Bytes Strategic Plan
January 2022 – December 2024

Vision / Purpose

Young people transform their world for good.

Mission

Each year we will ensure that over 3000 young people access digital technology in communities of promise.

Outline of Strategy – the process and the structure

In April 2021 we started talking with young people, staff and our Board about the future direction of Bytes. Several working groups were established, and we used a range of tools to assess our current activities. In June 2021 we conducted a staff reflection day to review our findings and to think deeply about the next three years. Following this process we drafted a range of strategic themes and once again we engaged young people, our staff and Board. This process has been highly participative and because of this process, a new strategic plan has emerged.

The strategic plan is structured as a high-level overview of our commitments until 2024. In it we:

- Outline four pillars for our work
- Explain our Theory of Change
- Provide detail on our four strategic goals which explore the problems we are addressing and our response
- Establish a summary action plan that links to the key priorities in the Programme for Government (PfG), Children and Young People Strategy (CYPS) and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG).

Each year Bytes will agree an annual action plan based upon this strategy.

Introduction to Bytes

The Bytes Project is a youth work charity that has been working with the most vulnerable young people in Northern Ireland for nearly three decades. We were established in April 1993, when a small group of people designed an innovative concept for Belfast, based on experience in an inner-city project in the USA. The original aim was to *build on the entertainment and amusement attraction computers with marginalised young adults* with a focus on 16–25-year-olds.

Initial funding primarily came from Apple which supported Bytes to set up ten "open house" facilities for young adults to work on employability skills, confidence building, self-esteem and allowing the individuals a safe space to work on seeking further education or employment. In the first 10 years Bytes were able to engage over 42,000 young people who gained skills in personal development and information technology.

Fast forward almost 30 years and Bytes are still providing young people, aged between 16-25, with the essential skills they need to flourish. Since then we have widened our areas of expertise and we now work across Northern Ireland. In 2020/21 our 40 staff engaged directly with over 1,000 young people in schools, on the streets and in youth programmes, across Northern Ireland and assisted hundreds of young people gain qualifications.

Who would have thought that a small group of people in 1993 with a vision, could have had such a strong impact on the lives of the young people and communities in Northern Ireland almost thirty years later?

Now for the next three years of empowering young people.

We aim to create opportunities to increase the contact between a range of groups. We want to support young people to build group relations and reduce intergroup tension. We want to focus on all communities allowing young people to have a platform to 'tell their story', which through self-disclosure will increase trust between the communities and increase empathy.

Pillars of our Work

	Youth Voice	Youth Digital	Youth Empathy	Youth Places
Activities	Amplify, unify and mobilise the voice of young people to influence the public debate using digital platforms.	Enable young people from communities of promise to prepare for the future of work.	Support young people to build relationships that create empathy and mutual respect.	Create eco-system of cooperation so voluntary organisations lead on the delivery of all funded youth work support these places to offer positive digital learning opportunities.
Outcomes	Young people advocate for and create social change.	Young people from communities of promise contribute the future of NI economy.	Young people contribute towards and equal and inclusive society which values respect.	Delivery of youth services that place people, not bureaucracy, at the centre.
Connectors	Advocates of youth participation, Participatory Budgeting Works, Local Councils, key NI Assembly Departments.	Organisations that deliver programmes focused on digital skills and entrepreneurship, Colleges, key NI Assembly Departments.	International Programmes, Organisations that focus on Peace Building and Inclusion.	Local and Regional Organisations, Community Asset agencies, key NI Assembly Departments.
Investment	Grants – NI, UK and RoI Governments and grant making bodies focusing on those funders who invest in our pillars. Social Economy – We aim to raise income through developing micro business models and delivering contracted services. Corporations – We aim to engage with businesses who focus on the development of digital skills to support our work.			
Key Contributors	Young People – leading and directing the services they want to see and improving their capacity to advocate for change. Staff – skilled in youth work, basic digital skills, self-reflective, satisfied working for Bytes. Board – providing good governance and protecting to the growing public trust in the third sector.			
Foundations	Digital Skills – we will embed digital skills across our offer to young people. Flat Culture – we will maintain a culture that nurtures leadership across the organisation. Quality Services - we will create and maintain a culture of continuous improvement. Open innovation - we will always pivot to collaboration with third and private sector partners. Mobility and Flexibility – we will ensure our services can be scaled up across NI and wider afield. Self-sustaining – we will aim to mix our income streams and focus on social economy business models. Good governance – we will continue building on the public trust in charities.			

Our Theory of Change

Janene help for this when completed.   Ideas of journey…

- We need place-based youth settings that offer access to digital skills – this will be:
    o Bytes provision where young people shape and develop their own services
    o Networks with other organisations that provide youth services
- Then we can extend and grow
    o Youth voice
    o Youth empathy
    o Youth digital
- We will engage over 3000 each year in opportunities to extend their digital skills

Our Way of Working

There are three themes that drive our values and behaviours:

For those we support:
Children and young people deserve the best services. At Bytes we aim to ensure we provide the highest standards of delivery. Our priority is ensuring that third sector organisations provide the highest standards of youth work delivery. We support this by providing effective support for governance, workforce development, curriculum development and representation.

For our organisation:
Humanity over bureaucracy. At Bytes we pursue trusting relationships, reducing management tiers, and the principles of horizontal collaboration. This shapes how Bytes engages staff, members, and external partners.

For our staff:
Innovation Mindset. At Bytes we are comfortable adopting new approaches based on a culture of continuous learning.

Bytes Strategic Goal One – Youth Voice

The Problem

Have a conversation with any young person in Northern Ireland and ask them if their government represent them and 9 times out of 10 you will be faced with a resounding "No". At Bytes our view is that the voice of young people is underrepresented. The British Youth Council recently called for the UK government to act and listen to young people, particularly post Covid 19, as certain issues have become more prevalent. Amanda Chetwynd-Cowieson, Chair of the British Youth Council said: "Young people remain passionate about seeing social and political change for their communities, and now is not the time to ignore their voices". Steps are being taken to address the underrepresentation of young people in NI with the development of the NI Youth Assembly. A member of this new assembly was asked why they volunteered to be involved. They said "I believe this is needed, I've seen young people's needs are not being met and their voices are not heard. The Youth assembly will ensure these changes and our MLAs hear our voice."

Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child sets out the right for children to have a say in matters that affect them. Given that those under the age of 18 years cannot vote, ways must be found to ensure that they are fairly represented across the country and their voice heard (Schubotz, McKnight, Lloyd & Devine, 2018).

Changing the approach of the youth work sector towards youth voice should be of paramount importance throughout the region. Roger Hart's Ladder of Young People's Participation (Hart, 1997) demonstrates the 8 levels of youth voice within organisations. Hart describes "Adultism" as the bottom 3 levels of the ladder, 'the assumption that young people are inferior to adults simply because of their young age' (Youth on Board, 2020). This may look like manipulation, tokenistic behaviour or using young people as a decoration to the organisation, all things that benefit the adults more than the young people. The top end of the ladder is where the youth work sector should be aiming with equity between adults and young people. The Queens' University professor Laura Lundy enhanced the field of research on youth participation with the Lundy Model of Child Participation (Lundy, 2007). This model identified 4 key areas for youth participation- space, voice, audience and influence; children and young people must be given a safe inclusive space to form and express their opinions, they must be facilitated to share their voice freely, this view must be listened to and acted upon as appropriate.

Our Response – We are going to ensure that young people shape the services provided by Bytes.   At Bytes we will listen to young people and empower them with the tools to act on issues in their communities. To engage the voice of young people outside of Bytes we will use our Sparks Participation Model and our www.positivesparks.org platform. We will use this across Northern Ireland and the rest of UK and Ireland and empower young people to present their views to key policy makers and funders.

Goal One – Youth Voice – Amplify, unify and mobilise the voice of young people to influence the public debate using digital platforms.						
Commitment	Outcomes	Key Success Indicators	By	PfG 2021	CYPS 2020-30	SDG
Use digital approaches to activate the voice of young people within Bytes.	*Bytes place the voice of young people at the centre of the organisation.* *Young people are empowered to speak out and advocate on issues affecting them and their community.* *Voices of young people from across Northern Ireland and further afield linked for shared purpose.*	• *Develop a Regional Youth Board for Bytes that meet with the Bytes Board twice per year.* • *Develop up to 10 Local Youth Boards for Bytes Local Services.* • *Provide at least 1 Participatory Budget opportunity for a steering group within the organisation per year.* • *One thematic group to improve engagement with those who tend to be less heard.*	2022 2024 2024	Our children and young people have the best start in life. Everyone can reach their potential. We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect. We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives.	Positive contribution to society. Learn and achieve. Live in a society that respects their rights. Live in a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted.	4 QUALITY EDUCATION 8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH 9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE 10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES 17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS
Use digital approaches to capture the voice of young people across the Great Britain and Ireland.	*Create non-judgmental spaces for young people to speak freely on issues affecting them and their community.* *Unify the voice of young people on prominent issues.*	• *Energise the www.positivespark.org platform with a minimum of 1000 inputs each year.* • *Share the Positive Sparks model and build capacity to use with a minimum of 3 youth providers in NI and UK per year.* • *Annually add a minimum of 2 new partnerships conducting similar work in the UK or Ireland.*	2024 2024 2024	We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is valued and treated with respect. We have a caring society that supports people throughout their lives. Our children and young people have the best start in life.	Positive contribution to society. Live in a society that respects their rights.	10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES 9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE

Bytes Strategic Goal Two – Youth Digital

The Problem

Currently 21,000 young people aged 16-24 are not in education, employment or training with 15,000 defined as economically inactive and 72,000 (23% of 16–24-year-olds) have no qualifications (NI Labour Force Survey, 2021). In NI we have an issue of a performance gap between the highest and lowest achievers which is important when we understand the future of work. The OECD Skills Strategy for NI (2020) outlines a range of skills imbalance in the region and highlights that career guidance for young people must support them to understand future career trends, particularly in STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts and Maths) (2020, p. 14). This is reflected in the Department for the Economy Skills Strategy, which highlights the need for STEAM skilled technicians that are not at a graduate level (2021, p.6). This is also detailed further in the x10 Economy Consultation with a focus on mid-level professional and tech education particularly levels three to five (2021: p. 6). The future economic needs are very clear. Much of this data is reflect in the Community Plans of local councils. We need young people to be able to access opportunities to improve their personal skills and STEAM and digital skills.

The lived experience of marginalised young people engaging with digital technology is a story of digital exclusion. The dynamics of digital inequality amongst young people are explored in a report from the Prince's Trust, Slipping through the Net. The report studied the online experiences of vulnerable young people, particularly those not in education, employment and training. It discovered that vulnerable young people inhabit less digitally rich environments, where they can "informally learn skills with the support of an accessible facilitator or peer" (2016, p. 10). If young people are not able to traverse traditional and social networks, there will be increased digital exclusion. As Van Dijk explains "the networked society tends to become more unequal that mass society" (2021, p. 116). This reality has been highlighted starkly during the Covid-19 pandemic with many young people not being able to effectively access basic digital equipment for their education.

Digital literacy is a key theme within STEAM, however support for educators to develop STEAM skills focuses on formal education through CCEA (see STEMworks). The same support is not available to local providers delivering youth service in communities of promise.

Our Response – We can transform the capacity of voluntary providers who deliver youth work to contribute to the future pipeline of digital talent. We want to enable young people to access digital equipment and trained staff to improve their STEAM and digital skills using a youth work approach.

Goal Two – Youth Digital - Enable young people from communities of promise to prepare for the future of work.						
Commitment	Outcome	Key Success Indicators	By	PfG 2021	CYPS 2020-30	SDG
Improve opportunities for young people in communities to access STEAM based learning.	*Young people experience improved motivation and access to STEAM opportunities.*	• *Create 3 digital hubs for young people to engage in STEAM activities.* • *Create 5 mobile digital teams to bring STEAM activities to communities of promise.* • *Create a curriculum for STEAM and Digital Literacy.* • *Bid for a minimum of 3 contracts annually to improve employability and skills with a STEAM focus.* • *Develop a STEAM skills pathway for youth workers to improve their capacity to deliver STEAM activities within their programmes.*	2024 2022 2022 2024 2024	Our children and young people have the best start in life. Everyone can reach their potential.	Learn and achieve. Experience economic and environmental well being.	
Create an eco-system of collaboration to improve opportunities for young people to improve their STEAM skills and digital literacy.	*Bytes recognised as a leading youth work charity delivering STEAM.*	• *Annually add a minimum of 5 new partnership with signed Memorandums of Understanding in place.* • *Annually submit funding a bid for 1 STEAM related activity with a minimum of one partner per bid.* • *Create a membership network of youth providers to provide and lobby for increased STEAM opportunities in areas of promise.*	2024 2024 2024	Our children and young people have the best start in life. Everyone can reach their potential.	Learn and achieve. Experience economic and environmental well being.	
Prioritise the use of digital platforms for learning.	*Bytes a leading charity in NI in terms of innovation in learning.*	• *Ensure that all skills training for young people and staff are completed on digital platforms (ie Ambition)*	2022	Everyone can reach their potential.	Learn and achieve.	

One Year Plan – add potential ideas here – this will be removed from final strategic plan

STEAM and digital literacy curriculum agreed

Training and recruitment of staff to deliver STEAM and digital skills using youth work

Design CPD training for the wider youth sector on youth work, STEAM and digital literacy and relate to the NI Youth Work Curriculum

Offer CPD opportunities for staff in areas of STEAM and digital literacy

Bid for 3 contracts/grants to enhance STEAM and digital literacy

Five new STEAM and digital literacy partnerships in place with MOU

Offer membership of Bytes for STEAM and digital literacy support to a minimum of 10 voluntary providers

Development of one business plan for the development of STEAM activities as part of a social economy model

Verbal Arts

Apex Housing – hubs – social housing and young people – ICT infrastructure to explore

Workspace

Essential skills – training and registration

Primary Measure for Bytes

- Young people report improved skills

Bytes Strategic Goal Three – Youth Empathy

The Problem

From the early 1960's Northern Ireland has been blighted with violence, political division and this led to segregation. A characteristic of Northern Ireland's society is the degree to which communities are segregated (Cairns & Hewstone, 2002; Knox & Hughes, 1994; Whyte, 1990). Segregation is prevalent within education settings as 94% of young people attend single denomination schools (Cairns & Hewstone, 2002). In terms of housing more than 70% of social housing estates are 90% single community occupied; and interface barriers between communities, have multiplied in the Belfast area alone there are eighty-eight security and segregation barriers (Community Relations Council, 2009). Segregation can cause suspicion and a mutual ignorance, (Gallagher,1995; Pettigrew,2000). Within Education we have seen attempts to reduce these issues and increase contact between communities (Al Ramiah, Hewstone, Voci, Cairns & Hughes, 2013). These actions are driven by the concept the Contact Hypothesis.

The contact hypothesis looks at increasing contact between the differing communities and improving relationships via increased direct contact. The contact hypothesis has demonstrated that contact between conflicting groups can reduce intergroup tension. Within this hypothesis there are four main conditions - equal status, common goals, social support and institutional support (Allport 1954). A fifth condition was added by Pettigrew (1998) suggesting that contact should provide opportunities for friendships to develop with different groups.

Within Northern Ireland there is a heavy focus on segregation and prejudice based on Protestants and Catholics but many other communities such as lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people in face segregation and prejudice in their daily lives because of their perceived sexual orientation. This can be extended to young people who may have a disability. Disabilities can be seen as physical, sensory, mental, light, or severe and refer to all people male, female, young and old. It is perceived that there are very few attacks on people with disabilities, but people believe that their complaint will not be taken seriously by the authorities.

Our Response - We aim to create opportunities to increase the contact between a range of groups. We want to support young people to build group relations and reduce intergroup tension. We want to focus on all communities allowing young people to have a platform to 'tell their story', which through self-disclosure will increase trust between the communities and increase empathy.

Goal Three – Youth Empathy – Enable young people to widen their connections with others.						
Commitment	Outcome	Key Success Indicators	By	PfG 2021	CYPS 2020-30	SDG
Develop youth work approaches that enable greater levels of empathy.	*Increased confidence in relationships leading to safe and inclusive communities* *Inclusive shared spaces and programmes for young people.*	• *Create a curriculum for empathy in youth work which embeds empathy as a first step to any youth work engagement.* • *Bid for a minimum of 3 contracts/grants annually to contribute to improved empathy.* • *Ensure Bytes create a minimum of 2 international programmes annually.*	2022 2024 2024	We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is treated with respect.	Children and young people live: In a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted; and In safety and stability.	
Contribute research on the theme of empathy in youth work.	*Youth work delivery underpinned by evidence-based practice* *Influence strategic leaders regarding best practice on inclusion.*	• *Annually contribute research to the theme of youth empathy.* • *Engage with research hubs within Queens University and Ulster University regarding this area of research.* • *Monthly engagements on the theme of empathy and inclusion with key strategic leads.*	2022 2022 2024	We have an equal and inclusive society where everyone is treated with respect.	Children and young people live: In a society in which equality of opportunity and good relations are promoted; and In safety and stability.	

One Year Plan – add potential ideas here – this will be removed from final strategic plan

- Prepare partnership with peace plus bid that links personal skills (empathy etc) with future of work requirements – Moville, NYCI, W5, Young Enterprise, 10-15 local providers outside Belfast and Derry
- Research into the changing nature of peace building
    - Duncan
    - Explore the role of psychological well-being and peacebuilding and embed in all Bytes place-based services
- Bid for min of 3 contracts/grants to enhance empathy – TBUC, peace plus and CGR
- One Erasmus bid / uk german connect
- Monthly strategic meeting with key stakeholders
- Explore the role of assistive technology in all Bytes work - https://www.ucd.ie/all/ucdstudents/support/assistivetechnology/

Primary Measure for Bytes

- Young people report higher levels of empathy for others
- Research published each year

Bytes Strategic Goal Four – Youth Place

The problem

There is a lack of accessible youth services for children and young people in many communities across Northern Ireland, and those communities that do have available youth provision, are not always able to cater for the wide range of needs of young people. Young people need a space to come to where they feel safe, have access to opportunities and feel a sense of belonging. Local youth services could be a cornerstone for young people, a place where they can learn, socialise, and thrive, but for young people in many local communities, they do not have this option. Local communities have community groups and centres, often run by members of the community. However, they do not always have a youth work ethos and can lack the skills, experience, or training to work with young people. This can often increase the exclusion of young people from youth services.   Local communities need youth services with sustained engagement and relationships with young people, positive roles models in youth work staff and volunteers, and services who do not just show up, deliver a short programme, and leave again

Not enough young people in communities have a voice in shaping their services, evidenced by Bytes through our on-street and outreach work where we hear the frustration from young people. These voices are not reflected in the surveys/research conducted by statutory and public services. Young people are ready to participate but have little to participate in.

Priorities for Youth is the current policy used by the Department of Education to govern youth services. A key commitment in the policy is that "The voluntary sector will be encouraged and supported to provide those youth services assessed as needed and the statutory youth sector will continue to deliver youth services where there is no viable alternative".   Across Northern Ireland voluntary providers, like Bytes, could expand services for young people in local communities but we are in direct competition with statutory services who, as the policy suggests, should be enabling local providers to offer these services.

Our Response - Bytes will develop groups of local young people in communities who will represent the voice and needs of other young people within that community. We will call these groups youth hubs, and they will shape, design and deliver the services Bytes offer young people in their community. We will also seek to collaborate with youth services that are already established in communities and support their work with young people, enhancing the skills of their staff, and lobby for their services to be recognised and resourced effectively.

Goal Four – Youth Place - Create eco-system of cooperation so voluntary providers lead on the delivery of all funded youth work.						
Commitment	Outcome	Key Success Indicators	By	PfG 2021	CYPS 2020-30	SDG
Ensure the Bytes enables young people to design, deliver and manage their own youth services.	*Young people are at the heart of the services they use.*	• *Develop a Regional Youth Board for Bytes* • *Develop up to 10 Local Youth Boards for Bytes Local Services* • *Link place-based approaches to wider wellbeing support for communities.*	2022 2024 2023	Our children and young people have the best start in life. Everyone can reach their potential.	Learn and achieve. Experience economic and environmental well being.	
Provide voluntary providers with the option of membership with Bytes.	*Youth work approaches are high quality and enable long term personal and social development.*	• *Support youth projects to access a range of support services from Bytes including curriculum and workforce development* • *Develop a strategic consensus across voluntary providers who provide youth services regarding their importance for children and young people* • *Offer effective representation with key youth work policy hubs.*	2024 2022 2024 2024	Our children and young people have the best start in life. Everyone can reach their potential.	Learn and achieve. Experience economic and environmental well being.	
Design and conduct research that captures the impact of place-based services in the third sector	*The impact of youth work are evidence based to lobby for increased investment.*	• *Engage with research hubs within Queens University and Ulster University.* • *Lobby for a long-term strategic focus on voluntary providers who deliver full time youth services.*	2024 2024	Our children and young people have the best start in life. Everyone can reach their potential.	Learn and achieve.	

Ten Primary Measure for Bytes

- Increased engagement with young people through all our activities
- Young people report improved skills
- Young people report higher levels of empathy for others
- Young people increase engagement with www.postivesparks.org
- Young people engaging with Bytes for more than 6 months report they are directing the activities in which they are involved.
- Increase in place-based services
- Increase in Bytes partnership with other voluntary providers delivering youth work
- Research published each year
- Staff satisfaction
- Yearly increase in non-grant funding income.

Contributing to our Mission statement: