The editors of the text under review set themselves several not insubstantial tasks. The book is first of all a textbook, the readers of which are identified as degree, diploma or postgraduate students and practitioners in community and youth work. It sets out to take stock of the current context within both the youth and community sectors by applying a critical analysis and engaging in a re-evaluation of the ‘values, intentions and outcomes’. Importantly, it also proposes to ‘address the deficiency in Irish material by theorising the policy and practice of youth and community work in the country’ (p. 2).

The book consists of a collection of ten essays provided by contributors from academic institutions and relevant senior management positions. The ten chapters are organised into three thematic sections: the first deals with concepts within youth and community work, the second with the challenges within the current policy context and the third with youth and community work’s futures.

This collection works well as a textbook to the extent that the editors, Catherine Forde, Elizabeth Kiely and Rosie Meade seem to have given a brief to contributors, which ensures that individual chapters do not read as stand alone essays. Instead, the various contributions, largely speaking, cover closely related aspects of various critical concerns in youth and community work. There are consequently, as is to be expected in a collection of essays, some minor instances of overlap and repetition, particularly in relation to discussion of historical developments. Nevertheless, the overall effect is to provide a close examination of the subject at hand from several perspectives.

As a textbook should, this work provides useful introductory essays to the key theoretical concepts underpinning both youth work and community work. These include Maurice Devlin’s contribution ‘Theorising Youth’, which provides a well-digested primer on the concept of youth. This piece seems to be reaching out to the student reader, in particular, by contextualising and explaining the importance and utility of theory in youth work practice.

Hilary Tovey in her chapter ‘Theorising Community’ provides a similar treatment to the concept of community. Besides providing an entry point to the understanding of the various iterations of this specific concept, Tovey also very helpfully gives a working definition of the term ‘contested concept’. Given the critical nature of this textbook and the plethora of ‘contested concepts’ within it, the provision of a practical definition will doubtless be a help to some readers.
The second purpose of the book is to address the deficiency in Irish material, which it does remarkably well. A number of contributions build arguments from an almost entirely indigenous evidence base, and the book includes both documentation of historical developments within the community and youth sectors in Ireland and Irish sociological and theoretical commentaries.

It should be said that confining oneself to a discussion of Irish evidence is less of a challenge for those writing on community work. However, anyone who has taken up the task of writing about Irish youth work will appreciate the difficulty of developing an academic discussion based entirely on current and relevant Irish evidence. This is particularly the case when one seeks commentary on current practice and policy concerns from youth work theorists. The inevitable consequence is that one is sometimes forced to support one’s points with such stock phrases as ‘in the British context’, before citing evidence from relevant developments in the United Kingdom. While the text under review is not free from such devices, it is admirable for the effort made to develop a thoroughly Irish resource and certainly does illuminate a number of uniquely Irish phenomena in the youth and community sectors. In this way, it significantly adds to the body of theory and scholarship on the Irish youth and community sectors and will ease the task of future writers and researchers who seek to focus specifically on the Irish context.

Most crucially, this book also aims to be a critical examination or reappraisal and to create space and occasion for critical reflection on the part of readers. Success in attaining this goal is perhaps most evident in the degree to which the text can be deemed ‘challenging’ in a number of ways. Firstly, this text presents a number of analyses which challenge the values, intentions and outcomes of our work within the youth and community sectors. To begin with, the chapter on ‘Irish Youth Work Values’ by Elizabeth Kiely critically challenges a number of the principles used to define and validate youth work, including participation, universalism and non-formal education. This is accomplished through demonstrating the scant degree to which these principles can be said to be meaningfully in evidence within Irish youth work practice. Like Kiely’s chapter, Rosie Meade’s contribution ‘Community Development: A Critical Analysis of its “Keywords” and Values’ looks at some of the key words, concepts and values that are called upon to legitimize and substantiate the practice of community development and justify its support from the public and the State. As with Kiely, these concepts and values, including participation, process and empowerment, are shown to be often nullified or undermined by opposing forces or tendencies within community development.

Sinead McMahon in ‘The Voluntary Youth Work Sector’s Engagement with the State: Implications for Policy and Practice’ disputes one of the most fundamental tenets of youth work, the assumption that the youth sector serves the interests and needs of young people. This contention is supported through demonstrating how youth work has historically sold itself to fit the state agenda and has purposely become involved in neocorporate arrangements which compromise the ability of the sector to serve young people first. Neocorporatist arrangements are also challenged in Catherine Forde’s ‘The Politics of Community Development: Relationship with the State’. This chapter charts the rise of neocorporatism and the formalisation of the State and civil society relationship through the development of mechanisms such as social partnership and
County Development Boards. Rather than supporting participation, as these mechanism were intended to, Forde demonstrates the capacity they have for extending state control over civil society and community development practice.

Seamus Bane’s chapter ‘Professionalisation and Youth and Community Work’ challenges both the concept of and the wisdom of professionalisation. Bane suggests that professionalisation is not in the best interest of youth and community work and supports this contention with a number of arguments that parallel concerns identified elsewhere in the text, including the issue of social control. Likewise, David Treacy’s contribution ‘Irish Youth Work: Exploring the Potential for Social Change’ picks up on several themes developed elsewhere in the book. In doing so Treacy starkly challenges the view that youth work has of itself. He makes a compelling case for understanding Irish youth work as fundamentally conservative, and asserts that much of the provision over the last decade ‘can be described as substandard recreation at its worst [and] at best it can be seen as limited to narrow personal development outcomes that are targeted at some young people’ (p. 194).

Chris McInerney’s chapter ‘Community Development and Participatory Theory: Problems and Possibilities’ argues that the State ‘has little interest in community development as a process of empowerment and inclusion, seeing it more as a means of service delivery and, ultimately, social control’ (p. 200). This contention may not challenge the conception of community development held by some. However, the nuanced and rigorous examination of these processes may challenge the view that such control is a simple one-dimensional process. McInerney recognises that there may be a latent progressive vision of citizen involvement, but that there is an ‘ongoing struggle...in the minds of political and administrative elites, between involving citizens and their organisations in decision making, on one hand, but being unwilling to disturb the dominance of representative and administrative decision making on the other’ (p. 205).

Lastly, the international context is treated in Eilish Dillon’s ‘Youth and Community Work in Ireland in the Context of Globalisation: Towards a Politics of Transformation’. This essay challenges a one-dimensional, or simple view of globalisation. In doing so, practitioners are presented with the relevance to their practice of the themes within globalisation and challenged to shape such practice in ways that engage with inequality and exclusion in Ireland.

Dillon isn’t the only author to suggest new ways of working or organising the sector. As we have seen, the critique provided by this book identifies a number of disjunctures between the values and the actual practice and outcomes of youth and community work. These theoretical concerns are not without significance for our working lives; rather the editors consider theorising to be a ‘political act’, and a number of authors explicitly ask that readers consider action to make participation, inclusion and empowerment real in youth and community work. In this way, the text gives a number of unambiguous challenges to practitioners, managers and policy makers within the youth and community sectors.

Kiely for one suggests that those within the youth sector must campaign for universal service, and work to articulate a clear vision of precisely what youth work is. Treacy likewise calls for the development of a clear vision of purpose and practice of youth work that includes provision for the ‘young people’s right to participate in the...
public sphere and enables young peoples voices to be heard’ (p. 196). In fact, Treacy argues that Youth Studies Ireland is one place (among others he mentions) where the debate on the purpose of youth work in this State can take place.

The contributors to discussions of community work are no less challenging in their suggestions for reform within the sector. Meade, for instance, asks community workers to seriously consider abandoning partnership with the State even though such an action entails obvious risks. Similarly, Forde offers the choice between ‘assisting in maintenance of the status quo and seeking a more equitable alternative’ (p. 148), while McInerney provides a menu of ways to address the failures of current arrangements within the community work sector to realise meaningful citizen participation and social inclusion. These include:

1. Accept the status quo – do not challenge state control;
2. More autonomous service delivery role – continue advocacy efforts and source funding from intermediate funding organisations;
3. Ambitious pragmatism – explore more fully the dual role of acting in partnership while consciously developing and pursuing more challenging agendas;

Apart from such challenges, it is worth noting in the context of a review that this book is also simply challenging to read. This is because it seeks to introduce a deep understanding of a great many nuanced and contested concepts. For this reader the challenge was unexpected. In fact, the sight of the names Forde, Kiely and Meade on the cover led me to the very wrong conclusion that this was an update to or replacement of the University College Cork Youth & Community Work Course Reader (1996). The present text is directed at a slightly different readership and unlike the previous work may challenge some readers with the conceptual density of certain chapters. It is a challenge, though, that once taken up, may reward the reader with a thorough and critical understanding of the youth and community work sectors. Reflective practice needs time and space, and the patient, careful reading that this text requires will be well justified.