



Department of  
**Education**  
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# STRONGER FUTURES

## - A Northern Ireland Youth Work Policy



**Stronger Futures** is a new plan for how youth work will support children and young people aged 4-25 across Northern Ireland. It aims to make sure every child and young person has the opportunity to access youth services in their community which meets their needs.

It has been co-designed in partnership with young people and reflects what matters most to them - things like belonging, safety, opportunities, trusted adults, friendships, support and a lifeline when they need it, while also helping them to engage better when in school.

### Here's what the policy means for you as a young person:

#### 1. Services will be inclusive, high quality, and shaped by your voice

Youth work will continue to be a non-formal type of education, meaning it's not like school, you can participate in youth services when you want - it's about learning through experiences, relationships, youth clubs, projects, and fun.

Youth services must be:

- designed in partnership with young people, not just for them.
- inclusive and welcoming and promoting children's rights, especially for those who face barriers such as poverty, rural isolation, special educational needs and disabilities and those who are vulnerable or at greater risk of not being included.
- linked to the school curriculum to support you with learning in school.
- available for ages 4-25, with different support determined by what you need:
  - 4-8: universal youth services preparing you for life-long resilience and learning.
  - 9-13: reflective of your educational and adolescent journey.
  - 14-18: reflective of your transition through your educational journey, employability and adult life.
  - 19-25: bespoke youth work interventions to help address acute needs.

Services will be local and accessible helping to remove barriers that prevent you accessing youth services.

## 2. ✓ Youth work will be designed around your needs

Youth services must be based on what young people tell us they need, as well as research that shows what works and educational priorities. We must listen to you and be open and transparent about how decisions are made and show the difference youth work makes for children and young people.

## 3. ✓ Youth workers and volunteers will be better supported

To ensure you get the youth services and support you deserve, it is vital that the right people with the right skills work with you.

To do this, it will be important to support:

- recruitment.
- training.
- safeguarding.
- leadership.
- valuing volunteers.

## 4. ✓ Funding and buildings will be used better to support young people

All public services are under financial pressure, but the goal is to use money more effectively to address the identified needs for youth work and find new funding opportunities across government and community partners.

There will also be a clearer approach to youth work facilities - aiming for:

- better quality spaces.
- more shared facilities so that local provision can be available.

### 5. Clear roles for the Department, the Education Authority (EA), and the community and voluntary youth sector

The policy is clear about who does what:

- The Department has set this policy and will monitor progress.
- The Education Authority (EA) will put the policy into practice, planning, supporting and securing youth services, working with local communities to help them deliver the youth services needed to support children and young people.
- Community and voluntary providers will partner with the EA to deliver youth services in local communities where possible, building over time to deliver in more local communities.

### 6. Stronger partnerships so support is joined up

This policy encourages closer partnerships to improve outcomes, including with:

- young people.
- schools.
- local councils.
- PSNI.
- other agencies.
- community groups.
- government (e.g. Department of Health).

## What this means for you

The successful implementation of this policy will mean children and young people across Northern Ireland can expect:

- consistent and constant youth services.
- welcoming, safe and inclusive spaces.
- services that support your needs, enable you to participate, and adapt to your changing needs.

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- support for wellbeing, including emotional wellbeing, and for young people who are vulnerable or at greater risk of not being included.
- support to develop skills that will help you in school and in life.
- more say in how youth work is designed.
- access to youth services - regardless of where you live or your background.
- youth workers who are well-trained and supported.
- youth services that are fair, transparent, and based on real evidence.



### INTRODUCTION:

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## Why this policy matters

Youth work is a vital part of education in Northern Ireland. It is an informal, rights based educational practice that supports young people's personal, social and educational development. Youth work is based on the voluntary participation of children and young people and delivers through a person-centred approach. Youth work practice is underpinned by National Occupational Standards and relies on a skilled volunteer network (circa 94%) alongside qualified staff. Youth work meets the assessed needs of children and young people and enables them to face challenges including from emotional health and wellbeing pressures to digital harms, poverty, and isolation. Youth work is more relevant than ever.

This policy sets a renewed direction for statutory youth services for ages 4–25. It builds on the previous **Priorities for Youth (2013)** and responds directly to what young people told us matters most: safety, trusted adults, friendships, opportunities, and a lifeline when needed.

There is significant reliance on youth work services across government departments, recognising the importance of investing early in young people. Its costs can be seen as preventive spend which can reduce the need for later spending in other areas. Youth work contributes economic and social value by helping to reduce crime, improve health, promote community relations and increase employment, as well as increase participation in education. However, more could be done to both quantify and communicate the economic value and benefits of youth service delivery.

Investment from government and other organisations is piecemeal and potentially duplicative. It is difficult to draw direct comparisons with other jurisdictions given the different delivery and funding models. Although there is a strong case for further financial investment in youth work, as public finances in Northern Ireland are under pressure, this policy is not primarily about additional cost – but rather about better use of existing resources (people, buildings, and budgets), including using the Children's Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015 to maximise shared investment as appropriate. It focuses on repurposing, reprioritising, and building cohesion across the system, including a clearer focus on roles of the main organisations and sectors involved.

**The goal is simple:** children and young people should have access to consistent, constant, inclusive, adequate youth services that meet their needs and are evidence-led.

## Vision

**All young people have access to consistent, convenient, and inclusive youth provision – a balance of fun and learning, adaptable to individual needs, with trusted workers who broaden horizons and provide safe spaces where all voices are heard.**

(created by young people)

## Policy context at a glance

Youth work contributes to educational outcomes (including attendance, transitions, skills and attainment), emotional wellbeing, civic participation, and cross-government priorities including ending violence against women and girls.

This policy is grounded in the Children's Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015, which applies up to the age of 18, as well as the statutory duties under Article 37 of The Education and Libraries (Northern Ireland) Order 1986 ("the 1986 Order"), to secure adequate youth services. This policy aligns with the 2025 Partnership Agreement with the voluntary and community sector.

This policy sets out a renewed strategic direction for statutory youth services in Northern Ireland, underpinned by the 1986 Order. It aims to ensure that children and young people aged 4 to 25 can access adequate evidence-based provision that supports their personal, social and educational development.

The policy is based around six key themes which emerged from the review of Priorities for Youth.

## Theme 1: Services

### Why this matters

Services must fit young people's real lives and be evidence-based - not what adults think young people need. Youth work is non-formal education: voluntary, relational, and fun. It should complement, not replicate, school<sup>1</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> Reference to schools throughout this policy includes all education settings, such as EOTAS.

### Policy position

Youth services should be:

- Safe.
- Planned and targeted to identified needs.
- Designed in partnership with, and centred on, young people.
- Non-formal.
- Complementary to formal education.
- High quality and impactful.
- Proactive and positive.
- Local, accessible and inclusive, including tackling barriers to involvement.
- Effective, efficient and consistent with relevant law and guidance.
- Reviewed - Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) will inspect youth provision; and pre-inspection and post-inspection support will be provided through the most suitable channels.

Youth services should be tailored based on needs:

- **Universal (open access):** an open access approach, open to all and delivered based on children and young people's needs.
- **Targeted:** thematic based, early intervention and early prevention youth work programmes that address the root causes impacting on the needs of children and young people such as hunger, poverty, rural isolation, emerging emotional health and wellbeing needs.
- **Enhanced:** to address the acute and individual needs of children and young people through effective interdisciplinary and multi-disciplinary approaches with youth work.

Services should be age-differentiated:

- **4–8:** universal youth services setting a bedrock for life-long resilience and learning.
- **9–13:** reflective of educational and adolescent journey.
- **14–18:** transitioning in educational journey, employability and adult life.
- **19–25:** bespoke youth work interventions to help address acute needs.

Services should be free from barriers to participation.

Providers must create safe, welcoming, inclusive environments (including for all Section 75 groups) and follow safeguarding requirements.

ETI will inspect DE funded youth provision. Pre-inspection and post-inspection support will be provided through the most suitable channel relevant to the group being inspected to drive continuous improvement.

### Intended Outcomes

- Young people experience consistent, safe, inclusive, and high-quality youth services regardless of location or background.
- Services are designed in partnership with young people and demonstrably responsive to their lived experiences.
- Youth work complements formal education, improving engagement, attendance and broader life outcomes.
- Universal, targeted, and enhanced youth work will be delivered consistently and effectively, as evidenced by annual reporting and all relevant legal requirements.
- Comprehensive practice improvement support, including pre and post inspection, will be provided and highlighted in annual reviews.

## Theme 2: Evidence based assessment of needs and outcomes

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### Why this matters

Youth services must be based on and adapt to the real needs of children and young people, in an ever changing and highly complex world. With finite budgets, there is a necessity to clearly and regularly assess the issues impacting on young people, identify needs and prioritise these to shape services which will make a positive difference for children and young people.

### Policy position

Needs should be:

- Clearly evidenced and informed by robust research and insight.
  - Assessed in an open and transparent way.
  - Informed by structures and process which include the voice of young people, service providers and stakeholders.
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- Used to inform budget setting and, in turn, designed within the context of available funding.
- Informed by Departmental priorities and policies.
- Approved by the Department.
- Regularly reported against - at a strategic rather than granular level - to drive forward quality, showcase the outcomes and benefits and allow for early intervention where benefits are not being achieved. Reporting requirements on delivery providers must be proportionate, outcome focused and avoid undue bureaucracy.

### **Intended Outcomes**

- The assessed needs of children and young people will be identified and addressed, with outcomes captured and reported.
- Services are prioritised based on evidenced need, ensuring resources are targeted effectively.
- Young people will be empowered to share their perspectives and influence decision-making, as reflected in Youth Voice reports.
- There is clear visibility of impact, with measurable improvements in outcomes for young people, providing a robust evidence base for youth work delivery through evaluations and research.

## **Theme 3: Youth Workforce**

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### **Why this matters**

Youth work is operationalised through a robust, interlocking framework including the youth work curriculum; national professional standards and qualifications which define the competencies and skills required for effective practice.

The diversity of the youth workforce, both paid and volunteers, is its greatest strength. The delivery of universal youth work across Northern Ireland is fundamentally reliant on a trained volunteer network (circa 94%) who are the backbone of the youth sector, extending the reach of youth services deep into communities.

The availability and quality of a youth workforce is important to the services provided and is a vital factor in a young person's experience and outcomes. Understanding the voice and

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responding to the needs of staff and volunteers are critical to their retention and should remain central to the decisions and planning to support them.

### Policy position

The youth workforce, including staff and volunteers, should be:

- **Planned and sustainable** - with workforce planning which progresses recruitment, retention, progression, leadership and succession planning. In providing pathways, care should be taken to avoid introducing unintended barriers to entry or for the existing workforce. Plans should be regularly informed and enhanced by feedback.
- **Supported to develop** - while recognising a one-size-fits-all approach would not be suitable across the diverse workforce, people within it should be enabled and supported to develop skills, experiences and qualifications relevant to their current roles and potential to ensure the quality and consistency of the workforce. This should include, but not be limited to, the youth work curriculum (including through the medium of Irish), strengthening of safeguarding and Special Educational Needs and Disability (SEND) skills. It should also include succession planning through accreditation in Levels 1 - 6 in youth work for the sector and support for volunteer development.
- **Recognised and valued** - building on existing strengths to ensure a confident, skilled, stable workforce with lower staff turnover and improved outcomes for children and young people.

### Intended Outcomes

- A skilled, diverse, and sustainable workforce is in place across all areas of youth work.
- The assessed needs of the workforce will be identified and addressed, with outcomes captured and reported.
- An effective curriculum to support youth workers will be delivered with impact measured.
- The workforce is recognised and valued, leading to greater stability and improved outcomes for children and young people.

## Theme 4: Funding and facilities

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### Why this matters

While there remains a strong case for further investment in youth work, we cannot ignore current financial constraints. Alongside making the case for investment when opportunities present themselves, we can use money, buildings, and partnerships more effectively and efficiently to ensure local communities can support and enhance youth work.

### Policy position

Resources should be:

- Advocated for and evidenced - including exploring how investment across government departments can be better utilised through youth services, using the Children's Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015.
- Sustainable - including a diversified funding base across government to augment the core youth budget; and via delivery partners in harnessing additional funding.
- Used in alignment with policy, legislation and Departmental oversight and be informed by identified need.
- Allocated based on assessed needs of children and young people.
- Used to address barriers to participation.
- Regularly evaluated.
- Shared - including the pursuit of greater sharing of buildings such as schools (Article 128 of the 1986 Order), youth centres, local council buildings, and community assets being utilised for youth services.

### Intended Outcomes

- Resources will be utilised effectively to meet the needs of children and young people, evidenced in an annual report.
  - Young people have access to high-quality, safe, and accessible facilities, open at the right times and in the right places.
  - Youth services benefit from more sustainable and diversified funding sources across sectors.
  - Greater collaboration and reduced duplication providing better value for money.
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## Theme 5: Structures and support

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### Why this matters

The roles and responsibilities of all stakeholders in the delivery of statutory youth services need to be clear, to ensure there is no duplication, tensions or distractions from the main purpose of supporting the needs of children and young people.

### Policy position

The key roles are set out as follows:

- **Department of Education (DE):** sets the policy mandate and will approve plans and monitor implementation and delivery.
- **EA:** has the statutory duty to deliver on the policy mandate and will work with effective advisory structures, including children and young people, to ensure transparent, sector informed and evidence-based decisions, strategic plans and how funding is used. The EA will act as the enabler and steward of youth services and will ensure adequate, inclusive provision in line with education legislation, policies and priorities. The EA will seek to build the capacity of local communities to deliver youth services and step back when the time is right. In the meantime, the EA will fill critical gaps where Community and Voluntary Sector (CVS) capacity is absent.
- **CVS<sup>2</sup>:** Community led youth services will partner with the EA to meet the needs of children and young people as identified through the EA's assessment of need process, drawing on support from the EA to build capacity and extend delivery in local communities. It is anticipated that CVS capacity will build over time as part of a managed transition.
- Support to youth settings will be provided through the relevant channels to drive continuous improvement, such as the EA or regional support partners. **The Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI)** will not be reinstated; the Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1989 will be repealed.

### Intended Outcomes

- The system operates as a cohesive and coordinated delivery model, focused on outcomes for young people.

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<sup>2</sup> References to the CVS throughout this policy are in the broadest sense i.e. inclusive of community, uniformed, faith and other non-governmental organisations involved in youth work delivery.

- Governance and support structures enable efficient decision-making and continuous system improvement.
- Effective partnerships with the CVS will be developed to meet the needs of children and young people.
- Capacity to deliver youth work will be addressed within the CVS to enhance youth work outcomes for children and young people.

## Theme 6: Partnerships

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### Why this matters

Youth work should be supported through partnership with:

- Young people - in providing opportunities for participation in the design and monitoring of youth services.
- Schools and communities - including youth workers in schools, shared use of buildings, and active promotion of youth services to pupils.
- Delivery partners - The youth work sector will work together and with others to ensure shared good practice and the best use of funding to provide the best outcomes for children and young people as appropriate.
- Central and local government - joining up public services and funding, where related to youth work and where this can be a useful vehicle for supporting the delivery of outcomes, including as supported by the Children's Services Cooperation Act (Northern Ireland) 2015. The Partnership Agreement between Government and the Voluntary and Community Sector (2025) will be adhered to.

### Intended Outcomes

- Effective partnerships with other statutory agencies and government bodies will be embedded within youth work practice, with joined-up support for young people.
- Collaboration across sectors delivers shared outcomes and maximises collective impact.
- Resources, knowledge, and expertise are shared effectively, improving service reach and quality.

# Implementation and Review

The EA will lead the implementation of the policy, with DE oversight. It is anticipated that this will be in a phased, managed transition, in the interests of the young people, and with the collective involvement of youth sector partners. The policy will be periodically reviewed with young people, youth work partners and stakeholders.





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