



Foróige Pre-Budget Submission 2024

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Summary

Foróige wants all young people in Ireland to be able to access youth work. For this to happen we need a universal youth work ecosystem that resources youth clubs and programmes that are open to all, alongside targeted support for those who experience disadvantage. This cannot be achieved over one budgetary cycle; it requires a longer-term commitment to provide young people with the skills, spaces, and confidence to thrive.

We are calling for a transformative investment in Ireland's young people over the next 3 years that will seek to realise this vision - a total of €40 million between 2024 and 2026, to support the engagement of an additional 83,000 young people in youth work.

In Budget 2024, our ask amounts to €15 million. This will lay the foundation for a robust and flourishing youth work sector that has the capacity to engage more young people and adult volunteers, flex our offering to accommodate emerging needs and issues, and support community connectedness across the country. Given the multiple converging challenges facing young people in 2024, along with this being a pivotal year 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 overall 3-year budget proposal as well as the specifics of our Budget 2024 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 over the last number of 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 Irish population of 0-24 year olds has grown by 10% between the 2006 and 2022 censuses. Alongside this, we have witnessed rising levels of need among young people, with demand for our services increasing year-on-year. Events over the last 3 years, including the introduction of public health restrictions in early 2020 to combat 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 heightened demand on our services.

At the same time, overall funding to the sector is at the same level today as it was in 2008. Budget 2023 was a significant disappointment to us. The sector was allocated a 1.6% increase in funding, which was well below the rate of inflation and was in effect a real terms cut to our budget lines. Additional one-off funding packages to support organisations with increased energy costs unfortunately did not come close to alleviating the strain on our services, especially because of the longer-term effects of years of under-investment. In 2023 core funding for youth work through the Youth Services Grant Scheme moved past pre-austerity levels for the first time, but it is clear that Ireland's growing youth population and the level of need have outstripped that degree of investment in the intervening 15 years.

Why 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 than this, there is substantial evidence to show that engagement in youth work is an effective form of prevention and early intervention for a range of adverse outcomes, thanks to our community base. We know that 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 grow among peers - especially vital coming out of Covid-19.

Research shows that youth work contributes to a multitude of positive outcomes for young people. We have attempted to distil some of these into the list below and provide a flavour of 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 supportive 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 that is essential to ensuring our communities thrive.

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 encapsulates the deep and inextricable 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 as necessary.

Universal youth work has been consistently under-funded, and we feel that 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.

Policy Context

This year is pivotal for the youth work sector, in particular with the development and expected publication of the next National Policy Framework for Children and Young People and the Action Plan for Youth Services providing a blueprint for young people in Ireland over the coming years, along with the ongoing review of the Youth Services Grant Scheme. In order 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 and address the major challenges facing young people but also our sector.

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 the Covid-19 pandemic on social skills, mental health, and academic success, to the impacts experienced over the last year by many families due to the soaring cost of living, and the challenges of adjustment and transition (be they within different tiers of the education system 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 the sector is undertaking and the ways in which this has expanded.

Much of the funding that is available to the youth work sector is targeted and does not support universal and volunteer-led youth work. It is our view that universal and targeted youth work are mutually beneficial, and must work and develop alongside and in complement to one another; this interaction is the key to enabling an ecosystem of youth work in the broadest sense to function effectively and successfully for young people and communities. Similarly, volunteer-led youth work is an invaluable part of service delivery, bringing with it a host of benefits to both the young people and adult volunteers who give of their time, effort, and wealth of experience. However, over recent years, funding schemes for targeted services have outpaced those allocated to universal and volunteer-led youth work, leading it to suffer by comparison. Our proposal seeks to rectify this by focusing 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 lucky 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.¹ Youth work and non-formal education are crucial to realising these rights, through the provision of developmental and educational activities, opportunities, and spaces

We want the value of youth work and the vital support we provide

¹United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child, Children's Rights Alliance 2010 (available at <https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/23814/5339ee8c9c564b37969703db9781bc0d.pdf#page=null>, last accessed 10 July 2023).

for young people and communities across Ireland to be recognised and sustainably funded. Crucially, we feel that the level of investment necessary must be delivered through a longer-term commitment by Government to meet the needs of all our young people, by developing and maintaining a holistic ecosystem of youth work services and supports. This will facilitate a diversity of provision and ensure that youth work is available to all young people across Ireland.

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 in an ecosystem that supports both universal and targeted engagement of young people.

Foróige is calling for a transformative investment in young people over the next three years (2024-2026) of €40 million.

This will engage an additional 83,000 young people across Ireland in youth work.

Our ask is broken down into €15 million in Budget 2024, with a further €12.5 million in both 2025 and 2026. This investment is split across a range of universal and targeted services, and represents an investment of €481 per young person over 3 years.

This section sets out our vision for young people and the youth work sector, our broader 3-year budgetary proposal, and the detailed breakdown of how this applies in 2024, including costings and impact for each budget line. We feel that 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's Blueprint for the Youth Work Sector

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

Accordingly, we have devised a blueprint for youth work which allocates additional resources to these areas to build capacity over the next 3 years. It consists of the following elements:

Creating a network of Universal Youth Work Hubs - €21 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.
- We have mapped a network of **102 locations** across the country, with a 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 outreach work, youth programmes, and digital youth work). This will create a total of **408 staff roles**.
- Each hub will engage 590 young people and 80 trained and supported adult volunteers - a total of **60,180 young people** and **8,160 volunteers** engaged.

An uplift to the Youth Services Grant Scheme - €5 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 **12,500 young people**.

Increased capacity in Digital Youth Work - €2 million

- The youth sector must be supported to build 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 a total of **29 staff roles** across the country - 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 **2,900 young people**.

Increased capacity for youth mentoring provision - €3 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 **48 dedicated mentoring staff** to support 1,200 new mentoring matches - **1,200 young people** and **1,200 volunteers**.

Expansion of specialised youth services - €2 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 **30 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 **900 young people**.

Expansion of the UBU Your Space Your Place Scheme - €6 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 **45 new projects** nation-wide to meet demand, each of which will be run by 2 staff - a total of **90 staff roles**.
- Each project will engage 80 young people - a total of **3,600 young people**.

Scaling Youth Participation to include more young people - €1 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 are proposing 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 60 young people to be engaged per local authority area, amounting to the inclusion of an additional **1,860 young people**.

Our Vision for Investment in Young People 2024-2026

Our ask is based on an 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. The table below sets out our proposed budgetary breakdown over the next 3 years.

Service	2024	2025	2026	Total Cost	Young People Engaged
Universal Youth Hubs	€7 million	€7 million	€7 million	€21 million	60,180
Youth Services Grant Scheme	€3 million	€1 million	€1 million	€5 million	12,500
Digital Youth Work Capacity	€1 million	€500,000	€500,000	€2 million	2,900
Mentoring	€1 million	€1 million	€1 million	€3 million	1,200
Specialised Services	€500,000	€750,000	€750,000	€2 million	900
Additional Targeted UBUs	€2 million	€2 million	€2 million	€6 million	3,600
Youth Participation	€500,000	€250,000	€250,000	€1 million	1,860
Total	€15 million	€12.5 million	€12.5 million	€40 million	83,140

Budget 2024 - Breakdown of Investment

Foróige is calling for €15 million in Budget 2024, to begin to lay the groundwork for every young person in Ireland to be able to access youth work. This will engage an additional 31,815 young people in 2024, and create an additional 203 staff roles.

Service	What will it fund in 2024	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 - half to come on board in 2024 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	€500,000
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 60 young people engaged per local authority area - Half of these on board in 2024		930	€500,000
Total		203	31,815	€15 million

Appendix 1: References

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