



Foróige Pre-Budget Submission 2025



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Summary

Foróige wants all young people in Ireland to be able to access youth work. Youth work makes a real difference to young people's lives, supporting every young person to realise their full potential and fostering community connectedness. But right now, young people cannot access youth work equitably - and therefore the many benefits and opportunities that it can bring, both for them and for communities at large.

For this to change, we need a universal youth work ecosystem that resources youth clubs and programmes that are open to all young people, alongside targeted support for those who experience disadvantage. We need the commitment and investment that will enable our sector to provide young people with the skills, spaces, and confidence to thrive.

In Budget 2025, we are looking for an increase of €15 million for youth work. This will lay the foundation for a robust and flourishing youth work sector that will engage more young people and adult volunteers, flex our offering to accommodate emerging needs and issues, and support community connectedness nationwide.

Given the multiple converging challenges facing young people in 2025, along with this being a pivotal time in the policy space for the youth work sector, now is the time to back our young people and resource youth organisations to deliver an integrated system of both universal and targeted supports.

This paper sets out Foróige's vision for young people and youth work in Ireland, the value that youth work brings to young people, families, and communities, our blueprint for strengthening the youth work sector, and a detailed breakdown of our Budget 2025 proposal.

About Foróige

Foróige is a youth organisation established in 1952. Today we work with almost 50,000 young people across Ireland every year, along with 4,000 volunteers and over 550 professional staff. We operate in both rural and urban settings across all 26 counties, as well as engaging in cross-border and international work.

At the heart of what we do is a passionate belief in the potential of each young person. We empower young people to develop their own abilities and attributes, to think for themselves, to make things happen and to contribute to their community and society consciously and actively. Foróige is for all young people, and also has particular strategies and initiatives in place to engage and support vulnerable young people. We engage young people in a range of contexts and settings, from volunteer-led youth clubs and cafés to mentoring, educational programmes, and targeted services.

Through this diverse network of supports that we provide across Ireland, we are very closely acquainted with the needs and interests of young people, families, and communities. We know that young people benefit deeply from engaging in youth work, and this is why our vision is for all young people to be able to do so.



Introduction and Rationale

Background

Youth work in Ireland is among the best in the world. When it comes to youth work practice, non-formal educational approaches, and in particular youth participation in decision-making, Ireland has been a pioneer on the global stage. However, this status as a leader is at risk due to continued under-investment in the youth work sector in recent years, particularly for universal youth work supports.

In the last 15 years, the youth population in Ireland has been growing. Data from the Central Statistics Office shows that the number of 0-24 year olds has grown by 10% between 2006 and 2022. Alongside this, we have witnessed rising levels of need, with demand for our services increasing year-on-year.

Events in recent years, from the Covid-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine and subsequent impacts on energy costs and inflation, and the increase of young people seeking refuge in Ireland, have combined to exert immense pressure on the youth work sector as we have sought to address the impacts on young people and communities.

Further, research by Maynooth University (2022) has shown that over 40% of the population experience mental health difficulties, with waiting lists for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services doubling since 2019. In 2023 the European Commission found that Ireland has the highest prevalence of loneliness in the EU at over 20% of the population, compared to an average of 13% across Europe. The ESRI's 2023 analysis of data from the Growing Up in Ireland longitudinal survey has emphasised the importance of out-of-school structured activities and spaces for young people in promoting civic engagement and strengthening communities, and the vital "buffering" or protective role they play for young people in areas with weaker social infrastructures by mitigating the adverse

effects this can have on young people's potential and life outcomes.

Despite this evident increase in needs, overall funding to the youth work sector has been slow to return to pre-2008 levels. While there has been some positive movement towards restoring investment, we are still behind where we need to be, particularly with regard to the Youth Services Grant Scheme. Core funding for youth work is not sufficient to meet the level of need that has emerged among the youth population in the last 15 years - and the longer-term effects of years of under-investment continue to be felt.

Post-Budget 2024 analysis commissioned by the Wheel (2023) examined key funding lines for community and voluntary organisations. This found that youth organisations were second worst affected as a sector over time, with overall investment -16.4% below 2008 funding in absolute terms. According to the author, this shortfall of just under €15 million and the "relative decline" of the youth work sector indicates that it is under-valued by Government.

Policy Context

We are at a critical juncture in the development of the youth work sector, with the publication of Young Ireland: the next National Policy Framework for Children and Young People, and the Action Plan for Youth Services providing a roadmap for young people in Ireland over the coming years, along with ongoing review of the Youth Services Grant Scheme.

The recent OECD report 'Together for Children and Young People in Ireland: Towards a New Governance Framework' (2024) recommends that "improving policy outcomes for children and young people remains high on the policy agenda."

For youth work organisations to be able to support effective implementation and delivery of these Government policies, we must in turn be facilitated to build organisational capacity in order to address the major challenges facing young people but also our sector.

Why Fund Youth Work?

We know that youth work is good for young people, for communities, and for the State.

Every €1 invested in youth work provides a long-term economic benefit of €2.22 (Indecon 2012). More recently, Social Return on Investment analysis by the University of Galway on Foróige's Leadership for Life youth development programme has shown that for every €1 invested, the programme delivers €10.90 of social value. This is only one example, but it shows the deep impact of youth work not just on young people, but also on communities.

More than this, there is a significant research base to show that engagement in youth work is an effective form of prevention and early intervention, as well as cultivating a multitude of positive outcomes for young people. Youth work develops positive skills, attitudes, and behaviours in young people, increases their resilience and support networks, and provides a safe space to have fun and develop social skills.

We have attempted to distil some of these below to demonstrate the breadth of impact. A full list of references can be found in Appendix 1.

Positive and Safe Social Spaces

By creating spaces where young people can come together to meet and interact, youth work fosters young people's social development, providing positive and safe outlets to connect with others and have fun.

Mental Health and Wellbeing: A wide variety of research studies have shown very positive outcomes in relation to mental health and wellbeing for young people engaged in universal youth work, increasing their resilience and support networks.

Poverty: Youth work is able to mitigate the effects of poverty and socio-economic disadvantage on young people, and intervene to support families and communities.

Substance Use and Risky Behaviour

Through safe social outlets and building young people's decision making and resilience, youth work is shown to prevent risky behaviours such as drug and alcohol use, smoking, and early onset sexual activity.

Anti-Social Behaviour and Crime

Youth work has been proven to increase young people's empathy, decision-making, and pro-social behaviour, making them less likely to engage in anti-social behaviour and become involved in criminal activity.

Employability and Educational Success

Youth work engages young people in a wide range of non-formal educational programmes and opportunities, which have been demonstrated to support their retention and motivation in school, as well as increasing their career aspirations and employability by building up key skills that prepare them for further education, training, and employment.

Rural Isolation

For many communities in rural Ireland, youth work has been the antidote to combat young people's geographical and social isolation, by providing supports outside school and the home which are invariably led by volunteers.

Connected Communities and Civic Engagement

Youth work activates young people's pride and belonging in their communities, nurturing engagement in social and civic life. Research has shown that young people involved in youth work develop a sense of social responsibility, going on to volunteer and take on leadership roles.

Volunteerism

Youth work engages tens of thousands of volunteers whose expertise, life experience, and community connectedness cannot be replicated by paid staff. These role models foster a spirit and culture of volunteerism among both adults and young people, that is essential to ensuring our communities thrive.

Supporting Young People through a Youth Work Ecosystem

Youth work is well positioned to tackle the needs we are seeing among young people: from the lingering effects of Covid-19 on social skills, mental health, and academic success, to the impacts of the soaring cost of living, and the challenges of adjustment and transition (be they within different tiers of education or into the workplace, living at home to living independently and the responsibilities of adulthood, or adjusting to a new context or community). But we cannot do this without a corresponding uplift in funding to the sector that recognises the scale of the work that we are undertaking and the ways in which this has expanded.

Youth work takes many forms. In the last decade, Ireland has invested in developing robust and effective targeted youth work interventions, notably through the UBU scheme. But most young people will never need to engage with targeted youth work, which is designed to address specific issues and challenges. This is why we need universal pathways that allow all young people to gain access to the positive outcomes youth work provides.

We know that universal and targeted youth work are mutually beneficial, and must work and develop alongside and in complement to one another. This interplay is key to enabling an ecosystem of youth work, in the broadest sense, to function effectively and successfully for young people and communities. This is especially so for volunteer-led youth work, which brings a host of benefits to both the young people and adult volunteers who give of their time, effort, and wealth of experience. Over recent years, funding schemes for targeted services have far outpaced those allocated to universal and volunteer-led youth work. Our proposal thus focuses on increasing provision and building capacity in this area of the sector.

Foróige wants youth work to be available to all young people in Ireland, not just the few who already have easy access to it in their communities or whose needs are considered serious enough to meet the threshold of targeted schemes. Under the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, young people have a right to

develop to their fullest potential, as well as a right to engage in leisure, play, and recreational activities. Youth work and non-formal education are crucial to realising these rights, through the provision of developmental and educational activities, opportunities, and spaces.

Universal youth work has been consistently under-funded, and its development is essential to creating a vibrant, inclusive, and thriving youth work sector in Ireland. Our blueprint therefore sets this as the foundation for levelling up the sector and ensuring that our vision of all young people in Ireland being able to access youth work is realised. For further information on universal youth work, please see Appendix 2.

Investing in Young People: Foróige's Vision

This budget proposal has been developed based on Foróige's analysis of the opportunities and challenges facing the youth work sector, current and anticipated demand on services, the needs and interests of young people, and the level of ongoing investment that we believe is necessary to address all the above. It will enable a thriving, responsive, and agile sector, where youth work is available to all young people in Ireland through an ecosystem that supports both universal and targeted engagement of young people.

Our proposal is drawn from our analysis of service delivery across the sector and areas that need strengthening, with the recognition that the work needed to achieve and embed this cannot be implemented over the course of one budgetary cycle.

This section sets out our vision for young people and the youth work sector, including which areas of the sector need to be resourced, and the detailed breakdown of how this applies in 2025, including costings and impact for each budget line.

Our proposal provides value for money, given the wide-ranging impacts of youth work on young people, families, and communities, and the broad social and economic value that the sector brings.

Foróige is calling for **a transformative investment in young people of €15 million in Budget 2025.**

This will engage **an additional 31,815 young people** across Ireland in youth work, and create **an additional 203 staff roles.**

This investment is split across a range of universal and targeted services, and represents **an investment of €471 per young person over 3 years.**

Budget 2025 - Breakdown of Investment

We believe that the time is ripe to scale and enhance the current structure of the youth work sector in order to accommodate new and emerging priorities in our work. Our vision for young people in Ireland requires the strengthening of the following key areas to support the successes of recent years in targeted youth work:

- **Universal youth work**
- **Organisational capacity**
- **Digital skills, literacy, and citizenship**
- **Youth mentoring**
- **Specialised youth services**
- **Youth participation**

Our proposal is broken down as per the table below - greater detail on each line item can be found in the subsequent section.

Service	What will it fund in 2025	New Staff	Young People	Cost
Universal Youth Hubs	- 34 Universal Youth Hubs - 4 staff per hub (club support, digital youth work, detached outreach work, and delivering groups and programmes) - 590 young people engaged per hub - 80 volunteers engaged per hub	136	20,160	€7 million
Youth Services Grant Scheme	Increase in funding to support pay parity with public service, compliance, management support, additional support for volunteer-led universal youth work		7,500	€3 million
Digital Youth Work Capacity	- Specialist digital youth work staff to coordinate and support digital youth work capacity and partnerships - 100 young people engaged per staff person	14	1,400	€1 million
Mentoring	Additional dedicated mentoring staff recruited across the country to support 400 mentoring matches	16	400	€1 million
Specialised Services	Additional 7 staff recruited across the country focused on providing specialised and integration support for particular communities, located according to need	7	225	€0.5 million
Additional Targeted UBUs	- 15 additional UBU projects - 2 staff per project - 80 young people engaged per project	30	1,200	€2 million
Youth Participation	- Increased capacity for Comhairle Coordinators at the local authority level - Additional 30 young people engaged per local authority area		930	€0.5 million
Total		203	31,815	€15 million

Foróige's Blueprint for Investment in the Youth Work Sector

We have devised a blueprint for youth work which allocates additional resources to these areas to build capacity in the sector. Our overarching vision for a thriving youth work ecosystem will take longer term investment over 3 years, amounting to a total of €40 million to reach over 80,000 young people. In Budget 2025, our initial ask of €15 million will go towards delivering the following elements:

Creating a network of Universal Youth Work Hubs - €7 million

- We have to prioritise universal youth work which is open to everyone, in order to ensure that all young people have access to a service in their locality which appeals to their needs and interests. This is a new model that we have devised to address the current lack of services - by establishing a network of Universal Youth Work Hubs, we can quickly and effectively increase provision for young people. The hubs will serve to coordinate service delivery across their catchment area and thereby harness a multiplier effect.
- We have mapped a network of **34 locations** across the country to begin with, building towards a broader vision of 104 hubs (minimum of 2 per county, and additional hubs in more densely populated areas). Each hub will have 4 staff working across universal youth work provision (youth clubs and cafés, interest groups, detached and outreach work, youth programmes, and digital youth work). In 2025, this will create a total of **136 staff roles**.
- Each hub will engage 590 young people and 80 trained and supported adult volunteers - a total of **20,060 young people** and **2,720 volunteers engaged**.

An uplift to the Youth Services Grant Scheme - €3 million

- The Youth Services Grant Scheme funds core organisational capacity, and the volunteer-led universal youth work that underpins our sector. Our proposed uplift in funding is designed to support pay parity with the public sector in order to address the staff recruitment and retention challenges

that youth work is experiencing. It will also resource additional support for volunteer-led universal youth work, as well as management, compliance and governance capacity. It will engage an additional **7,500 young people**.

Increased capacity in Digital Youth Work - €1 million

- The youth sector must be supported to build the capacity of staff and volunteers to drive digital skills and literacy development as an integrated part of our day-to-day work. This is a major need that we are seeing among young people. We can embed digital youth work by engaging specialist staff to coordinate and support digital youth work capacity and partnerships. These staff will also run showcase and taster events, engaging young people directly to explore cutting-edge technologies.
- We envision an initial **14 staff roles** across the country to grow capacity - ultimately, we would foresee 1 staff person per county, with an additional 2 staff in Dublin and 1 staff in Cork. Each staff person will engage 100 young people - a total of **1,400 young people**.

Increased capacity for youth mentoring provision - €1 million

- For young people whose needs are suited to it, one-to-one mentoring is a highly effective intervention - for example, it has recently been shown to be effective at providing additional support to young people engaged in CAMHS. In order to support more young people to avail of provision, the infrastructure supporting youth mentoring must be bolstered through the engagement of additional staff nation-wide.
- We foresee an additional **16 dedicated mentoring staff** to support 400 new mentoring matches - **400 young people** and **400 volunteers**.

Expansion of specialised youth services - €0.5 million

- Specialised youth services support young people with particular needs, for example young people who are LGBTI+, or who come from particular communities, such as Traveller and Roma young people and those from other diverse backgrounds. These

services provide vital specialist expertise and integration support for groups such as these, but provision is patchy.

- This will resource **7 staff** across the country focused on providing specialist and integration support for particular groups, located according to need.
- Each staff person will engage 30 young people - a total of **225 young people**.

Expansion of the UBU Your Space Your Place Scheme - €2 million

- The UBU Your Space Your Place Scheme funds targeted youth projects which are responsive to the needs of young people within the local community who experience disadvantage or marginalisation. It has laid the foundation for a network of targeted youth work, and we want to see the establishment of **15 new projects** nationwide to meet demand, each of which will be run by 2 staff - a total of **30 staff roles**.
- Each project will engage 80 young people - a total of **1,200 young people**.

Scaling Youth Participation to include more young people - €0.5 million

- Ireland has been leading the way in youth participation, through the work of the National Participation Office and Hub na nÓg. However, this work could be further resourced in order to include more young people in local, regional and national decision-making structures, and support them to have a voice on the decisions that affect them.
- We propose an increase in funding for Comhairle na nÓg (as administered by local authorities) to add capacity for local Comhairle coordinators. This will support an additional 30 young people (including more seldom heard young people) to be engaged per local authority area, amounting to the inclusion of an additional **930 young people**.



Appendix 1

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Appendix 2

Universal Youth Work

Youth work in Ireland has been shaped around the efforts of adult volunteers, a fact which is recognised in the definition given by the Youth Work Act 2001 by which our sector is governed:

“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: (a) complementary to their formal, academic or vocational education and training; and (b) provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations.”

Volunteerism is the bedrock on which youth work in Ireland is built: national youth work organisations began as organisations supporting adult volunteers, and later developed to address the need for professional youth work staff to deliver more specialised and prolonged interventions for young people at risk. This history captures the deep interdependence between universal and targeted youth services.

Universal youth work consists of spaces and activities provided for young people, largely by trained and supported adult volunteers, with the underlying support of professional youth work staff. It builds skills that are crucial for young people’s development and ability to manage the transition through adolescence into adulthood, such as critical thinking, communication, confidence, goal-setting, planning, creative problem solving, empathy and resilience. It provides young people with opportunities for safe socialising, access to safe spaces, and the creation of friendships, communities, and social networks that continue into adulthood - young people often experience formative events safely through universal youth work, such as their first disco, first overnight trip without their parents,

first international travel, or first festival experience.

Moreover, universal youth work that is volunteer-led allows young people to develop safe and trusting relationships with positive adult role models. It is these relationships which help to create early warning structures and strengthen the prevention and early intervention impacts we are able to have. For this reason, the interaction between universal and targeted youth work is critical, so that we can facilitate pathways in and out of each, ensuring that young people’s needs are met at the appropriate level of support and that interventions can be staggered and stepped up or down as necessary.

In 2022, the UNESCO Child and Family Research Centre at the University of Galway published a literature review examining available research into the outcomes associated with universal youth work, on behalf of the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. This paper found “overwhelming evidence that demonstrates the benefits and utility of universal or open access youth work.” Five thematic categories of outcomes for young people engaged in universal youth work were identified, which broadly correlate with the five national outcomes for children and young people. The paper therefore suggests that “government support for universal youth work has the potential to contribute to the achievement of national policy goals for children and young people.”

