



Uachtaránacht na hÉireann ar
Chomhairle an Aontais Eorpaigh
Irish Presidency of the Council
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**Minister Fitzgerald's Presentation on Ireland's Presidency
priorities in the area of youth affairs to the CULT Committee
of the European Parliament**

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(Check against delivery)

Ba mhaith liom buíochas a ghabháil do Cathaoirleach Pack, comh mhaith leis an gCoiste Pharlaimintigh seo, as ucht an cuireadh labhair libh inniu. Is mór an onir dom féin agus don Roinn Leanaí anus Gnóthai Óige.

Madam Chair, I welcome the opportunity to meet the Committee this afternoon.

This is all about making sure the 95 million young people in the 27 Member States do not become a lost generation. That must not and will not happen.

The challenges of the Global economic situation are massive.

At this time, resignation is our enemy. Resignation and postponement are our enemies. The first is unacceptable, the second is impossible.

It's unacceptable to be resigned to the implications of the economic downturn.

And it's impossible to postpone the development, the potential, the hopes of a generation.

Youth work, accordingly, is key to Ireland's Presidency of the EU and of the Youth Council.

Youth work is all about providing young people with a programme of education and activities to enhance their personal and social development. It involves non-formal and informal learning and is complementary to formal, academic and vocational education and training, which my colleague has been talking about.

The Council Resolution on Youth work 2010 of the Belgian Presidency references 'youth work' as a broad term covering a large scope of activities of a social, cultural, educational or political nature by, with and for young people. Increasingly, such activities also include sports and services for young people.

What this means is that Youth work takes place in the extra curricular area. It hinges on informal learning processes and on voluntary participation.

Clearly, Youth work should be based on the needs young people and their interests. It should reflect their lives and aspirations and demands.

It must be rooted in the realities of each area and as individual as every village while meeting standards and a quality framework that ensure it helps young people on their road to employment and on their road to employment; on their road to being contributing citizens.

Recent EU policy papers such as the EU Strategy (2009) covering 2010 to 2018, the EU Youth Report (2012) provide some illustrations of the activities which are happening through youth work in Member States.

However, it must be said that we do need a much more comprehensive overview of what's happening. We need to look at the scale, of the scale, impact of youth work. I am particularly encouraged that the Commission is currently addressing these gaps through a comprehensive study of youth work across Europe. That will give us very valuable information which we do need from Member States and which will add to our knowledge of what is happening on the ground in Member States.

This is important because Member States invest significantly in support for young people and youth activities but it is difficult at present to assess the extent of that investment because of the way that youth activities are organised and funded at regional and municipal level. Many activities are funded through sponsorship and in most member states, and of course, volunteers make a huge contribution.

But what is clear is that there is a huge commitment at every level of society throughout member states to investment in what works well for our young people. So the question I have is that youth work does work, but can it work better? And that's something we are interested in exploring and that is part of what we want to reach in our conclusions, with participation and help from young people and from the ground up in Member States.

Recent policy developments suggest that youth work has the potential to do more and has a special relevance for those young people who are marginalised from traditional systems of education, employment and training. All of the reports I've mentioned, plus 'Europe 2020', recognise the potential of youth work can offer in meeting the needs this particular cohort of young people.

We do know the impact the crisis in Europe has had on young people. The problem of youth unemployment is significant and substantial. The increase in unemployment has been extraordinary among 15-24 year-olds – increased by 50%. We also have a very significant rise in young people not in education, employment or training – means that the 7.5m young people between the ages of 15 and 24 are at increased risk of poverty and social exclusion. And of course, we know that, in turn, will increase the risks in terms of their wellbeing and their health.

Eurofound's latest comparative research findings on this group of young people are very stark. They show huge economic loss, perhaps €153 billion, to us in terms of economic and social loss of this group of young people not being engaged in the areas that I have discussed and not getting the kind of opportunities that they need to participate and be involved.

That's what can be measured. What *can't* be measured is the fearful intangible: the cost of their disengagement from society in general.

Because this lack of engagement, as we know, whether it is in employment or social activities, is corrosive and is expensive. And it does leave unexpressed the capacity of young people for creativity, for innovation, entrepreneurship and adaptability, all invaluable in stimulating a renewed and sustainable return to economic well being in member states, all pivotal in creating a more inclusive society.

Ireland's Presidency programme aims to leverage the potential of the hugely valuable youth work services we have that support of young peoples' rightful place at the forefront of Europe's economic and social renewal.

Working to advance our Trio Presidency theme, with Lithuania and Greece, - Social Inclusion - Ireland's national priorities for the Youth Council Presidency are;

To explore the potential of youth work and youth activities to address the goals of Europe 2020, particularly youth employment and social inclusion issues;

To promote understanding of the contribution of quality youth work to young people's development, well-being and social inclusion; and

To complete the very important cycle of dialogue between young people and policy makers.

Ireland's Presidency will also seek to maximise the potential of youth policy in addressing the goals of the Europe 2020 Strategy.

We must forge greater alignments and alliances between the key policy domains such as youth, education, training and employment.

After all, Youth work engages young people over a relatively long developmental period from ages 10 to 24 and beyond.

Activity and learning take place outside school hours, oftentimes in local centres, outdoors and in all sorts of non traditional settings. It works for

young people at their own pace and because they themselves want to participate. It does what other more typical formalised response cannot do. Therein lies its potential. It's more than complementary to formal education, training and structured programmes and interventions. Much more. It adds value to them. Immeasurable value.

A Youth policy coordinated with related policy areas can have a significant impact on young people's outcomes in health and wellbeing, in education, training and employment. Indeed it may have very particular relevance for those young people who are not engaged in education, employment or training (NEETs).

This priority theme will be advanced through the Youth working Party, work programme. The Youth Council in May 2013 will be invited to adopt conclusions on the contribution of youth policy to Europe 2020. The conclusions the Council will consider will be informed by the EU Youth Conference and Directors General meeting to be held in March in Dublin.

Ireland plans to host and an expert round table event on youth work and its contribution to Europe 2020 and youth employment (20–21 June 2013, Dublin).

I want to stress that while we may not be able to measure the dire consequences of disaffection – of a generation of young people being spun loose and lost from engagement with society – we *must* be able to measure the quality of youth work. If we don't find ways to measure the quality of youth work, we won't be able to continually ensure and enhance this pivotal area.

That means youth organisations and youth workers working to plan.

It means delivering relevant and responsive activities and programmes.

It means real connection to the interests, needs and experiences of young people.

It means a focus on outcomes and a foundation in evidence.

It means a requirement that youth services be relevant and needs based.

It means guaranteeing maximum benefit from participation in youth work.

It means recognising the achievements of participants so they can make good use of what they've learned throughout their careers, throughout their lives.

The organisation of youth work in Member States is as diverse as the services and activities provided. This richness and diversity is essential to respond to the many dimensions of young people's experiences and needs. Increasingly, we appreciate the significance of quality standards in youth services in member states – and of coherence.

Further work is required to explore how, together, we can advance shared objectives for high quality and standards in the provision of services to young people.

I intend, following consideration of the youth working Party to bring to the Council of Youth Ministers meeting in May, Council Conclusions to develop a common understanding of quality in youth work and set out priorities to develop quality standards in youth work and youth activities in the EU.

I know that the European Parliament has a keen interest in promoting high standards in services to enhance education and learning and the recognition of skills and qualifications. Establishing the European Qualifications Framework in 2008 underlined Members' proactivity in this area.

Ireland's Presidency will follow closely the development of the European Commission's proposals for a Council Recommendation on a Youth on the Move Card, to support trans-national learning and employment mobility for young people. The Presidency will start the work on the policy document, if it becomes available in the coming months, paving the way for the incoming Lithuanian Presidency.

The slogan ‘Nothing about them – without them!’ captures the key principles of the EU Structured Dialogue process. The third cycle of the dialogue with young people is underway. More than 12,000 young people have had their say so far. They’ve made input to policy development at local, regional and national level. They’ve had their recommendations presented to the Youth Council of Ministers. That’s necessary. With close to 100 million citizens between the ages of 15 – 30 in the EU, we must be ambitious in our plans for the rising generation – and those plans must be rooted in their expressed needs.

A deepening of the process at national level reaching out to a broad range of young people would enrich the dialogue experience for all stakeholders. We must reach out to young people who are not organised in groups or associations, young people who have much to say but who don’t choose to say it via the established youth organisations. Special efforts must be made to include those who are hardest to reach, those with fewer opportunities and those seldom heard.

The Irish Presidency has provided us with opportunities to advance this at our flagship EU Youth Conference which will take place on the 11 – 13 March in Dublin.

Following on from the EU Youth Conference, Ireland will host an **informal meeting of Directors’ General of Youth from each Member State on 13th March 2013 in Dublin**. Officials of the European Commission will attend and contribute to this informal youth policy debate and exchange of good practices.

Ireland will host an **informal policy debate on structured dialogue** between policy makers, young people, European Commission and the European Youth Forum on the day of the Council of Youth Ministers’ meeting (16 May 2013 Brussels).

The Presidency will hold an **Expert Roundtable event on ‘Youth work and its contribution to Europe 2020 and Employment’** (20 – 21 June 2013, Dublin).

In summary, the Irish Presidency Youth Programme will prioritise work to identify how youth policy and the youth sector can bring new synergies and additional elements to achieve the goals of Europe 2020 strategy. Our Programme will highlight how quality standards in youth work are an important tool to promote the development, well-being and social inclusion of young people and to address the challenges faced by young people with fewer opportunities.

I aim to ensure that actions in the Youth domain during Ireland's Presidency build on what has been achieved for and with young people, result in a sustainable legacy for the development of youth policy and services and make a positive impact on Europe's young people.

Thank you for affording me the opportunity to outline my plans for the Presidency and I look forward to working with you over the next six months and beyond.