youth Centre/Youth Work setting. In the case of Youth Work Ireland Midlands there is QQI Project which is funded by the Department of Justice. Amongst our ranks we also have accredited community training initiatives funded by ETB's, with others managing Community Training Centres / Youthreach etc., all these offer Junior & Leaving Cert equivalents and higher education opportunities to young early school leavers.

Data

The measurement and statistics on unemployment and youth unemployment are clearly important metrics in this area. The Labour Force Survey is the main measurement that informs policy. The Live Register also provides important data by various categories such as age, duration and payment types. This is important in examining trends in youth employment and indeed the differential treatment of young people for example in Job Seekers Allowance.

Youth unemployment rates for both measurements are ahead of the average for the population at large and close to the EU average. While normally the Live Register shows higher rates of unemployment (relating to payment types and part time signing on) this is the reverse for young people, although the 2025 LFS Survey showed a significant increase in the youth rate. This is also a recent phenomenon. It might be a fair assumption that reductions in JSA Payment rates to young people has contributed to this. This also suggests that a number of young unemployed people receive no income support which is very worrying suggesting hidden poverty and unemployment.

During the financial crisis another measure that was adopted was the abandonment of the school leavers survey. This was a valuable piece of research and given the later age

of school leaving recently, would also provide critical information in the discrepancy between the Live Register and Labour Force Survey relating to young people.

Discouraged workers (as defined by the ILO and LFS) are a particular cohort of the unemployed which are measured, but receive little other attention. These are likely to include a number of early school leavers. The outreach work of Pathways to Work should include these as a particular group and work with youth services which currently have considerable relationships with these young people and their communities particularly through delivering UBU and Garda Projects along with their own dedicated employment supports.

Dedicated Youth Employment Strategy

Review and Evaluate Current Situation and Provision relating to Young People

Any dedicated strategy for youth employment should evaluate and measure current initiatives such as Job plus and WPEP. Similarly, as mentioned various different data sources need to be analysed.

The application of lower youth rates for the minimum wage is an important aspect of young people's labour market experience. The Low Pay Commission has called for the reversal of this austerity era measure, and it has also been highlighted by the European Economic and Social Committee.

Similarly, the reduced rate of Job Seeker Allowance for young people is a clear negative message to young people. Rates should be equal for all adults.

Enhance Youth Works Employment Impact

Additional support should be provided for the employment relevant outcomes for all youth work interventions building on the work done by GYDP projects. Funds can be linked with employment type outputs such as soft skills. This is youth work funding for youth projects but designed to further employment outcomes identified by employers. Youth Work Ireland's Work to Learn projects have successfully partnered with the private and state sector in this regard. The Skillshare model developed by NYCI and DCEDIY could also provide a good measurement and outcome tool.

Enhance Youth Information Centres to Improve Employment Supports

Employment Services have long been identified as critical to the employment journey of people, and this is all the more important for young people. We are fortunate to have in Ireland a network of Youth Information Centres which already provide employment and training supports to young people. Enhanced support can leverage these relationships and provide value for money.

Utilise Youth Services as Intermediaries for State Employment Services

While considerable resources are provided for education and training initiatives for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds, they often entail similar provision or settings to those that young people left or feel failed them first time around. Local community-based youth services have illustrated that they can leverage critical relationships of trust to work with young people to assist them in engaging in provision that can enhance their labour market chances. This can often be in partnership with other agencies such as ETB's, local development actors, training organisations and DSP.

Of critical importance here is the youth service effectively mediates and vouches for the state with young people and builds the trust necessary. This work is effectively not resourced in a dedicated way and involves a whole suite of youth work interventions connected with confidence building and mental health supports. Such support is central to reform of the education and training system for young people and youth services.

Youth Services as Deliverers of Formal Provision

In many respects the logic and rationale for Youth Services as actual delivery agents for formal certified interventions is the same as the intermediary role. In this instance for a variety of reasons the youth service would deliver the intervention rather than acting as a broker or intermediary for a state provider. Formal educational opportunities are already being delivered by youth work organisations in youth centres. Local circumstances and situations would be the determining factor and the capacity of the local service. Similar supports would also be provided outside the training or education environment. We have significant experience amongst our members in this.

Educational Disadvantage

We cannot look at youth unemployment in isolation. Whether in Boom or Bust Ireland has a deep-seated problem relating to educational disadvantage. Early school leaving remains an issue in many disadvantaged areas. The performance of children on key indicators under the PISA system is significantly less in DEIS schools despite some improvement. Non-attendance measured by Tusla (formerly the NEWB) is still high.

We are still a way off the generally accepted school completion rates to senior cycle. Curriculum reform at the senior level needs to be a greater priority. Our members see an upsurge in "Emotionally Based School Avoidance" which needs urgent attention. Data in this area and the related area of vocational education and training is weak since the ESRI's School Leavers Survey was effectively defunded.

The new Junior Cycle Student Award is a step in the right direction and ensuring similar reform for the Leaving Certificate is fast tracked are low-cost solutions to begin to deal with our all too high. The reintroduce the Early School Leavers Survey is long overdue.

There is a need for a substantial research study on “Emotionally Based School Avoidance” Increased support for literacy and numeracy work coupled with support for voluntary youth services who work with early school leavers and the hardest to reach young people, with support certified learning in these informal settings is required.





Recommendations

1. Government should adopt a dedicated Youth Employment Strategy aimed at preventing the particular vulnerability to young people from the employment impact of economic shocks
2. Support Youth Information Centres in conjunction with INTREO in their employment related work
3. Provide a dedicated support to all local youth services for their employment work
4. Support and extend local youth services in their provision of training for young people
5. Reverse sub-Minimum Wage for young people to make work pay
6. Evaluate all current youth employment measures
7. Reintroduce the School Leavers Survey and include a module on Emotionally Based School Avoidance
8. Research the differences between the Live Register and Labour Force figures for young people compared to the rest of the population and the aspect of discouraged workers
9. Examine the long term reversal of lower Job Seekers Allowance rates and fully integrate with training and employment supports
10. Ensure normal allowances for unemployed can be paid for all programmes run by or in partnership with youth services subject to normal live register criteria
11. Devise innovative arrangements for above with under 18's (utilise Youthreach payments model etc)
12. Facilitate local agreements between Youth Services, DSP Offices, ETB's and other actors to ensure joint working and targeting locally
13. Make youth services community hubs for Intreo and employment services for young people, ring fence new staff for partnerships with or event direct employment by Youth Services
14. Allocate some of the additional CE Places directly to youth services for 18-25's for innovative labour market relevant projects, the flexibility and community basis can be extremely valuable as long as skills and progression are prioritised
15. More generally utilise the payments, flexibility and training regime of CE for young people in a labour market focussed way
16. Develop more skills and education training partnerships with Youth Services, in partnership, as contracted providers or in their own right depending on the circumstances

17. Deliver a number of the envisaged job promotion events in or in conjunction with youth services

Appendix One

Youth Work Ireland's Youth Employment Continuum

	Youth Work		Preparation		Activation	Formal Training and Education	
							
Provision	Core Youth Work	Youth Information	Youth Services in Partnership	Youth Services as Animators		Youth Services as formal providers	
Content	Soft outcomes, communications, teamwork (like Skills Summary)	CV Prep, coaching, job clubs	Delivery in partnership, LTI, ETB etc	Animation, activation, guidance, matching, support assistance to participate in ed & training, prevent drop out, practical day to day help		Delivering Youthreach, CTC and others	
Funder	DCEDIY	DCEDIY – room for others?	ETB's, DSP, local development	DCEDIY, Justice – clearest room for others and more support – DSP?		ETB's, DSP, etc etc	