

DE Funded  
Youth Service Volunteer Strategy

**2023-2029**

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## 1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 The Youth Service in Northern Ireland is delivered for the most part by volunteers (95%) with a small percentage delivered by paid part-time and full-time youth work staff (5%). Significantly this demonstrates that the sustainability of youth services in Northern Ireland is intrinsically linked to the recruitment and retention of volunteers to ensure its continued delivery of services.
- 1.2 Based on statistical returns to the Education Authority Youth Service we have seen a consistent year on year reduction of volunteers within Department of Education funded youth work. The Covid-19 pandemic highlighted not only the appetite to volunteer within communities, but the risk to succession planning for the youth sector as it has seen its largest reduction in volunteers as we emerged from the pandemic and restarted services.
- 1.3 The Covid-19 pandemic has also seen a significant increase in children and young people's emotional health and wellbeing needs. As a result of prolonged social isolation and disruption to their social lives this has also led to an increased need to provide personal and social development opportunities for children and young people. Youth Services has always been important, but to support all our children and young people as we recover from the pandemic, it will be essential.
- 1.4 Overall, with the need to provide increased services, set against a backdrop of an ongoing reduction in volunteer numbers within youth services, this strategy sets out the key themes based on feedback from the youth work sector and volunteers to support meeting the demands presently placed the service with a view to grow the scope and quality of support for volunteers in youth work in Northern Ireland.

## 2.0 Strategic Context

- 2.1 The Department of Education's policy '*Priorities for Youth – Improving Young People's Lives through Youth Work*', published in October 2013 sets out clearly the focus of delivery for all Department of Education funded youth work in Northern Ireland.
- 2.2 One of the key actions within Priorities for Youth is the production of a Regional Youth Development Plan based on an assessed need. The Regional Youth Development Plan is a three-year strategic regional plan, responding to the assessed needs of children and young people and focused on delivery against the key areas in Priorities for Youth.
- 2.3 A key area of Priorities for Youth is the Development of the Non-Formal Education Workforce, which includes support for volunteering within youth work.

- 2.4 In addition, under the priority of ‘Closing the Gap’ there is a focus on supporting children and young people aged 16 years or older into leadership and volunteer roles.
- 2.5 In the absence of an Executive level strategy or and updated Department for Communities strategy on volunteering in Northern Ireland, there are wider governmental strategic contexts that volunteering through Youth Work contributes to and are considered as part of this strategy;
- 2.5.1 Programme for Government (2016-2021)
  - 2.5.2 Children and Young Peoples Strategy (2020-2030)
  - 2.5.3 Education Authority 10 Year Strategic Plan (2017 – 2027)

### 3.0 Key Strategies and Development Plans

3.1 Youth Service delivery is part of a wider strategic context designed to deliver improved outcomes for children and young people. Outlined below is how Youth Work can impact on these wider strategic outcomes and why volunteers are critical in youth work to achieve success.

Strategy/Development Plans	Purpose	Impact
Draft Programme for Government	Outlines NI government strategy for economic growth and addresses disadvantage committing to a cross departmental approach to improve outcomes for citizens.	The strategy must support the contribution to Outcome 11 (High quality public services) and Outcome 14 (giving children and young people the best start in life).
Children and Young Peoples Strategy	To improve the well-being of children and young people living in Northern Ireland, delivering positive, long-lasting outcomes.	Volunteering will be central to how DE Funded Youth Work will support improved outcomes for children and young people. In addition to outcome “Children and Young People Make a Positive Contribution to Society”.
Education Authority Strategic Plan	Translates the education policies into operational strategies for improving the educational outcomes of children and young people.	Volunteer Strategy must align to wider EA corporate priorities, including the “L.E.A.R.N.” objectives. In particular, developing all our people to carry out our jobs successfully and Nurture Leadership.
Priorities for Youth	Outlines the priorities for the delivery of Youth Services in Northern Ireland for all Department of Education Funded Youth Work.	The Volunteer Strategy should contribute to Developing the Non-Formal Education Workforce priority but also consider routes into leadership for 16+ years young people under Closing the Gap Priority.

Three Year Regional Youth Development Plan	Based on assessed need, sets the regionwide strategic outputs for the delivery of Youth Work over a three-year period, delivered by both voluntary and statutory youth work providers.	As part of the enabling priorities develops the non-formal education workforce and improving the non-formal learning environment at a regional wide level.
Three Year Local Youth Developments Plans	Based on assessed need, sets the local (by council area) strategic outputs for the delivery of Youth Work over a three-year period, delivered by both voluntary and statutory youth work providers.	As part of the enabling priorities develops the non-formal education workforce and improving the non-formal learning environment at a local level.

## 4.0 Volunteers - The Stakeholder Environment

- 4.1 At the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic there was a surge in volunteering to support not only vulnerable children and young people in youth services, but wider support for members of our local communities.
- 4.2 The pandemic has presented for some volunteers personally more complex life situations due to a range of factors such as; new/additional caring responsibilities, changes in work patterns, employment status and work to family/personal life balance. In addition, with most public services not operating due to restrictions, those who have volunteered previously have reconsidered their personal priorities, resulting in not returning to volunteering.
- 4.3 Although the pandemic has highlighted the largest reduction in volunteers in youth work, it is also not the only reason volunteers have left youth work. Whilst it is evident from data that volunteer numbers are reducing year on year, conversely the expectations on volunteers have been increasing year on year at the same rate.
- 4.4 When delivering a regulated activity with children and young people, it comes with mandatory training such as safeguarding. However outside of essential training not only has there been a pattern of increasing volunteer hours, but increased expectations on volunteers to attend training, often alongside the same training routes or processes we expect of paid youth work staff.
- 4.5 There is a reliance on long-term serving volunteers to sustain existing provision, this is more evident in organisations funded under Generic/Non-Targeted funding, which is grant aid assistance for organisations operated solely by volunteers. Not only does this present a risk to ensuring that universal provision continues to be delivered but has highlighted a lack of succession planning to support youth organisations to “pass the baton” and nurture future leadership.

- 4.6 For those who want to volunteer in youth work, they have stated they do not know where and how to access volunteering opportunities. Youth Work delivery in Northern Ireland is very diverse in types of practice delivery and youth work settings. Creating clearer and supported routes into volunteering within youth work are required.
- 4.7 Volunteering within youth work is often centred on what a volunteer can do to meet youth service delivery needs or the organisational needs. This leads to a youth service centred approach, rather than a volunteer centred approach, missing out on the diverse transferrable and untapped potential volunteers can bring to youth work, ultimately adding value to the lives of our children and young people.
- 4.8 Volunteering by its nature is about giving of your time freely, however because of expectations we can place on volunteers or opportunities we offer can lead to a personal financial impact for the volunteer. Even before the present economic environment is considered, this presents a real barrier to encourage current volunteers to remain within the service, to recruiting new volunteers and enable volunteers to avail of the opportunities offered.

## **5.0 Youth Services - Current State Observations**

- 5.1 Based on available statistics the youth work sector has seen a consistent reduction in volunteer numbers (on average 8% reduction per annum between 2014 - 2017). Based on the most recent registration data the youth work sector has seen its most significant reduction post-pandemic (16% reduction in 2022).
- 5.2 Based on the same data it also demonstrates the contribution of volunteers on average has continued to increase (8-10% increase on average of volunteer hours per volunteer) year on year. This indicates that youth work is increasingly relying on an increased contribution of volunteer hours from those who remain within the service to address the gaps created as a result of those leaving the service.
- 5.3 Based on 2022 registration the youth sector workforce is made up of 5% paid staff and 95% volunteers. With such a significant dependency on volunteers to deliver the service set against a backdrop of reducing numbers of volunteers and increased volunteer hours contribution, without significant action to support and address volunteer recruitment this presents a credible inherent risk to sustaining the delivery of youth services in Northern Ireland.
- 5.4 In June 2022 the Education Authority Youth Service engaged the Youth Work Sector through a SHARED event on volunteering which highlighted and affirmed the stakeholder environment section. In addition, the event recognised a loss of knowledge, skills, and experience, particularly in the area of accessing funding.

5.5 The Education Authority Youth Service SHARED event on the theme of volunteering highlighted best practice to develop and support youth work volunteers, however it remained evident without a sector wide strategy which shares and extends this best practice these will remain as pockets of success and will not address the regionwide need.

## **6.0 What will we deliver**

Through the three-year Regional Youth Development Plan cycle, the Education Authority Youth Service will facilitate the support of eight key themes for developing Youth Work Volunteers:

- Theme 1: Promoting the Youth Work Volunteer Offer
- Theme 2: Welcoming and building a community of Youth Work Volunteers
- Theme 3: Minimising the expectations on Youth Work Volunteers
- Theme 4: Celebrating the Contribution of Volunteers in Youth Work Delivery
- Theme 5: Nurturing Leadership
- Theme 6: Strength Based and Volunteer Centred Approach
- Theme 7: Providing Skills and Immersive Experiences for Youth Work Volunteers
- Theme 8: Shared Youth Work Sectoral Approach to Supporting Volunteers

### **6.1 Theme 1: Promoting the Youth Work Volunteer Offer and Increasing Access**

The Youth Service will provide a supported pathway of accessing volunteer opportunities within the youth work sector and connecting volunteers to suitable delivery that meets the needs of the volunteer and supports the delivery of youth services in Northern Ireland. In addition, this theme will seek to attract new volunteers to the sector through promotion of the benefits of volunteering in youth work and identifying critical points in delivery which will support volunteer recruitment, such as summer programmes.

### **6.2 Theme 2: Welcoming and building a community of Youth Work Volunteers**

The Youth Service will seek to ensure each new volunteer is valued from their first day by providing a framework for welcoming and supporting new volunteers. In addition, volunteers will be afforded the opportunity to connect with other volunteers through welcome events and networking events to build a strong connected community of volunteers who have a voice in improving volunteering for all in youth work.

### **6.3 Theme 3: Minimising the expectations on Youth Work Volunteers**

Volunteers contribute freely their time to support the delivery of youth work and as such that time should come at zero cost to the volunteer, including expectations to facilitate their participation in volunteering in youth work kept to a minimum. Youth Service will seek to ensure volunteer expenses associated with volunteering in youth work are reimbursed and mandatory training requirements are limited only to statutory and legislative requirements, whilst supporting those who wish to progress and develop their skills.

### **6.4 Theme 4: Celebrating the Contribution of Volunteers in Youth Work Delivery**

Every volunteer matters. The contribution of volunteers such as time and the impact they have on the lives of children and young people varies but every volunteer should be recognised as equal in value. The Youth Service will focus on celebrating all volunteers, rather than recognising or awarding some.

### **6.5 Theme 5: Nurturing Leadership**

The Youth Service will provide support for those who wish to progress within their volunteer leadership role in youth work and feel ready to take on additional responsibility, adding support for succession planning of youth work as others step back, including progression onto training in youth work and paid youth work positions.

### **6.6 Theme 6: Strength Based and Volunteer Centred Approach**

The Youth Service will recognise and value the existing strengths and transferable skills volunteers can bring to youth work, which are not necessarily youth work skills, and respond to the developmental needs of volunteers and the needs of the youth service.

### **6.7 Theme 7: Providing Skills and Immersive Experiences for Youth Work Volunteers**

The Youth Service will provide for volunteer's optional skills-based training that not only serves to improve the delivery and quality of youth work but provides transferable skills which adds value to the volunteer's employability and life outside of volunteering in youth work. In addition, youth services can offer volunteer specific immersive experiences they don't normally have access to. Considering and developing a programme of developmental experiences at zero cost to the volunteer, from services and provision such as outdoor learning, to provide volunteer only experiences which not only prompt their personal growth but add value to improving their emotional health and wellbeing and improving their skill sets in youth work.



## **6.8 Theme 8: Shared Youth Work Sectoral Approach to Supporting Volunteers**

To effectively support the recruitment and retention of volunteers within youth work it is not the responsibility of any one area of the youth work sector. The entire youth work sector faces the same challenge, and as such the Youth Service will support and resource a joint sectoral approach to positively affect change underpinned by this strategy.

## **7.0 How we will deliver**

- 7.1 Core to the strategy is a sector wide approach to supporting the recruitment, development and retention of youth work volunteers. Critical to the success of the strategy is a joint Voluntary and Statutory approach.
- 7.2 The Education Authority Youth Service operates through a three-year assessment of need and planning cycle. The themes established in this Volunteer strategy will be the core drivers for within the Regional Youth Development Plan and Education Authority Youth Service Funding Scheme for Regional and Local Voluntary Youth Organisations.
- 7.3 Through the agreed plan, the Education Authority Youth Service will establish metrics/indicators to demonstrate the impact of the strategy, which will also provide evidence to quality assure not only the plan and the strategy but will facilitate where necessary required updates or changes to the strategy within the period.

## **8.0 Key Enablers**

- 8.1 **Voluntary and Statutory Working Together** – This strategy will seek to establish a shared vision, commitment and common purpose approach across the youth work sector.
- 8.2 **Voice of the Volunteer** – Core to all decisions in delivery and continuing to develop the quality of strategy is to ensure the voice of the volunteer is central to the decision-making process. Ensuring consultation on the needs of volunteers is given due weight in the context of planning and feedback from volunteers engaged as a result of the strategy ensures continuous improvement.
- 8.3 **Resource Allocation** – Commitment of staffing and funding through relevant youth funding streams for delivery, which is on a full cost recovery basis, equitable, and meets the ambition of the strategy are critical to success and affirming to volunteers the Youth Services commitment to support their role as a volunteer within youth work.