How to talk about youth work in Ireland

A framing guide for communicators

Sophie Gordon,
Principal Communications Strategist

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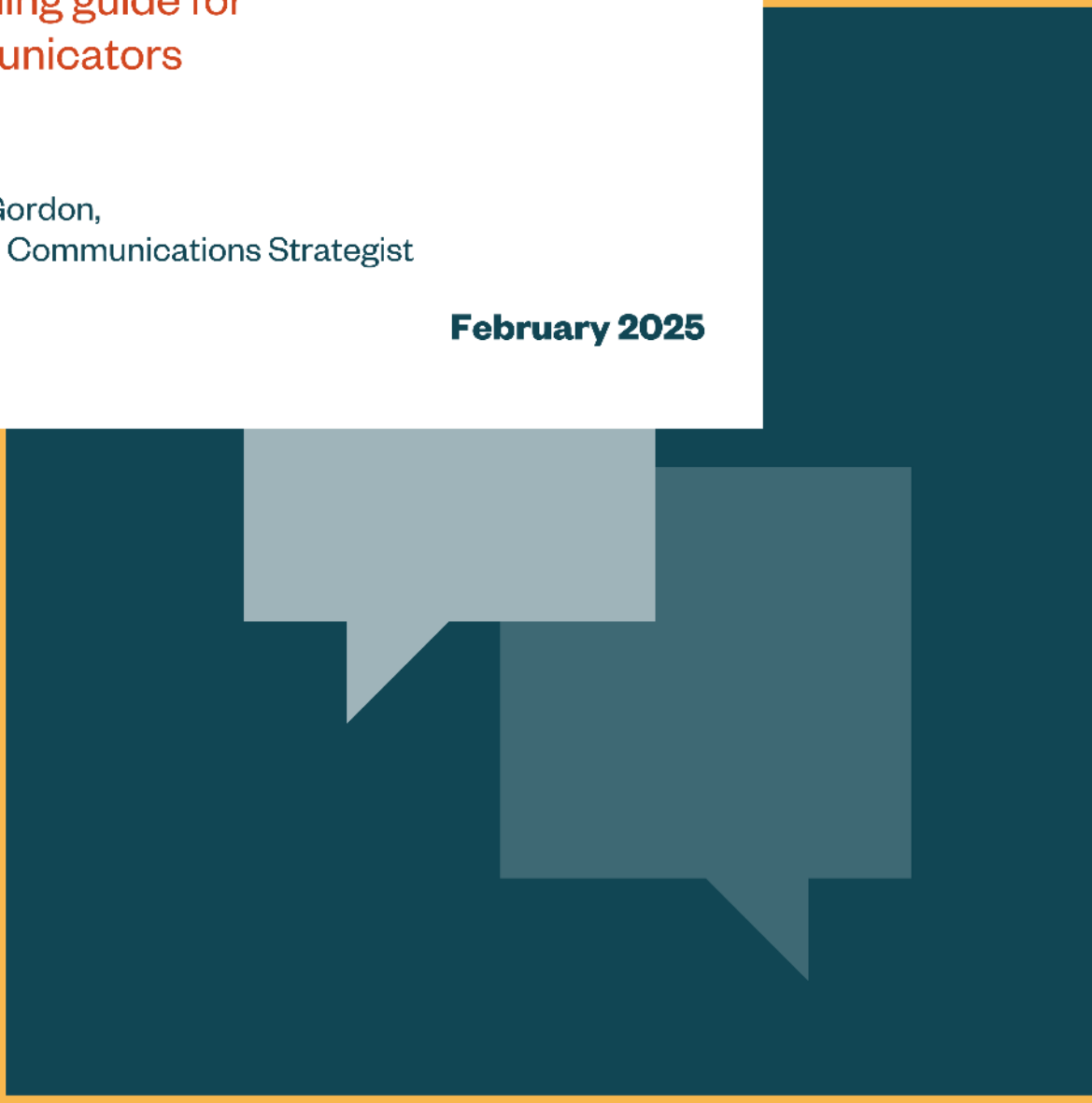

FRAME WORKS UK

In partnership with

NYCI National Youth Council of Ireland

Introduction

How we talk about youth work matters, as our communications have the power to shift hearts and minds.

This guide is for anyone communicating about youth work in Ireland. It provides practical guidance and advice to help build understanding of why providing the right spaces and opportunities for young people matters – and to help you make the case for support.

This guide draws on insights from FrameWorks UK's research – including insights for framing child protection[i], care experience[ii], health[iii], and poverty[iv]. It also draws on research into framing child and adolescent development[v] by our sister organisation the FrameWorks Institute in the United States. And it was informed by stakeholders from across the youth work sector, brought together by NYCI. This consultation revealed some specific communications challenges and opportunities.

The research this guide is based on was conducted in the UK and US, and it would be ideal to conduct this research in Ireland also. However, we have observed comparable communications challenges in Ireland and similar framing strategies to those found to be helpful in the UK and US are likely to be helpful here.

Communications challenges

Mindsets are deep, assumed patterns of thinking that shape how we see the world and how we act within it. Mindsets are shared, and activated by what we see and hear. At FrameWorks we've identified three dominant mindsets that influence how people think about a wide range of social issues.

Individualism

This is the idea that our outcomes – our failures and successes – are the narrow and exclusive result of our choices, effort and willpower. Thinking in this way can normalise inequality (because it leads people to think you get what you deserve) and make it harder to see the role and impact of our systems and surroundings on our lives.

Fatalism

This is the idea that the problems we're facing are too big and too complex to solve. Fatalism normalises the idea that taking action is pointless, and makes it much harder for us to recognise that solutions exist, or that they could make a difference.

Othering

This is the 'us and them' mindset that leads us to see our world as one of zero-sum competition. When this mindset is active, more for 'them/others' means less for 'me and mine'. Othering also leads people to reason that an issue affects others – not me – and, as a result, undermines engagement with that issue and can lead to stigma.

A further mindset to be aware of, which we have identified in our research into child and adolescent development:

"Blackbox" of development
Most people have a very limited understanding of child and adolescent development – tending to think of it as an automatic process. This causes us to underestimate the importance of stable, caring relationships and stimulating environments in shaping development. It can also lead to people thinking, fatalistically, that 'damage done is damage done' if a young person goes through adverse experiences. This can trigger othering and stigma, when people see young people who have faced adverse experiences as 'different' – rather than seeing that there are ongoing opportunities to provide the right support and help a child or young person's development get back on track.

When these mindsets are triggered, they can be significant barriers to change. In this guide we introduce tools and suggestions which will help to build understanding and support, and avoid triggering these unhelpful mindsets.

What is framing and how can it help?

Framing is the choices we make about what ideas we share and how we share them. This includes what we choose to emphasise, how we explain things, and what we leave unsaid. Framing can help us side-step the challenging beliefs people hold and unlock new ways of thinking about social issues.

Frames are not a set of messages. They are ideas. They can still be flexed in different ways, dialled up or down and tailored to suit an organisation or individual's voice. But by drawing on a shared set of frames, partners can align and amplify their communications to create a much clearer, stronger story.

How to build your story

'Story' can of course mean many things – from an overarching story about youth work, to the story of an organisation, or an individual's personal story. We can use framing to align and amplify across different stories by drawing on a shared set of framing principles to answer three questions:

- **Why does this matter – and what's it really about?**
- **How does this work?**
- **What can we do about it?**

We might not answer all of these questions in every piece of communication, but we should be thinking about them across our communications as a whole and working as a sector to try to answer them all. We can also use this structure in different ways – such as forming the basis of key messages for a campaign, making sure core brand messaging is answering all of these questions, or using it to support people to tell their own stories.

Why does this matter – and what's it really about?

1. Start with the positive impact of youth work

The order in which we come across ideas shapes how we respond to them and how we understand the information that comes next. We're more likely to remember things that come at the very beginning too – this is called the primacy effect – so what we lead with in our communications carries a lot of weight.

Youth work can take many forms, and this diversity is one of the things which makes it so valuable. However, it also means that defining youth work in terms of its 'inputs', the specific activities and forms it takes, can become unwieldy. It can also miss the point of why it really matters – what it is 'for' and the difference it makes to young people's lives.

Focussing on what youth work can *achieve* – rather that what it is – makes a compelling and joined up case for why it matters.

When we make the case for why something matters, we offer a shared reason to care. Establishing this common ground early on in our communications can help to overcome othering and engage people. It also shows what's at stake. And by starting with *positive* impact – showing people that youth work can make a difference to young people's lives, rather than leading with the negative consequences of a lack of opportunities for young people – we can sidestep fatalism.

Highlighting the positive impact of youth work also helps to shift people away from the notion that it is just a "nice to have", and instead presents it as an essential way to support young people and build a strong society.

What to do

- **Lead with the positive impacts of youth work,** before the specifics of how these are achieved.
- Talk about **individual and collective benefits.**
- Talk about the impact both **now and in the future.**

How to do it

Instead of:	Try:	Why?
"Youth work can vary significantly depending on the setting (such as youth clubs, dedicated youth centres, outreach and detached	"Youth work offers young people the spaces and opportunities to build relationships, explore their	**Leading with the outcomes of youth work speaks to its value – why it matters.**

projects (also known as street work), youth cafés, youth arts groups, in scouts and guides, youth action and participation groups and drug and alcohol projects) and the specific needs of the young people it serves."	identity, develop skills and increase their confidence. It is shaped by the needs of young people, and can take many forms – from clubs and groups to specific projects."	In some communications, you may want to then share one or more examples of the different forms it takes. But try to always start with the bigger picture of what youth work is *for.* This will also help to build a coherent picture of what different forms of youth work have in common – the value they bring to young people's lives.
"Youth work should be strongly and explicitly endorsed as a key element of national policy. The benefits it brings to young people and society must be publicly recognised."	"When young people have the safe spaces and opportunities to try new things, to forge relationships, and contribute to our communities, it's good for all of us. That's why youth work should be embedded in national policy."	**Spelling out the benefits – for young people and for all of us** – makes a stronger argument than the first example, by getting to the 'why'. Note the collective terms 'our' and 'us'. Language like this helpfully positions this as something that matters to us all, rather than creating distance between 'us' and 'them'.
"Right now, too many young people are missing out on the opportunities to broaden their horizons, build their confidence and connect to their communities."	"Not only do these opportunities impact young people's lives right now – by broadening their horizons, building confidence and connection to communities – they also set young people up for life. These opportunities help young people find their path, support their mental health now and in the future, and give them skills and confidence to succeed in life and at work."	**Talking about benefits and positive outcomes both now and in the future** speaks to the preventative nature (and long-term impact) of youth work, while also showing the immediate impact to young people. This helps to paint a picture of the downstream benefits AND the difference to young people's lives today, which make youth work more than the sum of its parts.

Bonus tip: how to make the economic case for youth work

FrameWorks' research on a range of issues has shown that when we rely on talking about economic benefits in order to show why an issue matters, this often does not boost support and can even backfire – triggering zero sum thinking.

However, making the economic case for an issue like youth work can be helpful – we just need to be mindful about how we frame it.

Sequencing is key. Make the economic argument after first establishing the 'why' – the positive impact of youth work on young people's lives and wider society. Explain how youth work positively impacts young people's lives, and how in turn that leads to cost savings (as per recommendation 2), rather than leaving people to join the dots.

In short, use an economic argument to support your story, rather than making it the whole story.

How does this work?

2. Harness the power of explanation

We need to explain how taking part in youth work shapes young people's lives – how it supports their social, emotional and identity development. We can also use explanation to show the importance and value of youth workers in guiding and shaping young people's development.

By explaining rather than just asserting something to be true, we can make sure we're building the understanding we want to. It's like showing our workings, rather than just expecting people to get to the same answer. Effective explanation ensures that we're filling in the gaps for people, rather than leaving holes in our story, which might be filled in with assumptions or stereotypes.

We know that individualism is dominant in people's thinking – so people will tend to think that how we do in life is a result of our own choices, effort and willpower. We also know that most people have a very limited understanding of how young people develop – tending to think of it as an automatic process.

Thinking in these ways can make it harder to see the role of our surroundings and things like the role of youth work (and youth workers). Thinking in terms of individualism can obscure why safe spaces and opportunities for young people are pivotal in shaping their development.

So we need to fill in the gaps. We need to add context and explain.

What to do

- **Try using the metaphor of 'discovery'** to explain the role youth work plays in development.
- **Use explanation to show, not just tell, how youth work shapes social, emotional, and identity development**. This means simply and explicitly making the connection between the opportunities and experiences offered by youth work and the impact this has on young people's development.
- **Avoid technical terms or jargon** – spell these out and bring them to life by explaining them well.

How to do it

The 'Discovery' metaphor

Metaphors can be an effective way to build understanding by comparing complex concepts to something more immediate and easily understood. They help to paint a picture and 'show' rather than just 'tell'.

Research in the US identified 'discovery' as a helpful way to explain that:

- adolescence is a critical period of discovery and opportunity – we explore the world around us and find the path to adulthood
- we need environments where all adolescents can take positive risks, discovering who they are and what they want for their future.

This metaphor helped to build understanding of how opportunities and environments shape development, and increased support for solutions. We suggest this could be helpful when applied to youth work in Ireland too.

The metaphor can and should be flexed and used in a variety of ways. For example:

- "Young people learn by trial and error. We can offer the safe spaces and support to do this."
- "When we're growing up, we need opportunities to test out new ideas and experiences."
- "Young people need the opportunities to unearth new experiences and make sense of them. Youth workers are here to guide them on their journey,"
- "Young people need to experiment. Youth work offers a laboratory of social learning, where young people can experiment with relationships, roles, and behaviours to better understand who they are and where they belong."
- "During adolescence, we begin to explore the world outside of our family in new ways."
- "Youth work helps children and young people find their path to adulthood, with youth workers helping them to navigate bumps in the road."

Some words and phrases you could use:

Discovering	Unearthing	Asking questions	Exploring
Experimenting	Mapping out	Finding answers	Equipping for the journey
Trying out	Navigating	Mapping out	Testing new ideas
Figuring out	Finding their path	New terrain	Laboratory

Instead of:	Try:	Why?
"Youth work has a transformative impact on many young lives. There is strong evidence to show that it promotes personal development and growth."	"We are all shaped by opportunities and experiences – and growing up is a critical time of discovery for all of us. Youth work offers young people the safe spaces and opportunities to explore the many paths in life."	The second example provides more explanation to *show* how development happens, rather than *telling* people there is strong evidence. It also talks about development as a universal experience (which can help to overcome othering), and links youth work to this.
"Youth workers build young people's capacity to consider risks and consequences in order to make informed choices and take responsibility. "	"Young people need opportunities to experiment – to learn by trial and error. Youth workers can provide the safe spaces and support for them to do that."	Using a version of the discovery metaphor helps to convey the idea of 'positive risks' and why these are important for development, without triggering the stereotype of a 'risky' or 'irresponsible teen'. Note how we can also bring in the role of youth workers, for example, in guiding and supporting young people on their journey of exploration and discovery.
"Youth-centred"	"Keeping young people's needs, interests and perspectives at the heart"	Spelling out the term not only makes it more accessible, it also brings it to life.
Relying on "youth work" as a shorthand	Spell it out, eg:	Using the term "youth work" is fine, but it doesn't do much heavy lifting by itself – many

	"Spaces and opportunities for young people to..." "Providing the safe spaces for young people to try new things and explore their place in society." "Opportunities and spaces for young people – from clubs and groups to exchanges and projects, support and advice."	people will have a fixed, limited idea of what it is. Consider spelling it out in ways that 'show' what it is and what it's for. Note that we can give specific examples of the opportunities and what young people get out of youth work. For example: "Spaces and opportunities for young people to learn and be challenged, to explore ideas like democracy and what it is to be a citizen of their community,"

Bonus tip: Make the positive case for youth work

Much like the first recommendation focuses on talking about the *positive* impact of youth work to show why it matters, as much as possible, explain how it works from a positive perspective too.

For example, rather than talking about "keeping young people off the streets", try talking about "offering young people safe spaces to grow, lead and contribute to their communities". The latter example makes a stronger case for youth work specifically, whereas young people could be "kept off the streets" in other ways that would not be so beneficial to their development.

This strengths-based framing is also more helpful for countering the mindset of othering, as it avoids triggering stereotypes of "problem teenagers".

3. Paint a varied picture of youth work

Many people do not know the extent of the different forms youth work can take. Painting a varied picture of what youth work looks like can help to build people's understanding of the diverse opportunities on offer for young people, and overcome misconceptions or fixed ideas. It can help to show that youth work is not one size fits all.

Remember to still put why youth work matters first – the outcomes rather than the inputs.

Rather than sharing a long list of different types of youth work in one piece of communication, consider focusing on one or two examples well, and working together as an organisation – and as a sector – to paint a varied picture across different pieces of communication.

What to do

- **Use specific examples of opportunities and activities** to bring youth work to life.
- **Use imagery to literally show** the different places, spaces, activities and people involved in youth work.
- **Explain what different types of youth work mean**, and give examples. For example, you could explain what Detached Youth Work is and what makes it unique and important.

What can we do about it?

4. Balance efficacy and urgency

Research on framing a wide range of issues shows that crisis framing frequently fails to deliver the hoped for effects[vi]. Crisis framing typically leads to one of two things. People either dismiss the claim outright or conclude that the problem is too big or complex to solve, and they are powerless to fix it.

Rather than simply positioning youth work as being in a state of crisis, we need to balance urgency with efficacy. Instilling communications with a sense of efficacy can help to boost support for solutions, and avoid triggering the fatalism mindset. For people to get behind youth work, they need to believe that change is possible, as well as seeing the need for action.

To achieve this, we need to spell out what we can do – solutions that we are advocating for, examples of what works, and how people can get involved or get behind it.

The focus on positive outcomes in recommendation 1 also adds to this sense of efficacy, by painting a vision for people to get behind. It shows what is possible when we work together to make things happen – and normalises action rather than inaction.

What to do

- **Try a 2:1 ratio.** For every dose of urgency (we need to act now) we should add two doses of efficacy (we can fix this). This applies to both content –like concrete solutions – and tone.
- **Offer specific solutions to issues you are highlighting.** Don't leave people hanging at the problem or imply 'it's just the way things are'.
- **Think about sequencing**. For example, you could start with efficacy (we can act) before urgency (we need to act) or start with what we have to gain, before what we stand to lose.

How to do it

Instead of:	Try:	Why?
"Youth work is facing a crisis – just when young people need help the most. At a time when young people are facing unprecedented challenges, there are fewer and fewer people engaged in working with them."	"Youth workers play a vital role in supporting young people through pivotal years of their lives. We need more people to get involved. We've seen a dramatic decrease in the number of youth workers, but it doesn't have to be this way. Together we can make sure every young person has the support and opportunities to thrive."	The first example uses crisis messaging and is framed in terms of what we stand to lose. It highlights a problem but does not offer a solution The second leads with what we stand to gain and spells out a solution: calling on more people to get involved with youth work. It also ends on a note of efficacy and uses collectivising language throughout.
"Our young people are in crisis, and without an increase in funding, we face an impossible task."	"We know that young people need us, and we are ready to rise to the challenge. With an increase in funding we can..."	This creates a sense of efficacy by acknowledging the challenge but focusing on what we *can* do. This would ideally be followed by what the funding would make possible.

Recap: how to build your story

Why does this matter – and what's it really about?

1. **Start with the positive impact of youth work** (and take care with economic arguments)

How does this work?

2. **Harness the power of explanation** (with a focus on the positive perspective**)**

3. **Paint a varied picture of youth work**

What can we do about it?

4. **Balance efficacy and urgency**

Further reading

From Risk to Opportunity: Framing Adolescent Development
Framing essentials: how explanation changes the conversation
Unleashing the Power of How: An Explanation Declaration
Framing essentials: fight fatalism with solutions

About FrameWorks UK

FrameWorks UK is a not-for-profit, mission-driven organisation, specialising in evidence-based communication strategies that shift hearts and minds.

We help charities and other organisations communicate about social issues in ways that create progress, through practical guidance underpinned by our framing research.

We're the sister organisation of the FrameWorks Institute in the US, which has been conducting framing research for more than 25 years. FrameWorks started working in the UK in 2012. And we established FrameWorks UK in 2021.

Change the story. Change the world.

Learn more at frameworksuk.org

[i] Communicating Connections: Framing the Relationship Between Social Drivers, Early Adversity, and Child Neglect, 2015
[ii] How to talk about care experience in Scotland, 2020
[iii] A matter of life and death: explaining the wider determinants of health, 2022
[iv] How to talk about poverty, 2018
[v] Talking about early childhood development, 2009; From risk to opportunity: Framing adolescent development, 2020
[vi] https://www.nytimes.com/2024/11/21/opinion/public-health-crisis-america.html?searchResultPosition=2