

Toolkit: Crafting Europe's Rural Tomorrow, It Starts
with You!

Bite sized learning 1.2: Active Citizenship for Youth



What is a youth advocate in a rural development context?

Imagine having someone in your corner, always looking out for your best interests and helping you tackle life's challenges. That person is called a **youth advocate**. Their main function is to protect your rights and help you grow in every aspect of your life, whether it's your relationships, education, health, housing, or career.

Youth advocates come in different forms and work in various places:

In Organisations:

Non-Profits: Think of groups that have teams of youth advocates who support and empower young people. They typically offer counselling, run support groups, or even campaign for better laws and services. [SpunOut.ie](https://spunout.ie) is Ireland's youth information website created by young people, for young people. They provide information on mental health, education, employment, housing and many other topics. They also run campaigns and support groups to empower and support young people across Ireland. Also [Teenline - ISPCC](https://teenline.ie) is a free national active listening service for children and young people up to the age of 18 in Ireland.

Government Agencies:

Social workers or youth workers, funded or backed by government, work to help young people get access to important services e.g. [Tusla - Child and Family Agency](https://tusla.ie)

Schools and Universities:

In schools and universities, youth advocates are counsellors or student support officers.



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Youth Work Ireland are funded by many agencies to support youth development through an informal education process enabling young people to build better local communities. They do this by providing a community-based response to young people's needs by offering them the opportunity to contribute to and participate in social education, artistic and recreational activities. One very active team is in Cavan | Monaghan but the work applies across Ireland <https://ywicm.ie/>

Healthcare:

There are also mental health advocates in hospitals or in the community (e.g. [Jigsaw in Ireland](#) working to make sure that every young person's mental health is valued and supported.).

Young carers are children and young people under the age of 18 whose lives are in some way affected because they provide care, assistance or support to another family member in the home. Young adult carers are recognised as a separate group and are aged between 18 and 24 years. [Family Carers Ireland](#) has a dedicated Young Carer Support Unit



At individual level:

Peer Advocates:

These are young people just like you, trained to support their friends and peers. They understand what you're going through because they've been there too, making their support very relatable. Irish peer advocate example is ECO-UNESCO, Ireland's Environmental Education and Youth Organisation, that works to conserve the environment and empower young people. They provide Level 5 training and qualifications to equip learners with the knowledge, skill and competence to act ethically and effectively as peer educators under direction in youth work contexts. [Level 5: Peer Education - ECO-UNESCO - Environmental Youth Organisation \(ecounesco.ie\)](https://ecounesco.ie)

Legal Advocates:

Did you know there are lawyers who specialise in youth justice? They stand by you to make sure your rights are protected. In Ireland, the [Children's Rights Alliance | Advocating for Every Child's Well-being \(childrensrights.ie\)](https://childrensrights.ie) has 150 members providing a legal helpline that offers advice and support to young people facing legal issues. They advocate for youth justice across 7 areas

1. [Fostering Children's Rights](#)
2. [Children's Rights in Laws, Policies and Practice](#)
3. [Building Children's Futures](#)
4. [Reducing Child Poverty and Social Exclusion](#)
5. [Educational Reform](#)
6. [National Movement for Children and Young People](#)
7. [People, Systems and Structures](#)

Note – this is not a full list of those involved in youth advocacy in Ireland. It serves to give you an idea of the scope of their work and encouragement to find out more about these, and others, involved in this area.



Why is Youth Advocacy so important in rural areas?

Youth advocacy has a really important role to play in rural areas to address the unique challenges faced by young people living there. By providing support, resources, and opportunities for empowerment, youth advocates help ensure that rural young people can thrive despite the obstacles they may encounter. Just some examples ..

- **Connecting to Resources** - Rural communities tend to be smaller and more spread out, which can lead to feelings of isolation among young people. There may be fewer social and recreational opportunities, making it harder for young people to connect with peers and form supportive networks. Youth advocates can help bridge the gap between rural young people and the resources they need, whether through virtual services, bringing services to the community, or advocating for better infrastructure and support.
- **Empowerment and Voice** - Youth advocates can ensure that young people's voices are heard in decision-making processes that affect their lives.
- **Stigma** - Mental health issues can carry a greater stigma in close-knit rural communities, making young people less likely to seek help. Access to mental health services can often be limited in rural areas, making it difficult for young people to get the support they need.



Real Life Story .. John's Mental Health Advocacy

Covid-19 was a tough time for John, a teenager in rural Ireland. He found himself experiencing severe anxiety and depression. He felt isolated and didn't know where to turn. His year-lead teacher, a trained youth advocate, noticed his struggles and reached out.

They connected John with [Jigsaw in Ireland](#) the youth mental health service that is based in his area. John was hesitant at first, but with teacher encouragement, he agreed to attend an initial session.

At Jigsaw, he met with a counsellor, who specialised in working with young people. She took the time to understand John's unique challenges and began working with him on developing coping strategies. These strategies included mindfulness exercises, breathing techniques, and practical steps to manage his anxiety.

In addition to one-on-one sessions, she recommended that John join a support group for teenagers dealing with similar issues. This group provided a safe space for John to share his experiences and listen to others who were going through the same struggles. For the first time, John felt understood and supported by peers who truly empathised with his situation.

His mental health improved significantly. Inspired by the support he received and wanting to give back, John decided to become a peer advocate himself. He underwent training provided by Jigsaw, learning how to support others who might be experiencing similar struggles, helping other young people in his area, sharing his story and encouraging them to seek help.





TOOLS for stakeholders involved in rural youth advocacy

quick, impactful actions and innovative tools, making it easy to implement and engage with youth advocacy in rural areas effectively.



Starting Point for Youth Advocacy in Rural Areas

Objective: To establish a foundational framework for effective youth advocacy in rural areas, ensuring that young people have access to the necessary support, resources, and opportunities to thrive.

Step 1: Identify Key Issues and Needs

The goal is to identify the specific needs, preferences, and challenges of young people to better tailor youth advocacy programmes and services.

Conduct a Community Survey

Tools: Google Forms for survey creation [Google Forms: Online Form Creator](#) | [Google Workspace](#)

Action: Design a short, focused survey to understand the challenges faced by young people in the rural community. Here are some ideas questions. Keep them simple....

1 Personal and Community Challenges

What are the main challenges you face in our rural community?

Options: Lack of recreational activities, transportation issues, limited educational opportunities, lack of employment opportunities, limited access to mental health services, climate anxiety, not enough time with friends, social isolation, other (please specify).

2. Support Services

What types of support services do you feel are lacking in our community?

Options: Socialisation opportunities, mental health services, diverse educational opportunities, recreational facilities, other (please specify).

IMPORTANT

Use the contents of this module to explain and give examples of what youth advocacy is and how it can benefit as the starting point in the survey process.



Starting Point for Youth Advocacy in Rural Areas

3. Free Time Activities

How do you typically spend your free time?

Options: Sports and physical activities, hanging out with friends, online gaming/social media, studying/reading, working part-time jobs, participating in community events, other (please specify).

4. Mental Health Services

How would you rate the availability of mental health services in our area?

Options: Excellent, Good, Fair, Poor, Very Poor

5. Mental Health and Well-being

Do you feel comfortable seeking help for mental health issues in our community?

Options: Yes, No, Sometimes. Follow-up: If no or sometimes, what are the barriers to seeking help?

6. Peer Support

Would you be interested in participating in peer support groups?

Options: Yes, No, Maybe

Ask 2 -3 pertinent questions about the key advocacy area you wish to concentrate on. This could be the environment, education etc. This is your starting point to know the baseline for any advocacy initiative



Starting Point for Youth Advocacy in Rural Areas

7. Community Involvement

What types of community events or activities would you like to see more of to support youth advocacy?

Options: Youth leadership workshops, mental health awareness events, climate action projects, educational workshops on advocacy skills, volunteer opportunities, sports tournaments, music and arts festivals, other (please specify).

8. Access to Information

Where do you usually get information about youth advocacy services and activities in your community?

Options: School/college, social media, community centres, friends and family, local newspapers, community bulletin boards, local radio, other (please specify).

9. The How Question

What specific improvements would you suggest to enhance youth advocacy in your community?



Starting Point for Youth Advocacy in Rural Areas

Step 2: Crunch the Numbers - Data Collection and Analysis

- **Tools:** Excel or Google Sheets for data entry and basic analysis.
- **Action:** Summarise the survey responses.
- **Focus:** Identify the top issues and opportunities for advocacy. What does the survey findings tell you about issues such as:
 - **Socialisation and Recreation:** Evaluate the availability and desire for recreational and socialisation opportunities.
 - **Peer Support:** Gauge the interest in peer support programs and the potential for peer-led initiatives.
 - **Mental Health:** Assess the availability and accessibility of mental health services and identify barriers to seeking help.
 - **Community Engagement:** Determine the interest and participation levels in community activities and events.
 - **Climate Anxiety:** Identify concerns related to climate change and the need for environmental advocacy.
 - **Education:** Evaluate the need for additional educational support and resources.
 - **Employment:** Understand the employment challenges and opportunities for young people.



Starting Point for Youth Advocacy in Rural Areas

Step 3: Data Analysis and Output

Steps to Follow

- 1. Data Cleaning:** Ensure that the data is clean and consistent, with no duplicate or incorrect entries.
- 2. Categorisation:** Categorise responses into different themes such as mental health, education, employment, etc.
- 3. Analysis:** Use basic statistical tools to analyse the data and identify trends and patterns. **Examples:** Pivot tables, charts, and graphs to visualise the data.
- 4. Summarisation:** Summarise the key findings in a clear and concise manner. **Example:** "70% of young people indicated a lack of recreational activities as a major challenge."
- 5. Actionable Insights:** Identify actionable insights that can inform your advocacy plans. **Example:** "Focus on increasing mental health awareness and support services, as 60% of respondents rated the availability of mental health services as poor."
- 6. Output:** Create a report or presentation summarising your findings, which can be shared with community members, and potential partners to inform and support your advocacy efforts. This report should highlight the key issues identified and suggest potential advocacy initiatives based on the data collected.

Video Tutorials

How to Analyze Survey Data in Google Sheets

Link: [Data Analysis with Google Sheets - Where to Start? \(measureschool.com\)](https://measureschool.com/data-analysis-with-google-sheets-where-to-start/)

This article brings you to tutorials focused specifically on analyzing survey data from Google Forms



Starting Point for Youth Advocacy in Rural Areas

Step 4: Share the Findings

Now you have your report, it is time to get it into circulation and get support in your wider community. We suggest..

- **Presentation:**
 - Create a visually engaging presentation that highlights key findings and actionable insights.
 - Use charts, graphs, visuals and testimonials from the young people involved in the survey to make the data more accessible and engaging.
 - Include a section on next steps and how the community can get involved.
 - Share a vision of the change that your youth advocacy project can achieve e.g. better youth mental health in your community, more young people involved in recreation etc.
- **Report Distribution:**
 - Share your report with stakeholders, community members, and make available online.
 - Schedule and host community meetings to present the findings and gather feedback.
 - Use these meetings to discuss the findings in detail and encourage community members to participate in upcoming initiatives.
 - Offer virtual meeting options to ensure everyone can attend, regardless of location.



*If you want to lift yourself up,
lift up someone else*



Booker T. Washington



Thank you
Any Questions?