

Press Release: Investment to support conversations on the future sustainability of voluntary youth work in Northern Ireland

Youth work in Northern Ireland has always made a positive impact on the lives of children and young people, supporting thousands of young people through a range of organisations. Moving into the next decade the voluntary youth work sector is working to collaborate and secure the sustainability of the sector.

Over the past decade, the voluntary youth work sector in Northern Ireland has faced a myriad of challenges. Issues cited include declining structures for communication and coordination, over-reliance on limited funding streams, diminished workforce capacity, and frayed relationships between different stakeholders.

Since April 2021, a small group from across uniformed, regional and local community youth and play work organisations have been meeting to explore these issues and consider ways to repair, reconnect and transform the sector. We expressed hopes to rebuild trust, celebrate the diversity of provision, and develop a shared vision for voluntary youth work. In 2023 we started to refer to this group as a coordinating committee. Throughout 2022/2023 the group focussed their energies on a proposal to the Dormant Account Fund (TNL Community Fund) to advance wider engagement across the sector.

This coordinating committee has secured £50,096 from the National Lottery Community Fund. The purpose of this investment is to widen these conversations across the full voluntary youth work sector and discuss the possibilities of a shared vision. Rather than establishing any new formal entity, the coordinating committee have agreed to work with independent facilitators to convene inclusive events focused on reconciliation, asset-based dialogue, and appreciative inquiry. In December 2023, following a procurement process, NICVA was appointed as an independent convenor for these conversations. We also appointed a dedicated communications intern to highlight the vital and transformative youth work happening across the voluntary sector.

The coordinating committee is focused on providing leadership through facilitating inclusive conversations while recognising they alone do not represent the whole sector. As 'guardians' of the awarded funding from the National Lottery they aim to invest in rebuilding relationships and dialogue across voluntary youth work in an accountable manner. We strive to involve the voluntary youth work sector representation in collectively defining the architecture for a progressive, outward and forward-looking voluntary youth work sector. We aim rather to facilitate conversations where the sector can shape its future.

A committee representative said: "This feels like a pivotal moment for our sector as we come together collectively to shape what we want our shared future to look like. We want all parts of voluntary youth work to feel heard, valued and able to contribute to important conversations about the road ahead. this is a very exciting time for the sector and voluntary organisations are looking forward to collaborating and promoting the voice of young people across NI".

The series of inclusive sector-wide conversations will take place during March 2024, facilitated by NICVA, the independent convenors. All those involved in voluntary youth provision are encouraged to engage and make their voices heard as part of this process. The Department of Education and Education Authority will be invited to join us in an observatory capacity as we progress on a pathway to transformative change. The dates and locations for these events are:

6 March 2024 from 6pm-8pm at NICVA

7 March 2024 from 6pm-8pm at Derry Shared Centre

13 March 2024 from 7.15pm-9.15pm at The Jethro Centre, Lurgan.

19 March 2024 from 11am-1pm at Omagh Enterprise Centre

20 March 2024 from 7pm-9pm at The Braid, Ballymena

26 March 2024 from 11am-1pm at The Canal Court

Ends