

Opportunities for Youth

An Action Plan for Youth Services

Nasc, the Irish word for 'link', empowers migrants to realise and fulfil their rights.



Nasc

Migrant & Refugee Rights

Nasc, the Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre

Registered Address: 34 Paul Street, Cork City, Ireland T12W14H

Phone: 021 427 3594

Email: info@nascireland.org

www.nascireland.org

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OPPORTUNITIES FOR YOUTH: AN ACTION PLAN FOR YOUTH SERVICES

Nasc, the Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre, welcomes the opportunity to contribute to this consultation on *An Action Plan for Youth Services*. As an organisation dedicated to supporting migrants, refugees, and ethnic minorities in Ireland, Nasc works extensively with young people from diverse backgrounds, particularly those who are navigating the complexities of migration, family reunification, and the transition from Direct Provision into community life. Our work involves direct engagement with children, young people, and families who often face significant barriers to accessing youth services, including geographical isolation, cultural and linguistic challenges, and socioeconomic constraints.

The experiences of migrant and refugee youths are marked by unique challenges, including displacement, trauma, and the need to integrate into a new society while maintaining their cultural identity. Nasc's work focuses on bridging these gaps through interagency collaboration, cultural sensitivity, and trauma-informed practices. This submission aims to highlight the critical role of youth services in promoting the well-being, development, and social inclusion of young people, particularly those from marginalised and vulnerable groups. It also provides practical recommendations to enhance access, quality, collaboration, and sustainability within the youth service sector.

Our contribution is informed by Nasc's direct practice with young people and our collaborative work with youth service providers. Through this partnership, Nasc has been able to facilitate meaningful support and advocacy, ensuring that young people receive holistic and tailored services that meet their specific needs. By sharing our insights and recommendations, we hope to support the development of a robust and inclusive Action Plan for Youth Services that ensures all young people in Ireland have the opportunity to thrive.

Introduction

Youth services play a crucial role in promoting the well-being, development, and social integration of young people. However, many young individuals, particularly those from migrant, asylum-seeking, and refugee backgrounds, face significant challenges in accessing and benefiting from these services. The purpose of this submission is to provide a detailed analysis of the barriers to youth services, evaluate the quality and effectiveness of these services, and propose measures to enhance collaboration, human rights promotion, and sustainability. Drawing on the experiences of Nasc, the Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre, which works extensively with young people transitioning from Direct Provision into community life, this submission aims to advocate for a comprehensive, rights-based, and sustainable approach to youth services in Ireland.

Young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds experience unique vulnerabilities that can hinder their full participation in youth services. These vulnerabilities stem from a combination of geographical isolation, cultural and linguistic barriers, financial constraints, and the psychological impact of forced migration. Research has consistently shown that inclusive, culturally responsive, and trauma-informed youth services significantly enhance social integration, mental health, and educational outcomes for refugee and migrant youth. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) underscores every young person's right to education, recreation, social support, and protection from discrimination. To align with these international standards, youth services in Ireland must be accessible, culturally competent, and responsive to the evolving needs of all young people.

The role of youth services extends beyond traditional social and recreational activities. These services are fundamental in providing safe spaces, building resilience, and fostering a sense of belonging, particularly for those who have experienced significant upheaval. By developing a framework that prioritizes equity and inclusion, youth services can contribute to a society where no young person is left behind.

Access to Youth Services

Ensuring equal access to youth services is critical for the holistic development of young people. However, migrant, asylum-seeking, and refugee youths encounter several barriers that limit their ability to participate fully in these services. One of the most significant challenges is the geographical isolation of many Direct Provision centres, which are often situated in remote or rural areas. This isolation limits opportunities for young people to engage in in-person activities, interact with peers, and access critical support services. According to a report by the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI), spatial segregation is a major impediment to the social integration of migrants in Ireland. The limited availability of public transport exacerbates this issue, as many young people do not have the means to travel to where services are offered. The financial burden of transport costs is particularly severe given the restrictive Daily Expenses Allowance provided to asylum seekers, which is currently only €38.80 per week for adults and €29.80 for children.

The physical inaccessibility of youth services is compounded by cultural and faith-based barriers. Many young people from migrant and refugee backgrounds come from cultures where gender-specific groupings are the norm, and mixed-gender environments may prevent their full participation. This cultural consideration is particularly relevant in youth services where gender-specific needs, cultural practices, and religious beliefs must be respected. To address this issue, it is vital to develop gender-specific groups led by appropriate youth leaders who can create a safe and welcoming environment for all participants.

Another critical factor that affects access to youth services is the need for cultural sensitivity and competence among service providers. Many young people who have migrated to Ireland have experienced trauma, loss, and displacement. Services that are not attuned to these experiences can unintentionally create barriers to participation. Increasing awareness and providing cultural competency training to youth workers can help bridge this gap, fostering an environment where young people feel understood and valued.

Quality in Youth Services

High-quality youth services are characterised by their inclusivity, cultural responsiveness, and trauma-informed approaches. For many asylum-seeking and refugee children, the transition to a new country involves navigating complex emotions and challenges related to past experiences of displacement, conflict, and loss. Therefore, youth services must adopt a holistic approach that not only provides recreational and educational support but also addresses the psychological and developmental needs of young people.

A fundamental indicator of quality in youth services is cultural competency among staff and service providers. This involves understanding and respecting the diverse backgrounds of service users, as well as incorporating culturally appropriate practices into service delivery. Youth workers who reflect the diversity of the communities they serve can create more relatable and supportive environments. Programs that include culturally sensitive activities and respect faith-based practices contribute to a sense of belonging and acceptance among young people.

Trauma-informed approaches are particularly important in youth services that cater to asylum-seeking and refugee children. Youth services should therefore integrate mental health support and create safe spaces where young people can express themselves without fear of judgment or retraumatisation. Access to trained mental health professionals and the availability of support groups are key elements of a trauma-informed approach.

Interagency collaboration is another critical component of high-quality youth services. Effective collaboration between youth services, schools, mental health professionals, and social services ensures that young people receive comprehensive support that addresses all aspects of their lives. This approach not only improves service delivery but also facilitates the identification and addressing of emerging needs among young people.

To enhance the quality of youth services, it is essential to ensure that cultural competency and trauma-informed training is available for all youth workers. Additionally, diversity in hiring practices can help ensure that staff members understand the experiences of the young people they support. Integrating mental health services into youth programs and strengthening interagency collaboration will also contribute to the delivery of high-quality, holistic support.

Collaboration and Co-operation in the Youth Sector

Collaboration and cooperation within the youth sector and between the youth sector and other services are fundamental to providing effective and holistic support to young people. Strong partnerships between youth services, educational institutions, healthcare providers, and social support organisations can significantly enhance the quality and reach of services. By adopting a multi-sectoral approach, service providers can address the diverse and often complex needs of young people in a coordinated and effective manner.

One of the primary benefits of collaboration is the ability to offer holistic support that goes beyond immediate needs. When youth services work in tandem with other agencies, they can provide a more comprehensive range of support, including education, healthcare, housing assistance, and legal aid. This approach is particularly beneficial for migrant and refugee youth, who often need assistance with immigration processes, educational integration, and social inclusion.

Despite the clear benefits of collaboration, there are barriers that need to be addressed. A significant challenge is the lack of specialised training in migrant and refugee issues for youth workers. Many youth services are not equipped with the knowledge or resources needed to support young people who face unique challenges related to immigration status, trauma, and cultural integration. Additionally, inconsistent funding models can hinder collaboration efforts, as short-term funding streams do not allow for the establishment of long-term partnerships. Improving communication and establishing standardized referral pathways between organizations can help overcome these challenges, ensuring that young people receive consistent and effective support.

Conclusion

Youth services in Ireland must be inclusive, culturally competent, and trauma-informed to ensure that migrant, asylum-seeking, and refugee youth receive the support they need to thrive. By adopting a comprehensive, rights-based approach, youth services can contribute to the well-being, development, and social integration of all young people. Implementing sustainable funding models, fostering interagency collaboration, and prioritising equity are crucial steps toward building a youth service framework that is effective, inclusive, and future-proof.

With dedicated efforts from policymakers, service providers, and the community, it is possible to create an environment where all young people, regardless of their background, can access the opportunities they need to succeed. By focusing on accessibility, quality, collaboration, and rights-

based approaches, youth services can play a pivotal role in ensuring that every young person feels valued, supported, and empowered to contribute meaningfully to society.