

## Introduction

The Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI), under the Youth Service (NI) Order 1989, has responsibility to *advise on the development of the youth service; encourage and assist the co-ordination and efficient use of resources of the youth service; encourage cross community activity; and most recently to encourage and facilitate shared education.*

Council members hosted an interactive event to stimulate discussion and debate. Also to build alliances across the statutory, voluntary, local and regional youth sectors during a time of uncertainty and change. Attended by **85** youth workers, managers, academics, decision makers and Trustees, the conference provided YCNI with critical information to plan for the future.

## Youth work tackles inequalities

*Mark Langhammer is the Director of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) for Northern Ireland. Previously the Director of Ulster University's Industry Direct initiative, CEO of North Belfast Partnership and Director of the Dunanney Centre; Mark started his career as an NEELB youth worker in Rathcoole.*

Internationally, our primary school sector is the most comprehensive part of our education system, the most socially integrated and performs well. (TIMMs, PIRLS).

All research tells us that, regardless of overall wealth, more equal countries perform better in education, health, competitiveness, productivity, and have lower prison populations, with less crime. (The Spirit level; Wilkinson /Pickett).

The NI Executive draft Programme for Government expands the 5 GCSE targets for young people, to improve educational outcomes, by including *reduce educational inequality; improve quality; and improve the skills profile of the population.*

Will the Department of Education (DE) enlist the youth service to help meet these targets? The relative informality of youth work and the potential for innovation to reach the most difficult, alienated or disengaged young people, will be constrained and squeezed, if that is the case. The youth service will find a target culture that will narrow practice.

What is often underestimated in education and perhaps in youth work is the **power of social balance**. The most powerful predictor of educational performance is socio economic status. The second is the socio economic status of classmates. **The peer effect is powerful.**

A disadvantaged young person in a socially mixed school will do better than a young person in a high poverty school. Social integration is effective. Youth work can and does have a key role to play in socially balanced interventions.

The recent **ILiAD Report** (QUB) investigating links between achievement and deprivation, articulated the social balance argument. Looking at the relationship between educational achievement and measures of deprivation over 3 years, the study identified key themes that impact on achievement: such as *the legacy of the conflict; need for joined up interagency work; parental capacity to support children; leadership, standards and expectations; a flexible curriculum; pupil resilience, alternative measures of success and the critical role of community, voluntary and **youth work interventions**.*

As part of this report, in the Duncairn ward of Belfast, a perception amongst a number of younger residents was that education is a waste of time, achievement is beyond them and worklessness is a feasible option. This may be no surprise to youth workers.

Good work is a major motivator and the absence of good work causes problems for all. Only 15% of our jobs can be described as genuine graduate jobs, less than 12% of workplaces are high performance, characterised by high levels of autonomy, high productivity and good industrial relations. There are few manufacturing jobs and swathes of the economy are locked into a low paid, low skills equilibrium. This creates problems for education and learning.

Good work is a major driver, a motivating factor in learning. Nothing motivates more than the prospects of an interesting job with decent rewards and avenues to progress. Young people work towards a goal if it is viable. The absence of good work can have a corrosive effect on the choices young people make. But has the deal broken down? Do young people get rewards from the labour market and life? Education for many, even for those who do achieve, does not guarantee anything.

If we are to reach young people and help them achieve, youth work needs to retain its informality, needs to be able to provide an experience which engages, animates, motivates and interests those young people who are disengaged by the highly focused school curriculum. Youth work methods can be successful in engaging young people in many styles of learning.

Youth work is more about **finding the treasure within**. It is about managed risk; challenging young people to grow into themselves, be themselves, and find constructive ways to utilise their talents.

The challenges for youth work are:

- Ensure the challenging budgetary situation does not constrain innovation.
- Resist pressures to enlist youth work to meet narrow educational targets.
- Encourage youth work to be aware of hard evidence that social mixing works. Can youth work develop some interventions that reflect this research?

## Youth work contributes to safer, shared and more confident communities.

*Dr Duncan Morrow, is Director of Community Engagement, Ulster University. He is responsible for developing the University's partnerships across the community, as well as lecturing in Politics. He was Chief Executive of the Community Relations Council for 9 years where he championed the concept of a shared future and developed the Council's key policies on interfaces, parading, regeneration and with victims and survivors of the conflict.*

(Transcript from film)

The backdrop to Northern Ireland is that this is a society that is brought up in a segregated way. That can be in schools but in a lot of ways it's physical, a territorial experience. What you end up with, particularly in areas of deprivation, is a *shared out society rather than a shared society*. We live in communities that are very divided. How are young people going to engage in this society? Are they going to have an opportunity to take advantage of all of it, or is it still the case that they will be brought into the middle of conflict?

Good youth work has a huge opportunity here because good youth work is actually about creating safety around things that carry risk, and community relations in Northern Ireland has always had this feeling that it carries risk – you are

personally at risk, whether through a direct sense of physical violence or a threat to your identity.

Good youth work is about how you create safety for young people to explore issues that are fundamentally risky and allow them to make decisions that free them to change. Unless those opportunities are created then I don't believe anything changes. Youth work makes change possible by using conversation and creating new experiences.

I have seen lots of good youth work. For example in one programme in Lurgan, young people talked about what this meant for their safety – am I safe to be in this part of town with you? They needed to explore. The youth work process helped them explore this, make new relationships and build programmes that reached out to include other organisations. I don't think you could have done that in a school. It was youth work that created the possibility. On top of that, once a new group was established it went onto broaden the agenda – to talk about ethnic minorities, sexuality, their own careers, the economy – it was a piece of work that was crucially important to opening young people up to the reality of the world.

(Film available @ [www.youthcouncilni.org](http://www.youthcouncilni.org))

*“a shared out rather than a shared society”*

## Panel discussion ~

chaired by **Stephen Turner YMCA Ireland**

**Tony Macauley** is a prominent writer, journalist and broadcaster. His critically acclaimed trilogy, *Paper Boy, Bread Boy and All Grown up*, balances Northern Ireland's turbulent history with entertaining wit and humour.

**Roisin McGlone** trained as a youth worker and is former CEO of Interaction Belfast, an organisation working closely with communities on conflict resolution across the interface. She has been involved in conflict transformation programmes in Croatia, Macedonia, Guyana, America and South Africa.

### Mark Langhammer

*(Summary points from panel discussion)*

Achieving social integration is beyond the role of the youth sector. Youth work can contribute, but tackling poverty is key to infiltrating social integration.

Youth work is educational in purpose ~ it is about learning to grow up.

Experiential learning is at the heart of youth work. It is about new experiences; relationships with other people beyond the local; relationships with a trusted adult who can motivate; prompting young people to interrogate and ask *why... why... why?*

Youth work creates safe spaces for young people; often working to alleviate community pressures on young people.

A conscious effort to interrogate practice is required ~ *"without data I am just another person with an opinion"*.

Improving the mental health and well being of young people is achievable through youth work methods.

## Opportunities and challenges for youth work in the new Programme for Government.

**Koulla Yiasouma** is NI Commissioner for Children and Young People. Before taking up the post in 2015, Koulla was Director of *Include Youth* for 17 years. She trained as a social worker and previously worked in probation and NI Women's Aid.

Working with children and young people is where my heart is. Youth work is well placed to deliver children's rights and human rights to young people.

We have a challenge, as youth work as a sector has been marginalised. For example in the Youth Justice Review (2011) it acknowledged *"we have been impressed at the outstanding work being done in the community by dedicated youth workers and volunteers. Often it is only these*

*workers who have the skill and persistence and the relationships with young people to engage those most hard to reach. In our discussions with young people and families they told us how they have been motivated and inspired by the commitment of these youth workers who they described as supportive, non-judgemental and caring, and that the system would work better if others adopted this approach”.*

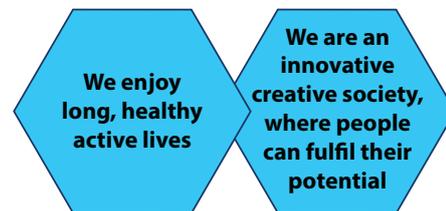
The report goes on to validate detached work by youth workers and youth volunteers as role models.

Recommendation 27 of the report called for the expansion of community youth work. However the Criminal Justice Inspection NI Report of 2015 stated that this recommendation had not been fulfilled.

My office is there to hold government to account around fulfilment of children’s rights. My guiding document is the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. I pay particular attention to what Government and all its Departments do.

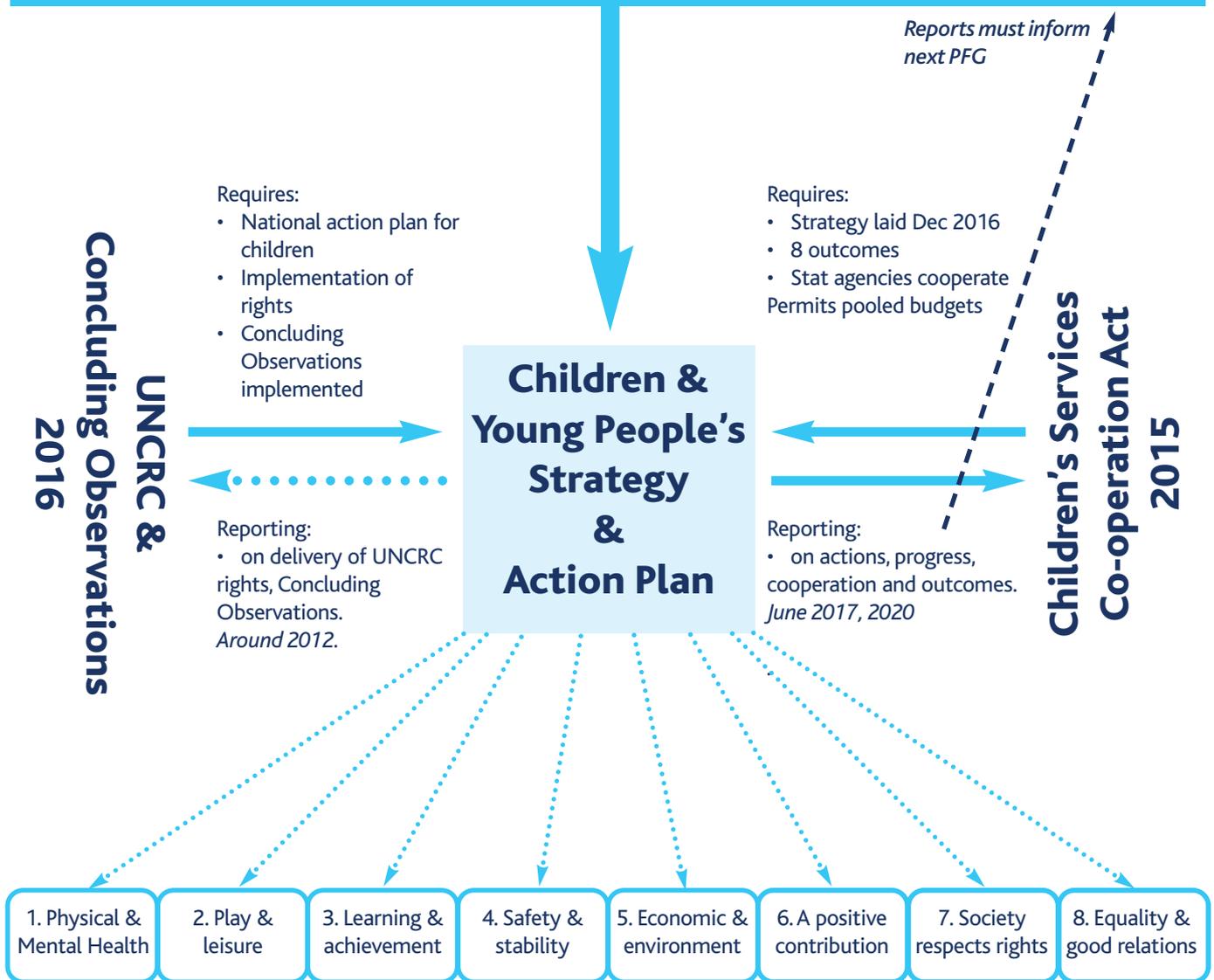
The outcomes focus of the new draft Programme for Government reflects the outcomes focus in youth work.

The Children and Young People’s Strategy & Action Plan should embrace all that concerns young people up to the age of 18.



*“by working with others in a co-ordinated way we can make a difference”*

**Programme for Government 2016-2012**



The priorities of my office are to:

**Resolve educational inequalities.**

**Improve mental health and well-being of our young people.**

**Reduce child poverty.**

At the request of young people we will also focus on:

**Addressing the ongoing impact of the conflict, and its legacy for children's lives.**

The UN Committee on the Rights of the Child Concluding Recommendations 2016, profiled children's rights issues in Northern Ireland. This reflects the dynamism of the local delegates. They made strong recommendations underlining the need to expedite a Youth Parliament Act to ensure that children are not only heard, but listened to and their opinions given more weight.

## Critical reflections and key messages from the conference

**Tom Wylie** is widely regarded as a leading expert on youth and policy across the UK. A former CEO of the National Youth Agency, specialist advisor to the Education Select Committee and a prolific writer on youth affairs. Originally from Northern Ireland, Tom is a Trustee of the Paul Hamlyn Foundation.

These considerations are aided by the notes from discussion tables and seek to identify a number of tasks to strengthen youth work in Northern Ireland thus contributing to *Priorities for Youth*. Conference participants demonstrated a strong level of commitment; were interested and stimulated by the various focussed inputs; and welcomed the opportunity for respectful, cross sector dialogue. Given the powers and resources of YCNI currently, YCNI role will be one of providing robust advice to the Department of Education (DE), the Education Authority (EA) and other stakeholders.

### YCNI should:

- Create a modest public affairs and communication's strategy, to enable advice to be shared and to engage the wider field in thought and advocacy.
- Provide evidence and advice on the contribution of youth work to the NI Executive Draft *Programme for Government* and *Children and Young People's Strategy*; demonstrating that whilst youth work has educational purposes, it contributes to wider government outcomes. Pay particular attention to the interpretation of "children and young people", to ensure the needs of adolescents and young adults are not given less of a priority than those of children.
- Lobby for a strategy document (Youth Work Charter) that will strengthen the contribution of youth work to social policy and produce greater consistency and equality of youth work provision across the country.
- Investigate the arrangements for coherent initial training of youth workers (paid and voluntary), and for their continuing professional development.
- Encourage the establishment of a research hub, in cooperation with a University, to collect data on the effectiveness of youth work; compile case studies; and connect research and practice to policy. This would contribute to an effective outcomes framework.

- Encourage the Education Authority to adopt a developmental mindset towards the youth sector, rather than simply administrative.
- Press for resources for an annual cross sector conference, including the participation of young practitioners.
- Request a stronger youth work presence in the governance of the Education Authority, including a youth work sub committee to oversee its activities.
- Establish a two way communication channel with the Education Authority Children and Young People's Committee
- Seek a review of existing arrangements for promoting the participation of young people in community life. Push to include, but go beyond the concept of a youth voice, into developing young people's skills in civic activism and volunteering.

*“Believe that further shore is reachable from here”* (Seamus Heaney)

## Next steps

This is the first in a series of engagement events facilitated by YCNI. Evidence gathered and reported at all events will inform YCNI strategic plans and future actions.

Youth Council for Northern Ireland members (to 30th September 2017)

Maire Young ~ Chairperson  
Bertie Faulkner ~ Vice Chair  
Derek Capper  
Anne-Marie McClure  
Hugh Campbell  
June Trimble

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