

# Youth Work and Youth Policy in the Republic of Ireland 1983-2008: 'Still Haven't Found What We're Looking For ...?'

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Twenty five years ago, in the summer of 1983, the up-and-coming rock star Bono was one of 24 people appointed by the Irish Taoiseach Garret Fitzgerald to a National Youth Policy Committee (NYPC), to be chaired by a High Court judge and former parliamentarian Declan Costello (himself the son of a Taoiseach). The NYPC was required to prepare, within a year, 'recommendations for a National Youth Policy which would be aimed at assisting all young people to become self-reliant, responsible and active participants in society' (Department of Labour 1983: 33).<sup>1</sup> It was regarded as highly significant that the NYPC's remit extended beyond youth work and into a range of areas of policy and provision. The fact that NYPC was appointed directly by the Taoiseach (rather than a government minister, as was the case with other youth-related commissions and committees before and since), and that it was chaired by an eminent public figure, meant much was expected from the committee (in terms of the quality of its deliberations and proposals) and furthermore that much would flow from its final report (in terms of the government response, and subsequent funding and other support for youth work, youth services and the development of youth policy). Twenty-five years later, what progress has been made, and what remains to be done?

## NYPC – context and conclusions

The NYPC, or 'Costello Committee', as it became known, was appointed (by a coalition government of the Fine Gael and Labour parties) at a time when almost half the population was under 25 and when the combination of a recently and rapidly urbanised society, an economy in stagnation and a high rate of youth unemployment had led to heightened political concern regarding 'apathy, disillusionment [and] active forms of anti-social behaviour' among young people (Govt. of Ireland 1985: 13). The increasing popularity of Sinn Féin amongst urban youth was also a factor in prompting the government to act decisively (or so it seemed at the time) to develop a national youth policy. It was then long before a paramilitary ceasefire and the official view was unequivocal:

*In this period of flux, certain national values and attitudes are in some instances being perverted. This is being attempted by organised groups who seek to harness the energies and enthusiasms of young people and involve them with organisations which have as their aim the overthrow of democracy and the imposition of a tyranny based on false principles of nationhood and cultural identity. That this sinister manipulation touches only a small proportion of our young population at present does not detract from the urgency of developing adequate policies and strategies to contain the damage it causes to the future of our democratic society. (Govt. of Ireland 1985: 13)*

This was certainly not the first time, or place, in which a youth policy initiative was characterised by a sense of urgency bordering on crisis. The Costello Committee, whose members were appointed on the basis of their individual expertise or direct experience of youth services or (as in Bono's case) youth culture – fulfilled its terms of reference and reported in September 1984. Before doing so it conducted a comprehensive study (probably the most comprehensive undertaken until then) of young people and existing youth-related policy and provision in Ireland. It had been asked among other things to make proposals on:

- the development of a comprehensive youth service meeting the varied needs of young people and linking youth work services effectively to the other services to youth;
- the social and political education of young people with a view to raising the level and quality of participation by young people in their communities and in social, economic and political institutions, both locally and nationally; ...
- the improvement of the range and quality of the services available to disadvantaged young people and effective linkage of child care, welfare, educational, juvenile justice and health services (Department of Labour 1983: 33-34).

In formulating proposals for a 'comprehensive youth service' the NYPC decided to uphold the primacy of the voluntary (non-governmental) youth organisations as the direct providers of youth work programmes and services. This was a reflection of existing practice, and was in keeping with the social policy principle of *subsidiarity* which has historically been an important part of Catholic social teaching and which shaped the emergence and development of social services in Ireland both before and after independence, although it was most explicitly and systematically developed by Catholic intellectuals in Germany (Kennedy 2001: 188; see also Geoghegan and Powell 2006: 33-34). According to this principle the state should have a secondary ('subsidiary') role in the provision of social services while families, communities and associations (which historically often had religious affiliations) should take precedence.

One significant exception to the historical dominance of the voluntary sector in Irish youth work is the City of Dublin Youth Service Board (CDYSB), established as a sub-committee of the (statutory) City of Dublin Vocational Education Committee in 1942. This was a response to an earlier 'crisis' of urban youth unemployment, perceived as being so serious the Catholic Archbishop of Dublin had urged the state to act (Devlin 1989; Lalor et al 2007: 271). The CDYSB continues to carry out its functions in the Dublin city area, and a number of other Vocational Education Committees (VECs) around the country have used their discretion, under the relevant legislation, to become actively involved in youth services over the years, but generally the national pattern has been one of voluntary organisations receiving financial support from the state to enable them to provide a range of services through clubs, groups and project work and increasingly (from the 1980s on) through the employment of full-time paid workers (Lalor et al 2007: 373-74).

The Costello Committee proposed this arrangement should continue, but significantly added that statutory support for voluntary providers should no longer be discretionary. It called for new legislation that would impose a Ministerial responsibility at national level, and a corresponding responsibility at local level, 'as is for example imposed in Northern Ireland on the Education and Library Boards' (NYPC 1984: 128). The Committee expressed its views on this matter strongly:

*We are convinced that until a clear and unambiguous statutory duty is imposed on some agency to ensure supply of the services which young people need [...], development will be spasmodic, muddled and inadequate. We feel that we must make this point. At the same time we want to make it clear that we are not suggesting a service managed and run by a statutory agency to the detriment of voluntary groups or the exclusion of agencies assisted from public funds. It should be made clear that the statutory agencies will support, not supplant, the voluntary organisations. (ibid)*

The NYPC outlined what it believed would be an 'effective voluntary/statutory partnership' (1984: 128), in the form of Local Youth Service Committees which would be independent and autonomous bodies with administrative links with the VECs, referred to above. The ten to 16 members of each Committee, appointed by the Minister, would be drawn on a 50:50 basis from statutory and voluntary interests, the former including personnel from services such as formal education, social services, local authorities, health services, educational welfare and youth justice; the latter substantially nominated by a Local Council of Voluntary Youth Organisations (to be established by each Local Youth Service Committee) with functions which would include: providing a forum for voluntary groups to exchange views and develop policy, encouraging good practice, developing an active role for young people 'within the youth service and in youth affairs more generally' and of course nominating a proportion of committee members (NYPC 1984: 132).

The Costello Committee gave careful consideration to the range or remit (what it called the 'contents') of a comprehensive youth service. It concluded that the main concerns of the Local Youth Service Committees should be twofold. At their core should be what Costello called 'mainline youth work services', defined as 'those providing out-of-school education, recreational and leisure facilities mainly operated by voluntary youth organisations' (although the committee did recognise youth work can take place in schools) (NYPC 1984: 101). An additional 'important and significant' focus would be 'special services to youth', referring to projects 'mainly for those who are disadvantaged, socially and/or educationally' (ibid). Broadly, the target age-group should be 12 to 21 years, with priority given to older teenagers: 'Participation of this age-group is vital to the purpose of the Youth Service we have in mind and we see the large drop off of this group as a major weakness of the present provision' (ibid: 117). Other services for young people, including formal education and training services, health and social and justice services would not strictly be part of the local youth service 'but would of course be co-ordinated with it' (ibid: 127). A co-ordinated approach would be facilitated by the presence on the Youth Service Committees of representatives from these various sectors: the Committees should be required by law 'to assist in such coordination to the extent that local conditions require and permit' (ibid: 139).

A further important consideration was the location – in terms of the designated government minister and department – of the statutory responsibility to ensure 'an adequate youth service is developed and maintained' (NYPC 1984: 137). Although the principal concern of the youth service, envisaged by the Costello Committee, was 'out-of-school education', and although the Youth Affairs Section (the main civil service support unit for youth work and related matters) had initially been established within the Department of Education, it had been moved shortly before the NYPC's establishment to the Department of Labour, reflecting current policy concerns regarding youth unemployment. While opinion within the

Committee varied, the 'majority' recommendation in the Final Report was that the Youth Affairs Section be relocated to the Department of Education with the Minister for Education being given statutory responsibility for the youth service (NYPC 1984: 137).

The NYPC laid considerable emphasis on the need for co-ordination of all youth-related policy and provision:

*It is imperative that the range of services to youth operates within an overall context of agreed policy – a context which facilitates regular planning for the future and review of performance and coordination of all services to youth.* (NYPC 1984: 104)

Locally this was to be achieved through the membership of the Youth Service Committees, as we have seen. At national level, the NYPC recommended legislation should require regular meetings between the Ministers responsible for the various aspects of youth provision 'so as to avoid overlapping and undesirable competition and to rationalise the allocation of resources between them' (ibid: 139).

Two further recommendations were intended to facilitate and support coordination but were also concerned with transparency, accountability and the provision of expert advice. The NYPC proposed an Oireachtas [Parliamentary] Committee on Youth Affairs, to ensure 'the services available to young people would be subject to public scrutiny and debate' (NYPC, 1984: 137). The other was for a National Youth Advisory Committee, whose composition should be '50:50 as between statutory and non-statutory personnel' and whose membership would include young people themselves 'as well as people experienced in the field' (ibid: 138-9). Significantly, the NYPC referred back to the recommendations of a committee appointed several years earlier by the Minister of State [junior minister] for Youth and Sport at the Department of Education:

*The O'Sullivan Committee [Dept. of Education 1980] recommended the establishment of a Youth Work Advisory Committee but our recommendation is for a Committee to advise the Minister on both the operation of the Youth Service and on Youth Policy generally and to be entitled the National Youth Advisory Committee. The Advisory Committee, like the Oireachtas Committee, should have functions in relation to Youth Affairs generally and should be required to publish an annual report.* (NYPC 1984: 138, emphasis in original).

Several other proposals of the NYPC merit mention. A system for 'assessing and monitoring services and ensuring that value is got for the public money involved' was recommended and it was thought this function could best be undertaken by a team of professional advisors, who would also have a role in relation to 'programme development and supportive services to voluntary organisations' (NYPC 1984: 120, 138). Curriculum development, in-service training of both paid and volunteer staff and research into 'youth needs and how such research relates to the development of youth services' should be promoted through a Department of Youth and Community Studies in a third-level institution; while a validating panel or Board was recommended to 'approve training courses and to set guidelines' (ibid: 121). While there was some ambivalence (and there may remain some today) in the voluntary youth sector about the contribution of paid workers and their perceived role in

'undermining' the traditional primacy of the volunteer (Devlin 1989), the NYPC adopted a clear position about the need for such paid workers and the importance of adequate remuneration and appropriate conditions of employment.

*We recognise that the maintenance of existing youth work services, together with the further development we propose, requires the professional contribution of full-time youth workers whether administrative, managerial, training or face-to-face youth work functions are involved. We feel that we must make the point here that the salary support system currently operating is inadequate...Accordingly we recommend the introduction of basic salary scales and other emoluments related to appropriate grades in the public service ... (NYPC 1984: 122).*

Lastly – but not least – the NYPC emphasised the importance of the participation of young people and their involvement in decision-making at all levels within youth groups and organisations and the youth service, both for their own benefit and for society as a whole:

*In summary, then, we believe that youth work must be addressed to the developmental needs of the individual; through social education, it must be concerned with enabling the individual to develop his/her own vision of the future and the social skills needed to play an active role in society. If youth work is to have any impact on the problems facing young people today then it must concern itself with social change...[It must] have a key role both in enabling young people to analyse society and in motivating and helping them to develop the skills and capacity to become involved in effecting change. (NYPC 1984: 116)*

## The 'long march' towards youth work legislation

Following publication of the NYPC report expectations were high that significant action would quickly follow. After all at the launch of the Committee, the Taoiseach said he would 'personally pursue the implementation of key recommendations in the eventual report' (*The Irish Times*, 16 September 1983). The fact that 1985 was UN International Year of Youth had explicitly been referred to as a factor in the Government's planning, and the timely delivery of the NYPC's Final Report seemed to promise the Year could be marked in a meaningful way by some substantial progress being made on implementation. However, disillusionment set in as the months of 1985 slipped past and no formal response was forthcoming. Then, in the very last week of the International Year of Youth senior figures in the youth sector were summoned to a hastily convened launch of the White Paper *In Partnership with Youth: The National Youth Policy* (Govt. of Ireland 1985).

It was not the first time the launch of a youth policy document took place in circumstances suggesting little enthusiasm on the part of policy makers. An earlier White Paper, *A Policy for Youth and Sport* (Govt. of Ireland 1977) had lain completed but unpublished in the Department of Education for more than a year until a partial leak by the education correspondent of a national newspaper precipitated a full release. Subsequently an election and change of government consigned the document to history. Something similar was to happen to *In Partnership with Youth*. The Fine Gael-Labour government broadly accepted

the Costello Committee's recommendations: there was to be a National Youth Service, upholding the fundamentally educational and voluntary nature of youth work and based on a partnership of statutory and voluntary interests (but with the voluntary organisations as the main direct providers); and it was agreed that without a clear statutory responsibility allocated at local and national levels to ensure the provision of the service, it was 'bound to be erratic, confused and inadequate' (Govt. of Ireland 1985: 17). This responsibility would be placed on the Minister for Education and on Local Youth Service Boards (not 'Committees').

These Boards would not be independent and autonomous as the NYPC had recommended. Instead, ad hoc Boards would be set up under the terms of the existing (1930) Vocational Education Act as sub-committees of the VECs. It was envisaged that if the proposals in the 1985 Green Paper *Partners in Education* (Department of Education 1985) were adopted (thereby abolishing the 34 VECs and replacing them with 13 more broadly-based Local Education Councils), the Local Youth Service Boards would be linked to the new LECs. A number of ad hoc Boards were established, and in fact the name of the City of Dublin Youth Service Board dates from this time; hitherto it had been known by its Irish name of Comhairle le Leas Óige ('Council for the Welfare of Youth'). Comhairle le Leas Óige was deemed to be a Local Youth Service Board provided its membership was adjusted to reflect fully the voluntary-statutory partnership enshrined in the new policy. Apart from the few ad hoc Boards, no other progress had been made in implementing *In Partnership with Youth* when a general election led to a change of government early in 1987.

The incoming minority Fianna Fáil administration (with Charles Haughey as Taoiseach) benefited from the recent creation of the National Lottery and the opportunity it gave for allocating substantially increased funds to voluntary youth organisations and others in the sporting, cultural and community sectors (Corry 1991;1992). In this context, there was little objection from the voluntary sector when the Minister of State for Youth Affairs, Frank Fahey, made it clear he was not interested in youth service legislation or in new statutory structures (whether 'Committees' or 'Boards') and instead proposed the establishment of Local Voluntary Youth Service Councils, made up almost exclusively of existing voluntary organisations at local level plus the Chief Executive Officer of the VEC or his/her nominee. The administrative costs of these Councils were to be 'borne by existing structures wherever possible' (Fahey 1988: 9).

While it was suggested the Councils could assess the level of provision locally and collectively submit costed programmes to the Department of Education (through the VEC) with a view to addressing deficiencies or filling gaps, there was no legislative or statutory responsibility to ensure a comprehensive or coordinated local youth service, and the arrangement always appeared likely to reinforce the status quo whereby voluntary organisations were most concerned with their own funding needs. In effect, the Costello Committee recommendation for 'local voluntary youth councils' was adopted, but entirely in isolation from the broader policy and legislative framework within which it was intended to play a specific role. Eleven voluntary youth councils were established on a 'pilot' basis in the late 1980s, constituted in differing ways but each receiving a small annual grant from the Department of Education, largely with a view to running joint activities or facilities. While their 'pilot' phase was a protracted one – even overlapping with the introduction of

'voluntary youth councils' under the terms of the current youth work legislation – they could never in themselves have been expected to lead to a significant lasting improvement in the quality or structure of local youth work services.

Consideration of youth work policy in the following years largely dovetailed with and received an impetus from the debates about broader education policy and provision. The early to mid 1990s saw a comprehensive review of the entire national system of education spanning the terms of two (opposing) governments. It included the publication of the Green Paper *Education for a Changing World* (Govt. of Ireland 1992) and the White Paper *Charting our Education Future* (Govt. of Ireland, 1995). There was an extensive national consultation exercise with major education 'partners' (National Education Convention Secretariat 1994); and, in parallel, the Department of Education instigated a consultative process with youth organisations and the VECs about a framework for the development of youth work, which led to agreement on most, but not all, of the major structural issues (Consultative Group on the Development of Youth Work 1993). Both the Green and White Papers had sections on youth work, the latter but not the former expressing a commitment to the introduction of youth work legislation. This is unsurprising given the former was published during a Fianna Fáil-led administration and Fianna Fáil had baulked at the idea of legislation in 1987; while the White Paper was published by a Fine Gael-Labour (and Democratic Left) coalition and it was under the 'watch' of these parties that youth work legislation had first been proposed by the NYPC.

The legislation was passed in the form of the Youth Work Act 1997. As a statute however the legislation was somewhat anomalous since it was framed as 'an Act to extend the powers of education boards in relation to youth work' and yet the much larger and more contentious Education Bill 1997 – which provided for the establishment of those boards in the first place and would have resulted ultimately in the abolition of the VECs – had not in fact been passed when there was a further change of government in 1997. At least two patterns will have become clear to the reader by now. One is the tendency of general elections to interrupt the smooth development of youth work policy. The other is the fact that Fianna Fáil has historically taken a benign view of the VECs while the other main parties have, at least in the past, been quite explicit about their intention to abolish them. The reason is fairly straightforward: Fianna Fáil, the largest of the parties, renowned for its strength in local political organisation, has tended to have a dominant position on the VECs around the country, since the VECs are structurally linked to the system of local government. Not surprisingly, therefore, the incoming government in 1997 (led by Fianna Fáil) deemed the Youth Work Act 'inoperable', and stated its intention to introduce amended youth work legislation. Possibly it would not have seen the need for legislation in this area, (certainly Fianna Fáil had hitherto shown no interest in youth work legislation) but its options were somewhat limited by the fact that in their final days in office the outgoing Minister for Education and Minister of State for Youth Affairs had implemented one important element of the Youth Work Act 1997 by appointing the National Youth Work Advisory Committee (NYWAC). This had at least two consequences. First it made it difficult for the new government to ignore the Act; and second, in securing Ministerial approval after a relatively short time to prepare proposals for a National Youth Work Development Plan, NYWAC established itself as having a long term contribution to make.

## Youth Work Act 2001

The revised (and current) legislation, the Youth Work Act 2001, was introduced after further consultation with the relevant voluntary and statutory organisations. The crucial difference from earlier legislation was that, far from undermining the VECs, it made them responsible for co-ordination of youth work within their areas. However, apart from the appointment of a (slightly reconstituted) NYWAC, its main provisions remained inactive for several years, partly for reasons of cost but also because agreement needed to be reached between the parties involved (the Department, the VECs, the voluntary organisations) about the precise shape of some elements of the legislation. NYWAC, on which all of these parties and others are represented, took a leading role (in keeping with its own statutory functions) in preparing detailed guidelines for the implementation of key components of the Act. In 2006, funding was finally provided by the Department of Education and Science to enable the VECs (or at least those which did not already have specialist youth work staff in place, who were the majority) to recruit Youth Officers and thereby to begin fulfilling their functions under the legislation.

The Youth Work Act 2001 (s. 3) defines youth work as follows:

*A planned programme of education designed for the purpose of aiding and enhancing the personal and social development of young persons through their voluntary involvement...which is:*

- (a) complementary to their formal, academic and vocational education and training; and*
- (b) provided primarily by voluntary organisations.*

Two elements of this definition echo the formulation in the 1997 legislation, and both are in keeping with the position taken in Irish youth work policy documents at least since the 1970s. These are the voluntary participation of young people and the fundamentally educational nature of the work. A third element – the idea that youth work is ‘primarily provided by voluntary organisations’ – was added to the amending legislation after lobbying by the voluntary organisations themselves, but again it is in keeping with longstanding traditions and assumptions in Irish youth work. The definition has recently been criticised for being ‘determinedly structured’ and for relying on concepts which are themselves ‘all contestable’ (Spence 2007: 6-7), but it might equally be argued that enshrining the educational and voluntary dimensions of youth work in law is a significant step forward and that the contestability of certain concepts allows some ‘room for manoeuvre’ in practice.

The Act defines a young person as someone ‘who has not attained the age of 25 years’; but specifies that ‘particular regard will be had’ to the youth work requirements of young people between the ages of 10 and 20 (inclusive), and of those who are socially or economically disadvantaged. The age-band specified is similar to that drawn elsewhere between youth and children’s services, although some Irish youth organisations argue this distinction is artificial and hinders the ability of youth work to engage in valuable developmental and preventative work with younger children. Despite adopting a broad definition of ‘young person’ the Act certainly does not place the emphasis on work with older young people’ as had the NYPC. It highlights the issue of access and participation by young women and men alike, as well as their information needs, and the youth work



requirements of Irish speakers. Under the 2001 Act, as in its 1997 predecessor and in line with recommendations going back to the NYPC, the Minister for Education has statutory responsibility for ensuring the development and co-ordination of policies relating to youth work programmes and services. The Minister must also ensure co-ordination of youth work with other services for young people, a point to which we will return.

As stated already the VECs, originally charged with responsibility for vocational and 'continuation' education under the Vocational Education Act of 1930, and operating predominantly at county and city level, are given responsibility under the Youth Work Act for ensuring the provision of youth work programmes and services in their areas. This involves: providing assistance, including financial assistance, to voluntary youth work organisations; preparing and implementing three-yearly Youth Work Development Plans, while ensuring co-ordination with other local services for young people; drafting annual youth work budgets and reporting on youth work services to the Minister for Education. Importantly from their own point of view and that of voluntary youth organisations, they have a responsibility to 'monitor and assess youth work programmes and services' and evaluate the expenditure incurred. To support the carrying out of its functions and in keeping with the principle of statutory-voluntary partnership, the Act requires each VEC to establish a Youth Work Committee and Voluntary Youth Council.

The role of the Youth Work Committee is to advise and make recommendations to the VEC on the performance of its youth work functions. It has a membership of 16-20 members comprising, in equal proportion, (a) persons nominated by the relevant local statutory agencies (for example local authorities, health services, FÁS [the national training authority], the Gardaí [police]); and (b) nominees of the Voluntary Youth Council for the area. Generally this means that when the Act is fully implemented every VEC will have a committee similar to that established in the City of Dublin VEC in 1942 – now called the City of Dublin Youth Service Board – and such as was recommended for every local area in the country by the Costello Report. The Voluntary Youth Council's role is to advise the VEC on matters related to the Youth Work Development Plan and to act as a forum for voluntary youth work organisations in the VEC area, including nomination of members to the Youth Work Committee. The Voluntary Youth Council has 10-20 members of whom, 'as far as practicable', at least one-fifth should be under 25 years old, and at least three-quarters should be volunteers. This latter provision is significant, and might be interpreted as a sign of the official ambivalence already mentioned towards the role and contribution of paid professional youth workers.

NYWAC, first established by the Youth Work Act of 1997 and expanded in size following the 2001 legislation, currently has between 31 and 33 members. Apart from the one to three Ministerial nominees it comprises:

- (a) nominees of the various Government Ministers and statutory organisations with an involvement in the provision of services for young people, including four nominees of the Irish Vocational Education Association (the VEC representative body), and
- (b) nominees of the 'prescribed national representative organisation' for the voluntary sector.

The National Youth Council of Ireland was explicitly named in the Act as having this 'prescribed' status for the first three years, and at the expiry of that period the status was renewed. The Act provides that the voluntary sector representatives will equal in number the total of all other members excluding the chairperson, making the Committee's constitution an almost equal partnership of voluntary and statutory interests.

NYWAC's role is to advise the Minister in relation to the provision of youth work programmes and services, the development and implementation of youth work policies, the coordination of youth work with other services for young people, the equitable treatment of young men and women in youth work, and the implementation of the detailed provisions of the Youth Work Act at national and VEC level. The first NYWAC, acting on a recommendation from the National Youth Council of Ireland, prepared proposals for the Minister for a series of actions and developments to address aspects of youth work not covered by a legislative framework, and these were (eventually) adopted by government and published in 2003 as the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Department of Education and Science, 2003). One of the suggested actions which has come to fruition is an endorsement framework for youth work training, established on an all-Ireland basis as the North South Education and Training Standards Committee (NSETS), which is working closely with partners in Britain through the Joint ETS Forum. Such a body was included in NYPC's proposals in 1984. However, the fact that NYWAC's brief is limited to youth work, rather than wider 'youth affairs', runs counter to the NYPC's thinking and recommendations, a point to which we will return.

Briefly in the early 1990s the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education employed a professional Youth Work Assessor, whose work resulted among other things in the publication of a review of youth work practice in community-based projects (Treacy 1992) and fed into the youth work consultative process mentioned above. When the incumbent left the post it was left unfilled. The Youth Work Act 1997 provided for the formal assessment of youth work programmes and services and the 2001 Act went further by establishing the statutory position of Assessor of Youth Work, analogous to the formal educational inspectorate. The Assessor has two principal functions in law: the assessment and monitoring of youth work programmes and services, and the review of various aspects of the Minister's and VECs' functions. Some commentators in the youth work sector suggest there may be a potential conflict of interest between these two intended functions, and significantly the relevant section of the legislation has not been formally 'commenced'. An Assessor was appointed to the Youth Affairs Section in 2006, but not strictly to the statutory post as provided for in the legislation. The new Assessor made quality standards in youth work practice his priority on taking up office, and the pilot phase of a national Quality Standards Framework (QSF) was launched in March 2008. Again, this development was in line with a recommendation of the NYPC – almost a quarter of a century earlier..

## **'A lot done, a lot more to do?'**

The campaign slogan of the Fianna Fáil party (the lead party in both the outgoing and – as it turned out – incoming coalition governments) during the 2002 general election was: *Go Leor Déanta, Go Leor Fós le Déanamh* ('A Lot Done, A Lot More to Do'). It is not an

inappropriate way of describing the current state of play in the development of youth work services in Ireland, specifically in relation to the proposals of the Costello Committee.

On the positive side, the achievements are significant. The legislation imposing a statutory responsibility at national and local levels to ensure the provision and co-ordination of youth work services is overdue and welcome. For this author its definition of youth work neither prescribes nor proscribes too much, and is certainly an improvement on the definition in the earlier (1997) version of the legislation, which began by saying youth work was a 'programme of activity...designed for the purpose of providing developmental and educational training...'.<sup>1</sup>

Also valuable has been the creation of NYWAC which, although strictly speaking limited to an advisory function, has interpreted its role in a proactive way to include supporting the officials in the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education and Science in developing and implementing significant new initiatives and generally exercising leadership in the sector as a whole. For example NYWAC was pivotal in the emergence of the *National Youth Work Development Plan 2003-07* (Department of Education and Science 2003), which has led to the introduction (jointly with partners in Northern Ireland) of an all-island endorsement framework for professional youth work training and education, mentioned above. *The Development Plan* has also led to a diminution in the number of 'single worker projects'; improvements in child protection and welfare and other related aspects of good youth work practice; the preparation of an 'intercultural strategy' for the youth work sector which is under consideration at the time of writing; and a focus on assuring and raising standards through the introduction of the QSF. A further area in which improvement in the last two decades has been obvious is the large increase in youth work funding. The budget of the Youth Affairs Section alone has increased since 1988 by approximately 1000 per cent.<sup>2</sup>

However, there is 'more to be done'. Most significantly, the *National Youth Work Development Plan* (Department of Education and Science 2003: 24) included 'as a priority action.....and one on which the implementation of much of the rest of the Plan depends' the establishment of a *National Youth Work Development Unit* (NYWDU) staffed by a small team of specialist personnel with the functions of managing and co-ordinating research relevant to the sector's needs, piloting innovation and generally supporting the development of good practice – a grouping similar to the 'professional advisers' recommended by the Costello Committee to offer 'programme development and supportive services' to youth organisations (National Youth Policy Committee 1984: 120). So far the NYWDU has not been established, although the official position remains that there is a commitment to do so.

Other infrastructural developments for which the Costello Committee saw a need – and no one has since mounted a coherent contrary argument – were for an Oireachtas [Parliamentary] Committee on Youth Affairs and a committee of ministers with responsibility for services to young people, provided for in law. Neither has been established. This is not because there are fewer ministers carrying such responsibilities than in the 1980s. Quite the contrary – the field of 'youth services' has become infinitely more complex in recent years, new 'interests', perspectives and practices have emerged, and there has been a shift in

both the budgetary balance and the 'balance of power' in provision for young people. For instance as already stated the budget of the Youth Affairs Section has increased enormously in the last two decades. However, as a proportion of all public funding targeted at young people it has decreased significantly, as youth justice services, health service provision for young people, drugs initiatives and other developments focusing on disadvantaged (mostly urban) areas such as the Young People's Facilities and Services Fund (YPPFSF) have grown and transformed the landscape of 'work with young people'. In the city of Dublin, where the bulk of the YPPFSF funds have been disbursed, the scheme led to a five-fold increase in project funding and staff between 1998 and 2003 (Lalor et al 2007: 273). Meanwhile the partially overlapping field of 'services for children', defined as those under 18 years of age, has undergone institutional consolidation since the publication of the National Children's Strategy (Department of Health and Children 2000) through the establishment of the Office of the Minister for Children (OMC), attached primarily to the Department of Health and Children but also with responsibilities relating to the Department of Education and the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform.<sup>3</sup> These are not developments which have gone on entirely separately from, or parallel to, the youth work sector. Rather youth workers and youth organisations have to varying degrees been involved or implicated in all of them, even though this has given rise to tensions and challenges relating to such matters as conflicting ethos or principle (as in the case of youth justice services and the question of 'voluntary participation') or the issue of what age-group of 'young people' youth work should concern itself with.

## Conclusion

Overall youth work today finds itself in a somewhat paradoxical position. On the one hand there is the relative clarity, security and 'status enhancement' associated with having a dedicated piece of legislation setting out what it is meant to be and who is responsible for ensuring that it happens. On the other, it is increasingly just one of a proliferation of types of policy and provision aimed at young people, and it often struggles to maintain key principles in a climate where substantial funding is available to support 'work with young people' and where youth organisations must compete to secure it, whether it is strictly 'youth work' or not. Meanwhile at national level there is probably a greater need now than 25 years ago for 'an overall context of agreed policy – a context which facilitates regular planning for the future and review of performance and co-ordination of all services to youth' (NYPC 1984: 104). However, not only is there no committee of ministers or parliamentary committee on youth affairs; but the one existing statutory national committee (NYWAC) has purely advisory functions. Representatives of the diverse government departments and statutory agencies with an interest in young people are members of NYWAC, but given the way its functions are defined it may be difficult for them to see its relevance for their own work. Certainly in the absence of any other inter-departmental or inter-ministerial mechanism to ensure coordination the current system relies rather too much on the level of interest and goodwill of individual civil servants.

At local level the Youth Work Committees of the VECs will bring together representatives of relevant statutory agencies (along with voluntary sector representatives) allowing for the possibility of a planned, coherent and coordinated approach to cross-sectoral youth

provision. However, this will require commitment, compromise and concessions on all sides. Otherwise, a 'minimalist' interpretation of the Act will prevail, whereby the VEC interprets its responsibility to 'ensure coordination' simply to mean that none of the youth work programmes or services in its own development plan duplicates any of the other youth provisions locally, but these latter continue as before without any overall co-ordination. This would, from the point of view of those individuals and organisations who have been calling for comprehensive youth work legislation for many years, be an opportunity missed.

There are challenges and opportunities in these emerging structures for youth work and youth workers. A central challenge will be to retain a core sense of vision and purpose regarding the relational, educational and associative mission of youth work, in a climate of increasing managerialism and outcome-focused accountability. Looked at positively, and without underestimating the obstacles and pitfalls that lie ahead, the opportunity may exist at local level to use youth work's new institutional foothold as a way of building fresh relationships with other 'youth interests' and with young people themselves; or to re-mould existing relationships from a position of greater strength.

## Notes

- 1 The author of this article was himself the researcher for the National Youth Policy Committee.
- 2 From 4m punts in 1988 to around 50m Euro in 2008, although further significant increases are unlikely for the foreseeable future.
- 3 While this article was in preparation Bertie Ahern resigned as Taoiseach. His replacement, Brian Cowen, in 're-shuffling' the Cabinet and the Ministers of State, announced that the Youth Affairs Section of the Department of Education was to be 'integrated' within the Office of the Minister for Children, to be re-named the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA). This development -- entirely unanticipated within the sector -- is likely to prove as significant as any documented in this article but the full implications are as yet unclear.

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