

Ireland

Young people in Ireland are chronologically defined as being over ten and under 25 years of age. In reality, youth work provision in Ireland is directed at 12- to 18-year-olds, which coincides with secondary level education. Youth work is defined in the Youth Work Act, 2001, as a “planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary participation, and which is complementary to their formal academic or vocational educational training; and provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations” (Youth Work Act, Section 3). This definition reflects the view on the ground. For example, one major national youth organisation, Foróige (Development of Youth), reflects this ethos clearly in its mission statement: “the purpose of the organisation is to enable young people to involve themselves consciously and actively in their own development and the development of society. This purpose challenges and supports young people to involve themselves in developing their character and talents”.

This philosophical orientation enables Irish youth work organisations to pursue a multi-faceted approach that combines personal development with social justice. Irish youth work organisations are concerned, to an increasing extent, with reaching out to vulnerable young people exposed to poverty, marginalisation and social exclusion, who are likely to underachieve at school, commit crime, engage in substance abuse and experience family difficulties. However, youth work in Ireland is viewed as a activity distinct from social work and straddles the fields of education and personal social services. Its emphasis on socialisation and inclusion through personal and social development differentiates youth work from social work, which is primarily concerned with child protection and family welfare issues. Youth work is predominantly located within the Third Sector, being composed of national and voluntary youth organisations under the overall coordination of the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education and Science and Vocational Education Committee (VECs). Social work is primarily located within the state sector, as part of the Health Service Executive (HSE), under the overall control of the Department of Health and Children.

Youth organisations operate a variety of programmes and activities that cater for young people with divergent needs and interests, including outdoor pursuits (hiking, water activities, etc.), project work, games and recreation, arts (drama, dance, etc.), citizenship and social action, summer projects and international exchanges.

Youth work in Ireland, consequently, has a distinctive ethos that defines it as a unique activity with its own clearly delimited mission aimed at the social and personal development of the youth population on the basis of voluntary participation. Its primary location within civil society in terms of service delivery reflects the historic influence of the principle of subsidiarity on Irish social policy formation and the limitations of the Irish Welfare State¹.

There are a growing number of independently managed, community-based youth organisations in Ireland. These projects are usually not affiliated to one of the national youth organisations and, according to the NYCI, are mainly funded by government departments or agencies other than the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education and Science.

¹ Powell, 1992: 232-8

There are considerable grounds for optimism in terms of the emergence of a legislative framework and the National Youth Work Development Plan (NYWDP). Implementation, however, has proved to be slow, with a reluctance to match rhetoric with resources. Nonetheless, inevitably the Irish State is being drawn into the sphere of youth work. As we have seen, funding is being provided by a diverse set of statutory sources. There is a real need for coordination and the new committee structure envisages providing just that: the sooner it is effectively implemented on the ground, the better it will be for the future of Irish youth work.