



Youth Work Ireland

Our Youth, Our Nation, Our Future.

Youth Work Ireland Final Declaration – AGM 2012

Working with over 70,000 young people in Ireland today with over 7,000 volunteers and 1,000 staff in the four corners of Ireland meeting today in Limerick to mark its 50th anniversary Youth Work Ireland adopted the following Declaration

Ireland continues to live in challenging times. However we do not see many long faces as we work with young people and local communities around the country. Young people are up to the challenge of change and can cope with hard times but this requires a supportive environment. Strong families and strong communities are central to this. Local youth services led by local people play a critical role in meeting the challenge of recovery.

Clearly our economic circumstances form the greatest challenge for young people in the immediate future. The economic crisis reaches all age groups; it affects the choices made in school, in the family and in all aspects of young people's lives. The Government committed to providing 60,000 education, training and work experience places in its programme last year. However progress has been poor to say the least. The Job Bridge programme providing work experience is more tolerated than welcomed and quality control has clearly been an issue. There is a need for a robust independent evaluation of this programme if the numbers are to increase.

Young people still do not receive equal treatment consistent with the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Government's own Children's Strategy. For example there has been no effort or attempt to include young people in the work of the Constitutional Convention which may make wide ranging recommendations for change that today's young people will have to live with in years to come. Unless this is addressed we will lead the work to hold an alternative Convention for those young people who have not been involved.

Changes to our school curriculum are happening slowly. For too long the school has been a top down institution where young people were passive recipients of a didactic model. The reforms currently proposed at junior cycle move towards addressing some of the outdated aspects of our curriculum but we must be more ambitious. The governance and management of schools still reflects a partnership between teachers, state and sometimes parents. Student Councils are poorly resourced and effectively crumbling. Any new structures in education must establish the pupils as the new partner in the governance and management of the school.

We welcome work on a new Children's Strategy and the development of a Youth Policy Framework. As with the development of quality standards for the youth sector we will embrace a greater emphasis on outcomes which will enhance the understanding of the huge social and economic value of local youth services led by local people. Some values must remain at the heart of this policy work such as the voluntary participation of young people, the focus on development and active citizenship, a strengths based approach and the value of relationships and critical adults in the process.

The proposed Referendum on children's rights is welcome though well overdue. We all know that everyone under the age of 18 legally is a child. However a real and detailed examination of the failure to protect children shows the importance of our teenagers in this debate. The litany of reports on neglect and abuse are replete with teenagers and parents who felt they were safe in the swimming club, on the altar, at home or school only to be let down. Most of all though these reports tell us of the countless numbers of young people who spoke out but were never heard.

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child says "States Parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child" This is arguably the key tenet of any child protection system. Indeed for the realisation of any right we need people to speak out and assert them. The teenagers who did this down the years ran in to a brick wall in our society. A potential referendum on children's rights challenges us to change this, to give everyone under 18 a real voice in decisions that affect them and for some young people to vindicate these rights independently themselves

The coming period will be an important one for children and young people in Ireland. It is critical that the role and place of young people is prioritised in attempts to resolve our economic crisis. We will play an active role in supporting a meaningful children's referendum to make our young people a priority in our country. The mistakes of the past demand no less.

We are therefore today calling for:

- A dedicated Youth Employment Pact based on the European Youth Guarantee
- A campaign by all to support the forthcoming Children's Rights Referendum
- Real and meaningful student councils for all schools in conjunction with curriculum reform
- The speedy development of Youth Policy Framework which harnesses the positive contribution of voluntary youth work led by local people all over the country as a key pillar of the Children and Young Peoples Strategy