2026 - 2029

# Regional Youth Development Plan



Education Authority | Youth Service

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**Produced on**
3 June 2025

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# Introduction & Background

## to the Regional Youth Development Plan

The Education Authority (EA) Regional Youth Development Action Plan for 2023-2026 outlines the key targets to be achieved by the EA Youth Service, based on the Regional Assessment of Need for 2026. This is delivered in accordance with the Department of Education (DE) Policy Priorities for Youth.

The plan will be reviewed regularly, and progress will be reported in line with the framework of the EA's Strategic Plan (2017-2027) and corporate business plans as well as the Children and Young People's Services' directorate business plan.

The resources provided to the Education Authority Youth Service by the Department of Education are deployed in accordance with the plan to achieve specific, policy led objectives, outputs, and outcomes.

In addition to the Regional Youth Development Plan the Education Authority Youth Service delivers local Services outlined in three-year Local Area Youth Development Plans, which are provided across the 11 District Council Areas. Key actions within the Local Area Youth Development Plans are informed by the Local Assessment of Need, Local Statistical Profiles, Regional Assessment of Need and the Regional Youth Development Plan.

# Planning Context


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# Legislative Context

## for Youth Service Planning

The key legislation governing youth services in Northern Ireland is the Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986. The legislation includes provisions for adequate youth services, primarily through Article 37 which states:

> *"Each board [now Education Authority] shall secure the provision of adequate facilities for recreational, social, physical, cultural and youth service activities and for services ancillary to education and for that purpose may, with the approval of the Department, either alone or together with any other person*
>
> *a) establish, maintain and manage any such facilities;*
> *b) organise any such activities;*
> *c) assist, by financial contributions or otherwise, any person to establish, maintain and manage any such facilities or to organise any such activities;*
> *d) provide, or assist by financial contribution or otherwise in the provision of, leaders for such activities; and*
> *e) defray or contribute towards the expenses of any persons taking part in any such activities."*

This key legislation **delegates authority for delivery and decision making to the Education Authority** for the delivery of youth services in Northern Ireland through Department of Education funding and in line with the Department policy for youth work.

This includes the delivery of statutory youth services directly (alone) or through grant aid assistance to the community and voluntary sector (any other person) and/or in partnership with the community and voluntary sector or other agencies (together).



# Primary Policy Context

## Priorities for Youth: Improving Young People's Lives Through Youth Work

Priorities for Youth: Improving Young People's Lives through Youth Work (2013) outlines a set of priorities within a policy framework for youth work within education, strategically aligned to the overall Department of Education policy and vision for Youth Work. The policy delegates responsibility to the Education Authority [referred to as ESA (Education Skills Authority) at publication] to achieve the following aims:

- To contribute to raising standards for all and closing the performance gap between the highest and lowest achieving young people by providing access to enjoyable, non-formal learning opportunities that help them to develop enhanced social and cognitive skills and overcome barriers to learning; and
- To continue to improve the non-formal learning environment by creating inclusive, participative settings in which the voice and influence of young people are championed, supported and evident in the design, delivery and evaluation of programmes.

The policy sets out a framework for the Education Authority to deliver youth services under the following five priorities:

1. Raising Standards for All
2. Closing the Performance Gap, Increasing Access and Equality
3. Developing the Non-Formal Education Workforce
4. Improving the Non-Formal Learning Environment
5. Transforming the Governance and Management of Non-Formal Education

In the context of planning the delivery of youth services policy outlines that:

> *Planning, funding and delivery of youth work will be based on the ESA [now Education Authority] composite (local and regional) assessment of need and will support requirements linked to the Department of Education key priorities at local, sub-regional and regional level. (4.6.1)*
>
> *ESA [now Education Authority] will develop a strategic three-year Regional Youth Development Plan (RYDP) for Department of Education approval, which will be implemented via annual Youth Development Plans across all levels. (4.6.2)*

The policy also references that the Education Authority is required to work in collaboration and partnership with the community and voluntary youth sector, and to consider their advice and feedback on the planning and delivery of youth services. This includes consideration of existing facilities provided by a wide range of providers, including the community voluntary sector, councils and charitable organisations and resources provided by other funding bodies.

It is important to note the contribution of Youth Work to other Policies, Legislation, Guidance and Strategies. Further Information regarding this can be accessed here.



# Assessed Need


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# Voice of Children and Young People

in closing the gap, increasing access and equality

Policy outlines that youth services should be based on the needs of children and young people; therefore, the plan must be child and young person centred. The first step the Education Authority has completed in this process to inform planning has been through the Regional Assessment of Need 2026.

**Youth Work Through Open Access**

The Regional Assessment of Need highlights very clearly the need to focus on open access youth work which includes the delivery of those services more regularly at times that suit them including twilight and afterschool, later opening at weekends, and during holiday periods. There is a strong theme to ensure these spaces are safe and inclusive. In addition, it is highlighted by children and young people that through open access youth work they would like the opportunity to explore the themes identified in the Regional Assessment of Need with a focus on:

- Access to information about the issues that concern them, as youth work/services are a trusted source of information on key issues and are provided in a non-judgemental and supportive environment.
- A key focus of the youth work curriculum, within open access youth work, is the development of opportunities to support their hobbies and interests.
- A greater effort and focus should be placed on reaching out and building increased opportunities for those who experience barriers to participation including those from section 75 groups and those who wish to engage in youth work through the medium of Irish.

Overall, the Education Authority needs to make a concerted effort to increase the opportunities for children and young people to access universal youth work programmes across the region.

**Early Intervention and Early Prevention through Youth Work**

Youth work should continue to provide group work programmes and projects based on emerging need regionally and locally, and this needs to be constantly reviewed over the planning years as the needs of children and young people change. Based on the current Regional Assessment of Need young people have identified specifically the pressing concerns noted below that youth work should initially focus on:

- support to address ending violence against women and girls
- community relations and equality beyond traditional Northern Ireland community backgrounds
- political education, citizenship and civic engagement
- understanding and exercising their rights,
- a youth work response to address poverty and food hunger
- increasing access to those section 75 groups
- managing their emotional wellbeing in particular sleep and rest
- addressing risk taking behaviours and
- supporting young people for employment and further or higher education
- Environment and climate

A process for young people to inform ongoing planning over the three-year period will be critical to ensure the plan remains child and young person centred.

# Support to Address Need

## through improving standards, developing the workforce, improving the learning environment and partnership

To effectively meet the needs of children and young people at a regional and local level the Education Authority must ensure supports are in place to deliver youth work to a high standard which meets the needs of our children and young people and is evidenced through proportionate reporting.

Staff and volunteers are critical to the delivery of youth services and therefore ensuring they are valued, equipped with the curriculum resources and have the skills that empower all our staff to meet the needs of children and young people will be crucial to success.

Given the proportion of the workforce that is made up of volunteers and the importance of open access youth work, there will need to be a continued focus on recruiting more volunteers to increase access to youth services. In addition, retaining volunteers, investing in them to recognise their contribution will be critical to maintain and grow this important part of our workforce.

In line with the Regional Assessment of Need, a workforce development strategy, which includes a programme of training and curriculum resources, is needed based on children and young people's needs for this planning period. This should consider not only options and adjustments to support full-time, part-time and volunteer staff, but will be developed through a lens of open access youth work and early intervention and prevention, which should be made available to all those delivering on Department of Education funded youth work.

To improve outcomes for children and young people the Education Authority Youth Service will develop a framework for effective partnership and collaboration based on principles and best practice.




HUMAN
BOARD GAME
Challenge

# Planning Strategy


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# Strategic Approach

for Youth Services

Considering the findings from the Regional Assessment of Need, including the legislative and policy context for youth work, there are four emerging strategic themes to inform the Regional Youth Development Plan. Strategic themes are crucial as they provide a high-level framework for aligning efforts towards common goals and achieving the long-term objectives over the three-year planning period. The themes below will act as a roadmap to guide decision making and the prioritisation of delivery.

## Child and Young Person Centred

**Through a rights-based approach the planning and delivery of youth services will be based on the needs identified by children and young people, including feedback to children and young people on how we used the information they have provided to inform our decisions**

## Delivering Services Based on Need and through Partnership

**The delivery of youth services will be based on the needs of children and young people through existing statutory youth provision and through grant aid assistance to the community and voluntary sector. This includes through partnership and collaboration when it improves the outcomes for children and young people.**

## Evidence Informed

**We will collect only what we need to inform the benefits and impact of youth work delivery in the lives of children and young people. We will engage in academic research to further provide evidence informed approaches to the impact, planning, and delivery of services with a focus on reducing bureaucracy and administration in the delivery of youth work.**

## Empowering All our Staff

**We will ensure all those delivering youth work have the curriculum resources and skills to meet the needs of our children and young people accessing youth services.**

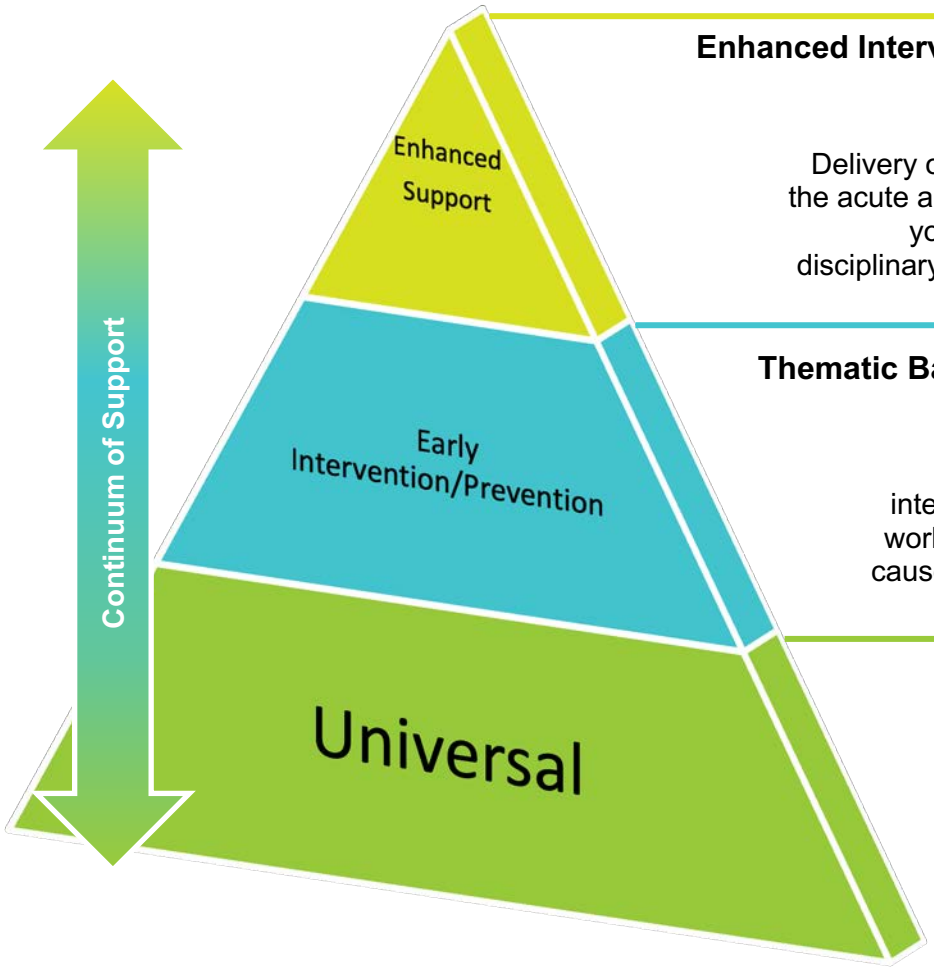
# Public Health Approach

## to strategic planning

A public health approach to youth services involves addressing issues through a focus on preventing problems and promoting overall wellbeing at a population level, rather than just treating individuals who are already experiencing issues. This approach emphasises evidence-based strategies, multi-agency collaboration, and a focus on the social determinants that impact children and young people. By taking a public health approach, services can be more effective in promoting the overall wellbeing of children and young people by addressing the root causes of problems and creating supportive environments that enable children and young people to thrive.

A focus on universal approaches to youth work will provide a foundational level of support that will help most children and young people develop to their full potential, by meeting their fundamental needs, building a foundation for growth, promoting equity and inclusion, and improving long-term outcomes. Early intervention and prevention approaches through youth work delivery are effective in addressing potential problems before they escalate, reducing the need for more intensive support later.

The planning, design and delivery of services through a public health lens requires a whole system approach to effectively provide a continuum of support for children and young people and adds value to all the types of interventions and delivery provided by youth work. For youth work to be effective the planning and delivery of services based on the needs of children and young people should be considered through a public health lens to maximise its impact.




**Enhanced Interventions Through Partnership (Highly Desirable)**

Delivery of targeted interventions to address the acute and individual needs of children and young people through effective inter-disciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches with youth work.

**Thematic Based Youth Work Programmes (Desirable)**

Delivery of thematic based early intervention and early prevention youth work programmes that address the root causes that impact the needs of children and young people.

**Open Access Youth Work (Essential)**

Delivery of quality youth services through an open access approach, open to all and delivered based on children and young people's needs.

# Benefits Realisation

of youth work delivery

Benefits realisation is the practice of ensuring that benefits are derived from the outputs and outcomes that youth work delivers. The process focuses on maximising the impact by identifying, planning, measuring and tracking delivery indicators to ensure the intended benefit value is achieved.

Benefits realisation is not just about delivering outputs; it is about ensuring those outputs create the intended value. Therefore, it is less about the number of outputs delivered and more about the value and difference the output has made.

Additionally, as the focus is on indicators, if the indicator is not demonstrating the expected result or impact, it permits organisations to reevaluate the need for the action and/or the approach earlier in the delivery.

As part of the regional planning process outlining the benefits of delivery and agreeing the indicators that evidence it is happening or has happened will enable youth work to articulate more clearly its impact on the lives of children and young people.

To achieve this, the plan will consider through an evidence-based approach the benefits of the planned delivery and establish indicators for each benefit. The indicators will become the focus of reporting for youth work delivery.



# The Plan


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# The Stretch Goal for Youth Services

## STRETCH GOAL UNDERPINNED BY THE PUBLIC HEALTH MODEL

| Universal (Essential Goal) | Early Intervention & Prevention (Desirable Goal) | Enhanced Support (The Stretch Goal) |
|---|---|---|
| **What is it?** | | |
| Providing **open access youth provision** that provides **safe and welcoming space** for all our children and young people. | Providing ongoing **thematic based group work programmes and projects** to address the **root causes impacting the needs** of children and young people. | Providing **targeted interventions** to address the **acute needs** of children and young people **in partnership** with other agencies to meet the needs of children and young people. |
| **How will we do it?** | | |
| • Providing adequate universal youth provision for children and young people, ensuring that statutory and voluntary youth services are funded to prioritise the needs of children and young people who access them<br>• Services are provided at the right times, in the right places based on what children and young people need<br>• Services are informed with the participation of children and young people<br>• Supporting children and young people who need early intervention/prevention to access programmes<br>• Services are equipped with the resources to deliver a quality open access youth work programme of offer<br>• Capacity of staff is supported to meet the needs of children and young people presented through universal provision | • Providing resources (curriculum, training and funding) to facilitate youth work programmes prioritised against assessed need through formal and informal settings<br>• Supporting families, formal education and communities to support the needs of the young person<br>• Services are informed with the participation of children and young people<br>• Supporting children and young people who need it to access enhanced support or engage in universal support<br>• Services are equipped with the resources to deliver a quality early intervention and prevention programmes/projects<br>• Capacity of staff is supported to meet the needs through the delivery of early intervention and prevention programmes/projects | • Providing resources (curriculum, training and funding) to facilitate enhanced professional development<br>• Working with partners and agencies to deliver bespoke support services at an individual and group level<br>• Supporting young people to attend specialist support services<br>• Reintegrating young people into appropriate youth work opportunities<br>• Reconnecting young people within their family, formal education and community<br>• Supporting children and young people to progress through early intervention and prevention programmes or connect with universal support |

| Universal | Early Intervention & Prevention | Enhanced Support |
|---|---|---|
| **How will we resource it?** | | |
| Focused use of the Department of Education Allocated Funding for Youth Work to the Education Authority | Mixed funding model approach using the Department of Education Funding for Youth Work and other Earmarked Funding aligned to the theme | Focused use of other earmarked funding supporting the delivery of youth work |
| **The Benefits** | | |
| **Children and Young People will have:**<br>• Increased protective factors in their lives<br>• Increased sense of belonging<br>• Experience social and emotional skills development<br>• Increased agency to make informed decisions<br>• Improved social connectedness<br>• Increased sense of power to change the world around them | **Children and Young People will have:**<br>• Improved the resilience, skills and abilities to manage their own wellbeing<br>• Increased agency to make informed decisions<br>• Increased participation in, and focus on, their learning<br>• Improved emotional health and wellbeing<br>• Development of their thinking skills, life skills and work skills | **Children and Young People will have:**<br>• Complex needs of individual children and young people are met<br>• Increased connection between statutory, community and public services<br>• Enhanced youth service capacity to meet the complex needs of children and young people<br>• Facilitated de-escalation support pathways |
| **Benefit Indicators** | | |
| • Number of open access youth work sessions provided<br>• Number of children and young people participating in open access youth provision<br>• Percentage of young people satisfied with the service<br>• Number of young people volunteering within the programme<br>• Number of young people gaining accreditation<br>• Status of children and young people's participation on the Engagement Framework<br>• Number of training programmes provided<br>• Number of staff participating in training | • Number of group work programmes delivered<br>• Number of children and young people participating in youth work programmes<br>• Percentage of young people satisfied with the programme<br>• Number of young people gaining accreditation<br>• Number of young people volunteering within the project<br>• Number of referrals to external or enhanced support services or universal services<br>• Number of training programmes provided<br>• Number of staff participating in training<br>• Number of children and young people progressing against one or more of the youth work outcomes | • Number of children and young people engaged in enhanced support youth work programmes<br>• The numbers of children and young people referred to external agencies<br>• Number of referrals to early intervention or universal services<br>• Number of children and young people progressing against one or more of the youth work outcomes<br>• Number of training programmes provided<br>• Number of staff participating in training |

# 2026-2029 Regional Youth Development Plan

| Strategic Theme: | Headline Goal: |
| --- | --- |
| **Child and Young Person Centred** | Implementation of a process that constantly and consistently seeks the views of children and young people to inform the planning and delivery of youth services on a quarterly basis |
| | Based on the views of children and young people, review and update annual action plans quarterly, based on the changing assessed needs of children and young people |
| **Delivering Services Based on Need and through Partnership** | Based on available resources secure adequate, accessible universal youth provision for all children and young people to provide open access at the right time and in the right place |
| | Based on available resources (Youth Service funding and other earmarked funding) provide early intervention and prevention programmes based on the assessed needs of children and young people |
| | Develop and deliver, in partnership with other agencies and government departments, enhanced support for children and young people based on their assessed needs. |
| **Evidence Informed** | Implementation of a Benefits Realisation Framework for youth work with established indicators to reduce bureaucracy and administration linked to reporting on delivery |
| | Implementation of a programme of academic research to evaluate and measure the impact of universal, early intervention/prevention and enhanced youth work support for children and young people |
| **Empowering All our Staff** | Focus on developing the volunteer workforce in line with the Education Authority Youth Work Volunteer Strategy 2023-2029 to increase recruitment, improve retention and recognise and celebrate the role of volunteers |
| | Implementation of a Youth Service Workforce Development Strategy that effectively provides curriculum resources and builds the capacity of workforce to meet the ongoing needs of our children and young people through universal, early intervention/prevention and enhanced support programmes |

# Reporting Impact


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# Benefits and Indicators

Summary of Delivery benefits and indicators

| Level | Benefit | Plan Indicators |
|---|---|---|
| Universal | ***Increased protective factors in the lives of children and young people*** | • Number of open access youth work sessions provided<br>• Number of children and young people participating in open access youth provision<br>• Percentage of young people satisfied with the service<br>• Number of young people gaining accreditation<br>• Number of young people volunteering within the programme<br>• Status of children and young people's participation on the Engagement Framework<br>• Number of training programmes provided<br>• Number of staff participating in training |
| | ***Increased sense of belonging*** | |
| | ***Experience social and emotional skills development*** | |
| | ***Increased agency to make informed decisions*** | |
| | ***Improved social connectedness*** | |
| | ***Increased sense of power to change the world around them*** | |
| Early Intervention / Early Prevention | ***Improved resilience, skills and abilities to manage their own wellbeing*** | • Number of group work programmes delivered<br>• Number of children and young people participating in youth work programmes<br>• Number of referrals to external or enhanced support services or universal services<br>• Percentage of young people satisfied with the programme<br>• Number of young people volunteering within the project<br>• Number of young people gaining accreditation<br>• Number of training programmes provided<br>• Number of staff participating in training<br>• Number of children and young people progressing against one or more of the youth work outcomes |
| | ***Increased agency to make informed decisions*** | |
| | ***Increased participation in, and focus on, their learning*** | |
| | ***Improved emotional health and wellbeing*** | |
| | ***Development of their thinking skills, life skills and work skills*** | |
| Enhanced Support | ***Complex needs of individual children and young people are met*** | • Number of children and young people engaged in enhanced support youth work programmes<br>• The numbers of children and young people referred to external agencies<br>• Number of referrals to early intervention or universal services<br>• Number of children and young people progressing against one or more of the youth work outcomes<br>• Number of training programmes provided<br>• Number of staff participating in training |
| | ***Increased connection between statutory, community and public services*** | |
| | ***Enhanced youth service capacity to meet the complex needs of children and young people*** | |
| | ***Facilitated de-escalation support pathways*** | |

# Outcomes Based Accountability

for Department of Education Funded Youth Work

Below is the established Outcomes Based Accountability (OBA) agreed with the Department of Education for the Delivery of Youth Work. The Education Authority has considered this report card as part of planning and will map the indicators collected through a benefits realisation approach to report on the agreed Outcomes Based Accountability.

| How much did we do? | How well did we do it? |
|---|---|
| • Total Youth Service membership<br>• Number of projects delivered with young people<br>• Number of young people engaged by youth services (by age band)<br>• Number of young people volunteering within youth projects<br>• Number of Moderation/Monitoring visits<br>• Number of adult volunteers<br>• Average hourly contribution by volunteers | • Percentage of young people reporting improvement against one or more youth service outcomes<br>• Percentage of young people satisfied with their service<br>• Percentage of moderations rated 'meets requirements' or better<br>• Percentage of moderations/monitoring visits that require to be followed up |

| Is anyone better off? |
|---|
| • Number and percentage of young people achieving an accredited outcome<br>• Number and percentage of young people progressing to expected stage on the youth service engagement framework<br>• Number and percentage of young people making progress against youth service outcomes |

# Youth Work Outcomes

for the delivery of Youth Work

The Youth Work Outcomes were established in 2015 through the Youth Service Sectoral Partners Group, linked to an action within Priorities for Youth which states the development of "*Robust quality and proportionate reporting systems*". The working group established the outlined framework of expected outcomes for youth work, with the aim to generate robust and proportionate data for all Department of Education funded youth work. The Youth Work Outcomes have been established as the unifying and common focus within a diverse sector and are embedded within all youth work delivery to measure the progression of children and young people.

| INDIVIDUAL | GROUP, COMMUNITY, SOCIETY CONTEXT |
|---|---|
| **Outcome: Enhanced Personal Capabilities**<br><br>Outcome Indicators:<br>• Greater self-awareness<br>• Increased confidence and self-esteem<br>• Empathy<br>• Resilience<br>• Managing feelings | **Outcome: Improved relationships with others**<br><br>Outcome Indicators:<br>• Improved ability to work with others (teamwork)<br>• Positive peer relationships<br>• Improved relationships with adults<br>• Positive engagement with others from diverse backgrounds<br>• Greater respect for difference |
| **Outcome: Improved Health and Wellbeing**<br><br>Outcome Indicators:<br>• Increased satisfaction with life<br>• Greater awareness of health issues (sexual/physical)<br>• Improved ability to make healthy choices (reduction in risk-taking behaviours / reduced substance misuse) | **Outcome: Increased participative action**<br><br>Outcome Indicators:<br>• Increased sense of belonging to community<br>• Improved communication between young people and adults<br>• Positively influenced others, advocates on behalf of others or takes on a representative role |
| **Outcome: Development of thinking skills, life skills and work skills**<br><br>Outcome Indicators:<br>• Decision-making<br>• Planning and problem solving<br>• Leadership and communication<br>• Creativity | **Outcome: Active Citizenship**<br><br>Outcome Indicators:<br>• Volunteering (local and international)<br>• Increased awareness of local and global issues<br>• Employment, education or training |

# Youth Work Engagement Framework

for open access youth provision

The Engagement Framework was established in 2015 through the Youth Service Sectoral Partners Group, linked to an action within Priorities for Youth which states the development of "*Robust quality and* proportionate *reporting systems*". The Engagement Framework forms part of the annual return from universal open access youth provision to report on the participation levels of children and young people, based on a reflection completed by youth work practitioners.

| Category of Engagement | Indicators of Engagement | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| | **Intensity and commitment of engagement** | **Distance travelled for children and young people** | **Children and young people's influence in decision making** |
| **Contact** | • Attends, e.g. to meet friends and takes part in social, creative, recreational or sport activity | • Enhanced Personal Capabilities<br>• Improved Health and Wellbeing<br>• Positive relationships with others | • Makes personal decisions on participation in activities designed by others |
| **Engagement** | • Engages in, short term, group programmes<br>• Makes new relationships | • Enhanced Personal Capabilities<br>• Improved Health and Wellbeing<br>• Developed thinking, life and/or work skills<br>• Positive relationships with others | • Contributes to decision making with others relating to a specific programme or activity |
| **Active Participation** | • Participates in planned, long term, group work programme with youth work outcomes | • Enhanced Personal Capabilities<br>• Improved Health and Wellbeing<br>• Developed thinking, life and/or work skills<br>• Positive relationships with others<br>• Increased Participation | • Actively involved in assessing needs, decision making, planning and problem solving either around a single activity or within the club, unit or project generally |
| **Maximising Potential** | • Participates in the design and/or delivery of programmes or activities for self and others, including evaluation<br>• Acts in a leadership role<br>• Involved in the unit/club/project to their maximum ability | • Enhanced Personal Capabilities<br>• Improved Health and Wellbeing<br>• Developed thinking, life and/or work skills<br>• Positive relationships with others<br>• Increased Participation<br>• Active Citizenship | • Positively influences others, advocates on behalf of others<br>• Takes on a representative role within and/or beyond your club, unit or project e.g. in governance arrangements or as part of a local or regional youth council or forum |



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**Produced on**
3 June 2025

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