



Youth Work Ireland

Youth Participation Policy
making our beliefs real



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YOUTH WORK IRELAND

YOUTH PARTICIPATION POLICY

making our beliefs real

By Youth Work Ireland

Drafted by Matthew Seebach



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Youth Work Ireland

Youth Work Ireland is a federation of local youth services throughout the country who work in the interest of young people through the provision of a range of services and who share a common ethos and approach.

Our Vision

Youth Work Ireland has a clear and unambiguous view of the kind of society we want to contribute to developing.

Our vision states this clearly as:

'A more equal and sustainable world where all young people are valued and involved.'

Our Mission

Our mission is:

'to contribute to changing society for the benefit of young people.'

We will achieve this by deploying the resources of the Federation, both nationally and at a regional level through the engagement of Boards, staff and countless volunteers in order to:

- Promote quality youth work
- Build our capacity
- Work to realise the rights of young people
- Influence decision making and policy

Our Beliefs

We have a positive view of young people, their dignity and worth

All young people have rights and should be supported to realise these

Young People have the potential to effect change



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Introduction

This policy contains:

Our position on what youth participation is in **Youth Work Ireland**

This is informed by our Beliefs, Principles and Mission as they appear in our current Strategic Plan (2009-2013). The Strategic Plan has itself been determined by extensive consultation with all **Youth Work Ireland** stakeholders.


Additionally, every attempt has been made to ensure that our position is consistent with the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child. This policy position is also informed by the OMCYA model of youth participation, an evidence-based model derived from research (NCO, CRA & NYCI, 2005).

This policy position sets out **Youth Work Ireland's** commitment to advocating for the right of young people to be heard in decision-making within their own lives, within **Youth Work Ireland**, within the Irish Youth Work Sector, within their communities and in Irish society. It is our belief that this ambitious commitment defines our model and approach to youth work.

Our principles of how we will do youth participation

This is informed by consultations with all member youth services and young people.

This statement of principles includes a recognition that the only way to develop and make these principles real is to work with our members to learn from their practice, expertise and experience. In this way we can develop a shared, fuller understanding of these principles, which can support better practice and policies in the organisation.





Our vision of youth participation


These are the outcomes of youth participation as identified in our operational and strategic plans – this is what we have said we are trying to accomplish through our work in supporting youth participation.

Our commitment to organisational and societal change to achieve greater youth participation

This is what we commit to doing to achieve youth participation and includes:

Participation proofing all decisions within **Youth Work Ireland** National Office.

Developing and implementing a Participation Strategy that disaggregates, communicates, integrates, monitors and evaluates all actions in the operational plan to support our participation objectives.



SECTION 1

Youth Participation in Youth Work Ireland



Youth Work Ireland, its Board, staff and members have collectively established an organisational Mission, Vision and Beliefs. These outline an ambitious agenda in relation to youth participation which not only seeks to involve young people in making decisions within our organisation, but which works towards young people participating more fully in decisions in their own lives, the Irish Youth Work Sector, their communities and in Irish society. We believe that this broad view youth participation combined with our sense of duty to advocate for young people and their rights distinguishes our model and approach to youth work and youth participation.

Our Beliefs

In our Strategic Plan (2009 – 2013) **Youth Work Ireland** states three key Beliefs which have important consequences for our Youth Participation Policy:

- We have a positive view of young people, their dignity and worth.
- All young people have rights and should be supported to realise these.
- Young people have the potential to effect change.

It is important to point out that these beliefs not only reflect the position of **Youth Work Ireland** and its members, but that they represent ideas consonant with those put forward within the Vision of Youth Work articulated in the National Youth Work Development Plan (2003 – 2007) (DES, 2003).

The first of these beliefs means that we do not see young people as society sees them, which is largely negatively. We believe that this negative view of young people on the part of society limits their opportunities to take part in decision-making. Therefore, part of our commitment to youth participation means making efforts to combat the negative view of young people and promote a positive view of young people.

The second belief is even more fundamental. Subscribing to the UNCRC has consequences for our participation work. This is because Article 12 of the UNCRC tells us that young people are citizens now; participatory activities have the purpose not of preparing young people to be citizens in the future, but to exercise their rights to make decisions now. This right is not restricted to decisions, which only affect young people themselves. In other words, young people have the right to be involved in decisions, which affect themselves as well as adults, in an organisation, in the wider community and in society as a whole.

Having laid claim to this belief, **Youth Work Ireland** now has responsibilities to support young people in enacting their rights.

The last belief is that young people have it within themselves to effect positive change through their agency. This is important in relation to participation as it provides a positive basis for their involvement in decision-making. That is, the involvement in decision-making is not a paper-exercise; it has the purpose of bringing about tangible change.

As importantly, this belief provides a basis for our supporting young people in other kinds of participation. While this policy focuses on decision-making, we believe that young people's full citizenship, as enshrined by Article 12, also gives them the potential to effect positive change in their lives, in our organisation, in their communities and in Irish Society through participating in and initiating action. Our role is to support them and create the environment in which their positive action can take place.

Our Mission

Youth Work Ireland states in its Mission and Vision that it has an unambiguous commitment to involving young people in society and to affecting change in the world. These commitments also have consequences for our participation work. **Youth Work Ireland** participation work is not just about ensuring that young people are given opportunities to make decisions about their own lives, but also about our own work and about issues in society in general. This means that **Youth Work Ireland** is an advocate for change in Irish society, which will allow for greater and more meaningful youth participation.

Levels of Decision Making

The question often arises as to what participation in decision-making means. What kind is best? Is there a hierarchy? Our answers to these questions derive from best practice identified by and employed within the OMCYA. Below are listed the four ways that we will seek to involve young people in decision-making both about our work and about issues that affect them in their own lives, in their communities and in Irish society. None of these is inherently better than the other, but rather, each of these will be more appropriate in a given situation. We are committed to using the most appropriate method, the one that can bring about involvement that is most meaningful and have greater real impact in within a given situation.

1. Children and young people's views are taken into account:

Children's views, whether volunteered or sought by adults, need to be taken into account if their rights are to be respected under the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. The information children provide is one source, amongst others, that adults use to make a decision.

2. Children and young people are involved in decision-making

At this level, children are actively and directly involved at the point where decisions are made. Children and adults share views and discuss issues together. Adults still hold ultimate responsibility for deciding the course of action, but children will be involved in steering that.

3. Children and young people share power and responsibility for decision-making

There is not always a clear distinction between this level and the previous one but the critical difference is the degree of influence that children have on decisions. At this level, adults have a commitment to share power and to undertake joint decision-making with children. Decisions may be made by negotiation, consensus or voting.

4. Children and young people make autonomous decision

Children make autonomous decisions, but often the implementation of these decisions will require input from adults and is ultimately dependent on adult structures, responsibility and power (Adapted from Shier, 2001).

SECTION 2

Youth Work Ireland's Principles of Youth Participation



The following principles derive from consultation with our member services and young people we work with. We recognise that putting these principles into practice is our main challenge in implementing this policy. Our greatest asset in making these principles real is the experience and expertise of our Member Youth Services and the Young People we work with.

Our aim is to engage with both in a process of continuing learning and practice development, which develops a better understanding of these principles, derived from their practice. At the same time we must work together to identify and acts on strategies to disseminate and embed knowledge of these principles and practice to apply them throughout the organisation.

Principles of Youth Participation:

- Youth participation is based in Children's Rights as outlined in the United Nation's Convention of the Rights of the Child (1989) – this means that young people are citizens now and have a right to have a say in decisions that affect them.
- Youth participation is at the core of good youth work. Good youth work is informed by young people deciding what they need and what they would like to take place. Youth organisations benefit from young people's involvement; if the young people have involvement and have ownership; they will value the work of the organisation. Youth participation is necessary in order to keep young people engaged and to ensure that youth work is enjoyable.
- Youth participation does not happen by accident. Effective youth participation requires youth organisations to develop structures, supports and planning. Above all it must be resourced.
- Youth participation requires the transfer of power from adults to young people. It is about a relationship that involves power with, rather than power over young people. It is about partnership with young people.
- Youth participation must be meaningful and above all else must avoid tokenism. Young people must be actively supported in real rather than tokenistic engagement. They must know that they have had their voice heard, and that they have had a meaningful outcome impact. Young people's decision making needs to be visible.
- Youth participation must appeal to young people. Young people want their participation to be educational, developmental and enjoyable. Most importantly, it needs to be by informed choice. When offering opportunities to become involved in decision-making, adults must ensure that young people want to be involved and that it is enjoyable.

- Youth participation must involve efforts to allow all young people to become involved, through offering different kinds and different levels of involvement in decision-making. It must be provide supervision and monitoring to support all young people, but particular efforts must be made to involve young people from diverse identities, circumstances and backgrounds.
- Youth participation must be respectful of all young people. Equality must be the basis for participation. It must ensure that everyone has a chance to take advantage of the opportunity to have their say. At the same time, it mustn't give any one young person too much responsibility.

SECTION 3

Outcomes of Youth Work Ireland's work on Youth Participation?



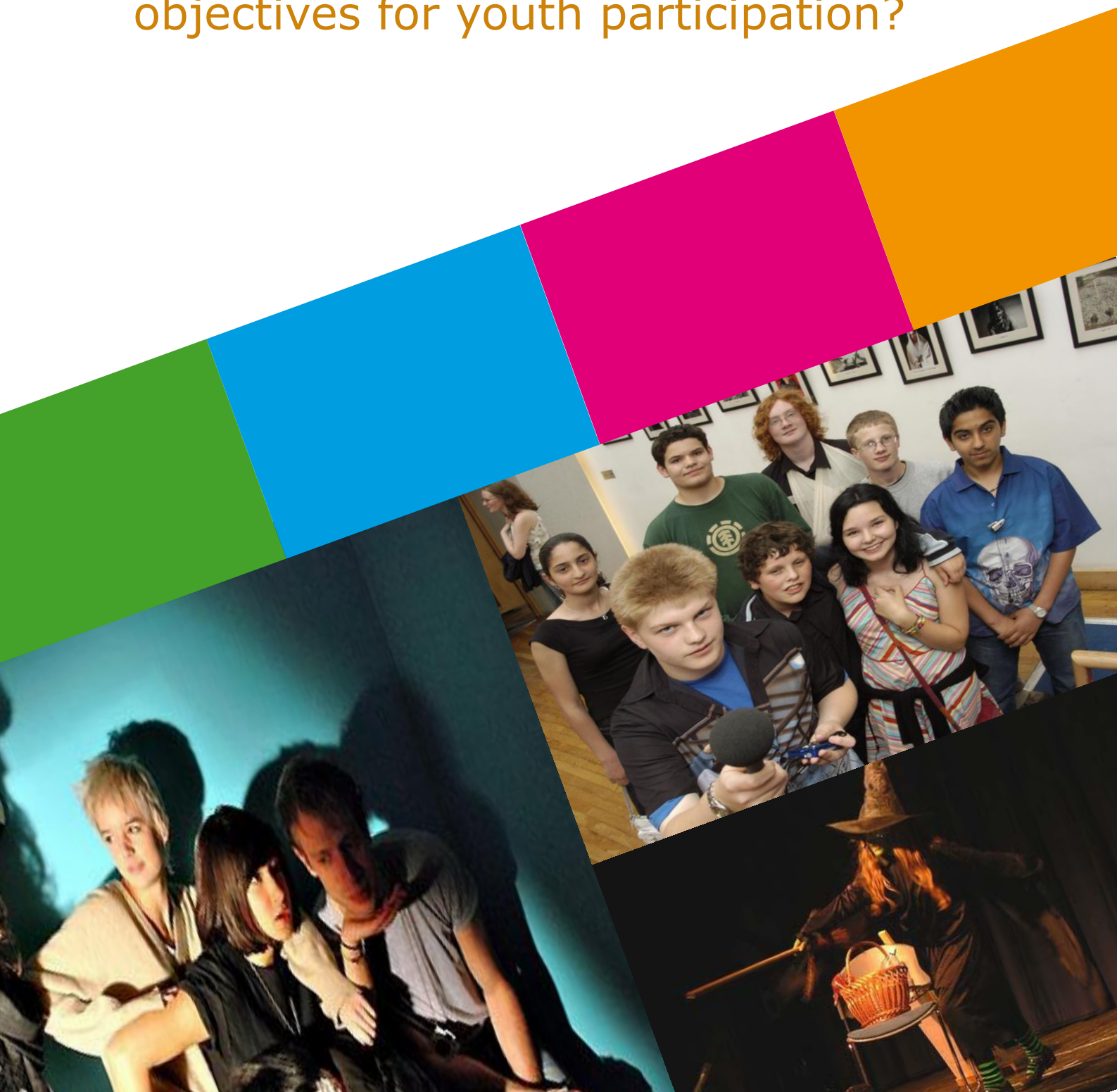
Youth Work Ireland's Stakeholders have set the following as key strategic outcomes and goals for its work to involve young people in decision-making.

Strategic Outcomes and Goals

- Society has a more positive view of youth and is less resistant to young people participating as active citizens.
- Young people have direct influence and power in shaping legislation, policies and practices that impact on them.
- Some young people are confident and skilled in representing their views.
- Society has a more positive view of youth and is less resistant to young people participating as active citizens.
- Young people have direct influence and power in shaping legislation and practices that impact on them.
- Some young people are confident and skilled in representing their views.
- Systems and policies change to allow for young peoples involvement.
- There is a clear understanding of what youth participation is.
- An agenda for realising youth participation is developed and understood.
- Our practice and policy is directly informed by young people.
- Young people inform and engage in our organisational structures and systems.
- Young people participate where possible in all actions of the organisation.
- Opportunities are provided for young people to engage in developing their skills and capacity for participation.
- Stereotyping of young people as problematic is actively challenged at app levels.
- Young peoples positive contribution to community and society is valued.

SECTION 4

Youth Work Ireland achieving its objectives for youth participation?



Participation Proofing

The **Youth Work Ireland** National Office commits to involve young people in decisions that affect them through proofing its work for young people's participation. This means that in initiating any new piece of work we will ask if this new work will affect young people, if so, we will seek to involve them in decisions made in relation to that work.

These decision-making processes will be informed by the understanding of participation articulated here including our Mission, Vision, Beliefs, Objectives and Principles.

*For a full description of the **Youth Work Ireland** Participation Proofing Protocol, please see the **Youth Work Ireland** Youth Participation Webpage:*

www.youthworkireland.ie/participation

A Strategy for Social and Organisational Change

Above are listed an ambitious vision, objectives and goals for participation and rights of young people in their own lives, in **Youth Work Ireland**, in the youth work sector, in their communities and in Irish Society. The **Youth Work Ireland** National Office will develop and maintain a Youth Participation Strategy and action plan that will ensure a co-ordinated and effective approach to meeting these objectives.

All actions will be informed by the will be informed by the understanding of participation articulated here including our Mission, Vision, Beliefs, Objectives and Principles.

The **Youth Work Ireland** Participation Strategy is essentially an effort to disaggregate all of the key actions from the operational plan, which have been developed in order to meet our youth participation objectives.

The purpose of disaggregating these actions into a specific Strategy or Framework is the following:

- To clearly communicate our actions around youth participation to our Member Youth Services in order to build support and understanding for our participation work.
- To be strategic in implementing our actions so that they progress in an integrated and intentional manner.
- To ensure that our efforts to meet our participation efforts are resourced, monitored and evaluated.

For a full description of the **Youth Work Ireland Youth Participation Framework of Actions**, please see Appendix 1.

For further information go to the **Youth Work Ireland** Youth Participation Webpage: <http://www.youthworkireland.ie/participation>

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Shier, H., (2001), Pathways to participation: openings, opportunities and obligations: a new model for enhancing children's participation in decision-making, in line with article 12.1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child. Children & Society, 15(2), 107-117.

Youth Work Ireland, (2009) Youth Work Ireland Strategic Plan 2009 – 2013, (Dublin: Youth Work Ireland).

A full and up to date list of resources and references is available to download from the Youth Work Ireland Youth Participation Webpage:

<http://www.youthworkireland.ie/participation>

Appendix 1

Youth Participation and Rights: Implementing the Youth Participation Policy and the 2009-2013 Strategic Plan

Framework of Actions for Youth Participation and Rights: Implementing the Youth Participation Policy and the 2009-2013 Strategic Plan

This document sets out a framework of actions, intentionally developed over the past year that will bring about the realisation of our vision, mission, beliefs and objectives in relation to the rights and participation of young people in Youth Work Ireland, in their communities, in the Irish Youth Work Sector and in Irish society.

These actions are informed by our Strategic Plan 2009-2013, by our work in partnership with young people, by practice within our 22 member services and practice concerns as identified through a peer-reviewed desk study published in *Youth Studies Ireland*, 4 (1) 2009.

The Youth Work Ireland Strategic Plan 2009 – 2013 sets out an ambitious agenda for realising young people’s rights and participation in our organisation, in the Irish Youth Work Sector and in society as a whole. Most relevantly, the Strategic Plan sets out strategic objectives and a set of shared beliefs which determine the way that we work with and for young people. These beliefs also inform our objectives and the partnerships that we develop to progress our work.

Our Beliefs

- We have a positive view of young people, their dignity and worth.
- All young people have rights and should be supported to realise these.
- Young people have the potential to effect change.

Our Strategic Objectives

In order to realise our Vision and Mission, four core strategic objectives will guide our work over the next 5 years. The actions under these objectives are largely oriented towards engaging the development of Youth Work Ireland, the Irish Youth Work Sector and Irish Society in an emancipatory movement. This movement is envisioned to encourage sector-wide support for young people’s rights, support young people to have their voice heard, and advocate for tangible changes in the current policy framework. This paper is a focused discussion on this set of actions.

Strategic Objective One:

We will work to promote quality youth work Practice as a developmental process with and for young people

Actions to progress this goal in a manner that is consistent with our beliefs will involve not only developing innovative evidence-based programmes and professional development, but also directly ensuring that programmes develop practice and organisational policies that support young people to become active in their communities and have their voice heard. Key to this is engaging with approaches consistent with our beliefs; including strengths based approaches to working with young people.

Key Actions to achieve Strategic Objective One:

- Provide a programme of training to the Irish Youth Work Sector through the Irish Youth Work Centre that introduces youth participation in a community context through an understanding of strengths based approaches. Not only will this programme develop practice in the sector and promote rights-based and strengths based approaches to Youth Work, it will also document and capture current practice to be shared within the sector and help to encourage consideration of within the youth work sector of what is common to all of us in our Youth Work.
- The provision of a series of Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) workshops for Youth Work Ireland youth workers on a regional basis. These workshops will employ appreciative inquiry to identify and document effective practice which is currently taking place within Youth Work Ireland services to engage young people as active citizens in their communities. This practice will be underpinned by learning from ABCD practice internationally in order to support the continued development of Youth Work practice which supports young people to have their voice heard, to activate their rights and to become active participants in their communities. These workshops will be tied into an ongoing plan of professional development to ensure continual development and sharing of effective practice including supportive discussion and sharing of practice through a Virtual Community of Practice (VCOP).
- Redevelopment of the "Youth Work in Ireland" VCOP to support the sharing and development of practice which supports young people to have their voice heard, to activate their rights and to become active participants in their communities. The "Youth Work in Ireland" VCOP will continue to focus on supporting the learning and development of practitioners from across the Youth Work sector. Redevelopment will include tying content and discussion on the VCOP into discussions and learning which takes place in the training programme in the Irish Youth Work Centre. This will involve supporting the continued networking of training participants through the forum, re-purposing documentation of practice gathered in workshops and trainings as detailed above as well as video footage of these events re-developed into Webinar material.
- Implement and document a pilot scheme to put in practice an asset-based approach through a youth-led matching fund programme for young people's community projects. The long-term plan for this project is to evaluate and if

successful manualise and provide training and support for other Youth Work Services interested in this approach. Initial funding is in place, a core-group of young people has been recruited and planning workshops are now scheduled for this initiative.

Strategic Objective Two:

We will work to create a climate where the right of young people to participate equally in decisions affecting them is realised

This objective specifically prioritises and focuses on advocacy work which will realise a change in perceptions of young people and in opportunities to exercise their rights, particularly their right to be heard. In the process of developing our Strategic Plan, consultations and focus groups identified a concern that currently policy, Youth Work practice and the position of young people in society is influenced negatively by a deficit view of young people. Such a view is opposed to the beliefs of Youth Work Ireland and the view of young people put forward in the National Youth Work Development Plan (DES, 2003). This view, along with a historic lack of regard for the rights and best interests of young people limits the scope and opportunities for young people to participate equally in decisions affecting them.

Work to address this strategic objective will involve advocacy efforts which take place in partnership with young people to alter the frame of reference within which young people are viewed and in which decision-making which affects young people takes place.

Key Actions to achieve Strategic Objective Two:

- Support the ongoing development and also initiate the dissemination of the 'Voices of Youth' programme which provides a platform for young people to actively engage with the media and concerns of youth voice and perceptions of young people in Irish society. Dissemination will be through documentation and manualisation of the programme and provision of training to Youth Workers in the sector.
- Through a Youth-led, partnership with 'Voices of Youth,' seek funding to support the research, analysis and dissemination of a 'Strategic Frame Analysis' in order to identify the dominant beliefs and understandings about young people in Ireland. The results of the analysis will serve to identify potential reframing messages that will inform advocacy efforts by young people and by the sector.
- Documentation and development of practice that engages young people as self-advocates in their communities and in society. This will take place through a youth-led international workshop in which young people present, share and document barriers and opportunities for young people to positively engage in their communities and to have their voices heard.
- Identify gaps and failures to involve young people in policy and legislative development and work to directly involve young people in these. This builds on previous work in this year to develop a National Youth Poll around the effects of the Current Economic Crisis.

Strategic Objective Three:

To create an environment for the benefit of young people through influencing legislation, policy and public opinion

Achieving this objective involves advocacy and engagement with the broader policy and service development agenda to ensure that these are informed by the voice of young people and best practices as they have been identified within Youth Work Ireland and in international research. Our beliefs are critical in informing this advocacy work and bring a consistent emphasis on the need for the youth sector, government and Irish society to respect and act to implement the rights of young people.

Key Actions to Achieve Strategic Objective Three:

- Developing a peer-reviewed, evidence-based paper which sets out Youth Work Ireland's beliefs and values in relation to current Youth and Community Work models. The discussion within this document will examine current trends in policy and theoretical approaches and make a case for the relevance of Youth Work Ireland's beliefs and practices in the emerging policy context. In particular, the discussion will interrogate deficit versus strength based approaches to working to young people and the importance of young people's citizenship and rights. The purpose of this discussion is to provide a evidence base for engagement with the policy process in the medium and long-term.

Strategic Objective Four:

To strengthen and develop an effective, innovative and cohesive organisation that can achieve its mission

Our strategies for developing an organisation which can effectively support participatory processes include proven organisational change mechanisms such as Quality Standards, policy integration, leadership and strategic communication.

Key Actions to Achieve Strategic Objective Four:

- A new National Office Youth Participation Policy provides for the organisational change required to embrace and support the involvement of young people in the organisation, in their communities and in society. This policy articulates the principles and commitments of Youth Work Ireland in relation to youth participation and rights as they are identified within the current strategic plan and through a Survey of member services conducted in 2008. Several of the key actions that appear in this paper are mandated by the policy. Most saliently, this paper is itself part of the policy commitment. That is, the policy mandates the development of a clear framework of actions to enact Youth Work Ireland's beliefs and commitment. This paper serves to provide that very framework and is part of our efforts to communicate our commitment and provide leadership within Youth Work Ireland and within the Irish Youth Work Sector.
- A Participation Proofing Mechanism has been developed, piloted and is now being implementing to ensure that all of our in the National Office is measured and referenced against our commitment to youth participation and rights. This

mechanism ensures policy integration as it is embedded in the central decision-making processes within the National Office and serves to challenge all staff to involve young people in a principled way in our decisions.

- A Youth Reference Panel is currently being developed to provide a structure that ensures that young people's voices are directly heard in the decision-making and policy development processes within Youth Work Ireland. This structure will seek to bring young people not only into a greater range of decision-making processes, but to map out and develop the ongoing changes that will need to take place in order to bring about increasing levels of young people's involvement that are required in the organisation. In this way, the panel will develop and enlarge its role on an ongoing basis.
- Quality Standards are an important tool in ensuring the ongoing improvement and harmonisation of practice, as well as higher levels of organisational efficiency and impact. However, Quality Standards are also a means of creating change in organisational culture and ethos and as such must be informed by our core belief in youth participation and rights. The current re-development of the Youth Work Ireland Quality Standards Framework seeks to involve young people in a number of ways in order to ensure that these beliefs, as well as the experience and perspective of young people is included. Firstly, it has been agreed that young people will be involved in the current process of revising the standard framework. Secondly, the new version of the standards will provide for young people to be involved in the Assessment Preparation Teams for the Assessment process. Thirdly, young people are to be involved in providing evidence during the assessment process. Lastly, a pathway to the involvement of young people in the assessment process as Assessors has been built into the current iteration of the QSF and the involvement of Young Assessors on the Assessment Team is envisioned as long-term outcome of the Assessment Process.

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