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Are whole communities more likely to flourish where there is local ownership of youth provision?

A comparative analysis of three youth work projects in Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland

RSW RESEARCH AND EVALUATION
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Contents

Introduction

This research came about as a result of conversations over recent years which dared to reimagine how Northern Ireland's youth work is delivered. It coincided with six regional youth work organisations coming together, committing to support the Department of Education (DE) Youth Policy Team and Education Authority (EA) Youth Service to pursue new delivery models that would improve young people's experiences and outcomes[1]. Yet, conversations pushed further than looking to the potential outcomes for young people – asking:

> *Are whole communities more likely to flourish where there is local ownership of youth provision*?

To test this hypothesis, two youth work projects in Northern Ireland (Streetbeat Youth Project and New Lodge Youth Centre) and one in the Republic of Ireland (Bradóg Youth Service) were selected for analysis, each led by community-based organisations evidencing compelling outcomes, often achieved through partnerships with voluntary, community and statutory partners. Outcomes included:

- Significant service reach to marginalised young people.
- Strong community affiliation and engagement, with associated opportunities to strengthen skills and capabilities across the whole of a community, including but not limited to, the young people.
- Tangible outcomes for participating young people, including improved educational and school attendance outcomes through skilled interventions and strong links with a range of other agencies.
- Greater flexibility to respond appropriately to changing and localised needs and priorities including more efficient use of facilities and greater potential to leverage additional funding to augment public resources.

Whilst both deliverers in Northern Ireland have the capacity to scale up their work, the prevalence of surrounding state-led services restricts this – exemplifying how Northern Ireland's current legislation serves to maintain the status quo of state-led delivery primacy.

The research also traces the twenty year process led by City of Dublin Education & Training Board (ETB) in which 12 youth services being delivered by ETB across the City were transferred into community ownership under a different policy paradigm for state services; one shaped by the premise that the state's role is primarily to support voluntary delivery.

Legislation in Northern Ireland outlines that the statutory authority (now Education Authority Youth Services) is the decision maker for planning, delivering, monitoring and funding youth work. This has created a scenario where EA youth services do not need to prioritise Voluntary and Community Sector (VCS) delivery. Legislation and associated policy in the Republic of Ireland, by contrast, is shaped by the premise that the state is not best placed to deliver youth work.

If this research hypothesis appeared to stand up to testing, it was intended that the findings would be shared with the Department of Education's Youth Policy Team and Education Authority's Youth Service as evidence of the merits of an updated model of youth work delivery which provide for greater community ownership of management, design and delivery.

[1] YMCA Ireland, Youth Initiatives NI, Youth Work Alliance, Boys and Girls Clubs NI, Youth Action NI and Bytes.

A 1994-95 review of a community based developmental project in Northern Ireland[2] referred to youth work then as a "*complex mosaic*"; resources, practice and provision varying significantly. It tested the hypothesis that *young adults who were marginalised could build a strong social identity capable of redefining and repairing fractured relationships if given the opportunity, resources and freedom to take decisions.* Young adults designed models of self-help following community development principles with Belfast Education & Library Board staff joining with community, youth and academic overseers. In evaluating the project, McCartney found:

1. ***Trust in young people*** was vital – yet they often claimed through the project that adults reneged on decisions or closed down debate.
2. ***Young people tended to be witnesses of rather than participants in change***, adults not going far enough in sharing power.
3. Youth workers needed to take a more ***proactive stance as enablers of young people***.
4. ***Authority figures defined the problem, solution, structure and response***, set the budget and determined the outcomes.

Whilst the project provided significant challenge, McCartney concluded:

> *"for youth work to be responsive to the needs of young people there is a* ***fundamental imperative for a significant reorientation in the way authority, power, resources and facilities are organised and deployed …*** *how we organise and deploy resources is central to any social change concept of ambition."*

We question, thirty years on, whether this significant reorientation has, or indeed, whether it can take place in Northern Ireland under the current legislative context. This research presents fresh insights into the potential benefits for communities across Northern Ireland of taking steps towards such significant reorientation.

We are grateful to the Sir Halley Stewart Fund whose funding made this research possible and to all who participated in interviews and focus groups – from New Lodge Youth Centre, Streetbeat Youth Project, Bradóg Youth Service and current and retired staff from the City of Dublin Education & Training Board.

We are also thankful to Prof Sam McCready for his invaluable insight and support throughout.

[2]Summarised in: Chapter 3, McCready & Loudon, 2018, The History of the Youth Service In Northern Ireland (1973-2017) Ulster University

Methodology

To explore the hypothesis that *communities are more likely to flourish where there is local ownership of youth provision***,** the following was conducted:

1. A Literature Review (Appendix 3). This helped to shape our methodology and inform the interview questions. It found:

    - Youth work is delivered in the context of the young people's wider community / society *and* a particular ideological framework. Perspectives about society, young people and their role within society will influence any approach
    - Youth participation concepts emerged in the 1970s and continue to feature in literature, alongside empowerment and social justice which have come to prominence. Participation is often presented in literature in the context of the young people's role and standing within a community and beyond that, society.
    - Youth work which focuses solely on young people as individuals functioning exclusively within peer networks are not unhelpful and do not reflect reality.
    - Community development is represented in literature primarily as being either needs based or strengths led. However, community development approaches *must start from within an organisation or group,* yet*:*

        > *"Establishing within each institution* ***a sense of responsibility for the health of the local community****, along with mechanisms that allow communities to influence and even control some aspects of the institution's relationships with its local neighbourhood****, can prove much more difficult****."* Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993[6]

    - Needs based approaches to youth work are contrasted with asset based approaches in which assets often extend beyond a youth centre: this ***intersection of youth and wider community participation*** reflects 'real life' and has the potential to impact on whole communities as well as young people.
    - Community must**,** therefore**,** be a prominent feature of youth work, and vice versa.
    - Whilst literature emphasises ***the merits of voluntary and community sector (VCS) provision,*** recognising the permeable relationship between youth work and its community, there remains clear ***desire amongst voluntary and community-leaders to work with the state towards delivery excellence.***

2. A comparative analysis of three youth work delivery models:

    - ***Streetbeat Youth Project***, Woodvale Road, West Belfast. Streetbeat was chosen as it has an excellent track record of working in communities including schools with a comparatively small investment from the DE youth work budget. It operates in proximity to a wide range of state based youth services.
    - ***New Lodge Youth Centre***, New Lodge, North Belfast where the statutory youth service handed delivery over to a community provider (Ashton Community Trust) in 2013. New Lodge Youth Centre was chosen to showcase its high level of community engagement. It operates in a building currently owned by EA and, since delivery moved to the community provider (Ashton Community Trust) in 2013, there have been ongoing efforts to move this to community ownership. New Lodge receives a medium sized investment from the DE youth work budget.

- Streetbeat and New Lodge are both working within the context of Northern Ireland's current legislation which does not emphasise nor prioritise the Voluntary and Community Sector's contribution in terms of funding or leadership opportunities.
- ***Bradóg Youth Service, North West Inner Dublin*** which transferred from state to community ownership in 2005. It was selected to showcase the development of its delivery model from state based delivery to maturing community sector delivery over a twenty-year period.

3. Tracing the history of a twenty year process led by the City of Dublin Education & Training Board in which 12 youth services being delivered by ETB across the City were transferred into community ownership. The researcher visited the two Belfast-based organisations on several occasions, interviewing:
    - The Directors andf staff teams
    - A group of young people gathered by the staff team (including young volunteers)
    - A group of parents (New Lodge Youth Centre only)
    - Other community stakeholders working in partnership with the youth centre and able to comment on their observations of the centres' impact on the community:

      For New Lodge Youth Centre: Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI) and 174 Trust

      For Streetbeat Youth Project: Boys' Model School and Impact Training.

For Bradóg Youth Service, because time in Dublin was restricted, the researcher conducted one focus group with the youth centre's Director, staff team and several representatives from City of Dublin Education & Training Board

The questions used for semi-structured interviews and focus groups with the Directors and staff teams can be found at Appendix 1 The questions used for stakeholders were specific to the context and so varied, but common questions used can also be found at Appendix 1.

Direct quotations and general observations from staff and stakeholder consultations were shared with a group of eight to ten young people at New Lodge and at Streetbeat. The young people were invited to state whether they agreed or disagreed with the statements and observations. In every instance, the young people validated all that had been claimed and observed by staff. Their responses to the statements and observations forms the basis of their contributions.

In both locations, young people who participated in focus groups were older teens (aged 15 to 19), many of whom were able to reflect on their journey within the organisations over a number of years.

In New Lodge, the same approach was adopted with a group of five parents who also validated all that had been claimed and observed by the staff.

> *"On the appearance of things many of the programmes run in many youth groups appear to be similar … However, the experience of participating in a programme can be used to create learning about social relationships … two youth groups could be operating development education programmes, while exposing the young people to entirely different perspectives and values."* Hurley and Treacy, 1993[1]

Given Hurley and Treacy's observation (cited in the literature review) the deliverers' activity per se was not the focus of the consultations, nor of this study. Rather, the focus is on:

- principles by which deliverers work including their understanding of youth work 'ownership'
- observations about the impact of their work on the young people and the wider community.

Summary of Findings

City of Dublin Education & Training Board: Historical Overview

Early state-led models set the foundation for youth work in Dublin City by establishing youth clubs and training centres, initially to address poverty and social need. The emergence of a strengthened and more organised community and voluntary sector throughout the 1960s and 1970s brought local actors into the picture and started a dialogue on state support for more community-based models.

The 1980s and 1990s saw a strong emphasis on developing local advisory groups, building capacity through Liaison Officers, and establishing financial and operational structures that would later enable community ownership. This was the recognised final destination.

From the late 1990s, new state-funded contracting models and multi-year funding cycles were introduced – this expanded service delivery but also highlighted tensions between standardised state or larger voluntary models and the need for community based, flexible provision.

The City of Dublin ETB completed a twenty-year process of bringing smaller community-based recipients of funding programmes into community ownership.

Whilst Government-funded programmes have had different emphases over time, including administratively heavy requirements on recipients, policy has been shaped by the premise that the state's role is to support voluntary delivery rather than to maintain state, delivery over the long term.

City of Dublin Education & Training Board Transfer of Ownership: Key Findings

The Republic of Ireland's Youth Work Act, youth work policy, and the approach of government departments and state delivery agents are all shaped by the premise that the state is not best placed to deliver youth work. The very wording of the Act is explicit:

> *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 education and training; and*
> - *Provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations* [3]

This wording may help to inform legislative change in Northern Ireland (see Section 4, Recommendation 3).

Whilst the Act allows for state frontline delivery when this is required (as was the case in Dublin City over the 1980s-90s), the Act and accompanying policy enabled a twenty-year process in which 12 Dublin City community-based youth services transitioned to community ownership.

Yet, the state continues to recognise its enabling role in: funding, policy direction; capacity and governance support and training; quality assurance; and accountability for the use of public funds.

[3] https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2001/act/42/section/3/enacted/en/html#sec3

Key findings to emerge from tracing the history of the transfer of ownership from City of Dublin ETB to community organisations, outlined in full in Section 5, included that the ETB believe that:

- Youth work is most effective when it emerges from and is delivered within a wider community development context and through organisations which have their origins within that or an adjacent community.
- Youth work has the potential to be the "*glue around which families, schools and communities can unite and strengthen*"[4] thereby with its impact being felt beyond the door of the youth club.
- The VCS is best place to lead delivery – the state does not have the capability to do the same or have the same impact (deliver the same outcomes) within communities.
- State delivered youth work tends to diminish in quality and depth over time as the youth work role narrows, with public-sector employees tending to focus over time on conditions of service impacting on (for example) hours of delivery.
- The state continues to have a key role to enable and support delivery – throughout periods of transition and over the long term. VCS providers need the state to facilitate and support their leadership – to provide funding, capacity building where needed, credibility and ensure accountability.

The majority of VCS organisations in Northern Ireland are already fit for purpose, and delivering effectively at scale. However, a minority may need support to build their capability to govern and deliver effectively. City of Dublin ETB addressed this 'gap' over a twenty-year process of building the necessary skills – amongst pre-existing Advisory Group members, and, at times, identifying newer members with complementary skills.

Key Traits of Community-led Delivery

The key, commonly observed traits across Streetbeat Youth Project, New Lodge Youth Centre and Bradóg Youth Service included:

- ***A strong trust in and respect for leadership*** within the organisations which helped to foster:
  - Compelling organisational cultures, towards which staff felt great affinity and loyalty.
  - A sense of community: a committed community of practitioners, together, facing out towards the young people they served, and the wider community.
  - Strong and effective staff teams which combined the best of local and external talent.
- ***A commitment to learning and reflection,*** manifest in:
  - Disciplined and regular reflections on practice within staff teams.
  - Active encouragement of professional and personal development including youth work qualifications.
  - Ambition for innovation and excellence, often equipping staff with required specialist skills.
  - Passion for young people to achieve their potential – academic, vocation, social and personal.

[4] ETB staff member

- ***Education lay at the heart of youth work,*** which sought to ensure that young people are best placed to take actions on issues that affect them now and in the future.
- ***Young people are encouraged to take the lead,*** supported by:
    - Tiers of entry and specialisms, expertly developed with input of young people, representing choice and diverse opportunities for engagement and growth.
- ***Breadth and depth of programmes:***. It was recognised in 2012 that statutory management was no longer best placed to deliver youth work from New Lodge Youth Centre in a way that met community expectations. The transfer brought about opportunities for the following, which were also observed in Streetbeat and Bradóg:
    - **Greater flexibility with regards to opening hours and programme provision**: freedom to respond and flex to meet the constant and yet ever-changing expressed needs and priorities of young people.
    - **Leveraging additional funding and resources** to supplement statutory funding and so generate greater social returns.
- ***The challenge of engaging parents,*** with some success built through community credentials and specifically targeted parents' programmes and events.
- ***The young person's social and community context is recognised and understood*** in personal and social development work - manifest in diverse ways, very often through partnering with community, voluntary and statutory agencies to extend and reinforce reach. Examples included:
    - Streetbeat regularly initiating engagement in school, gradually drawing (particularly the most socially isolated) into wider activities outside school.
    - Streetbeat's embedded work in local schools and training organisations is increasing its reach and community impact.
    - New Lodge is helping to form better bonds between young people and other agencies (social workers, Youth Justice Agency staff, disability youth club etc.) to help foster better engagement with other agencies and impact on community safety.
    - Flexible and responsive approaches to delivery, including multiple entry points meeting differing needs and circumstances.
    - All three youth organisations are creating opportunities for young people to contribute to their community, and thereby to recognise themselves, and be recognised as, an asset to that community.
- ***The wider community benefits***:
    - Individuals, families, community and statutory agencies, benefit from Streetbeat, Bradóg and New Lodge's proactive approaches, working with and alongside.
    - Increased skills and motivation for young people to become active citizens within their community, through formal, organisationally-led and informal means.
    - VCS organisation can access additional resources from charitable trusts and other sources, to augment public funds, and so expand service provision and achieve greater social return on state investment.

Conclusions

The research findings point to significant potential benefits when:

- The state prioritises the Voluntary and Community Sector's leadership of frontline delivery.
- The state works collaboratively with the VCS in support of delivery – including in arrangements relating to funding, investment, quality assurance and policy.
- The VCS is supported in and accountable for its delivery leadership role.

We conclude therefore that, where youth services are being delivered by the state, transfer to VCS ownership, in a manner similar to the process managed by the City of Dublin ETB, is preferrable.

The reports recommendations have been informed by:

- Observations from Streetbeat Youth Project, New Lodge Youth Centre, Bradóg Youth Service and the City of Dublin ETB experiences of transitioning projects into community ownership.
- Three principles, evidenced within the research findings.

These observations, along with the following three principles, have informed the report's recommendations.

Observations

Observation 1

Streetbeat Youth Project, New Lodge Youth Centre, Bradóg Youth Service and the City of Dublin ETB experiences of transitioning projects into community ownership were that, when VCS is in the lead there is:

- Stronger community affiliation and engagement, with associated opportunities to strengthen skills and capabilities across the whole of a community, including but not limited to, the young people. This is often achieved in part, or supported by, partnership approaches.
- Stronger tangible outcomes for participating young people, including improved educational and school attendance, leadership development and qualifications, through skilled interventions and strong links with schools and other educational providers.
- Increased service reach to marginalised young people.
- Greater flexibility to respond appropriately to changing and localised needs and priorities.
- More efficient use of facilities and greater potential to leverage additional funding to augment public resources – with proven ability to generate a greater social return on the state's investment.

Observation 2

Transition to community ownership of delivery was effective in Dublin City because:

- Relevant legislation in the Republic of Ireland (Youth Work Act 2001) aligns with state policy and has thus been an enabler of the change that has taken place. The same clarity is not provided for within the Northern Ireland legislation[5].

[5] Article 37 of the Education & Libraries (NI) Order 1986 states:

- ETB staff and leadership:
    - believed in the principle of community leadership;
    - worked tirelessly to achieve it, but in a measured way; and
    - recognised their long term contribution to be one of an enabler and mediator between state and community deliverers after the transition was complete.
- Community organisations in general, and specifically, Bradóg Youth Service:
    - was a willing partner, working with ETB to build its capacity to take on significant new governance responsibilities; and
    - was willing to take measured risks to ensure it had the resources and infrastructure it needed to scale up of its delivery models.

Principles

Principle 1:

Legislative change is necessary in Northern Ireland to achieve the delivery changes proposed.

Principle 2:

Such changes would be achievable within existing resources, yet would require a revision of the spend profile.

Principle 3:

The statutory and Voluntary & Community Sector must work collaboratively within relationships based on trust to secure and sustain delivery changes over the long term.

Having established the hypothesis of this research, we ask:

- ***What*** needs to be done in response?
- ***How*** might such actions be approached?

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(1) Each board (now EA) shall secure the provision of adequate facilities for recreational, social physical, cultural and youth service activities and for services ancillary to education and for that purpose may, with the approval of the Department, either alone or together with any other person –
(a) establish, maintain and manage any such facilities; (b) organise any such activities; (c) assist, by financial contributions or otherwise, any person to establish, maintain and manage any such facilities or to organise any such activities; (d) provide, or assist by financial contribution or otherwise in the provision of, leaders for such activities; and (e) defray or contribute towards the expenses of any persons taking part in any such activities.
(2) A board shall, in carrying out its functions under paragraph (1), have regard to the facilities provided by other persons.

Recommendations

What needs to be done in response:

Recommendation 1:

DE Youth Policy Team set a legislative and policy direction which determines that the Voluntary and Community Sector should be the main delivery mechanism for youth work and broader youth services in Northern Ireland so that the EA Youth Service can commence transfer of ownership of delivery to the VCS.

How this might be approached:

Recommendation 2: Infrastructure Oversight Body

DE Youth Policy Team oversees the establishment of a regional infrastructure body to be led by DE with equal representative membership from EA and the VCS.

Such a body would oversee all planning and investment decisions that would: (i) plan for and support the VCS role to grow and develop over the next five to seven years; and (ii) define the funding and monitoring role of the EA.

It may be appropriate for this body to be aligned to the Joint Government and Voluntary Sector Forum – perhaps to be set up as a sector-specific subgroup of the Forum. Recent achievements of this Forum, including the Partnership Agreement and Funding Principles, create a helpful and constructive context for this recommendation.

Recommendation 3: Work towards legislative change

Significant change in practice and policy direction will require legislative change.

It is recommended that ***DE begin preparing for new legislation now***, alongside establishing an oversight body. Both should be developed in tandem to avoid one significantly delaying the progress of the other. If planning for legislative change is underway in the current mandate, this may be ready for implementation early in a new mandate.

The Republic of Ireland's Youth Work Act 2001 provides a potentially helpful template for such, within which youth work is defined 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 education and training; and*
> - *Provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations* [6]

[6] https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2001/act/42/section/3/enacted/en/html#sec3

Recommendation 4: Develop a Revised Funding Formula

Recommendation 1 may be deliverable within existing resources – whatever changes are realised need not incur additional costs Indeed, it has the potential to yield greater social returns for the same state investment.

However, in line with the principle of the centrality of community-based delivery of youth services, changes would require a review of the spend profile – we recommend that ***DE ringfences 60% of its youth service budget for frontline delivery***.

The remaining 40% would be distributed between:

- *Support and development* – much under-resourced in current arrangements. There may be a role for EA, alongside VCS leaders within this function.
- *Contribution to headquarter expenses of larger voluntary youth service providers* – to be maintained at 2025 levels, if not increased.
- *Administration and monitoring expenses* – recognising the importance of EA retaining such functions.

Within the ringfenced 60% it will be also be helpful to replace annual core grants with multi-year arrangements for greater stability.

Recommendation 5: the Voluntary and Community Sector must be prepared for scaling up their delivery

The VCS will be required to demonstrate that it is fit for growth and prepared to meet the associated challenges, including, but not necessarily limited to:

- Governance arrangements: scale, skills and experience.
- Quality assurance processes including working towards continuous improvement. There may be a role for the Education & Training Inspectorate within this as well as the national infrastructure organisation (see Recommendation 2).

Recommendation 6: A North–South learning exchange

A North–South learning exchange is advisable**,** to share learning between the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, with respect to formation of culture, standards, evaluation tools etc. It may also be helpful for leveraging cross-border funds.

Recommendation 7: Plan ahead for the practical implications of transfers

The practical implications of transfer at any significant scale will require careful planning and execution. A brief outline of key considerations is provided at Appendix 2. These include, but may not be limited to: staffing considerations; management of assets; and contracting arrangements.

Research Findings

CITY OF DUBLIN EDUCATION & TRAINING BOARD

Historical Overview

Ireland's youth work projects/services emerged as part of state welfare initiatives in the 1940s. In City of Dublin, youth clubs and centres were established to address the high levels of poverty and social need after World War II. Public bodies including the Vocational Education Committees (VECs) and later the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) established basic community training centres (Brugh na N-Óg known as 'Brughs'). City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee was unique in establishing a sub committee responsible for youth work (now, the City of Dublin Youth Service) as early as 1942. In the 1950s, funding became available for youth clubs in Dublin City – much earlier than the rest of the country. Over time, the Department of Education funded training for youth club volunteers as the youth club system expanded. This facilitated a grant aid system to voluntary provision across Dublin City. Within the City of Dublin ETB, the Liaison Officer role emerged, to support volunteers, train youth club leaders, and support programming, much of which remains in place today.

Parallel with this, across the country throughout the 1960s and 70s, larger voluntary organisations including Catholic Youth Council, the National Federation of Youth Clubs and Foroige emerged, advocating for state support for youth work, whilst emphasising local participation. As funding programmes were introduced in the 1980s, these national youth work organisations became one of the conduits for funding and for delivery across the country, but not in Dublin City.

In Dublin City, funding tended to be allocated directly to local boards of management. Initially, as funding programmes developed (SPY: Special Project For Youth) 20 projects formed across Dublin City, each with its own management committee. The role City of Dublin ETB was to allocate departmental funding, monitor spend, and support delivery. In the late 1990s, Department of Education introduced standardised Youth Worker salary scales which were implemented in Dublin City by the ETB.

The 1980s also saw the introduction of local Drugs Task Forces including funding for preventative work with young people, resulting in a significant grant scheme, Young Peoples Facilities and Service Fund referred to as YPFSF, administered by City of Dublin ETB. An ETB Officer (Liaison Officer) sat on each of Dublin City's eight Task Force Groups.

Through the 1990s, with increased and more stable longer-term funding for the youth sector, new centres were built across the City with dedicated youth work teams attached. Buildings remained in the control of the local authority, but were sublet to the youth service. City of Dublin ETB's work expanded significantly. Many of the newer communities allocated funding had little or no local infrastructure. In these instances (12 locations) reflecting this lack of capacity, City of Dublin ETB directly delivered the service including the employment of youth workers in partnership with local communities. However, this was never to be a permanent arrangement, as the former Director explains:

> *"I would say openly … we'll do it in a fixed period. …. sometimes that fixed period took a lot longer than we envisaged … each of those projects that were set up under the management of the City of Dublin Youth Service, an advisory structure made-up of local community representatives was put in place from the very beginning. And it was the role of the area*

Liaison Officer for that project to work with and develop that advisory structure so that one day the hope was that they would then become the community-based management…. so they had to be sort of experts in what it took to build or to help with community. Then, as we progressed, you would augment the local community people with other people who maybe have an investment within the local community, maybe a business person, a lawyer, an accountant who could bring that wealth of knowledge to support that community structure."

"… the idea was to get it back out into community ownership, but sometimes it took a little bit longer than was actually anticipated, because that group had to be worked with and delivered, and they had to reach a certain point before we were happy for the sign-offs".

Liaison Officers were assigned to build the capacity of local Advisory Groups of community initiatives which were to eventually to become capable of establishing themselves as a company limited by guarantee and to manage the projects. ETB staff members observed of the Advisory Groups:

"They were really community led, people in the community coming together and saying, we need something here."

"… what you did have was a willingness and a want by the community to own the services and to support the young people."

Yet, some Groups were fearful of this process or content to retain their informal capacity. Many of these were:

"Very, very community driven people with a passion for their community and development of their areas, not just around young people."

It was, therefore, a very significant undertaking for City of Dublin ETB to support groups through this process – taking 20 years in total. Each group was assigned a Liaison Officer to help them to reach a required level of professionalism and competence before gradual handover to community ownership could commence. Yet this had to be achieved without alienating those with a passion for and longstanding credentials within communities:

"… the danger was, if you didn't get the balance right on that, what you were losing was that community ownership, that sense of all those in together for the benefit of the young people in their area, who would have then unfortunately maybe felt, well, I can't do that. Like, whereas what we were trying to do was … to look to see can we get a balance on that."

Throughout this time, Liaison Officers were also supporting groups that were formally constituted and employing staff and running projects directly.

Role of City of Dublin ETB in the transfer to community ownership.

City of Dublin ETB played a central, evolving role in delivery, oversight, and transfer to local ownership of community-based youth work services. Over a twenty year period, City of Dublin ETB oversaw the transfer of 12 community based youth work services to community ownership.

1. Employer and Overseer

In instances where community capacity needed to be developed, City of Dublin ETB directly delivered the service, was the employer and provided the administrative and funding oversight. It also ensured compliance with state requirements alongside preparing local Advisory Groups to form companies limited by guarantee, and so to take over full ownership of delivery, manage budgets and employ staff directly.

As transitions occurred, staff who had been employed by City of Dublin ETB did not transition into the newly-formed community organisations. Rather, they were often redeployed within the ETB.

> *"…our end goal always was that we would be building local infrastructure to be the deliverer… the commitment we made was we would move those as soon as was viable, but once staff were employed with us, they were our staff, and those staff would have to move as each project moved or be absorbed into the organization at some stage."* Former ETB Director

> *"From our perspective… those that transferred back into community ownership … the vast majority of them, when they went back, they went back as a package. They didn't go back with staff attached. What happened with the staff that were employed by the ETB or the VEC as it was, they were then slotted in to the other partnership projects that still existed."* ETB Staff member

One exception was a long-standing ETB Youth Worker who had worked in Stoneybatter (the final community project to transition in 2024) for 20 years. He is seconded into the community organisation that took over the running of this project (Bradóg Youth Service). This proved effective for continuity and establishing trust, and can be contrasted with other experiences:

> *"Some of the projects then that started off under community ownership, took a bit of time to get off the ground and to find and to integrate themselves fully, because we're starting pretty much from scratch. The fact that Billy moved made such a massive, massive difference. It made that integration so much easier, and it was allowed to hit the ground and just go straight on."* ETB Staff member

2. Building Governance Structures and Advisory Mechanisms

ETB's Liaison Officers supported Advisory Groups, composed mostly of members of the local community whose members' commitment to and passion for their communities laid the foundations for community ownership of the youth services. Liaison Officers helped to bridge the gap between the state's administrative demands and realities on the ground. They trained and supported local volunteers and Advisory Group members, bringing them to the point of being capable of, and willing to, take over full management of their services.

3. Balancing Compliance, Accountability, and Community Development

City of Dublin ETB instituted a framework of accountability, ensuring payments reflected newly-implemented salary scales and undertook monitoring, to ensure appropriate use of public funds. Over time, the emphasis of Liaison Officers shifted back and forth between supporting and

monitoring, reflecting: charity regulation requirements; changes in leadership and policy within Government; and economic pressures. The recession following the crash of 2008 was notable as a period of close monitoring.

Liaison Officers actively developed the skills and capacity of Advisory Groups. Through training, mentoring and supporting their development, they built and embedded the required skills within the local community. They also sought to nurture dynamic, community-led approaches, accommodating innovation and adaptation to local needs, negotiating often conflicting demands of top-down regulation and bottom-up innovation. City of Dublin ETB regarded itself as 'first responder'; wanting honest feedback about challenges and successes and open communication about failures and setbacks as well as encouragements.

4. Enabling Community Ownership:

Whilst ETB often began as the deliverer, its long-term goal was always to support the transition of each service, one by one, into community ownership – its premise being that it was not, and ought not to be, the deliverer. It encouraged local decision-making, seeking to foster genuine connections between youth services and local communities.

5. Evolving Funding and Contracting Models

City of Dublin ETB continues to administer central government funding. The commissioning department changed on several occasions over time. (It is now the Department of Education & Youth). Funding programmes too changed, the current primary scheme being UBU Your Place Your Space which has reportedly increased administrative and management burdens, and impacted on how community groups may bid for delivery.

Under UBU new providers are appointed under a Call For Service.

Commentary

The Republic of Ireland's Youth Work Act 2001 is the foundation for voluntary and community leadership of delivery. Within the Act, youth work is defined 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 education and training; and*
> - *Provided primarily by voluntary youth work organisations* [7]

Specific reference to voluntary youth work organisations as the primary provider confers legitimacy and a clear remit for the sector. The relevant government department (Education & Youth) is responsible for oversight and maintaining national standards through the Vocational Education Committees (VECs).

> *"The VECs will be required to ensure that the provision of youth work and youth services is co-ordinated with 'approved, designated and authorised' voluntary and local youth organisations by providing assistance including financial assistance to them. … The VECs will*

[7] https://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2001/act/42/section/3/enacted/en/html#sec3

also have a role in monitoring and assessing the youth programmes or youth work services and examine the effect and efficiency of youth work services and youth work programmes provided within its area."[8]

It is not simply that the Act allows for voluntary and community group leadership delivery, it:

- Actively structures youth work around such leadership.
- Recognises the legitimacy, relevance and importance of bottom-up delivery.
- Acknowledges the inherent strengths of community-led approaches in their responsiveness, cultural relevance, and long-term commitment to local areas and their capacity.
- Continues to recognise the value of the state's role in resourcing and ensuring accountability.
- Government policy from the 1980s onwards also recognised the need for community development, resulting in the formation of area partnerships, bringing together statutory and voluntary agencies to create and deliver local plans.

We see all of these principles play out in the transition of youth services from direct ETB delivery to local community ownership. In addition to the legislative framework, the following were key:

- Operational stability through stable funding models with clearly defined salary scales for staff, although there were also periods of cut backs and uncertainty.
- The skilful contribution of Liaison Officers to:
    - Effectively bridge the gap between state expectations and local (often chaotic) realities within community provision.
    - Clarify who was accountable at each and every stage of transition processes.
    - Bring local Advisory Groups members on a journey of developing their skills and capacity.
- City of Dubin ETB invited honesty from local providers about their failures and challenges, although this was not always easy to balance with their monitoring responsibilities.
- Many Advisory Groups members had passion and vision for their communities, and for community development in the widest sense, thus placing youth work within a broader community context. That youth work lives within the wider community ecosystem would prove to be key: it can draw other elements of community life together, and so make a deep and wide contribution to community development.

    "Youth work has the potential to be the glue around which families, schools and communities can unite and strengthen" ETB staff member
- A belief that outcomes will be stronger, for young people and for the wider community, when locally committed deliverers are in the lead.
- An understanding that long term, effective delivery partnerships require structural support: community organisations can only truly lead when the state facilitates this through adequate structures.

[8] https://www.youthworkireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Understanding_Youth_Work_Final_Draft.pdf

- A conviction that young people must be at the heart of decisions taken about their services: recognising that youth work is conducted *with* rather than *to* young people.

The model was not simply about having voluntary or community groups deliver programs – it was about getting local community members involved in running and managing youth services, resonating with a community development model in which communities are built from the inside out, purported by McKight and Kretzman and highlighted in the literature review.

BRADÓG YOUTH SERVICE, NORTH WEST INNER DUBLIN

Historical Overview

Bradóg Youth Service, formally constituted in 2005, was one of the first community-based projects to move from ETB to local ownership. Its roots go back to the forming of North West Inner City Network in 1997 by community activists with a vision to empower the community to shape its own future. Bradóg Youth Service emerged from its 1999-2004 local area Action Plan as *"a dedicated space for engaging young people, providing a safe platform for them to express practical challenges and needs through various projects and groups.."*[9] These roots remain central – its provision growing out of need clearly identified within the community:

> *"…I think it's really, really important that within Dublin that youth work isn't taken in isolation, that it's youth work and community development."* Bradóg staff member

In 2005, Bradóg employed five staff, based in a shared community centre in inner Dublin's North West Markets area. It expanded into neighbouring areas, building 'satellite' Dublin City Council youth centres from which staff worked. Because young people don't tend to travel far, bases in distinct localities were, and remain, important to Bradóg's delivery model. Bradóg moved into its current main building (central Dublin location) 12 years ago, shared with several other projects and costing €62K annually in rent. There were times when it struggled to afford the rent:

> *"We couldn't afford the rent and it needed a complete renovation. So we got public funding and everybody pulled together. We did get support from everywhere for that, City of Dublin ETB everyone across the board, family, friends, everyone came in and kind of got stuck in … there was kind of a rooted embedment in the community"*

Bradóg enjoys the benefits of a centrally located self-managed building for which they could (for example) determine opening times; a flexibility they did not have in other community venues.

> *"..we do get to self-manage … so that's a huge plus because we open the building until 11 o'clock at night if we want to. We open it on a Sunday. We open it over Christmas…".*

Around that time, Bradóg took over a pre-existing diversion service employing two staff members. In 2020, Department of Justice funding enabled the diversion project to expand: it now employs two Roma workers, four full-time justice workers, a family support worker and a project leader.

In 2024, City of Dublin ETB issued a Call for Service for provision in Stoneybatter (the final location to transition from ETB to community ownership). The Call For Service included an option for augmentation.

> *"So last year when the call for service went out, it was of really big interest to us because we actually liked the area. We'd already expanded into the area. The Justice Project had gotten bigger. We were working a lot more in the area. Made sense."* Project Leader

In 2015, the option of working with Stoneybatter had been raised, but at that time, Bradóg was not ready to do so. Yet, with the passage of ten years, Bradóg was ready to consider this:

> *"…given the chance now to work with each other, I now say, why were we thinking like that?"*

[9] https://bradog.com/history/

Outcomes of the Augmentation: Bradóg with Stoneybatter

Outcomes for Bradóg

A new base for Dublin 7: taking on Stoneybatter came with a Dublin City Council-owned building. Whilst Bradóg is still searching for other buildings further into Dublin 7, this building, within a block of flats in Stoneybatter, is serving a purpose and *"it allowed us to find our feet"*

Opportunity to access funding to redevelop detached youth work: a gap since its street workers had been lost during the years of austerity which was highlighted in a ETB review.

> *"So, on that Call for Service, part of our request was that we would have some of the funding go towards our detached team and then we contacted Justice. So we got dual funding to put a full detached team in place."* Bradóg staff member

Billy: the "biggest asset": an ETB Youth Worker employee, who had worked in Stoneybatter for 20 years, was seconded to Bradóg by the ETB. Staff spoke warmly of his pivotal role:

> *"…we wouldn't be the service we are now without Billy, and that's very truthful. He was happy to share his access to the community with us and give credibility. Billy had 20 years' of relationship with parents and young people. And the only consistent that was in it was Billy."* Bradóg staff member

> *"I think if we didn't have him, they would have been more standoffish."* Bradóg staff member

> *"Some of the projects that started off under community ownership, took a bit of time to get off the ground and to integrate themselves fully, because we're starting pretty much from scratch. The fact that Billy moved made such a massive difference. It made that integration so much easier, and it was allowed to hit the ground and just go straight on."* ETB Staff member

Further building credibility: the opportunity to expand its reach and deepen its practice, and in particular, to re-establish detached work, has helped maturation within Bradóg generally:

> *"… we also have the legacy now with Stoneybatter behind us, you know, which really complements us as well."* Bradóg leader

Outcomes for Stoneybatter community

Stoneybatter had lacked staff capacity and other resources, limiting their impact. The staff member who seconded reflects:

> *"I always say it's like I came from a corner shop into a supermarket."*

One year on from the augmentation , Bradóg has established a full five-day service in this community, local young people willingly engaging:

> *"… last year, when we really got something up there, like the need was so great from the kids, and still is. they were more than happy to open arms and say, Come on, give us a youth service here for the amount of kids. But I think the more workers and the more we have now to offer that we can sort out those little problems like younger children looking for provision we don't currently have."* Bradóg staff member

Stoneybatter and Bradóg both benefit from being part of something bigger and better resourced:

"I think it's suiting us all. … It will take a couple of years, I think, for, but …. I think the community was quite open to having us coming in."

Principles / Values Governing Bradóg's Delivery

The values upon which Bradóg is founded and the work undertaken are to:

- ***build a safe space***: built on trust, positive relationships and dependability, in collaboration with young people, and to nurture positive mental health and wellbeing.
- ***be inclusive***: with a service which is judgement free.
- ***empower***: nurture potential and encourage self-belief.
- ***foster lifelong learning*** and development.
- advocate for and support ***young people's positive participation in their community***, and active citizenship.

Bradóg commits to: liaise and network with other community groups and agencies; and to collaborate with and be accountable to young people, to help them shape the future of their communities.

Values reflected within the staff team

Most of the 12 strong-staff team have worked within Bradóg for five, ten and twenty years, evidencing:

- ***commitment*** to the organisation, the young people and the wider community
- ***consistency*** in building relationships and in delivery
- ***credibility and trust within the whole community:*** as staff see a third generation of children come through.

"So I lived in the area 50 years ago, so I now have people that, I'm a granny, they're a granny, and their grandchildren are coming in here …people that are parents now who we all worked with when they were just coming to us, and their children come in now." Bradóg Staff member

The team's ***sense of ownership*** stems from Bradóg's affiliation with the community. Some staff grew up locally, others have come from outside:

"I think the staff have that connection with the community, it's stronger than it was. … the public engagement is bigger and the issues for the community seem to be a lot more to the front. We seem to be on top of what's happening in the area …. The UBU team might feedback where all the drug dealings happen at the moment or where it's shifting. And I just think that, yeah, the community spirit is bigger in a project like this. I think it's because we acknowledge the impact all them things have on the children though."

"..trust is what we want to gain and you gain actually strong relationships… beyond youth workers and young people, with the whole community, with other kinds of community members."

"We're very lucky we've some people that are from the community that work in the service, they've either come through the service or they live in the community. And it's so important they know a lot of the local knowledge or the older young lads that are now in their 30s …. to the relationships with older people, with mammies whose children come into us now, with a nanny up the road, or the ones on the street, who can tell you different trends as well."

Schools

Bradóg reports earning the respect of and building ***strong relationships with schools*** – going into schools using a variety of creative media to explore issues including bullying, discrimination and sex education. The UBU scheme requires youth work projects/services to work 'out of school'

*"We have spent years building up relationships with the schools. So like I mean years and we actually have very, very good relationships with schools**.** Our schools will actually recognise the work and the kind of referral mechanism to a youth service for young people now, which is huge because 15, 20 years, they didn't."*

"So the acceptance was there for us to come into the schools, when they saw what we were doing… that it was youth work, it wasn't school work, but it was very developmental for the young people. And they could see the impact of it within the schools."

Given this restriction, the trust Bradóg has established is remarkable, and the staff expressed appetite for more:

"Like I would love to be in there at lunchtime in the yard or in a room somewhere, but it's not going to happen."

Wider community networks and standing within the community

Bradóg is an active member of ***a Children Youth Action Group network***. Such networks are not terribly common across Dublin City, but, with its community roots, becoming an active partner was nurtured within Bradóg from the start.

"… we're very unique in this community: the collaborative work that goes on between the child and family projects, the youth services, the school completions, the diversion for all the different community-based organisations. It's very, very tight."

"Our fist manager really promoted that community development piece… we're always at the forefront of it.."

Its community roots has also helped to deepen its youth diversion work, and it has seen shifts in perception over time regarding its work with the Garda:

"… at one point we used to be called rats and everything because we were working with the guards. And while we still work with the guards …. the perception of what we do has changed. So there's much more openness from the young people and the parents to say, well, actually, maybe we should make different choices."

There is a shared ***sense that the community is behind them***. This makes the team feel able to challenge young people, and members of the wider community, where necessary.

"The one thing about this community is .. they'll be quick to tell you if you're not doing a good job. … And we are well received in the community and we get lots of compliments. But we work in an environment that if you're not doing your job or your role, people will know, you

know, you'll be called out on it. And its people have no qualms in telling you if you're not doing an adequate job within the community."

"… I know that it'd be very easy to challenge somebody or to talk openly about someone's attitude to racism or, backgrounds or whereas maybe in the past, in the directly managed projects, people were just afraid to challenge each other a little bit more.

Staff felt that project run by the state would not have such freedom. These reflections were from a youth worker had worked in both contexts:

".. you get to the more significant conversations with young people here … I would often have gone away … over the last so many years and felt like I was underachieving or … not challenging certain things, whereas here, I just feel the culture is to be open about stuff."

"…you don't go home from here, like, and forget about the place, you don't, you don't. In a good way."

Relationships with parents are generally strong, and closest with the most 'in need' young people. When professional meetings being called, for example with mental health services, staff are in regular contact with parents. Whilst there are community days and parents' days at times, for the more mainstream programmes, more generally:

"…we meet and greet and be fairly warm to them. But they don't come in. It's a youth space. You know, the youth workers are the adults in here working with them."

Relationship with the Garda

Its relationship with the Garda has provided a foundation for youth diversion work whose team members reflect that the scale and depth of the project was made possible by Bradóg's community credentials and the trust established with the Garda:

".. I know for us on the diversion, without the longstanding relationships … we would not be as embedded in the community as we are now, but because we got to ride the coattails of Bradóg *and the reputation that it has for 20 years. So, without that, I don't think a diversion programme would be as successful as it is without the reputation of that."*

"…all the projects are saying like they can't get parents to sign early interventions for 8 to 10 year olds to say that the young people are involved in criminality or potential. We've a queue of people because of Bradóg's *legacy that we have. And they see it as* Bradóg. *They don't see it as a garda youth diversion, you know, and it doesn't happen in other projects."*

"… we have really good relationships with our guards. So we would have a juvenile liaison officer and we're quite unique that we fall across four Garda catchments."

"So we have to deal with four different guarded districts and for our young people to be referred in as well. … if we were just the project starting off, I don't think we'd be able to do that work as openly as we do, because I don't think we'd be as trusted."

NEW LODGE YOUTH CENTRE

Historic Overview

New Lodge Youth Centre is a voluntary youth centre in the Greater New Lodge area of North Belfast which moved from Belfast Education & Library Board to Ashton Community Trust community control in April 2012[10]. Since this transition, the Youth Centre has

> *"...worked hard to increase programme delivery and maximise the overall potential of the Centre by ensuring greater accessibility and usage by local young people. We provide a range of programmes for young people … that are designed to help them grow and develop."*[11]

Part of the wider work of Ashton Community Trust, the Youth Centre is in contact with 150+ young people each week through: drop in youth clubs; detached youth work; specialist provision including: disability; new comers and detached work with exceptionally marginalised young people (through EA's Engage Programme). There are structured opportunities for: volunteering; accredited training and leadership programmes; and trips abroad. The centre works with an increasing number of partners in Greater New Lodge and North Belfast and, more recently, has been delivering programmes in several local schools.

The centre's hinterland of Greater New Lodge is an area of high socio-economic deprivation ranked among the top 10 most deprived output areas in Northern Ireland, based on the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure[12]. The ranking considers factors including income, employment, health, and education. The 2023 Education Authority's Local Assessment of Need: North & East Belfast provides recent insight into young people's experiences locally including the critical contribution of youth centres:

> *"Nearly all wards in Ardoyne, Waterworks and New Lodge are in the top 20 indicators of Employment, this lack of employment attainment adversely affects the income and food available in a household. Young people cite concerns of domestic violence, interface riots, money issues and food problems. This affects them by not feeling safe and impacts their mental health. … However, young people welcome youth centres as safe spaces with community involvement, access to food, support, and education in life skills."*

The Centre has a staff team of 15. Its Youth Leader in Charge, Sean McMullan has been in place since 2022. His influential, visionary leadership was regarded by staff and stakeholders to be key to the centre's growth, depth of practice, and scale of activity in recent years.

With increased demand within the local community for expanded opening hours and greater breath of programme provision, it became apparent to all stakeholders that EA was no longer best placed to deliver youth work from New Lodge Youth Centre in a way that could meet community expectations. This resulted in the transfer of the responsibility for youth provision in the area from EA to Ashton Community Trust in 2012. There was an expectation that Ashton could generate a greater social, economic and democratic social value return

[10] The Education Authority (EA) was established in 2015 to take over the functions of Northern Ireland's five Education and Library Boards (including BELB).
[11] https://www.ashtoncentre.com/services/youth-development/new-lodge-youth-centre/
[12] Based on 2017 data (latest available multiple deprivation data)

Principles by which New Lodge Youth Centre works

The following key principles were identified by the staff during the consultations:

- Togetherness
- Inclusivity
- Partnership
- Educational
- Hope
- Commitment
- Passion

1. Strong sense of team

In consultations, staff emphasised the following factors as contributing to a strong sense of team.

Discipline of and recognition of the value of meeting regularly to reflect and share good practice:

> *"We take time to reflect on practice – and set goals twice yearly."*
>
> *"We have really good conversations at staff meetings…. there's much more time set aside for staff meeting and reflecting than anywhere else I've worked."*
>
> *"Everyone's opinion is taken on board, heard and valued. Everyone is valued and given a voice regardless of how long they've been here."*

This is particularly striking as the team regularly faces fatigue; working hard, over long hours in an area characterised by significant deprivation and need:

> *"We can feel so empty with compassion fatigue given the nature of the issues we have to deal with. To offload and debrief can be easily neglected in the sector, but it is why we do exactly that."*

The result is a staff team and organisational culture characterised by close relationships, high levels of motivation, freedom to offer and receive constructive criticism, to learn from and share the load with one another and sufficient structure to operate effectively.

> *"We know each other really well."*
>
> *"Everyone feels so motivated coming out of staff meetings."*
>
> *"We are used to and able to give each other constructive criticism – for example after one of us has facilitated a session."*
>
> *"Anyone can learn from someone else."*
>
> *"There is enough structure to know who to go to."*

2. Culture of deep commitment, pride and respect.

Staff spoke of a culture of deep commitment, pride and respect for one another and the young people. This has not been easy to achieve – staff shared the difficulties associated with turning around the culture that prevailed in the centre and amongst the young people in 2012. Now that much has been achieved:

> *"…it's down to the staff's hard work that it is maintained – a balance between professionalism and care in how we interact with the young people."*

"I can be proud – telling my friends and family of what we do and achieve."

"We want to see the club do well."

Staff observe young people respecting them and the centre, having found a place to belong – they see this manifest in the young people's conduct; behaviour and use of language.

"The buildings may not be that great, but the young people take such pride and speak highly of this place."

"We find young people even coming early, waiting to get into the centre – that was never the case before! And wanting to hang around and continue conversations after programmes end."

Team members' commitment was evident in the club's extensive summer programme: six weeks of activity, six days and nights each week, yet, "*So critical in an interface area*." A number of the older young people consulted, who volunteer with the club, also spoke of their significant contribution to the summer programme – helping day in and day out.

The *"shared passion for young people and specifically working in New Lodge Youth Centre"* was clear.

3. Drive to improve – knowledge, skills and role modelling – amongst the staff and young people

Staff spoke of the importance of opportunities to take on courses, up to and including the Youth Work degree at Ulster University and of a shared ambition to continue to learn:

"None of us [staff team] *is happy with the knowledge we have."*

"Accredited courses are available to us regularly, for outreach work and other things and many of the staff team have gone through the degree, many of them together."

Young people are increasingly progressing onto further and higher education with support from the staff. Four young people were being interviewed for Ulster University's Youth Work degree at the time of the consultations. With its Belfast site situated on New Lodge's doorstep, the staff are mindful of the importance of building connections:

"*Ulster (university) is so close, but yet so far. Yet, we've been able to build connections there and bring young people down and get involved."*

"How amazing is it that young people from here can move onto university!"

"Young people become more knowledgeable about Ulster University through meeting placement students coming through - it opens this up as an option and creates some ambition."

Most team members grew up in New Lodge or in similar communities – their ability to provide helpful role models, progressing onto Youth Work degrees was also felt to be important.

"We've learnt not to underestimate the power of role model, particularly if young people don't have that at home."

Alongside general training and learning, specialisms have been encouraged- staff working with disability projects, newcomer families, 'at-risk' young people. The unattached model for the most at-risk, rarely leaving home and taking drugs from an early age, has been effective, with gradual build-up of trust to address low confidence, self-esteem and anxiety – to the extent that some of

these young people have gone on trips to Manchester – so significant in the light of where they started.

Regarding the centre's work with young people with disabilities, the staff member leading on this work reflected:

> *"I've never been so connected with young people with disabilities. When you consider one in four have a disability, there is such a great need to work well with young people with a disability. Our partnership with 174 – bringing young people from the centre there and vice versa helps to build understanding, normalise disability and build natural opportunities for contact and connection."*

Though team members each have their specialisms*, "we can all chip in with drop ins etc."*

Structure of delivery

Figure 1 summarises the key elements observed with respect to how delivery was structured:

"Building a sense of progression across the provision has been a process, with ideas driven by the young people"

Community based, community facing:
Youth work truly embedded within a local community, in which ownership amongst young people, staff, parents and the wider community is strong.

Progression builds belonging:
Provision for children aged 5 through to clear, structured developmental opportunities for older young people.

Range of specialisms:
Outreach and engagement of: most marginalised, risky young people, new comers, disability, variety of courses and schools work.

Education is at the heart:
Equipping young people for the long term,
Helping them to stay in school

Partnerships are increasingly key:
For building more effective relationships with a broad range of young people and enabling other agencies to do the same.

Freedom from statutory targets or funding limitations:
Maximises freedom to use funding flexibly and adapt what they do without external restrictions placed on practice.

Impact on Young People

Whist recognising that change may not be immediate; often impacts are seen over the long term – "*a long process with bumps along the way*" – overall, staff observed the centre having a deep impact on young people in the following core ways:

Key Change	*Context / approach*	Common guiding principles
Ability to build routine	*Engage initially even in the chaos and gradually build routine*	• Importance of evaluation of activity • Ongoing informal conversations • Be attune recognising impact on mindsets • Importance of staff as stable figures of safety in often unstable lives • Building belonging / ownership
Educational engagement	*Supporting young people with a breadth of expectations in and through a wide range of skills and settings – done in the context of being one of the most significant educational underachievement in NI*	
Raising aspirations		

The key findings which emerged from consultations with young people and parents were:

1. They value the sense of belonging / ownership

The young people and parents validated the staff team's account of opportunities for young people to feel included, consulted and valued and thereby to feel pride in / ownership of the centre. Young people felt there was much evidence of pride in the place and what each achieves – whether that's getting onto the annual trip to Romania or Berlin, taking part in the youth club at 174 Trust, or volunteering with younger ones. The impact of engaging younger children, through the two clubs for 5 to 7 and 8 to 11 year olds was regarded as important for building belonging, shaping behavioural expectations early and creating anticipation (a taste of the centre gave younger ones something to do and something to aim for).

> *"Young people take ownership and make it their own - there are suggestion boxes, and a youth committee that meets, and chances for young people to put forward their ideas."*
>
> *"So many opportunities and activities and you get to speak your mind."*
>
> *"Everyone is valued."*
>
> *"Getting younger ones involved / valued / giving them a voice – for example, my brother did a DJing course and got an award for it."*

2. They build confidence, self-understanding and leadership skills

Belonging, engaging and encountering role models from their and similar communities all helps to encourage and challenge young people to achieve their best and were identified as key to building confidence, self-understanding and leadership skills.

Several parents reflected that children had had very low periods of depression, anxiety or self-doubt, resulting in withdrawing from most or all social interaction. Yet, each found belonging and life.

"I lost my daughter in her mid-teens for several years. I was demented and that impacted on everyone in our family. She hated school, but she wanted to come here -it became her safe place. She'd been in counselling and through lots of different services, but it wasn't until she came here and had conversations with Sean that she turned a corner. She lives, eats and breathes the club. She's progressed onto becoming a leader here."

"It has genuinely built my confidence."

"You can see how the club has built your confidence."

"There is one-to-one support that really helps me to release things I am concerned about and helped me to be myself."

Parents and young people also spoke of improved understanding of and being better able to articulate their self of sense, hopes and aspirations. Activities for girls, such as recording podcasts, partnered with Ulster University and Youth Action, were referenced as particularly significance: for girls to, together, explore and articulate issues faced.

"The podcasts with UU for girls really helped me to be able to understand how others see issues."

"Podcasts and girls programme helped me to see what I don't need to feel ashamed of."

Opportunities to build leadership capabilities was believed to be important, for example through the Young Ambassadors programmes:

"Young people are empowered to take the lead – that was missing here before. The young people used to be led (and were used to being led) but can now take the lead." Staff member

Confidence to speak up and articulate experiences of and observations about being part of the centre were evident to the Education Authority during a moderation meeting when its representatives met some of the young people.

"EA noted at a recent moderation meeting the degree to which, even younger children, so able to articulate the impact of the centre. We got great feedback from EA." Centre Leader

Young people meet and engage other visitors including from NICCY, MLAs, and the DfC Minister. 60-70 have been involved in *"selling the centre and their sense of pride in it."* Centre Leader

3. The value opportunities to progress into volunteering

The older young people and their parents valued opportunities to progress into volunteering; choosing to help out regularly – to give something back. This meant a lot, strengthening their sense of ownership and community and a chance to take responsibility.

"Most of us older ones volunteer at the club with the younger ones – come after school – it gets you out even when you don't feel like it – something to look forward to."

"Us younger volunteers put a massive amount into the summer programme – sometimes we're here from 10 to 7, but it's so good to see the young people enjoy it."

4. They grow in aspiration and motivation: to stay in school and to build skills for life

One team member reflected that, in all of their activities and intent, "*Education is at the heart of all we do."* This was reinforced, by young people and parents' observations:

"I feel I really was helped a lot – the club played a big part in where I am now [Classroom Assistant for children with special needs]. *When I was 16 I was really worried about my future – don't know where I would be without the group. You can go to them when you're struggling with school – though they do push you. They don't just say it's okay not to get what you need. They are pushing me to get what I need."*

"It's made a difference to my younger sister - she couldn't control her emotions – now she sees and talks to volunteers – she's doing so much better in school and doing her homework."

"It's helped me a lot to help me know what path to go down – for GCSEs and for A Levels."

Several parents reflected how Sean and other staff helped children to (re)engage with education:

"My daughter left school at age 14, but she got her English and Maths through the club. She's now in paid work at 174 Trust."

"Sean pushed her and had faith in her – she went off the rails for a couple of years. But now, she'd rather be here volunteering than clubbing on a Saturday night – she loves it. I'm now trying to encourage my introverted 15 year old to come."

5. They reflect the value of the centre to the wider family and the whole community

The young people and the parents are very aware of the impact on a wider community in which there is much deprivation and associated social needs.

"Club does so much for people at Christmas in particular – Sean will never see anyone struggle."

".. giving practical help like the food hampers and toys at Christmas."

"Any issue people have, they can go to talk to Sean to help get the best outcome."

"When my mum was sick, he [Sean] *was always asking if I was okay."*

Impact on the wider community

1. General observations

The centre is part of the Ashton Community Trust whose work has considerable community reach across New Lodge and wider into North Belfast. This has helped it to build its community presence, and its breath of reach. For example, the Centre Leader reflected:

"Ashton use the buildings for other community things during the week, bringing others into the building and increasing our connections."

"I have seen the staff team work to create this centre to be a hub – we have taken ownership to mean being able to support people more generally in the community."

This strengthens the sense of its being a community 'hub', for dropping in, calling on for help (even, for example, borrowing flasks for funerals) and co-ordinating a Christmas toy appeal for families:

"We're like a wee hub in the community …. local people feel able to come to us."

Staff reflected on a wide (and growing) range of partnerships and of the regard with which the centre is held. Of particular significance was the ***credibility built with statutory agencies - Social Services. Police, elected representatives and Youth Justice Agency***. This results in joint conversations about young people to pool understanding and in statutory agencies using the centre to meet young people which improves their contact.

> *"We know we are just one part of a wider process."*
>
> *"There's always somebody or organisation to connect with."*
>
> "We earned the respect of other agencies. . I'd *get three or four calls every week from others about some of our most risky young people."*
>
> *"We are regarded as as important as statutory agencies – that didn't used to be the case. They are coming to us to engage about the young people, making asks for us to help to facilitate contact with them and other youth services. As money gets tighter this becomes a crucial way of working."*
>
> *"Pride in what we deliver trickles out to the young people, into the community and to North Belfast in general."*

The range of partners, within New Lodge, but also across North Belfast, include:

- 174 Trust
- Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI)
- Harberton (North) Special School
- Blessed Trinity Secondary School
- Glenveagh School
- Mountcollyer Youth Club
- Holy Family Youth Centre
- Ardoyne Youth Club
- Ardoyne Youth Enterprises
- Walkway Community Centre
- St. Patricks Primary School
- North Belfast Area Project

The centre's influence in one local school was noted when teachers adopted a question centre staff had used in a group session with pupils: a small piece of evidence that methodologies within non-formal youth work are being held in regard by school leadership and taken on board.

A joint initiative, a mixed ability youth club, between Trinity School and Harberton (North) Special School was born from realising the extent of social isolation Harberton pupils experienced. It has become a 'stand out' programme – with notable feedback from Education & Training Inspectorate inspectors.

2. Observations of local partner organisation: Community Restorative Justice Ireland (CRJI)

CRJI is community restorative justice group, offering accredited restorative justice practices and programmes to empower individuals to resolve issues that affect their quality of life. It offers mediation services, advice, interventions, and other supports.

The Youth Centre and CRJI work closely, both attending Safer Streets meetings with statutory, voluntary and community partners. Several examples were offered of CRJI, the Youth Centre and others pooling knowledge of and access to families, individuals and groups of young people with particularly challenging circumstances / behaviours. This enables each agency to make more significant progress that they could do working alone.

Since the joint working, and the introduction of their joint Young Ambassador programme, PSNI and local people have noted a *"noticeable drop in anti-social behaviour – the past year being the quietist*

on record including on the interface." Various programmes have formed within New Lodge Youth Centre and a number of agencies will begin work in the area meeting with groups (including parents) there to understand and then address issues, such as the appearance of racist graffiti.

CRJI's worker in New Lodge finds it *"very impressive and inspiring to come here* [the youth centre]" – indeed:

> *"New Lodge Youth Centre is totally invaluable to me. The relationships they have with the kids – it teaches me how to build relationships – I come in here and the young people here get to know me."*
>
> *"To me, this centre would be my baseline to know the mood of the kids. I come here for advice regularly."*

There are plans to expand the collaborative approach to other areas of North Belfast.

3. Observations of local partner organisation: 174 Trust

174 Trust is a charity providing a local Christian witness without denominational bias or sectarian prejudice on the Antrim Road, close to the New Lodge Road. It has been running a disability youth club since 2000 for children from North Belfast who have a physical or learning disability. 11-18 year olds years meet weekly, with a separate, junior club for 5-11 year olds. The Project serves as a wonderful social outlet, where children can play, learn, and create. With the assistance of outside organisations, the older group extends this social outlet by developing important life skills to foster greater independence.

Sean approached the Trust to ask if some of his young people could volunteer with 174's Disability Project in 2015. The leader of the project (Linda) reflected:

> *"I thought the young people here were too rough and I didn't know how my children would react to them. Would they be frightened by their disabilities, or be sniggering? I gave it two weeks – and that was ten years ago! "It turned out to be the best partnership project we've ever done."*

The New Lodge young people are often the only able-bodied peers disability project members engage with. They are their friends – they come to chat and spend time.

> *"There's something about having someone of the same age choosing to spend time together."*

New Lodge staff members also reflected on the value and uniqueness of the project:

> *"…bringing young people from the centre there and vice versa helps to build understanding, normalise disability and build natural opportunities for contact and connection."*

The leader reflected that her son (who died in 2024) and who had Downs Syndrome *"fitted in just so well at New Lodge – he was just to accepted here on his grounds."* A large photo mural of his time with friends at New Lodge is in the centre's entrance.

Qualities observed of New Lodge Youth Centre and its leadership

- Vision of leader: particularly to ask *how can we get involved, break down barriers?*
- Openness of staff and volunteers to come and try
- Commitment to our young people and theirs

- Structured approach to enabling young people to plan and lead

Impact on the young people and wider community

- Opportunities to meet together, to break down fears or misconceptions, for young people from New Lodge Youth Centre and from 174
- Opportunity for New Lodge youth people to develop planning and leadership skills, as they plan and lead joint sessions and host 174 young people at their centre
- Platform for dealing with discriminatory language / behaviours

Concluding Remarks

Emerging from the consultations is a clear picture of a youth provider which:

- Has a visionary leader who asks questions others don't think to ask: How can we get involved? Where is the opportunity here for our young people?
- Prioritises building a compelling organisational culture based on shared values of the staff and community.
- Is committed to building a supportive team characterised by reflective practice driving excellence.
- Has a very strong sense of its place at the heart of its community.
- Is moved to respond to the needs of young people and the wider community.
- Believes that supporting young people's educational attainment is central to its purpose.
- Engages the most marginalised and challenging young people.
- Builds progression routes to push young people on and create, for them, a compelling community of belonging.
- Leads and benefits from partnerships, particularly helping statutory agencies to reach in.
- Is pushing further into work based in schools to complement centre delivery.

STREETBEAT YOUTH PROJECT

Overview

Streetbeat Youth Project was founded in 1992 to help young people in Belfast's Greater Shankill area, and beyond, to fulfil their potential by creating safe places for young people to learn, grow and be challenged in their values and behaviour. *"Working mainly with 11 to 25 year olds. Streetbeat strives to create spaces for all young people to realise their potential and then works hard to provide everyone with opportunities for this potential to develop and flourish."*[13]

Streetbeat is in contact with over 1,800 young people annually through: drop in services; counselling; tailored adventure programmes; volunteering; training; developmental groupwork and mentoring. Activity takes place in partner schools and at Streetbeat's Woodvale Road premises. Its hinterland is the Greater Shankill – an area of high deprivation. Woodvale Ward was ranked among the top 10 most deprived areas in Northern Ireland, based on the NI Multiple Deprivation Measure[14]. This ranking considers factors including income, employment, health, and education. The 2023 Education Authority's Local Assessment of Need: North & East Belfast provides insight into young people's experiences of the area, and the critical contribution of youth centres such as Streetbeat:

> *"Living in safety and stability is also a significant issue featuring in low income, unemployment indicators alongside high levels of crime, this is particularly true of Shankill and Woodvale wards. Young people cite concerns of domestic violence, interface riots, gangs/paramilitaries and not feeling safe. This affects them by not wanting to leave their own area or getting involved in local activities. Significant flashpoint areas are Lanark Way and the Springvale Innovation Factory site behind Woodvale Park. However, young people welcome youth centres as safe spaces, cross community groups and programmes to encourage local community involvement. Learning & Achieving remains a priority … in Shankill and Woodvale Wards. Young people are concerned about school stress/anxiety, lack of educational supports at home and in school, resulting in low confidence. Young people would like a range of learning supports, informal/vocational opportunities."*

The organisation delivers group work and mentoring in 10 schools – in North Belfast, but increasingly, in other parts of the City. This speaks of an organisation which is confident in the impact of its approach with ambition to share this City-wide.

Streetbeat has a staff team of 23.

Principles by which Streetbeat Youth Project works

Streetbeat's published organisational values are:

- Ensuring consistency
- Championing integrity
- Building change through collaboration
- Valuing learning
- Being professional

[13] Streetbeat Youth Project Strategic Plan, 2023-2026
[14] Based on 2017 data (latest available multiple deprivation data)

Whilst these values were observed, the headings adopted below encapsulate the themes which emerged through consultations with staff, volunteers and other stakeholders.

1. Leadership

Trust in the capability and vision of Streetbeat's CEO was a dominant theme in the staff consultations including references to his strong values, regarded as key to building a compelling organisational culture with a strong values base.

> *"Steve always does the right things the right way. Never cuts corners compared with many other organisations – his values and principles run through all of us."*
>
> *"He [Steve] never allows Streetbeat to be tainted by outside influences – he protects the reputation of this organisation. Yet, he's flying under the radar.*
>
> *"You trust him as he knows what he's doing."*
>
> *"He is consistently fair, on the same level and wants what's best for the staff."*

2. Organisational Culture and Practice

This leadership fosters a ***deep sense of pride in and loyalty to the organisation*** amongst staff; expressed in care and concern for the organisation itself as well as its young people:

> *"We feel ownership of Streetbeat. We genuinely want to see it do well and the young people to benefit and have a good experience. We feel ownership – for ourselves and the young people coming in."*
>
> *"I have been able to be part of building a unique way of operating."*

Developing the staff team:

Mindful of the dangers of building an organisation solely around the leader, a management team and leadership team have been formed – their members being invested in to build insights and skills to share in operational and strategic leadership. This was noted by one staff member:

> *"There's been a shift in emphasis in recent years – building capacity and capability of management team to take on more responsibility and 'see in' to how the funding works etc"*

Commitment to professional development was apparent, in particular staff members being supported through degrees in Youth Work at Ulster University, which strengthened comradery:

> *"Support from the rest of the staff is so real – how we work and engage with each other. We've grown and learnt together, doing the degree together and learning on the job."*
>
> *"There is deep loyalty to Steve and to Streetbeat – it put us through our degrees. I wouldn't have done that otherwise. All that has been put into me."*

Growing the staff team:

Streetbeat does not uphold the view 'you've got to be from this community to understand it'. 14 of its 23 strong staff team grew up locally, many having journeyed through the organisation from the age of 11, moving into volunteering and eventually into paid employment. The remainder are from diverse backgrounds, in and beyond Belfast. Whilst local staff reinforce local connections and credibility, others add fresh, distinct voices and different forms of challenge. This intentional blend of the 'best of both' from inside and outside Greater Shankill helps to ensure the organisation:

(i) benefits from the best candidate for every role by recruiting from the widest possible pool;

(ii) robustly tests the vocation and suitability of local young people moving into youth work;

(iii) guards against introspection and fear of the 'outside' by welcoming outside influences; yet

(iv) nurtures local talent.

"He [Steve] is catching the best as they come through, both those who live and breathe this community and those brought in from the outside. The two together is a strength."

"The variety of workers is a real strength – we each have our own niche contributions, some from the area to make links and others who can bring a newer world in."

The approach to developing and growing the staff team results in a strong mix of strengths, expertise and backgrounds.

Organisational 'ownership'

One staff member defined ownership of youth provision as:

"The capability to deliver when you need it in a way that's needed."

There was a strong sense of ownership across the staff, reflected in their motivation to do a good job, and in negating the need for onerous organisational processes:

"It's our reputation on the line. It keeps everyone working to a high standard."

"… we all take our jobs seriously, and want what's best for the young people. Otherwise, we may need all of the processes. But we don't. Everyone has a passion for Streetbeat and for the young people. It's values driven."

The convergence of one team member's professional drive and his commitment to Streetbeat's was expressed in his desire to leave a legacy within the organisation:

"I have found a home to flourish in, and that's what Streetbeat allows. I, as a staff member, am keen to leave a legacy, with others being trained."

"Young people feel this is their space. We are heavily involved in their lives – connection with school and youth club helps to build that."

One staff member illustrated the value of being free to respond quickly to events during a period of local rioting last summer:

"There and then, we can take a group away, get them out of the area. Not as tied by processes and need for planning as statutory providers. That's really important in our community. We don't have to stick with the plan – when something happens that flips it in the weeks that follow …. planning weeks in advance can be unrealistic."

"Streetbeat is unique, even in the community sector. With the number of programmes, the flexibility we have to make decisions quickly and the team input."

Structure of delivery

Figure 2 summarises the key elements observed with respect to how delivery was structured:

Impact on young people

The key findings which emerged from the conversations with young people were that:

1. ***They appreciate and benefit from the breadth of connections Streetbeat facilitates***

This was helped by often initiating relationships in schools, to be reinforced at the club and vice versa. Whilst the young people consulted where engaged in club activities, they were also able to reflect on the value of Streetbeat's input in their schools:

> *"They* [Streetbeat staff] *helped me to organise an event at my school* [Boys' Model] *that was designed to support each form class to deal with issues – mental health, boys not talking about stuff, challenging harassment of women."*

> *"I like the way Streetbeat facilitate events. There are other groups that put on events at our school, and they are good too, but Streetbeat is more interactive – they have a particular way of getting you involved."*

> *"I organised a stall at my school for International Women's Day and* [staff member] *helped me and others to get it organised."*

This is also evident in the diversity of the backgrounds of young people Streetbeat is reaching and enabling to mix. Young people attend the club from across Belfast – not just the local Greater Shankill area. This benefits local young people and those coming from other areas – mixing with those they may otherwise not meet, and so broaden their horizons and experiences.

> *"I'm from West Belfast – we have Yee Ha in our area, but Streetbeat had an event with the two organisations together at my school, to talk about issues and you could give your opinions. That event was really good and got me coming to Streetbeat."*

One young person spoke about the need for more support for neurodiverse young people. Having autism, he reflected that many people and organisations struggle to listen to neurodiverse people, but he had "*found a home at Streetbeat to socialise*."

> *"Streetbeat works with every special needs GCSE class at the Boys' Model."*

Streetbeat's Peer Mentoring programme, delivered to secondary school senior year groups, has proved effective in engaging young people from diverse backgrounds – from 'middle class' grammar schools through to secondary schools in socio economically deprived parts of Belfast. Offering enrichment programmes to grammar schools helps to ensure that young people who are less likely to live close to youth clubs (EA or otherwise) benefit. One young person from a grammar school in East Belfast reflected on her experience of Streetbeat's Peer Mentoring Programme:

> *"I've been taking part in Streetbeat's Peer Mentoring programme at my school this year. We meet once a week and the Streebeat staff are so lovely, and good at helping us to think about and discover our skills. They give us the opportunity to talk about all sorts of issues and I've got to know and understand people in my year I wouldn't normally be with. This year has been so good, and we've all really enjoyed it – and hopefully it has prepared us for the next step, which is mentoring a younger pupil next year. I'm looking forward to putting everything I've learnt and thought about into practice then."*

2. ***They grew in confidence and self-belief***

It is evident that staff members understand the power and significance of a personal invitation to a young person – to come and find belonging. Most of young people consulted had first encountered

Streetbeat at school. Once relationships had been formed, and the staff knew the young people, they were invited to one of the groups, drop ins or other activities at the club. This means it has a pipeline of opportunities to draw young people in, to: expand young people's experiences and opportunities to connect; and to ensure that the club benefits from a continual stream of new young people from across Belfast, not just from Greater Shankill. This intention is particularly powerful for young people who were more socially isolated. And this could not be achieved without its credible presence in schools. This initial invitation was often the starting place for nurturing a connection to Streetbeat and other young people:

> *"When I first came to Streetbeat 8 or 9 years ago, I could barely speak to anyone. The leaders and meeting new friends helped me to speak up and to be normal."*

> *"I kept myself to myself all the time until someone brought me here – I met the leaders and new people. It opened up volunteering, peer mentoring and anti-bullying, wellbeing bus and now I'm working in a nursery one-to-one."*

> *"Some of us had a lot of self-doubt. And discovered that when you're here, it really opens up your head. It's definitely a confidence booster, and helping you to want to go further."*

Young people also observed that staff actually enjoy spending time with them:

> "[Staff member] *really gets to know you so well and you can just tell that he enjoys it too – it's not just something he has to do. It's really nice that he enjoys it too, and makes us feel better – you know that he doesn't hate us or anything. It's so reassuring that he doesn't think we're weird or anything. But then, half the leaders are as weird as us!"*

> *"All the leaders want us to have a good time in our groups."*

> *"And in the summer groups, we get to play games and the leaders join in…..leaders didn't join in so much in other clubs that I've been to. Here you can just tell that the leaders are really enjoying it."*

> *"You know the leaders are really enjoying it."*

Taking opportunities to shape activities and engage with others was also key in building confidence:

> *"Our group was originally trying to find a purpose – like the leadership or youth work OCN. But we decided we preferred a more relaxed group, and so we started to look at issues in our community and things like how celebrities affect us."*

> *"Our group has lots of big conversations and debate.*

Streetbeat's adventure programme was highlighted as a particularly impactful programme, for building confidence and self-belief:

> "[Staff member] *takes you out bouldering, and mountain climbing and things. That's what got me into sport. Having that here at Streetbeat is a really good thing for development. It's a better way to build connections with us, through sport, if groups and drop ins aren't particularly your thing. Doing that together means you can just focus on the moment."*

Young people appreciated opportunities to 'give back' - at school, in the club and in the community - and some of the older young people have volunteered regularly or at one off events:

"We took positive affirmation quotes and things and sweets and gave them out to people in Woodvale Park. One old woman was just looking at the quote for ages, and you really made that women's day – gave a woman strength to go on."

"Most of us also do peer mentoring at school with Streetbeat, or did before we left school."

"We're the oldest age group group and we're expected to play a role – being looked up to because we're the eldest. We're always being asked to volunteer at the drop ins and things. When we're doing an OCN, we can help out."

3. They grew in aspiration and motivation: to stay in school and to build skills for life

Young people know that Streetbeat is concerned about their education, recognising that leaders wanted to see them engage with education and achieve as much as possible.

"A leader told me about the course she was doing. She encouraged me to keep with my A Levels and keeps pushing me even now. Now, I've been invited back to my old school to talk to Lower 6th and Year 8s about what I'm doing at Belfast Met – the Year 8s are all asking me what it's like. I'm getting the chance to be a role model now!"

"They do encourage you to stay at school, but also talk to you about different options – they have a lot of influence. They really help you and care more about helping you than making themselves look good."

In this young person's view, her school was more concerned about how her decision reflected on the school – contrasting this with her belief that Streetbeat staff cared more about helping her to make the right decision for her.

"I think Streetbeat definitely does help young people for the long term. There are lots of OCNs offered – skills like team work, volunteering, youth work, peer mentoring, community action, mental health."

"…and they do really help people to stay in school – they show a different way of what success can look like."

"In this group, we look at the salaries you can get for doing different jobs, and house prices and show you what you can get if you work hard for it. Show us what aspirations can get us."

Impact on the wider community.

1. General observations

Staff spoke of a deepening and strengthening of the organisation's brand and reputation over time, particularly through its growing work in schools. It is embedded within two training organisations and a growing number of schools:

- Impact Training
- Pathways Programme (Extern)
- Boys' and Girls' Models Secondary Schools (key partner schools serving locality in N Belfast)
- Belfast Royal Academy, North Belfast
- Hazelwood Integrated College, North Belfast
- Victoria College, South Belfast
- Grosvenor Grammar School, East Belfast
- Lagan Integrated College, East Belfast
- Ashfield Boys' Secondary School, East Belfast
- Ashfield Girls' Secondary School, East Belfast

Its partnership work has accelerated in recent years, as several staff members observed:

> *"More and more groups look to us to lead in consortium funding bids, and collaborative work."*
>
> *"Other organisations want us around the table – they see we get things done with and for the community and that we are large enough to be an attractive funding partner. EA may even come to us to propose things we can do together."* Staff member

Some particular examples included:

- One young people's group host a Christmas meal for older people each year locally – since last year, one lady has brought buns to the centre each week, evidencing the enduring connection this formed. One of the young people volunteered to do the write up of the event, which appears each year in the local Shankill Mirror.
- A fundraiser for a local defibrillator
- Programme for young mums
- An annual awards night which *"parents love"*

> *"Streetbeat is embedded in this community – through development of the local staff, contact with parents and families, volunteering, park events, schools work, young mums' work – it all permeates out into the community."*

2. Observations of working with Streetbeat: Local partner school, Boys' Model

The Boys' Model School is a large boys' secondary school in North Belfast – it draws heavily from the Greater Shankill area. The school has a deep commitment to partnering with external agencies, the Principal recognising the "*very valuable role that community and youth services can play in helping to work with young people to address barriers, to help ensure they are better placed to engage better with and at school."*

This belief was the starting point for an openness to "*bringing as much opportunity to engage together* [with Streetbeat] *into the school as possible …the more positive the boys become towards education, school attendance, the better that is for everyone.*"

She, and Streetbeat are clear about the ***purpose behind working together***:

> Yes, "*Activities are cool and fun – what young person wouldn't want to be involved?*" Yet:
>
> *"It's not just for the fun of it, we are about raising attainment, and to achieve that, we need the boys at school. Streetbeat can help with this."*

Streetbeat first worked in the school in 2014, offering counselling. Its presence and contribution has grown significantly; now "*Streetbeat are here every day, supporting young people in a variety of ways including those most at risk of dropping out. I feel it's a real wraparound approach.*"

Their Youth Workers tend to work with marginalised pupils – poor attenders, often socially isolated boys, meeting with them and filtering them into small groups. Part of the approach is to gradually support them into activities at Streetbeat, and so to take the contact beyond school.

They are also, at times, involved in mediation between pupils and teachers; a helpful, neutral third party to help work through difficulties.

What the school (and particularly the Principal) have had to do to facilitate the partnership

- Be prepared to allow space in the school day for pupils to be with Streetbeat staff and recognise the value of this non-formal input
- Have regard for the interplay between the formal, taught and non-formal, 'hidden' curriculum, placing weight on that hidden curriculum with informal interactions which emphasise the modelling of relationships and values – to ensure that, amongst other things, pupils are and feel valued.

Key principles identified for working well together

- Mutual understanding of the overall intention: to get pupils into school and raise attainment
- To recognise and celebrate other benefits that flow from the non-formal approach
- Willingness of both parties to be solutions focused, valuing a range of perspectives
- To build protective factors and retain school's discipline standards at all times
- To allow space for the cool and the fun

Qualities the school observes in Streetbeat

- Responsive and agile
- Informal approach, but not casual
- Rooted in community
- Capable, with strong leadership
- Properly understand their intention: connecting youth work to raising academic attainment, as well as focus on self-esteem, pupil voice, building confidence etc.
- Understand need for positive messaging about school in school

"With Streetbeat it's not casual – not a doss house for boys to sit with their feet up."

Impact on school and pupils

The Principal's observations about Streetbeat's impact of on pupils come with a conviction, based on evidence build over 10 years, about the positive impact of community and youth services on young people, particularly boys.

Observations of impact go beyond the anecdotal; the school has been gathering attendance and GCSE attainment data on boys who have / are engaging with Streetbeat over recent years, finding:

Current Year Group	***No currently engaging with SB***	***% of engagers receiving FSM***	***% of these pupils with improved attendance***	***GCSE attainment of leavers overall (108)***
8	15	73%	53%	% predicted 5A*-C – 28.7% % achieved 5A*-C – 72.2% % achieved 5A*-C incl English & Maths – 31.4%
9	37	54%	65%	
10	43	58%	42%	
11	47	72%	51%	
12	49	67%	69%	
13	25	76%	80%	
14	28	28%	88%	

"Even boys who are unlikely to get English / Maths and other GCSEs – we still need them to be in school as much as possible to help ensure that they get whatever they can, and qualifications in addition to GCSEs to open doors for them."

Not all change, such as a sense of pride that comes from the achievements made through interacting with Streetbeat, is as easily 'measured'. However, the overall impact of Streetbeat on pupils was summed up in the word 'Enormous'.

One final remark from the Principal:

> *"Leaving community organisations beyond the school gate would leave the young people hugely disadvantaged. We've got to pull resources in – especially in an area of socio economic disadvantage. We're a controlled school, so we can't do much about our own spending – we've got to tap into more agile resources that are out there*."

3. Observations of local partner training organisation: Impact Training

Impact Training NI is a training organisation, offering vocational qualifications, apprenticeships and essential skills with a broad base of options for students. On the Shankill Road, it draws students from the Greater Shankill area, and further afield, with around 300 students attending. Situated close to Streetbeat, the two organisations have worked increasingly together over the past 8-9 years. Impact employed its first Youth Worker in 2016. Observing the benefits of a youth work-led enrichment approach to complement its training, the organisation now employs a team of four Youth Workers.

> *"Streetbeat is one of three of our strongest partners – it may well be the strongest! …. having started out with it delivering 1-2 hours content per week, this has grown to Streetbeat giving us a worker one day per week all year."*

At no cost to them, Impact Training benefits from one day per week of Streetbeat's adventure programme leader (Marty). Each September, he works for 6-8 weeks with students on its Youth

Work course before moving on to a class of Impact's choosing – one of the 'hardest', perhaps with a large number of withdrawn students and/or those whose behaviour is most challenging.

> *"We don't have to think about anything for that day Marty takes the class – anything we need, we ask Marty for."*
>
> *"Marty is one of the only people I know you can send any group to with complete confidence."*

Streetbeat also provides placements for Impact's Youth Work course students and inputs into the course through the adventure programme, mentoring and cultural training.

> *"There is a big focus for us on getting kids out into placements in the community, and Streetbeat helps with that."*
>
> *"Streetbeat understands the level required of young people on placement and takes on their personal and professional development – not thinking what can this student add to our work, but how can we develop this young person? It is so fresh for a placement provider to think in those ways."*

Key principles identified for working well together

- High level of trust with positive, strong relationships between the staff across the organisations.
- Complementary values, with each organisation placing emphasis on building a strong values-based organisational culture.
- A mutually good understanding of the community and what is needed, as well as the vision and ability to draw young people from beyond Greater Shankill

Qualities and practices the school observes in Streetbeat

- Organisational culture: *"They have a great culture round there."*
- Staff mix and capability: *"A lot of people very well placed, and diverse."*
- Their ability to get young people to do things they'd have never dreamed of doing.
- Emphasis on conversation: *"They don't have a sports hall, so have a lot of conversation going on – the young people grow up really quickly."*
- Strong involvement in partnerships locally *"They play their part in wider Shankill … very active in forums and the Greater Shankill Partnership."*

> *"Steve has built that place up - he is careful about the staff he takes on and his attitude and behaviour, inside and outside, is tight and that reflects on the young people. A lot of the staff would be Christian, with respect, openness, caring and honesty."*
>
> *"The numbers* [staff and young people] *speak for themselves – how the team has grown because of demands and so many people want to be involved in Streetbeat. It's busting at the seams – for its mentoring programme, it is one in, one out."*

Impact on the students and community beyond

Impact observe Streetbeat's key contribution as being to help young people mature and form into responsible adults who, in turn, are capable of contributing to the community including having the

skills local employers look for. And they see that firsthand – as students enrol on Impact's Youth Work course, their staff observe:

> *"You can tell within 5 minutes the young people who have been through Streetbeat – they are confident, mature, personable, willing to talk, proud Streetbeaters with strong belonging."*

> *"More than half of our students would know Marty."*

> *"It's really helping young people to become better all round people."*

Streetbeat and Impact Training hold one another in high regard. Their cultures and values simply 'fit', creating an optimum environment for the partnership to flourish and young people to benefit.

> *"We're massive fans of Streetbeat …. speaking to you, it's hit home how much they do for us and they offer us."*

Concluding Remarks

Emerging from the consultations and associated reflections is a clear picture of a youth provider which:

- Prioritises building a compelling organisational culture based on shared values
- Has built a deeply committed community of practice in which staff thrive and strive for personal and professional excellence
- Prioritises building a staff team whose members share the values and vision, and bring diverse skills and backgrounds
- Embodies a deep desire to be with and for young people
- Knows and understands the power of a personal invitation to a young person, to build deeper connection
- Has a deep conviction about its ultimate purpose; building educational outcomes for young people
- Is leading the way in partnerships
- Is serving young people and partners to significant effect
- Is confident in its vision and ambitious to share this across Belfast

Appendix 1: Interview / Focus Group Questions

Questions used to guide semi-structured interviews and focus groups with New Lodge Youth Centre, Streetbeat and Bradóg Youth Service Directors and staff teams:

Staff team experiences and observations

- Observations and experiences of being part of this team including the role of leadership and the team's strengths & weaknesses
- Anything you observe that makes the team unique

Values

- Any principles / values by which you work: (i) within the team; (ii) with respect to your delivery?
- How do you observe these working out in practice?

Sense of ownership of youth services

- What might 'local ownership' of youth services mean to you, young people and the community?
- What do you do / have you done (if anything) to nurture this?

Delivery

- How would you describe your provision for young people?
- What are your main priorities and how are these reflected in your programmes?
- What are your reflections about the place of statutory, voluntary and community provision, in this area and more generally? Are there any advantages for a voluntary youth provider to work alongside statutory services?

Your impact on young people locally

- What do you understand about the impact you are having on young people?

Connection to place and wider community impact

- What (if anything) do you understand about your impact on the wider community?
- What relationships have you or others built within the community that contribute to this?
- How have these relationships formed?
- What role do schools and other community / statutory groups have within this?

Questions used to guide semi-structured interviews with partner organisations:

The interviews were introduced as opportunities to explore the youth provider's work and impact through the eyes of key stakeholders, with semi-structured interviews covering community partners' observations about:

- The organisation's development / evolution over time and what you, as a stakeholder, believe has driven that.
- The organisation's approach to youth work delivery – including any similarities and differences with other youth work providers you may be aware of.
- The impact the youth organisation is having on the young people you are also in contact with.
- The impact the youth organisation is having on your organisation and others within the community more broadly.
- What has been required, of the youth organisation and of you, to help to foster these outcomes?

Appendix 2: Practical Considerations for Transfer of Ownership to VCS

To enable transfer of ownership, practical considerations will need to be addressed by DE at a legislative level, and the EA and the Voluntary and Community Sector at an operational level. It has not been the focus of this research to offer a detailed account of the management of such – that must come once the premise of this research has been accepted. It is, however, helpful at this stage to acknowledge key considerations.

Legislation and policy alignment: Northern Ireland's current legislation will not support significant transfer of ownership, and so, as acknowledged in Recommendation 3, DE will need to prepare for legislative change.

Clarity of the role of EA Youth Service: This may include a role within Support and Development, as explored in Recommendation 4 in addition to: reviewing funding arrangements; monitoring, co-ordination; and ensuring universal delivery. This final point may require the state to step in in the short term to deliver or to ensure delivery, in areas where community and voluntary provision is lacking, for whatever reason. But the legislation should be clear that EA deliver is timebound and has a core focus on enabling VCS delivery.

Clarity regarding requirements of the Voluntary and Community Sector: If transfer is to be successful long term, DE Youth Policy Team, EA Youth Service and the VCS must, together, agree and set clear expectations about what is required of voluntary and community organisations that will take the lead in delivery, and of the role and responsibility of any Headquarter organisation(s).

Staffing arrangements: the ETB staff did not transfer to the employment of the community organisations – rather they were redeployed within the ETB. Differing terms and conditions may make transfer of EA youth work staff to community-based organisations an unlikely scenario. EA may therefore have to plan for how this may be managed through redeployment for example, to a Support and Development role and/or natural wastage over a period of time.

Management of assets: There needs to be a clearer process for EA Youth Service to review assets that were built with dedicated DE Youth Work budget and how these may be used beyond the EA by the Voluntary and Community Sector. The experiences in New Lodge highlight the need for clear and formal provision for the management of assets, particularly buildings, including clarity over long term ownership and responsibility.

Contracting and funding arrangements: In certain locations, potential VCS deliverers may emerge clearly. In other instances, this may be less clear. Careful consideration will therefore be needed regarding contracting arrangements and the processes by which providers are identified. The Infrastructure Oversight Body (Recommendation 2) may take the lead on the design of such. Funding arrangements must provide sufficient stability and surety for providers stepping in.

Appendix 3: Literature Review

Introduction

A variety of purposes for and models of delivering youth work were represented in the literature reviewed, yet several recurring themes emerged, many of which are encapsulated in the following definition of the key purpose of youth work:

> *"[To] enable young people to develop holistically, working with them to facilitate their personal, social and educational development, to enable them to develop their voice, influence and place in society and to reach their full potential."* (Agreed by many across the sector and published in the National Youth Agency's National Occupational Standards 2009)

Literature also emphasised that youth work is delivered in the context of:

(i) ***the young people's wider community / society*** and should not be viewed as entirely separate from this – this is recognised in work as early as the mid-1990s through to contemporary literature:

> *"Many of the most innovative community leaders are rediscovering that youth can be essential contributors to the wellbeing and vitality of community. Projects that connect young people productively with other youth and adults are now seen to be the foundations upon which healthy communities can be built."* (Kretzmann & McKnight 1993[6])

> *"Young people are part of communities, they know their local areas and often want to build on what's great about them."* (Angus 2022)

(ii) ***an ideological framework*** which reflects a range of assumptions including about the nature of relationships between young people and rest of society:

> *"Youth work, similar to other educational interventions, is not value free. …The values which inform the work in any given situation influence the types of outcomes which are likely to be the result of the specific intervention. Such values influence the work at both institutional and youth worker levels."* (Hurley and Treacy 1993)[1]

Hurley and Treacy trace four paradigms[15], two aligned with functionalism and two with conflict theories, to illustrate how paradigms influence:

[15] Those identified by Burrell and Morgan (1979): radical humanist; radical structuralist; interpretive; and functionalist.

- Assumptions about society
- Application to youth work model
- Programme emphases
- Nature of the relationship between youth worker and young people
- Structures for participation (in decision making structures)
- Outcomes – for young people
- Outcomes – for society

Throughout their work is the premise that underlying messages portrayed to young people:

> "*will be determined by the beliefs and values of the adults. These beliefs and values are in turn determined by the adults' implied worldview or theoretical perspective, whether this is specifically understood or not. Thus, if we are to understand the potential impact of youth work interventions on young people and society then we need to understand the basis on which the value systems of adults who work with young people are based.*"

Sala-Torrent & Planas-Lladó 2024[3] explore conceptions of youth work from the perspective of the evolution of sociological thought – from Durkheimian influences in which adults share society's morals and values, and participation is limited as adults hold the power, to Weberian in which adults guide young people in their life pathways, through to Marxist which seek alternatives to the status quo, partly in light of understanding young people to be victims of social injustice.

According to the literature, therefore, practitioners' perspectives about society, about young people and their role within it will influence their approach although these differences may not be immediately apparent:

> *"On the appearance of things many of the programmes run in many youth groups appear to be similar … However, the experience of participating in a programme can be used to create learning about social relationships … two youth groups could be operating development education programmes, while exposing the young people to entirely different perspectives and values."* (Hurley and Treacy 1993)[1]

Youth Participation

Participation is a right of children and young people, recognised in Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. Sala-Torrent, M & Planas-Lladó, underline:

> *"Following the agreement signed by the EU and EC in 2010, which specified youth participation as a common objective, the new resolution of the EC and EU: EU Youth Strategy 2019– 2027, 2018 (European Commission, 2018; Council of Europe, 2019) continued to support participation, and recommended that member states: a) promote dialogue and the means of participation at all levels; b) contribute to preparing young people for participation through youth work; and c) explore innovative and alternative methods of democratic participation. Thus, the EU and CE encourage member states to promote the active participation of young people; to achieve this through including them in the decision-making process; and to foment dialogue between adults and young people via the figure of the youth worker."*

The concept of youth participation, emerging in the 1970s, continues to feature in literature, alongside empowerment and social justice coming to prominence. At its most basic, participation

may be understood as the extent to which young people are involved in youth work delivery to build skills, confidence and agency: on a continuum from entirely designing and/or running delivery through to having some limited input. Participation too is often presented in the context of the young people within a community and wider society:

> "…*theories drawn on from a variety of disciplines to inform the field of children's participation have mostly been adult or community-based theories adapted to work with children. One area less theorised and evident in the literature is the notion of child-initiated participation. To ensure that children have the opportunity to participate in society in truly authentic ways, as 'active citizens', we need to reflect upon how formal participatory processes can inhibit children's organic participation." (*Malone & Hartung, 2010[11])

Programmes that may appear similar at first glance can be built upon differing ideologies and so have differing agendas. Hence, many commentators emphasise the *state of mind* of practitioners and young people, over and above *behaviours* in seeking to recognise true participation in action. Sala-Torrent & Planas-Lladó analysed perceptions and interventions of youth workers promoting youth participation in Catalonia, Spain. They made connections between participation and the status of young people in their communities / society:

> *"While most of the youth workers interviewed understand that their role is to promote the participation of young people in the spaces and times specifically dedicated to them… some also emphasize the marginality of young people in decision-making spaces. In doing so, they link the concept of participation to that of social justice, showing how young people are treated and disenfranchised in relation to political and civic decision-making, a common element in the relationship between young people and the public sphere*."

The following National Youth Agency's explorations of youth participation highlight that youth participation is likely to result in wider community impact:

> *"At its best, participation ensures that young people are at the heart of designing, managing and evaluating youth work policy and practice and have opportunities to make a meaningful contribution within their communities and within public and political decision-making processes." (*Youth Service Liaison Forum, 2005).
>
> *"Young people should be given the space and opportunity to lead, shape and own the youth work journey. Active participation in leadership development is an important part of this as it empowers young people to take ownership of their lives, experiences and communities. …. Building active participation into your youth work is of benefit to young people, youth workers and the wider community."*
>
> *(National Youth Agency* **Raising the bar – Youth Work Practice Standards[9])**

This reinforces a view that youth work focusing on young people as individuals functioning exclusively within peer networks is unhelpful. It does not reflect reality where young people inevitably engage with and regard themselves as members of a community which they may impact (and vice versa).

> *"Youth participation is important, because when young people participate, it draws upon their expertise, enables them to exercise their rights as citizens, and contributes to a more democratic society."* (Checkoway, 2011[12])

“Youth participation refers to the active, conscious involvement of young people in processes of community development and implies a high degree of commitment by young people in the questions that affect their community. When young people participate in community programmes, they acquire skills and resources that facilitate their individual empowerment.” (Sala-Torrent & Planas-Lladó 2024[3])

The Community Context: Aset-Based Community Development

If youth work, and youth participation in particular, recognises young person as influencing and being influenced by community, as Sala-Torrent and Planas-Lladó's final quotation suggests, it is appropriate to explore some of the ways in which community development is represented in literature. Kretzmann & McKnight 1993[6]present two means of understanding and undertaking community development:

Needs based in which areas of socio-economic disadvantage in particular come to be understood and mapped by need, determining how areas are understood and problems addressed, through:

> *"…activities that teach people the nature and extent of their problems ….. well-being becomes synonymous with being a 'client', having needs that can only be met by outsiders …. consumers with no incentive to be producer."*

The community may have little power to "*affect the pervasive nature of the deficiency model*" in which "*influential institutions develop stake in maintaining that consumer focus*". This *"deficiency orientation"* Kretzmann and McKnight argue, has "*devastating consequences*" for residents and communities*:*

- thinking of themselves as deficient; incapable of taking charge of lives and futures
- leading to fragmentation of solutions
- targeting of resources towards service providers rather than residents
- nurturing beliefs that the only way to attract resource is to concentrate on deficiencies rather than strengths
- reinforcing perceptions that only outside influences can help
- weakening 'community glue'; relationships with outside agencies are prioritised over the local
- survival becomes the goal, with any sense of the potential for flourishing, serious change, or community development diminished – even leading to hopelessness.

Strengths led in which areas are understood by locally identified capacity, skills and assets.

> *"The key to neighbourhood redevelopment, then, is to* ***locate all of the available local assets****, to begin* ***connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness****, and to begin harnessing those local institutions that are not yet available for local development purposes….****the process begins with a new map*** *– guide to capacities to replace the needs map to begin to assemble strengths."*

The authors' context, 1990's US is relevant today; they assess that the likelihood of outside help for communities, in the form of *"significant inputs of federal money"* was *'bleak':*

> *"it is increasingly futile to wait for significant help to arrive from outside the community. The hard truth is that development must start from within"*

Kretzmann & McKnight outline a process of mapping individuals, informal and formal institutions and associations, acknowledging that assets-based community development does not mean that communities may not need outside resources, rather it:

"…suggests that outside resources will be much more effectively used if the local community is itself fully mobilised and invested, and if it can define the agendas for which additional resources must be obtained."

Some principles for asset-based community development they uphold include that the process:

- affirms and builds on what is already going on within a community
- is rooted in traditions of community organising, community economic development and neighbourhood planning
- recognises the importance of relationships: strong ties within communities
- is likely to encounter differing senses of responsibility for the health of the wider local community within the institutions which own community assets.

They, and others, however, also reflect that:

*"Establishing within each institution **a sense of responsibility for the health of the local community**, along with mechanisms that allow communities to influence and even control some aspects of the institution's relationships with its local neighbourhood**, can prove much more difficult**."*

Asset-based Community Development and Youth work

In their study of the Foyer Federation in London, Stuart and Perris 2017[4] found an assets based approach to youth work had been embedded across all organisational practices: place and space; relationships; language use; goal setting; assessment, monitoring and evaluation; decision-making; staff development; and management. The organisation was observed to "*treat young people as capable of solving their own issues with appropriate support*". Stuart and Perris contrast this with a 'deficit approach' in which practitioners "*make choices about who is 'in need' and how young people should engage with the service 'provided'".* An asset-based activity theoretical system starts with identifying and celebrating what young people have, can do and are. *"The survival of the fittest services for young people are surely those that best enable young people to thrive."*

Stuart and Perris emphasise potential benefits of asset based approaches, for young people, and for the state:

"An asset-based approach is suggested to empower people, allow authentic power relationships, and has potential to save state money and achieve effective outcomes."

However, they also caution against this being used to justify reducing funding:

"Nor should asset-based working become an excuse for the state to further reduce investment in services or welfare."

An asset based approach to youth work can, and, as much literature highlights, often does extend beyond the confines of a youth centre:

*"Recommendation CM/Rec(2017)4 of the Committee of Ministers of the Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2017) which pertained to youth work, highlighted the importance of counting on youth workers with the skills to promote and support the active participation of young people in local and regional life." (*Sala-Torrent & Planas-Lladó 2024[3])

Having explored perceptions of youth workers and interventions which promote young people's participation in the community, Sala-Torrent & Planas recommend:

> *" greater collaboration between youth workers, young people and adults to foster innovative public participation policies that help promote the potential of municipalities for change."*
>
> "*If what makes communities strong are aggregations of people who feel connected and supportive, then we should put considerable effort into creating environments for and with young people, especially as they experience oppression in community settings and are often silent and invisible unless they are perceived to be causing trouble. In such a context, policies that promote youth citizenship and participation are extremely important."*
>
> *"Authors such as Hart (2008) and Adu-Gyamfi (2013) support a model that focuses on children and young people and incorporates inter-generational links, awarding particular importance to the potential of the relationship between young people and adults, mutual recognition and dialogue in which the two groups can share power."*

Much literature encourages, even assumes, youth participation beyond the youth centre – this ***intersection of youth and wider community participation*** reflects real life.
Sala-Torrent,& Planas-Lladó identify the following features of community participation representing:

- *Liberating;* people becoming aware of their situation and working to implement change.
- *Empowering;* allowing community members to take control and collaborate to meet collective aims.
- *strengthening* of social ties
- *promoting trust and co-operation* between individuals

The young person in the context of community, and society is central – missing the opportunity to work collectively with young people and the community means missing out on this:

> *"Young people are a product of our society today. They aren't different from this society."* *(*Sala-Torrent & Planas-Lladó)

Community ought therefore to be a prominent feature of youth work. Kretzmann and McKnight 1993[6] observe:

> *"Many of the most innovative community leaders are rediscovering that youth can be essential contributors to the wellbeing and vitality of community. Projects that connect young people productively with other youth and adults are now seen to be the foundations upon which healthy communities can be built."*
>
> *The direct participation of young people in the community can be facilitated by associations and community organisations that are on the alert for specific ways to utilise the unique capabilities of the young – it is possible to link with all sorts of institutions and organisations."*

They go so far as to reflect that young people can only make a meaningful contribution to addressing community, or societal concerns when:

> *"..the young people of the community are firmly connected in the process of community building with local organisations, institutions and concerned individuals."*

Checkoway, as early as 1996, suggested the creation of:

"trusting spaces where adults and young people can share power and make decisions together and see each other as allies, and to plan spaces where both groups can connect and discuss issues that affect them".

In their conclusion, Sala-Torrent and Planas-Lladó stress:

"..now is the time to implement innovative participation policies that focus on the status of young people and allow adults and young people to bowl together, thereby strengthening community bonds."

Delivery Agents of Youth work: State Versus Voluntary Community Sector Responses

A great deal within the literature highlighted ***the merits of voluntary and community sector (VCS) provision***. The following key strengths of VCS approaches were drawn from the School for Public Health Research's 2022 report[2] of research conducted amongst youth work professionals across England in 2022:

- ***Ahead of statutory and health services in co-production***, advocating and amplifying young people's voices – therefore "*the VCS could offer a model around how to better involve the voices of young people in service design and provision."*
- Consistently noted to be ***doing a lot with a little***; plugging gaps and picking up young people missed by other services.
- Have more ***freedom to innovate and test creative ways of working*** in response to needs; resulting in a ***more 'youth focused' approach*** than statutory service often provides.
- ***Lack of formality was upheld as an important enabler of engagement***, with ***VCS provision portrayed as more trusting and friendly***.
- ***Flexible with more time*** to work with young people, resulting in ***trusted relationships able to identify key issues.***

Kernaghan (2021)[10], through case studies, found:

*"…the **range of styles and methods** voluntary youth work providers can employ provides the **flexibility to adapt services or programmes to suit the distinct needs** of individuals or groups of young people from diverse backgrounds at a local level.*

Partnerships and collaboration instigated by voluntary providers was highlighted by Kernaghan:

*"…the voluntary youth work sector has been **successful in establishing partnerships with statutory agencies and community organisations** to support young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing. Specifically, schools were identified as a key partner."*

"On average, voluntary youth work providers reported collaborating with 4.5 other organisations to support young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing …. two-thirds of voluntary youth work providers collaborated with a local post-primary school (67.4%) with 43.5% working with their local primary school."

*"… within the voluntary sector … 63% of organisations work with another local voluntary youth work provider with 52.2% working with a regional youth work provider and 45.7% working with another local community provider. Further evidence of partnership working can be shown **through the extensive network of statutory and non-statutory partners** such as the*

local council (58.7%), PSNI (56.5%), local church (50.0%) and Health and Social Care Trust (41.3%)"

Kernaghan, however, argues that there remains much greater scope for multi-agency working:

> *"While multi-agency collaborations have been working at a local level,* ***this is an area in which the potential of the voluntary youth work sector to support young people's mental health and emotional wellbeing has not been fully realised****. Findings show nearly all organisations would support better opportunities to collaborate with others within the voluntary youth work sector and acknowledged that there was further work needed to develop effective partnerships with statutory agencies. Increased collaboration would be significant in increasing innovative multi- agency approaches, reducing replication and making better use of available resources.*

The potential for the voluntary sector to engage volunteers and so to increase the range and scope of provision is also highlighted:

> *"A key strength of the voluntary youth work sector is the use of volunteers to support their work. ….. The majority of voluntary youth work providers also offered opportunities for young people to volunteer within their organisation."* (Kernaghan, D, 2021[10])

The literature did not, however, advocate for the abolition of state responsibility or involvement with several examples of clear ***desire amongst voluntary and community-leaders to work with the state towards delivery excellence***. The National Youth Agency Advisory Board's Roadmap to a National Youth Strategy[9] envisions consistent local offers, through community-based partnerships, fulfilling local authorities' statutory duties. And improving access to youth work nationally through joined up statutory, community and voluntary approaches is a key theme in Hidden in Plain Sight 2022 the report of the Commission on Young Lives.

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