



youthlink

# ANNUAL REVIEW

## 2020-21





## YOUTH LINK'S VISION:

Churches working together to build excellence in youth work and ministry towards a just, peaceful and flourishing society based on the common good.

## INCLUSIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Youth Link is committed to the needs, welfare and flourishing of young people not only to enable healthy personal development but also to be positive citizens and members of civic society. In a society where past violence has polarised and divided people and sectarianism and racism traps people in silos physically and emotionally, the challenge is to build healthy and inclusive relationships and to empower those relationships to creatively exist on the basis of hospitality, respect, trust and openness to see the good in each other.

## COLLABORATIVE ACTION

From its inception collaboration has been at the heart of Youth Link's development and its programmes. From the beginning Youth Link was a collaborative project between the Churches not only has this been sustained and strengthened but collaboration has long since gone beyond the Churches sector to include the statutory and voluntary sectors. Youth Link is an active partner and embraces a range of partnerships in the implementation and delivery of its youth work programmes. In a world where interdependence is key, Youth Link sees collaborative action as not only being at the heart of its activities, but core to its ethos.

## ACHIEVEMENTS AND PERFORMANCE

As a partnership of churches working together, Youth Link will contribute to a more inclusive and peaceful society by enabling young people and youth practitioners to build positive, healthy and sustainable relationships within and between communities through education, training and empowerment programmes.

Youth Link continues to be one of the largest providers of accredited youth work training in Northern Ireland and provides a coherent training route that offers young people and adult volunteers a progressive pathway into youth work and ministry. In excess of 350 young people and adult volunteers received accreditation during the year and staff continued to work constructively to further develop training at youth and adult level in urban, rural and border regions.

## COVID-19 IMPACT ON PROGRAMME DELIVERY

The Covid-19 pandemic has been the single most significant environmental and social factor that has impacted on Youth Link's work. In March 2020, staff had to relocate their work environments to their homes; they had to embrace the use of new technologies for communicating together, with key sectoral partners and with programme participants [young people and adults].

The work done to maintain relationships and provide positive foci for young people, through interactive on-line sessions, meant that when

the temporary easing of restrictions occurred, there was opportunity to engage again in some in-person, face to face work with young people, all be it primarily in small groups in outdoor spaces. The time 'between lockdowns' also provided opportunity to undertake planning for the new academic year and to set the foundations for September programmes.

In September 2020, the commencement of a number of programmes coincided with young people returning to school, all be it still under new constraints. Youth Link staff undertook comprehensive risk assessments during the planning stage of each programme, in order to determine the most appropriate approach to delivery. In some instances, some face-to-face sessions were considered appropriate [e.g. based on group number, facilities, travel options etc]. However, the majority of programmes moved fully on-line, including the Degree programme and facilitation methodologies (and skills) were developed in response.

## ANALYSIS

- Youth Link invested in additional IT resources to facilitate staff working online with programme participants and to be effective and efficient in other aspects of their contractual commitments.
- Online programmes have enabled Youth Link to continue and, in some cases, extend its



geographical reach and mix on programmes. For example, an advertised Level 2 Certificate in Youth Work Practice attracted adult participants from Belfast, Co. Armagh, Co. Derry/Londonderry and Co. Down.

- Established methods of delivery and schedules, needed to be reviewed to take account of the challenges presented by on-line learning. Bespoke approaches were developed per group, in order to respond to concentration issues, support needs, access to technology etc. Generally, this has meant that for example, a programme of 30 hours duration, now requires more (but shorter) sessions, thereby needing to be spread over a longer period of time.
- The lost opportunities in relation to residentials and other developmental activities has also been of significance. Staff have sought to create other means to bond and support young people, e.g. the provision of wellbeing packs; group cookery sessions with ingredients distributed in advance; group music events as well as other fun activities, used to punctuate issue-based group work.
- Partner organisations, who we support through the provision of training programmes, have also been significantly impacted, with many staff 'furloughed' or in some cases, contracts reduced or terminated. This has had an impact on their 'outreach' to young people, thereby reducing Youth Link's opportunity to offer support and to access young people and adults seeking to develop their skills in youth work provision.
- A change in young people's participation in on-line sessions was noted when lockdown returned in January 2021. This coincided with the return to home-schooling, which for most young people, has meant significant periods of on-screen time throughout the day. A felt sense of 'screen fatigue' has been noted among young people, by Youth Link staff, as well as greater challenges in relation to motivating and encouraging engagement.
- This echoes the concerns expressed by many professionals and organisations, about the impact of Covid-19 on the mental health and wellbeing of young people. Youth Link

is aware of the need to be pro-active in addressing this area of increasing need.

- Input to young people in relation to cyber-bullying, has been integrated into a number of programmes, in response to the increased use of social media by young people during Covid-19 restrictions. This is recognised by Youth Link not only as a safeguarding issue but of fundamental importance to young people's welfare. The provision of mentoring sessions for group participants [with appropriate safeguards and boundaries in place] is one way in which Youth Link is seeking to provide young people with safe and supportive links with adults.

Significant restrictions continued to be in place until the end of April 2021. The impact on young people was substantial, most acutely being felt by those at significant transition or exam stages. Youth Link staff and casual workers continued to work with course participants, across Northern Ireland and the Border Counties, endeavouring to be responsive to their needs while encouraging their engagement in accredited learning opportunities.

Whilst youth work and ministry have always had a particular focus on development through 'process' rather than solely as 'outcome', the importance

of this is now magnified. Being supportive, encouraging and 'present' with young people at this time is a crucial aspect of the role of Youth Link staff members, both short term and long term and that echoes core values of Youth Link - improving young peoples' lives through positive outcomes and building relationships that enable transformation in the lives of individuals and communities.

## FINANCE

Financial and administrative information is available on request and via our website [www.youthlink.org.uk](http://www.youthlink.org.uk) is the full set of financial statements for the year ending 31 March 2021.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS – FUNDERS

Gratitude is expressed to funders including The Education Authority; The Executive Office; Northern Ireland Community Relations Council; Special European Union's Programmes Body (SEUPB); Department of the Economy; The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade; Co-Operation Ireland; Irish Youth Foundation; The Irish American Partnership and our member Churches, The Church of Ireland, The Methodist Church, The Presbyterian Church in Ireland, and The Roman Catholic Church for their continued support.

