

THINKING SERIOUSLY ABOUT ...

The Future of the Youth Service

Welcome and Introductions: Breda Friel [Conference Chair]

As conference chair and on behalf of the Youth Service Sectoral Partners Group I am delighted to welcome you to today's conference. In extending this welcome I also want to thank you for making time and taking the opportunity to attend this significant event.

Today's conference is part of Youth Service Month, during which there have been a number of events, activities and seminars. This Youth Service month has also been supported by the Department of Education, Youth Council of Northern Ireland and the Education Training Inspectorate.

The events and activities that have been taking place have been titled: "Thinking Seriously About youth work in a variety of settings" these initiatives were designed to:

1. Reflect on issues affecting the future impact of the youth service on young people
2. Celebrate the contribution of the youth service to the development of young people and the communities in which they live.
3. Influence the future shape of the Youth Service within the new public sector structures.

About two days after I received notice of this event, on a Saturday, I was having coffee in a restaurant in Donegal. I was thinking of the conference as I put sugar in my coffee. The little sachet had an Irish proverb written on it. It stated:

Mol and oige agus tíochofaidh si...

The translation is:

Praise the Youth and they will Flourish

I considered those words and found in them a challenge that is refreshing, timely and fitting, a challenge that is both personal and communal. Serendipity I thought.

The proverb brought back to our responsibility to the young people not present. I am mindful of this challenge for all involved in shaping the future of the youth sector within the new structures. For me, however, this responsibility means "having an awareness of how we can make a difference "in" and around us"

It is important at this time of transition to celebrate. Celebrating and acknowledging the contribution the Youth service makes to improving life chances, raising standards and supporting the social, personal development and education of young people and celebrating, acknowledging the role and the contribution of young people within that journey and to that process also.

It is necessary to value best practice; it affirms the practitioner, affirms the young person and community and in doing so sends out ripples of hope and opportunity.

Reflection offers an opportunity, to consider and review performance, strategy and actions and to consider where to next, what next. Today offers an excellent opportunity to:

- Consider the relationships between the Youth Service and other stakeholders both statutory and voluntary sector.
- Highlight the contribution of youth work toward raising standards and meeting governmental/departmental targets set for the personal, social and educational needs of young people

Conference offers the space to be a source of positive influence on the future shape of the Youth Service, a youth service that enhances the life of a young person and enables them to, as the proverb states “flourish”.

This conference takes place at a time of major organisational change in public administration. This change will shape the establishment, relationship and avenues of working in the Education Skills Authority. Youth Work and the Youth service have a crucial place in the changing structure. Transition is challenging both professionally and personally; and this change necessitates substantial reflection and consideration on the proposed new structures that are coming to the statutory and voluntary sector. As Sri Vasudeva states “Let us aspire to make the changes that will make us a source of positive influence. Let us set an example for those coming after us”.

Youth work month facilitated seminars exploring outcomes in youth work practice and youth work in schools. The Department of Education Priorities for Youth consultation process was central to discussions at a conference last week. Further to this YouthNet, the voluntary youth sector, will consider the findings of their consultation process next week.

The policy and vision for the Youth service, and the context for this conference is also shaped by the Strategy for the Delivery of Youth Work in Northern Ireland.

Today gives the opportunity to develop and explore themes that have emerged from the consultations, discussions, submissions and seminars that have taken place at various points during this period. Some themes have led to further questions and areas that call for our attention. For example:

How can the developing policy for the youth service maximise cooperation and collaboration for all stakeholders who are key in operationalising the policy?

And mindful that the United Nations Charter for Children celebrates a milestone anniversary at this time, how can we maximise the opportunity and synergy between EU Youth Strategy and, the Priorities for Youth and the Ten Year Strategy for Children?

We must ask ourselves, what steps are required to support the development of complementary, balanced and collaborative formal and informal education services?

If the aim is to support young people as active citizens and empower them socially, personally, economically and politically, and of course spiritually, how can we create a service with young people at the centre in all developments?

How do we ensure that the approach is co-ordinated to meet the needs of all young people on a continuum of need, those met through universal provision and those requiring specialist and targeted services?

Today we will hear from a number of keynote speakers who within their input will seek to develop the range of topics and themes before us for reflection and active consideration. We will have questions and answers, panel discussion and workshops and I look forward to the contribution this event and your participation can make toward informing future policy.