

The need for youth work has never been greater.

Young people in Ireland are growing up in a period of historically unprecedented change: they have more disposable income than ever; they are challenged by the power of modern communication technologies and the force of aggressive commercialism. Reference points for ethical direction are becoming weaker and social and economic structures change at unprecedented speed. In Ballymun, young people are also growing up in the biggest building site in the country.

The need for Youth Work, with its emphasis on informal and convivial relationships, has never been greater. The voluntarism of Youth Work gives it a unique capacity to reach out and engage young people.

While most young people are thriving in this age of opportunity, a significant number are feeling even more left out and alienated than ever.

Youth work has a unique and powerful role to play in supporting vulnerable young people. I want to demonstrate this by noting the experience of Outreach Youth Work in BRYR.

Since 1999 BRYR has undertaken regular street work in Ballymun: our workers, taking regular routes in the evenings, meet with large numbers of young people on the streets and blocks. They explain their supportive role and build relations of trust with the aid of contact-building activities such as adventure trips, street games and street art. Over time most young people in the area get to know these workers and a depth of understanding and trust in their role has developed in the community. Young people increasingly come to the workers seeking support and advice. Adults in the community and local organisations also seek out the assistance of our outreach youth workers in responding to the needs of their young people.

At the same time our workers build relationships with state and community services from sports & recreation, through schools & training, to health and justice. Our workers have become intimately aware of the potential and challenges in these services and use this knowledge to guide young people in appropriate directions.

Last year alone BRYR recorded just over 500 such referrals: these ranged from connecting with a sports club, to dealing with attempted suicide. And it's not just the initial referral. Follow-on support in collaboration with the services can significantly increase the young peoples' ability to sustain engagement.

I would like to draw attention to three vital aspects of this work:

1. Young Peoples' vulnerability is closely linked to a sense of alienation from mainstream society. Alienation increases the likelihood of personally and socially destructive behaviour and lifestyles. Building relations of trust and breaking down alienation is the core work for Outreach Youth Workers. Breaking this alienation is an essential pre-requisite for improved personal developmental and pro-social activity.

2. Making this connection with vulnerable young people needs high quality work. It's a process that needs time and dedication. Outreach Youth Workers need a strong organisational framework and the three "C's". Personal *confidence* to work in this highly challenging arena is vital – not many people can work in young peoples' space especially the unpredictable street environment. They need long term *commitment* - mistrusting young people tend to actively seek a commitment that goes beyond just "doing a job". Finally, Outreach Youth Workers need a great deal of *competence* that comes from experience and training.

3. Effective connections between Outreach Youth Workers and state or community services are vital to make it work. You can't build a bridge for young people with a foot firmly on both sides of the divide. In Ballymun we have developed and continue to develop these links – often personalise but always based on a matured understanding of the capacities and limitations of services. In the last two years Ballymun has created a fascinating Network for Assisting Children and Young People. The Network is an effective collaboration between 14 agencies including BRYR: it focuses explicitly on the needs of vulnerable, named young people. Simply by being able to refer in a safe a minimally bureaucratic way relevant agencies can get together to forge practical collaboration for the welfare of our most vulnerable young people.

Text Insert: "Case Study"

A young man of 20 who we have known for years was homeless. He seemed depressed due to a recent bereavement and had no place to sleep. Our youth workers were very concerned. Some shelters for homeless people were full; he was too young for some emergency services and too old for others. He wouldn't go to the hospital A&E for emergency psychiatric support and we felt that providing him with a sleeping bag was not enough. We checked dozens of B&B's for accommodation but due to the weekend's big rugby match and a reluctance to take someone referred by a youth worker we could not find a place for him. We stay with him all day. He has a shower in our facility and we get him some fresh clothes. He eats in our youth restaurant. Near the end of a long day we find private accommodation. We set up a timetable of activity and support to get him through the weekend and arrange a number of appointments for Monday and Tuesday. Six months later and with continuous support from our youth workers he is in secure housing and a vocational training course and we are cautiously hopeful for his future.