



# ARK Policy Brief

## How youth work creates opportunities for young people to engage with education, employment and training

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This Policy Brief presents research evidence and key themes discussed at an ARK policy roundtable event in April 2026. The discussion was informed by early findings from the research project ‘From the Ground Up: Exploring how youth work creates opportunities for young people to engage with education, employment and training’, funded by EPIC Futures NI. The project involves collaboration with the YouthStart Consortium (Youth Action NI, NI Youth Forum, Include Youth, Springboard, The King’s Trust, Bytes and Start360). The roundtable was conducted under the Chatham House Rule, bringing together over 40 leaders from the youth work sector, young people, representatives from government departments and academia.

As part of the research project, six young people who have participated in the YouthStart programme were selected as ‘Young Experts’ to work alongside the research team. One of the Young Experts, Cían, opened the roundtable discussion, sharing his honest and personal journey from homelessness to hope, a transformation made possible through his involvement in the YouthStart programme.

### Cían’s story

“I lived in and out of hostels and on the streets with no sort of purpose in life or no sense of direction of where I wanted to go in life... I felt like I didn’t belong in the world, constantly crying to myself looking for help but I never knew where

to find it. During my time in the hostel, staff from the NI Youth Forum started coming into the hostel to support other young people and I heard about the programme ‘YouthStart’. I got on well with the youth work staff – no pressure, no demands, no ultimatums; they were willing to meet me where I was at, at that point in my life. They were invaluable to me because they believed in me and gave me hope and provided me with opportunities to do better. I now have a job as a youth apprentice with the NI Youth Forum. My life has been transformed, I have been changed. I credit all this to YouthStart and the youth workers around me.”

### Background and policy context

Every young person deserves the chance to make the most of their talents, skills and aspirations. However, the number of young people not in employment, education or training has become a persistent policy issue in Northern Ireland. An estimated 20,000 young people aged 16 – 24 were not in education, employment or training between October to December 2025 (Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency, 2026). These figures represent a young person missing the chance to fulfil their full potential and without action to address the root causes, there is considerable risk that more could drift into a position where they are not engaged in work, education or training for a prolonged period. It is widely recognised that long-term youth

unemployment and disconnect from education and training can lead to economic and social exclusion which can be felt throughout adulthood (Hargie et al., 2011; Thompson, 2023). Learning and employment opportunities are essential for successful transition into adulthood. This is a fundamental period in a young person's life and understanding this transition requires an exploration of the journeys that young people make as they leave school and encounter work, further education, navigating the housing system and often dealing with complex personal situations as they progress towards adulthood.

Young people who are not in work, education or training are not a homogenous group and the challenges they face can be complex and multi-faceted, particularly for young people who are disadvantaged (Simmons et al, 2014; Holmes et al, 2021). Such challenges relate to material deprivation, educational underachievement, having Special Educational Needs and/or a disability, poor mental health, experiencing homelessness, being care-experienced, involvement in the criminal justice system, addiction, domestic violence and abuse. These are not mutually exclusive, and a young person may experience several adversities simultaneously. Understanding these factors is key to developing appropriate support measures and interventions that enable young people to build the capacity, confidence, skills and qualifications they aspire to and can attain, helping them prepare for and enter employment and fulfil their aspirations.

Responsibility for education, training and skills policy is devolved across the four UK nations. In Northern Ireland, there has been some policy commitment to support young people to progress into work or provide opportunities for learning, for example:

- Pathways to Success strategy (Northern Ireland Executive, 2012) aimed to reduce the number of young people not in education, employment or training. As a cross departmental strategy, different departments were tasked with

certain actions, and a number of work and skills programmes were introduced.

- Transition of Young People into Careers (14 – 19) was established in 2019, jointly funded and led by the Department of Education and Department for the Economy. The project aims to transform the education and training system to deliver better outcomes for children and young people. Recognising the importance of this transition period for young people, it focuses on progression, career pathways, curriculum delivery and post-16 education.
- The JobStart scheme was launched in 2021 by the Department for Communities to help young people on qualifying benefits enter work by offering 6-month job opportunities. Employers who sign up to the scheme are required to develop the skills of young people and must provide training to develop occupational and employability skills. The scheme was initially developed for young people but has since expanded to include all working-age individuals in receipt of benefits. However, funding for the scheme ended in March 2026.
- Skills for Life and Work (Department for the Economy, 2019) is a key skills programme for young people. It targets young people aged 16 – 17 who have left school but need work experience and qualification at Level 1 or Entry Level to find work or more on to higher level training. Young people under the age of 22 can join if they have a disability, and those with care-experience can join up to the age of 25. The programme works with a range of training providers across each council area.
- The Skill Up programme (Department for the Economy, 2021) provides upskilling and reskilling opportunities for anyone aged over 18. It is delivered across local colleges (Level 2 – Level 5 qualifications) and universities (PG Cert and PG Dip qualifications) offering free short-accredited courses in certain sectors.

While the range of initiatives demonstrate a willingness to support young people into work, education or training they are often short term and lack sustained funding. In addition, responsibility for supporting young people's engagement with work, education and training spans multiple departments and a fragmented infrastructure of support operates across and between different departments, with no single department or Minister responsible for this task. Horgan and Gray (2012) note that even where responsibilities are split between departments, government ministers tend to act on an individual basis. This silo mentality presents significant challenges to delivering co-ordinated and effective support for young people.

The main strategy aimed at promoting more young people to engage with education, employment or training was Pathways to Success (Northern Ireland Executive, 2012). However, it ended in 2020 and since then there has been no dedicated strategy for young people and therefore no comprehensive plan to support them entering or re-entering education, work or training. This raises questions about the priority placed on young people, particularly at a time when the number of young people defined as economically inactive has been increasing.

## The YouthStart Programme

The YouthStart programme received funding in 2023 from the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF). The YouthStart consortium has rolled out a Northern Ireland wide 'youth employability programme that uses a youth work approach to build young people's skills for life, learning and work' (YouthStart, 2025). Support is provided in a holistic and personalised way that is tailored to each young person's distinct needs. Young people can take part in social action projects, participate in team building, volunteering, essential skills development, gain qualifications, participate in supported work experience and develop CV and

interview skills. YouthStart has developed strong links with business and industry with outcomes showing that participants have access to good quality training and job opportunities. Each member of the consortium has autonomy in how they deliver the programme aligned to meet the needs of the young people who use their services. Most young people are referred to YouthStart through direct contact with youth workers, schools or educational providers or their local Health and Social Care Trust.

Since 2023, the YouthStart programme has consistently overperformed targets set. The consortium has supported 3,693 young people who are furthest from the labour market – 892 young people have progressed into paid work and 1,581 have gone back into formal education or into further training. At the time of writing (May 2026), 198 young people are being supported. Despite the transformational impact of the YouthStart programme, funding cuts have created uncertainty and instability for the consortium and the wider youth sector. In December 2025, the UK Labour Government announced that the UK Shared Prosperity Fund (UKSPF) would be renamed The Local Growth Fund (LGF) and funding would be cut by 64%. This means that vital provision will decrease from £25m to £9m per year from April 2026 (McCormack, 2026). As of 31 March 2026, the YouthStart consortium has lost substantial funding, which will have a significant knock-on impact for the sustainability and infrastructure of youth work in the voluntary and community sector. This has serious implications in terms of supporting young people who face multiple and complex barriers and it is likely that it will create further disengagement. This is taking place at a time when the UK Government has expressed serious concern about the growing number of young people not in work or education. Former Government Minister, Alan Milburn, has been commissioned by the government to examine and report on the causes of this and how they can be addressed.

## The value and role of youth work

A youth work approach (also referred to as methodology or pedagogy) is equipped to respond to the diverse needs of young people, encompassing tailored and personalised support, starting with the young person rather than a pre-defined outcome. It adopts a flexible and innovative method to establish trusting relationships between the youth worker and the young person/people. This relational framing emphasises the importance of fostering supportive relationships (Hammond and Harvey, 2021). One defining characteristic of youth work is that young people should be ‘perceived and received as young people’ (Davies, 2005: 7). This perspective recognises young people as individuals and affirms their worth, treats them with respect and supports their inclusion within society.

More broadly, there remains ambiguity around defining the concept of ‘youth work’ in both policy and professional practice. Corney (2021) outlines that one of the reasons for the lack of a persistent definition is the complex and diverse situations of young people at the centre of youth work. Another is the variety of contexts in which youth work is undertaken, the activities and programmes that are delivered and the aims and objectives that are envisaged (Corney et al, 2024). Hammond (2024) explains that in Northern Ireland, youth work is commonly viewed as ‘non-formal’ education, which is recognised as organised educational activity, falling outside the formal system and may operate independently or form some broader activity that is intended to benefit a defined population with learning objectives. By contrast, formal education refers to a structured and hierarchical system which runs between primary school and higher education. The Department of Education commonly define youth work as ‘non-formal’ which Hammond (2024) suspects has contributed to misunderstandings of the concept and arguably contributes to the persistent under-recognition of youth work practice as a core educational provision that should be valued alongside formal education.

Traditionally, learning and education has been built around three strands: schools, further education colleges and training organisations (Bytes, 2025). However, evidence suggests that a youth work approach creates an environment in which young people can engage more effectively with learning and skill development (Ord, 2016). This is particularly important for young people who have had negative experience of school or disrupted pathways.

The Independent Review of Education (2023) ‘Investing in a Better Future’ recognised the value of youth work, particularly its role in helping young people enter employment and remain engaged in education. It emphasised that the sector deserves greater recognition. It also noted how it represents good value for money, contributes to economic and social value by helping increase employment and participation in education. There is a strong economic and social value case for youth work. Research by the UK Youth and Frontier Economics (2022) found that for every £1 government invests in youth work, the benefit to the taxpayer is between £3.60 and £6.40, saving the government £3.2 billion a year through improved education and employment outcomes. Similarly, The King’s Trust (2026) revealed that every £1 they invested in programmes to support young people to get ready for work and access job opportunities over the last 10 years has led to £5 of social benefits. They estimate that a total social value of £3.9 billion has been generated to society, £210 million in Northern Ireland. Despite this, more emphasis is needed on developing better ways to measure and communicate the economic value and wider benefits of youth work.

As argued by Bytes (2025) youth work charities should be recognised as ‘the fourth strand’ of provision for young people, operating alongside the traditional learning and education organisations for developing skills by placing the same value on youth work and implementing similar funding and commissioning arrangements.

## Roundtable discussion

In advance of the roundtable, participants were asked to consider four questions. These were based on the early research findings emerging from the Ground Up project. The questions were shaped by Lani, one of the Young Experts taking part in the project, to ensure they were more accessible for the young people in the room.

1. How can the current system better acknowledge and integrate the benefits of youth work to support young people in accessing employment opportunities?
2. What are the alternative approaches to tackling youth economic inactivity if funding is reduced?
3. How can we better address the needs of young people who are struggling to enter the workforce, education system and training?
4. How can departments work more collaboratively to support young people's transition and pathways from school?

## Recognition and understanding of youth work

Participants noted that there remains uncertainty around the understanding of youth work, what it does and its effectiveness. It can be misunderstood and seen as providing 'fun' which, while important, overlooks the vital role it plays in educating, empowering and supporting young people. Some participants described youth work as the 'poor cousin in education' and the 'Cinderella service' that is often neglected and fighting for better recognition and resources. Many examples were provided of the co-location of youth workers in schools and youth hostels where they were accessible to young people facing complex issues. Some participants at the roundtable said that they had a poor understanding of youth work methodologies and this has a knock-on effect on building recognition. Participants noted positive changes in the Republic of Ireland resulting from

the government moving responsibility for youth and youth work to the reconfigured 'Department of Education and Youth', demonstrating more of a clear commitment and focus on youth work within education.

In the context of significant funding cuts to the sector, participants discussed the 'Northern Ireland Can't Wait Campaign' which helped shine a light on the value of youth work. Nevertheless, they emphasised that it should not take a crisis to do so. Many participants discussed the profound impact of the cuts to youth work provision and there is significant anger that politicians from the UK Government and the NI Executive have failed to safeguard funding to support young people to meet their potential. Despite youth work charities consistently overachieving on targets, funding continues to be cut, with the view expressed that charities are simply expected to continue to deliver on the basis of goodwill with limited resources and less staff. This has led to low morale within the sector and a shifting dynamic in provision. Ultimately, there is less support for young people, less contact time due to rising workplace pressure and precarity and some youth services may be forced to close or limit provision in more rural areas. The UKSPF model addressed some of the previous fragmentation by encouraging and rewarding collaboration which led to the creation of YouthStart. However, the significant reduction in funding will result in greater competition and a waning interest in cooperation. Many of the youth work leaders and representatives raised the challenge in securing sustainable funding due to a lack of understanding among funders and policy makers about the person-centred nature of youth work. There is an overt push from funders towards clear measurable outcomes and the fulfilment of targets. While important, these can be difficult to evidence, especially in the short term as youth work interventions are often 'non-prescriptive' and underpinned by creating a 'secure attachment' or as one participant put it, introducing a 'third parent' who walks alongside the young person

promoting 'equity, equality and independence'. It was noted that securing investment for this sort of 'pure youth work' is incredibly difficult. Another participant stressed the counterfactual dimension - what would be the cost if youth work was not addressing these issues?

## Education, transitions and employability barriers

The current lack of a dedicated strategy for young people not in education, employment and training was a cause for concern for many participants. Departmental representatives acknowledged the various strategies and programmes undertaken by either government departments or the community and voluntary sector and determined that there was no requirement for a strategy at this time, noting that the number of young people who are not in employment, education or training were not viewed as a priority. However, as one youth representative emphasised, the lack of a strategy means that it is harder to focus minds on the challenge and there is a lack of accountability for those young people who are impacted. Indeed, there was broad consensus in the room that young people need to directly inform and shape future government policies. Participants urged civil servants to listen to them, talk to them and to ask them what works. Cian's story energised people in the room and prompted participants to discuss the need to increase opportunities for departmental representatives to hear about the transformational impact of youth work from young people directly.

The often inflexible nature of formal education excludes some young people who could be better engaged by other methods. Participants recognised the linear or 'monolithic' route pursued by schools which pushes students towards more 'traditional' pathways such as university. One participant noted that 'schools are set up for academic achievement' which can often overlook other pathways. As a result, there is a general lack of knowledge, understanding and an undervaluing of apprenticeships and vocational opportunities,

which is often where young people thrive (Purdy et al, 2026, forthcoming). School was recognised as being an isolating experience for many, which often fails to meet the 'personal and social needs' of the young person. A youth work representative pointed to the importance of the 'group work process' embedded in youth work pedagogy which supports young people to build relationships and to gain a supportive peer network. Some outlined that the Department of Education commitment to make education compulsory to age 18, can only work if a broad and flexible curriculum is offered, which is underpinned by the experiences and needs of young people. Examples of good practice were outlined, such as youth work organisations being invited to engage with young people in local schools. This provides an important opportunity to raise awareness of youth work, particularly at key junctures such as GCSEs.

The transition period in a young person's life was also discussed by participants, that is, the period when they leave school and progress towards either further education, work or training. It was recognised that for some young people, this transition period is far from straightforward. Particularly for those who struggle in formal education, it can lead to greater challenges and have an adverse impact on their confidence and skills as they consider their next steps. There was a discussion around earlier intervention and looking 'upstream' by focusing not just on the transition from post-primary, but also from primary school. This 'whole life approach' by ensures that children and young people's basic needs are being met through the implementation of anti-poverty interventions. Youth work was described as offering a 'warm handover' to mainstream Further Education and employment. It often acts as a crucial juncture between leaving school and moving on to the next stage in life. As one participant observed, youth work is the 'fourth strand' that should be given equal status alongside formal education as it can make effective contributions by engaging young people and improving access for those furthest from the labour market.

## Youth work and employers

Many in the room recognised the opportunities offered by building stronger relationships with employers and developing their understanding of youth work. In a difficult funding context, there may be opportunities for youth work charities to engage with corporate funders who recognise the need to tackle ongoing skills gaps. However, it was also recognised that jobs and opportunities offered by employers are often Belfast-centric and that there are distinct infrastructural barriers for those who live in rural areas.

There was a view that employers often do not understand the complex barriers that some young people face in engaging in the labour market and indeed the value that youth work approaches can bring in terms of providing long-term support which can improve a young person's chances of sustaining a job. Furthermore, many employers continue to prioritise formal qualifications, which makes it difficult for young people to get their foot over the door. Connected to this is limited employer engagement in alternative training pathways, for example, a reluctance to offer apprenticeships. Participants also outlined the ineffectiveness of current 'Labour Market Partnerships,' (run by local councils in Northern Ireland) which were perceived by participants as failing to meet the needs of young people.

## Policy and system change – voices of young people at the centre

The roundtable discussion highlighted long-term systematic barriers for young people, for example the risk of losing social security entitlement that some face when transitioning into employment. One participant shared an example of a young person who said 'mummy won't let me work' due to fear that it would impact the household income.

Another participant said that some young people conclude that it is safer not to participate in programmes due to fear of losing entitlements or being at risk of having a benefit sanction applied. Youth leaders signpost and help young people navigate the system but there was consensus that reform of the system is needed to facilitate more participation in education and training and that current benefit rules undermine the government's policy of reducing youth unemployment.

As outlined above, participants expressed frustration due to the absence of a coherent, cross-departmental strategy for young people who are not in education, employment or training. There was an emphasis on the need for a cross-departmental strategy where 'ownership and responsibility should be shared,' alongside 'accountability around progression' and 'flexible outcomes.' Some participants observed an apparent 'lack of willingness' for cross-departmental working and collaboration. The Alan Milburn review was recognised as a positive intervention, but stressed that it is important that the unique circumstances in NI are acknowledged, particularly the legacy of the conflict. Participants emphasised the need for young people to be at the table from the beginning. Departmental representatives pointed out the difficult financial situation and the restrictive nature of single year budgets.

Ultimately, youth work is viewed as a critical but under-valued component of accessing long-term and sustainable employment, with strong potential to reduce youth unemployment and economic inactivity. However, its impact is heavily constrained by continued funding instability, weak system integration, limited employer recognition and no clear policy direction.

## Reflections and recommendations

The roundtable concluded with a reflective 'TEA' exercise, which asked participants: what *Touched* you, what *Enthused* you and what *Action* will you take. Participants said they were most touched by Cían's personal journey, which they described as moving, powerful and showed how youth work helped him to overcome adversity and become a fantastic role model for young people. Many participants were enthused by the table discussions, listening to different perspectives and the energy, enthusiasm and passion that was present in the room. In terms of actions, participants said they would continue to call for a strategy to support young people who are not in education, employment or training, engage with departments, advocate for the youth work sector and ensure the voices of youth work leaders and lived experience of young people inform policy development going forward.

On the basis of the roundtable discussion, the following recommendations are proposed:

- Prioritise introducing a cross-departmental and fully funded strategy for young people who are not in education, employment or training, with clear targets, outcomes and monitoring. The strategy should be co-designed with young people and informed by their views and experiences. It should also appoint a 'Young Person Champion' who can advocate for young people. This policy commitment should be progressed immediately and included as a key action in the next Programme for Government.
- The government should recognise and promote the transformational value of youth work, particularly for the 14 – 19 pathway and its distinct pedagogy that should be formally recognised as a core employability service - a 'fourth strand' alongside formal education settings.
- Establish a multi-year funding environment which provides stability and enables the sector to expand, prevents the loss of further staff and facilitates programmes such as YouthStart to continue their vital work in supporting young people to gain qualifications, foundational skills and work experience to fulfil their potential and reach their goals.
- Strengthen pathways and transitions for young people through exploring and investing in new ways to improve awareness and understanding of flexible pathways beyond academic routes including vocational options such as apprenticeships. Work in partnership with employers to establish how best to support young people in accessing job opportunities, these should be through long-term programmes and initiatives.

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