



An Evaluation of Youthreach

Inspectorate Evaluation Studies



PROMOTING THE QUALITY OF LEARNING

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Foreword

Youthreach is a national provider in the Irish education and training continuum. Since its establishment in the 1980s, Youthreach has been a fundamental element of the response of the Department of Education and Skills and the Government to early school leaving and educational disadvantage in Ireland. It has provided a way in which young people and adults may return to, or complete their education in a non-threatening learner-centred environment. Youthreach caters for almost 6,000 learners annually in places funded by the Department of Education and Skills.

Since 2006 the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills has been involved in evaluating the quality of the education and training provision in those Youthreach centres funded by the Department. This report is based on the findings and recommendations from twenty-five of these evaluations.

This report describes the considerable successes of the programme. It acknowledges the effectiveness of Youthreach at recruiting its target group and highlights the strong focus that the programme places on the holistic development of the individual learner. Learners who engaged fully with their programme were seen to have positive learning experiences, improved self-esteem and self-worth and enhanced personal and social development. The report praises the positive atmosphere of centres, and the considerable time and effort devoted by Youthreach staff members to getting to know learners individually—their background, their parents and families. These features were found to play a key role in the support offered to learners. The report also shows how engagement with the Quality Framework Initiative (QFI) has fostered a culture of planning in centres, which is characterised now by collaboration and inclusivity.

The report highlights the challenges that exist for Youthreach and shows that while centres have the capacity to make changes in some areas, they may require external assistance to effect change in others. Considerable challenges still exist in areas such as centre management and staffing, programme development, lack of access to the services of national agencies, and accommodation, as well as in other areas to do with learner attendance, retention, assessment, certification and progression. The quality of classroom discourse, and in particular learners' literacy and numeracy skills development, is another aspect requiring attention. Improvements in these and other areas would lead to more efficient and effective operation of the Youthreach programme and ultimately to more rewarding educational experiences for learners.

Youthreach continues to develop and evolve. A range of developments, such as the quality framework initiative, the special education needs initiative (SENI) and indeed evaluations conducted

by the Department's Inspectorate, have been initiated in recent years with a view to bringing more consistency and cohesion to the programme, and to promoting a culture of planning and self-evaluation. I hope that this report will contribute to this culture of continuous improvement; it is intended as a resource for Youthreach management and teaching personnel and will also prove useful for policy-makers and other key stakeholders.



Harold Hislop
Chief Inspector



Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 What is Youthreach?

The Youthreach programme offers second-chance education and training to young people who have dropped out of school early. It is directed at young, unemployed, early school-leavers aged fifteen to twenty years and operates on a full-time, year-round basis. Youthreach seeks to provide early school-leavers with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate fully in society and to progress to further education, training, and employment. The objectives for its participants, termed learners, may be summarised as follows:

- personal and social development and increased self-esteem
- second-chance education and introductory-level training
- the promotion of independence, personal autonomy, active citizenship, and a pattern of lifelong learning
- integration in further education, training opportunities or the labour market
- the promotion of social inclusion.

Youthreach is funded by the Department of Education and Skills. It is delivered through a network of 103 centres for education managed by Vocational Education Committees (VECs).¹ The centres in which the programme is delivered are out-of-school settings and are distributed throughout the country, generally serving disadvantaged areas.

Table 1.1 shows the number of places approved by the Department in VEC Youthreach centres nationally since 2001. Four hundred new places were provided in 2007.

Table 1.1: Approved places in the VEC Youthreach programme for the period 2001–2007

Year	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007
Approved places	2,947	3,031	3,258	3,258	3,258	3,292	3,692

1.2 Quality assurance in Youthreach

Quality assurance in Youthreach is supported by the Quality Framework Initiative. Following developmental and piloting work, this initiative was introduced nationally in 2006. It aims to provide a comprehensive planning, evaluation and validation framework for Youthreach. The framework consists of four building blocks, namely: (1) quality standards, (2) internal centre evaluation (ICE), (3) centre development planning (CDP), and (4) external centre evaluation. A set of quality standards for centres, along with guidelines on both ICE and CDP, has been developed. In some centres the initiative involves the development of a three-year plan followed by three years of internal evaluation, with a focus on evaluating the implementation of the plan. In other centres the internal evaluation process involves an evaluation of the centre's performance against the quality standards and results in the production of an annual plan. Centres engage in CDP or ICE processes annually. The external evaluation of Youthreach commenced in 2006.

Quality assurance in Youthreach centres in respect of the Further Education and Training Awards Council (FETAC) is discussed in section 4.2.4.

1. The Youthreach programme is also delivered in around thirty Community Training Centres (CTCs) throughout the country and in ten Justice Workshops. These centres are funded by FÁS or the Department of Justice and Law Reform, or both. This report is not concerned with that group of centres.

1.3 External evaluation of centres for education

1.3.1 Background to the Inspectorate's evaluation of centres for education

Since 2006 the Inspectorate has evaluated the Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Centres funded by the Department of Education and Skills. These evaluations are designed to:

- introduce the practice of external evaluation to centres for education, as provided for in the Education Act (1998), section 7 (2) (b)
- identify, acknowledge and affirm good practice in centres
- identify, in a constructive way, areas for improvement in centres
- promote the goals of the quality framework initiative
- provide an assurance of quality in the non-formal sector of the education system based on the collection of objective, dependable and high-quality data
- inform Department of Education and Skills policy towards future development.

In 2006 and 2007 the Inspectorate undertook an evaluation of the quality of management, planning and education provision in twenty-five VEC-managed Youthreach centres, and reported also in each case on the centre's context and ethos. The evaluation of centres for education is now a continuous process.

1.3.2 Evaluation activities in Youthreach centres

An evaluation of a Youthreach centre commences with a pre-evaluation meeting between the inspection team and the centre's management personnel and staff. The centre also completes a programme questionnaire and a learner data form for the inspection team. The in-centre evaluation phase usually takes place a week after the pre-evaluation meeting and is generally conducted over two or three days. During these days the inspectors visit classrooms and observe teaching and learning. They also interact with the staff and learners, examine learners' work and conduct interviews with learners and with parents where relevant. The inspectors also meet the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) and sometimes the Education Officer (EO) or Adult Education Officer (AEO) of the relevant VEC, along with a centre's board of management (where one exists). Relevant centre documents are also reviewed, including the written lesson preparation of staff members. A post-evaluation meeting is held between the inspection team and the centre's management personnel and staff following the in-centre evaluation phase. The draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation are presented and discussed at this meeting. The centre is subsequently issued with a written evaluation report. Each report presents the findings of the evaluation and makes recommendations for further development. Management personnel are given the opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of their report, and, where applicable, their response is published as an appendix to the report. The final report is published on the web site of the Department of Education and Skills.

1.3.3 Composite national report

This report is the product of an analysis and synthesis of twenty-five reports of Youthreach evaluations conducted during 2006 and 2007. This sample represents 27% of the total number of Youthreach centres that existed at the end of 2007. While this report presents findings based on observations of practice in the centres and classrooms visited, it also incorporates an analysis of

programme questionnaires and learner data forms that each centre completed as part of its evaluation. This report analyses and comments on:

- the context in which centres operate
- the management of centres, including the management of staff, accommodation and other resources
- the centres' plans and policies, including the planning process and implementation of the plans
- the learning environment, including the ethos of centres and how learning is supported in them
- the programme offered to learners, including curriculum and timetabling matters
- teaching and learning in centres.

While reference is made to classrooms throughout this report, it should be understood that the term incorporates other places of learning visited by the inspectors, including workshops, kitchens, gardens, and other outdoor areas. The purpose of the report is to make a positive contribution to the development of the Youthreach programme, and to the quality of management, planning, teaching and learning that takes place in centres. The objectives of the report are fourfold:

- to assist centres and the teaching staff in the process of self-evaluation and review
- to inform and encourage professional dialogue
- to draw attention to examples of best practice
- to suggest areas for improvement.

This publication is intended as a resource for centres' management and teaching personnel. It is also expected to be useful for policy-makers and other stakeholders.



Chapter 2

Centres in context

2.1 Introduction

This chapter outlines the general context in which the twenty-five Youthreach centres evaluated were seen to operate. It begins by making reference to the origin and location of those centres evaluated and it profiles the learners enrolled at the time of the evaluations. Some commentary is provided on the age range of learners, the learner referral systems in operation, and enrolment levels in centres. Reference is also made to the wide range of learning needs of participants. Finally, the nature of the learning programmes that were provided in the centres is described.

2.2 Origin and location of centres

Most of the centres evaluated were founded in the immediate aftermath of the official launch of Youthreach in 1988 and in the earlier years of the 1990s. The FÁS training tradition, which is commonplace in the parallel network of Community Training Centres (CTCs) that were set up before the establishment of Youthreach centres in 1988, was found to be quite strong in a few centres. However, there was evidence to suggest that those particular centres continue to adapt to the Youthreach model, which blends elements of youth work, training, and education. A small number of centres were established in more recent years in response to a local need.

While a few centres were sited in small rural towns, most were sited in urban settings. Of the centres inspected that were sited in cities and large towns a small number were found to attract most of their learners from specific localities or districts. In the case of these particular centres a perception had developed in the area that they catered only for eligible participants from those districts.

Many centres were in a relatively central site in their area. The value of being in a central site was mentioned to the inspectors by Youthreach personnel on numerous occasions. A central site made it easier for learners to gain access to a centre, which in turn facilitated more regular attendance. Transport to centres rarely presented a problem for learners, despite the fact that 18% of all learners in those centres evaluated resided some distance from their centre. The most common modes of transport used by learners included walking, public bus, and parental transport. In the case of the more rural centres the withdrawal of school buses at mid-term and other holiday periods was found to adversely affect learners' attendance rates. Some learners travelled in vehicles funded by their centre, by the local VEC or by the Department of Education and Skills. A few learners cycled, drove their own cars, or availed of a lift. Given the geographical spread of centres visited in the course of this evaluation process, it can be said that most areas of the country have reasonable access to a centre for education delivering the Youthreach programme.

All the Youthreach centres visited operated in an out-of-school setting. A range of building types was encountered, the quality of which varied from centre to centre. (The issue of accommodation will be explored in greater detail in chapter 3.)

2.3 Profile of Youthreach learners

2.3.1 Age range of learners

Most learners in the centres visited were aged between sixteen and twenty. Occasionally, learners up to the age of twenty-seven were encountered. These were learners who, for a variety of reasons, were only now availing of second-chance education and training. Despite the minimum school leaving age being enshrined in legislation, some of the centres visited were experiencing pressure to admit learners under the age of sixteen. Some pressure to enrol in Youthreach under the age of sixteen was seen to come from members of the Traveller community, most of whom at present enter Youthreach at the age of fifteen. Discussions with centres' management personnel frequently revealed problems associated with appropriate educational provision for applicants aged between twelve and sixteen who were not attending, or who had become disaffected with, mainstream schooling. Such disaffection, allied to frequent suspension or permanent exclusion from school, was offered by most learners as the reason they had come to Youthreach. For most, their experience of school was bleak, and laced with negativity.

2.3.2 Referrals and enrolments

According to information supplied by each of the twenty-five centres before their evaluation, the enrolment of a learner on a Youthreach programme was instigated for the most part either by the learner themselves or by a parent, generally the mother. Table 2.1 shows those found to be involved in the referral process.

Table 2.1: Persons involved in referring learners to Youthreach

Person who referred the learner	Mother	Father	HSCL teacher	Visiting Teacher	Education Welfare Officer	Other
% of learners who were referred	37%	8%	5%	4%	4%	42%

The majority of those persons referred to under the category entitled "Other" involved self-referral by the learner. A small number of young people, however, were referred by other relatives or by personnel attached to the Health Services Executive (HSE), social workers, local juvenile liaison officers (JLO), or residential care or community youth project personnel. In general, it can be seen that the professional assistance offered to learners and their families in the referral process was limited.

The total combined enrolment of the twenty-five centres evaluated was 834 learners, of whom 435 (52.1%) were male and 401 (47.9%) were female. A good gender balance among learners existed in the majority of centres. Of the learners enrolled in these centres 141, or 17%, were members of the Traveller community. This participation of Travellers in the centres may rise, however, in line with the further education provisions outlined in the *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy* (2006)² and Department of Education and Skills circular letter 86/2008, which prohibits the enrolment of learners under eighteen years in senior Traveller training centres from the beginning of January 2009.

² Government of Ireland (2006), *Report and Recommendations for a Traveller Education Strategy*, Dublin: Department of Education and Science.

Thirteen of the twenty-five centres evaluated had enrolments of between twenty and thirty students; the smallest had eighteen. The largest centre visited had ninety learners enrolled (thirty-five male, fifty-five female). The ratio of female to male learners in this centre was due to the provision of a back-to-education initiative (BTEI) programme with crèche facilities for young mothers.

2.3.3 Learners' needs

The learners enrolled in the twenty-five centres evaluated were found to have a wide and varied mix of individual learning needs. This was evident from discussions held with the centres' personnel and with a small number of professionals who worked closely with a few centres, from discussions with learners themselves, and from reviews of the centres' documents, including the learner data forms that all centres completed for the inspection team before their evaluations.

It was clear to the inspectors that many of these young people had learning, emotional or behavioural difficulties, often exacerbated by family problems and mental health issues. In discussions with learners, some outlined the emotional pressures that they had experienced in life so far. Learners regularly described, for example, the rejection they felt as a result of being "put out of mainstream education." The inspectors were also made aware of other factors affecting the learners, particularly relating to dysfunctional family backgrounds, substance misuse problems, literacy and numeracy problems, poor physical health, violent behaviour, and personal isolation.

Of learners in the centres visited 41% were reported to have some form of individual plan in place. Such a plan was reported to be under development for 9% of learners, while the item was unanswered in the learner data forms for 5% of learners. At its highest level, therefore, it could be said that up to 55% of learners in centres had their own individual education, learning or action plan. For the most part, these plans were of a general nature, indicating mainly an outline of FETAC modules to be studied. They fell short of what might be expected of an individual learning plan. (This issue will be addressed further in a later chapter.)

The pre-evaluation information provided by centres concerning the literacy and numeracy levels of learners was generally imprecise, but for the most part these levels were designated as "poor" or "weak" with the occasional description as "fair", "good", "average", or "excellent". A minority of centres responded with individual learners' spelling or reading age as gauged by a variety of tests, such as *Marino Word Recognition* and *Young Cloze Three*. However, detail at this level was in limited supply in most centres, because very little, if any, initial assessment of learners was taking place in centres. Centres with limited access to psychological, counselling or psychiatric services were often seen to depend initially on the expertise of staff members for ascertaining the general level of ability and achievement of the applicant. This work was done mainly by the co-ordinator or resource person. On the whole, widespread literacy and numeracy deficits were indicated.

Absenteeism by learners was a significant problem in most centres. Data supplied by each centre evaluated showed that daily attendance was frequently less than half and rarely reached more than two-thirds of the learner cohort.

All centres experienced difficulties in accessing appropriate inter-agency support, particularly in dealing with learners showing elements of psychiatric disorder, low levels of emotional intelligence, or significant cognitive difficulties. Centres, for example, do not have access to the educational

psychological services of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) (except for those involved in the SENI³), while learners themselves have no access to the NEPS casework service. In the case of the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) only unofficial support is provided at present. This lack of access to the services of national agencies was acknowledged in the 2008 value-for-money review of Youthreach by the Department of Education and Skills.⁴ That report recommended that “Youthreach learners should be able to avail of the services provided by national agencies such as NEPS, NEWB, NCSE, NCTE etc. as is the case with learners in mainstream schools.”

2.4 The learning programme

Typically, a learner spends two years in a Youthreach centre. While Youthreach is a national programme, centres are locally managed, and programmes can therefore reflect the particular social, economic and cultural environment in which they operate. Courses accredited by the Further Education and Training Awards Council are common in centres, but a significant number of centres also offer other courses, or elements of other courses, such as the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP), the Junior Certificate programme and the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme.

The three elements of youth work, training, and general education permeate most of the programmes offered in centres. Youth work aspects of a programme usually take the form of social and personal education, sometimes delivered as structured parts of the education programme and sometimes delivered very effectively in informal settings and in an informal manner. The provision of work experience, along with a number of practical subjects, is generally viewed as the main manifestation of the training element. However, in those centres where the programme is planned and managed in a comprehensive fashion, learners are consistently focused towards achieving gainful employment upon their progression from the centre. Throughout the evaluations, examples of good practice were seen in classroom management, where learners were encouraged to focus on problem-solving, on learning by doing and on tackling work in incremental, cumulative segments, and especially where they were aware of the practical, tangible, employment-focused outcomes. The formal courses provided in centres, such as FETAC-accredited courses or the Junior Certificate and LCA, comprise the education element of programmes.

³ The Special Education Needs Initiative (SENI) is described in section 8.3.4.

⁴ Government of Ireland (2008). *Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Programmes funded by the Department of Education and Science: Value for Money Review*, Dublin: Department of Education and Science, p. 239.



Chapter 3

The quality of centre management

3.1 Introduction

Youthreach centres generally have two or three distinct management layers. This chapter begins by commenting on the senior management layer at the level of the Vocational Education Committee. Some centres also operate boards of management, and this layer is addressed next. The chapter then turns its attention to in-centre management and administration arrangements. It also considers the management of centres' staff, accommodation and resources.

3.2 Vocational Education Committee

Almost all the twenty-five centres evaluated operated directly under the auspices of their local VEC. In one instance a VEC shared responsibility for the management and operation of the Youthreach centres within its remit with a local non-governmental organisation. The partnership arrangement in this instance was found to operate very effectively. The good working relationship that was observed by inspectors was facilitated by a memorandum of understanding between both parties and that allowed for each organisation to "play leading roles in a variety of functions."

Line-management responsibility for a centre usually either rested with the chief executive officer of the VEC or was delegated to an education officer or adult education officer. VEC members generally learned of the progress of their centres through reports from the relevant chief executive officer or education officer or through the circulation of the minutes of board of management meetings (where boards existed) at VEC meetings. It was found that the larger the VEC scheme the less likely it was for responsibility to rest directly with the CEO, and in the majority of schemes it was an education officer or an adult education officer who had managerial responsibility for, or a closer relationship with, a centre. Despite this, the inspectors found that almost all CEOs were very familiar with the origins, organisation, operation and challenges of their centres. While this can be attributed to the regular briefings that they received from their education officer, it can also be attributed to the high level of personal interest in and commitment to centres displayed by the CEOs themselves. One report, for example, commented that

the chief executive officer is thoroughly familiar with the work of the centre, with its successes and with the various challenges that it faces. The proactive role taken by the chief executive officer in overseeing its operation is laudable.

Most CEOs viewed the role of the VEC, as mentioned in one inspection report, "as that of support to the centre management team, while also functioning in an advisory capacity." A common feature among all VEC schemes and centres was that a designated manager, or liaison person, based in the VEC head office, facilitated effective and regular communication between the VEC and the centre. A few VEC schemes, particularly the larger schemes, had Youthreach county co-ordinators. These co-ordinators, whose duties varied according to the VEC scheme, were also found to facilitate, even bolster, communications between VEC head offices and centres.

The inspections revealed that the existence of genuine levels of interest in and commitment to centres among personnel at the level of VEC head office had a positive influence on staff morale and the quality of work undertaken in centres. Centres that felt valued, actively supported in their work by head office, and “regarded by their VEC as an integral part of the service continuum in their county” appeared to flourish. On the other hand, the inspectors in a few instances found local VEC senior management personnel displaying limited interest or involvement in their Youthreach centres. In some VECs the co-ordinator of the Youthreach centre attended regular management meetings with the CEO and with principals or directors and co-ordinators of other VEC schools and centres for education. This is an excellent example of how schemes fully integrated their Youthreach sector within their general structures for education provision.

The inspectors felt that there was a “communications gap” or that the quality of relations between VEC head office personnel and personnel in centres could be improved in a few instances. In these circumstances there was usually nobody at the head office level that had direct or line-management responsibility for Youthreach. In these cases a recommendation was generally made that such a person be identified. In one centre, for example, it was recommended that the VEC should

become more closely involved in working with the management personnel in the centre. Such a level of collaboration would help to create a more supportive framework for centre management and provide assistance in the development and implementation of plans and policies.

More worryingly, in a small number of instances the inspectors found that the VEC management allowed inappropriate and ineffective centre management strategies and practices to continue to operate, despite being aware of serious shortcomings.

While senior management personnel were all familiar with the Vocational Services Support Unit (VSSU) procedures (2004) pertaining to centres for education, not all could vouch for their full implementation in their centre. Inspectors regularly referred to there being opportunity to promote their implementation further in centres.

Senior VEC management personnel and, where relevant, members of boards of management of almost all the centres evaluated were acutely aware of the continuing need for Youthreach staff development and training. Most ensured that the centre’s staff had access to local and nationally provided professional development programmes. In many instances members of the staff were actively encouraged and facilitated to attend courses and acquire additional qualifications. VEC management personnel generally had the responsibility for staff recruitment in centres and in many instances involved in-centre management personnel in the recruitment or selection process—a practice that the inspectors considered to be appropriate.

The senior management personnel attached to almost all the Youthreach centres visited displayed a keenness to ensure that their centre’s accommodation was suitable and safe. In a few instances evidence was provided that VECs were actively pursuing improved accommodation facilities.

Features of good practice

- Almost all VECs had a designated officer at the senior management level with responsibility for Youthreach who was familiar with and supported their centre
- Some VEC schemes fully integrated their Youthreach sector within their general structures for education provision
- Effective channels of communication were present between VEC and in-centre management personnel in most centres
- In almost all instances the senior management promoted staff training and development, as well as safe and suitable accommodation

Concerns

- In a few instances the VEC senior management showed little interest or involvement in their Youthreach centres
- Not all senior managements could vouch for the full implementation of the vocational services support unit procedures in their centre

3.3 Board of management

Although Youthreach centres are not required to have a board of management, evaluations found that of the twenty-five centres inspected twelve had a board of management. These boards operated as sub-committees of their respective VECs and in all instances included people from a variety of backgrounds. Board members included, for example, elected representatives or executive officers of the relevant VEC, representatives of local and national agencies, members of the local business and industry sector, and persons from local community and youth groups and organisations, as well as representatives of Youthreach staff. The inspectors frequently commented on the high level of professionalism and dedication displayed by board members, particularly with regard to their commitment to the type of education provided by their centre. It was noticeable, however, that parents were usually under-represented on boards. The inspectors frequently recommended that “parents be offered the opportunity to become full and active members of the board of management.” It was noticeable also that the majority of boards did not have representation by learners. The most common reason given by centres in these cases was that they had a learner council. All centres should facilitate learners in establishing a learner council.

Some VECs had adopted innovative approaches in setting up boards of management for their centres. In one case a single board governed two Youthreach centres within the particular VEC scheme and comprised, among others, the co-ordinators of each of the two centres. This promoted the sharing of good practice between the two centres involved. In another instance there were plans for setting up a board of management that would “have a remit for all further and adult education services provided by the VEC, including Youthreach (others include Vocational Training and Opportunities Scheme, post-Leaving Certificate and adult literacy).” The board proposed here was quite a new departure with regard to management structures, in that its remit extended beyond the Youthreach sector itself.

Most of the boards of management encountered in centres met regularly. Attendance at meetings was reported to be high in most instances. It was common practice for minutes of board meetings

to be recorded comprehensively and circulated appropriately. Good practice was observed where the minutes of board meetings were adopted at regular VEC meetings. The minutes of board meetings, in the case of those centres that had boards, were made available to the inspectors for review during the evaluations. The issues discussed regularly at meetings included community relations and disciplinary matters as well as transport, accommodation and curricular issues. Budgetary matters, the inspectors found, were generally left for discussion at VEC meetings. The CEO, or another designated person, generally took responsibility for pay and non-pay budget allocation and expenditure. Interviews held with boards revealed that members were generally aware of the challenges facing their centres. Some members, however, were unclear about the legislative environment in which they operated. Similarly, some were unfamiliar with the VSSU procedures pertaining to centres for education. It was common for inspectors in these cases to recommend that appropriate training be organised.

The level of engagement of board of management personnel, including VEC management personnel, with the Quality Framework Initiative, particularly in policy development work, varied from centre to centre. In one centre the CEO and adult education officer had actively participated in relevant activities, while in another it was mentioned that the VEC and the board had adopted a hands-off approach to the implementation of the QFI. The inspectors also found that many boards were not involved in the development of policy for their centre but viewed their function more as one of policy ratification. The inspectors usually made recommendations in such cases that senior management and board of management personnel engage more actively with the initiative.

In general, evaluations concluded that boards of management were an asset to centres. There were opportunities for them to support centres' planning and policy development and to support the in-centre management's decision-making processes. They also helped centres to foster strong links with their local community. One evaluation report commented that "the membership of the board has strong links with the community . . . which are invaluable in eliciting community support and goodwill towards the centre." Some centres were able to utilise the community links that their boards provided to secure work experience placements for their learners. In others it was suggested that the possible community links that their boards presented be exploited. The inspectors asked those centres that did not have a board of management to consider establishing such a board.

Features of good practice

- Although not required to have one, slightly fewer than half the centres evaluated had a board of management
- Most management boards met regularly, attendance at meetings was good, and detailed records were kept and circulated appropriately
- The members of most boards of management were aware of the challenges facing their centre
- Some centres were able to utilise the community links that their boards provided to secure work experience placements for their learners
- The existence of learner councils in some centres gave learners a representative voice

Concerns

- There was little representation by parents or learners on boards of management in centres
- Some board members were unclear about the legislative environment in which they operated and were unfamiliar with the vocational services support unit procedures
- Senior management and board of management personnel in only a few centres actively engaged with the QFI process, particularly policy development work
- Board of management members lacked appropriate information and training in most of those centres that had a board

3.4 Internal centre management

All the centres visited had a permanent full-time co-ordinator, or a person acting in this capacity. The quality of the work of the co-ordinator was praised in most evaluation reports. It was common for inspectors to use such words as “efficient”, “effective”, “competent”, and “comprehensive” when describing the work of co-ordinators. The more effective co-ordinators had a clear long-term vision for their centre, they displayed a high level of commitment and dedication, and they fostered high expectations of the learners among their staff.

Department of Education and Skills circular letter FE 12/2003⁵ identifies the duties of Youthreach co-ordinators (and Youthreach resource persons). It was clear from discussions with the majority of co-ordinators that their duties not only conformed to those listed in this circular but included others not referred to in the circular. For most co-ordinators their duties had evolved with the passing of time and were subsequently wide and varied. In the majority of cases these duties were not made available to the inspectors in written form. This was also true in the case of resource staff and other staff members with identified duties. In one evaluation report it was suggested that “a written role profile for the post [of co-ordinator] would prove beneficial and should be reviewed regularly.”

Most co-ordinators’ time was found to be taken up with the day-to-day running of their centres, as well as with such issues as the enrolment of learners, monitoring attendance, managing staff and learners, processing learner payments, maintaining discipline, supervision, ensuring the implementation of VSSU procedures, and networking with outside agencies. Circular FE 12/2003 allows for direct class contact time for co-ordinators in keeping with the needs of the programme, as required by the VEC, subject to a maximum of fifteen hours per week. It was clear, however, that the administrative rather than the educational role took precedence in the case of most co-ordinators. Of the twenty-five centres evaluated only four co-ordinators were found to teach for fifteen hours in their centre. The remainder taught for ten hours or less, with a significant proportion having no class contact time at all. There was little correlation to be found between the size of a centre and the number of teaching hours undertaken by a co-ordinator.

The inspections revealed that the quality of the work of centres would benefit from a greater concentration by in-centre management personnel on the management and delivery of teaching and learning. While it was recognised that the size of a centre may have a bearing on the amount of class contact time a co-ordinator could be timetabled for, it was considered to be good practice that co-ordinators would have a degree of timetabled class contact in their centre. This practice would not only allow co-ordinators to keep abreast of developments in teaching methods but would also provide them with opportunities to gain first-hand experience of the educational and developmental needs of the learners, and to develop a good rapport with them.

The inspection reports regularly made reference to the previous experience and mix of skills that co-ordinators possessed. These included people skills, financial management skills and organisational, administrative and ICT skills, as well as interpersonal and communication skills. Some reports made reference to how co-ordinators had effectively and judiciously transferred important skills that they had acquired in previous roles to their co-ordinating role. Evaluations also revealed that almost all the co-ordinators encountered had the confidence of their staff and learners and were keen to move their centre forward. In these centres the co-ordinators were held in high esteem and had the trust and respect of their staff and learners.

5 Department of Education and Skills circular letter FE 12/2003: *Contract template for the employment of Youthreach co-ordinators and resource persons.*

Only a few co-ordinators were found to experience difficulties in managing their centre. In one centre, for example, difficulties in managing the staff arose because of the different contractual bases on which teachers were employed, with some being employed on a temporary basis while others were employed as teachers on a permanent basis. Where co-ordinators were experiencing challenges in managing their centre, the inspectors usually recommended that improved support by their line manager be initiated. In a small number of instances it was suggested that professional support or supervision external to existing line-management structures, or the VEC, be considered.

All centres visited had at least one resource person, with a small number having two, three or even more. In effect, the resource person in a centre is the person who is responsible to the co-ordinator from day to day for the delivery of the Youthreach programme. In most centres the co-ordinator and resource staff worked well together as a team, supporting one another in their different roles, as appropriate. This was particularly true in centres where roles were clearly defined. In one Youthreach centre it was reported that the “co-ordinator is ably assisted by a resource person who acts as a deputy co-ordinator.” Best practice was observed where the co-ordinator worked in a collaborative and inclusive way not only with the resource staff but with all the staff of the centre.

Features of good practice

- The majority of centres implemented circular FE12/2003
- Co-ordinators displayed a progressive and dynamic leadership style in most centres
- Many co-ordinators had effectively and judiciously transferred the essential skills that they had acquired in previous roles to their co-ordinating role
- In some centres staff duties were clearly defined, were made available in written form, and were reviewed regularly
- A good working relationship between the co-ordinator and resource person (or persons) existed in most centres

Concerns

- A few centres experienced personnel or organisational difficulties that had led to challenges in managing the centre
- Most co-ordinators did not view classroom teaching as a priority in their role in centres

3.5 Management of staff

The learner-to-staff ratio in Youthreach centres is generally 9+:1. The average size of the teaching staff in those centres evaluated that catered for up to twenty-five learners was seven. This was generally a combination of full-time and part-time teaching staff. One such centre employed ten teachers. The average number of teachers in centres that had between twenty-five and fifty learners enrolled was twelve. Those few centres evaluated that catered for more than fifty learners employed an average of eleven teachers (most of whom were full-time). All centres employed a number of well-qualified staff members from a variety of professional and vocational backgrounds. Staff members were generally assigned to particular subject areas according to their qualifications, but in most centres personal preference and the needs of the centre were also considered. This was seen to be effective.

In a few centres the co-ordinator was involved in staff recruitment, and best practice was observed where a structured induction process existed for new staff members. Most staff members in the centres visited worked in a part-time capacity, with a significant number being shared with other local VEC schools or centres for education. One report mentioned that “the experience of working in different centres is proving very valuable to the staff concerned in that they can apply skills and ideas learned in one particular centre across [in] others.” While this working arrangement had benefits, it also presented difficulties. It was difficult, for example, to involve all staff members in the QFI process and to ensure full attendance when organising staff development, in-service training, and staff meetings.

There was good gender balance among teaching staff in most centres, and each centre had staff members with varying lengths of service and experience. Co-ordinators in each centre were acutely aware of the importance of continuity and relevant experience in ensuring successful engagement with learners. One report commented that “the combination of suitable qualifications and long-term stability of staff provides for both continuity and the effective delivery of the Youthreach programme.”

The inspectors regularly referred to members of the Youthreach staff as being professional, competent, committed and dedicated educators “who worked diligently to provide a meaningful and comprehensive education for the learners.” High staff morale and a sense of teamwork were observed in almost all the centres visited. In a few centres, however, it was found that the varying conditions of employment of staff members had led to fragmentation of the staff team and consequent low morale. This in turn had resulted in difficulties that hindered the effective management of the centre and contributed to difficulties with the attendance of learners. In essence, differing conditions of employment meant that there were inequalities in the allocation of work among staff members. In these centres the inspectors recommended that appropriate involvement in policy development and in the activities of the centre be undertaken in an equitable manner by staff members so as to ensure the balanced development of centres, as well as staff equity and harmony.

The inspectors found that most members of the teaching staff in the different centres had attended relevant professional development courses within the three years before their evaluation. When viewed in totality, the range of courses attended by Youthreach staff is very impressive. While numerous courses were organised by the QFI service, it can be said that centres were also very resourceful in identifying particular courses to suit their individual needs. There was evidence, for

example, that staff members had attended courses in first aid, drug use, ECDL and sex education, as well as other courses concerning such topics as special-needs education, conflict resolution, interculturalism, counselling, and learner profiling. It was also clear from classroom observations that such courses had paid dividends.

With regard to dedicated curricular support services in particular (for example LCA and JCSP support services), the inspectors found that the level of access to and engagement by the staff of the centres varied between centres. The reasons for this included, among others, irregular notification of Youthreach staff regarding training opportunities, leading to a lack of awareness among the staff of available services, as well as a non-entitlement to professional development provided.

The non-teaching staff encountered in centres included, among others, secretarial staff, counsellors, catering and cleaning staff and crèche managers and assistants. All such staff members were found to play an important role in their centres and, in some centres, were regularly consulted and involved in its operation.

Features of good practice

- All centres employed a number of well-qualified teachers from a variety of professional and vocational backgrounds
- Youthreach staff members were described regularly as being professional, competent, committed and dedicated educators
- In almost all centres there was a high level of staff morale and good teamwork
- There was appropriate deployment of teachers across the timetable in the majority of centres
- Teaching staff in the various centres had high levels of access to appropriate continuous professional development

Concerns

- Differing conditions of employment for staff members led to low morale in a few centres, and this affected the management of the centre and contributed to learners' difficulties
- There was a structured induction process for new staff members in only a few centres
- The level of access to and engagement by members of the teaching staff with dedicated curricular support services was poor in some centres

3.6 Management of accommodation and other resources

The Youthreach centres evaluated were housed in a range of building types, including old vocational schools, industrial units, town houses, and historic buildings. Many were housed in rented accommodation, but a number of VECs owned the building in which their centres operated. In those cases the senior VEC management was frustrated by the fact that no funding was available from the Department of Education and Skills to maintain their own buildings, yet funding was accessible if it was necessary for the VEC to rent accommodation.

There was significant disparity in the quality of the accommodation provided for learners. The accommodation in one centre, for example, was described as being "of a high standard, is

welcoming and provides suitable space for the staff and learners,” while another report mentioned that accommodation “was not conducive to delivering high-quality education to marginalised young people and is not an appropriate building or educational facility for a Youthreach programme.” In the case of this latter centre the inspector ultimately recommended that alternative accommodation be secured for the programme. Almost all centre management personnel were proactive in endeavouring to ensure the appropriateness of the buildings in which their centre was housed. As a testament to the work being done by centres it was noteworthy that, in the main, staff and learners did not allow unsuitable premises to unduly curtail or hinder the quality of their work.

Most buildings, while not ideal, were found to be adequate for the purpose. Access to most centres was poor for persons with physical disabilities. Although all centres had a health and safety statement in place, these were not always up to date or reflective of the health and safety risks present. The inspectors recommended, therefore, that such statements be revised and updated. Safety statements should give appropriate attention to the health and safety risks associated with items of machinery or equipment in a centre. Storage space for teachers’ materials and learners’ work was limited in most centres.

Each of the centres visited had one or more general classrooms, a kitchen or dining area, office space, and a designated computer room. Computer rooms were utilised well by most centres and were usually well equipped with appropriate hardware, software and broadband internet access. The inspectors usually made recommendations in instances where such facilities did not exist. There was limited permeation of ICT in other learning spaces in centres. Most centres also had an art and crafts room, a counselling or guidance room, and either a woodworking or metalworking room. Five centres had fully staffed on-site crèches, while a small number had their own staff room. Other rooms found in centres included those used for hairdressing, recreation or games, music, sewing, and laundry as well as shower rooms. Only a small number had separate staff and learners’ toilet facilities. Prefabricated classrooms were present in less than half the centres visited. The classrooms in the majority of centres were small and cramped in comparison with the average size of classrooms found in mainstream schools. Despite this, the classrooms in most of the centres were attractively presented by the staff, and displays of learners’ work were regular features.

A centre or its facilities were sometimes shared with participants in other programmes or organisations. Where this occurred it was generally found that a good relationship existed between the Youthreach centre and the relevant organisation, and that they worked well together to provide for the needs of their individual learner or participant cohorts. Further, some Youthreach centres made use of local community facilities. This was particularly true in the case of sports facilities, but such arrangements generally had cost implications, including transport costs. Many centres, for example, made use of local sports halls and fields. Almost all centres were lacking facilities of this nature.

Quite a good range of teaching and learning resources was available in most centres to support the implementation of the programme. Literacy and numeracy resources, however, were noticeably limited in most centres, with some inspectors recommending that library resources be developed for use by the learners. In most instances the staff reported that their management was generally supportive with regard to the purchase of resources and facilities. Most were acquired on a needs basis, which seemed to serve subjects well. Examples of resources recently acquired by centres included resources for personal development, computer hardware and software, as well as

equipment for woodworking, hairdressing, home economics, and for recreational purposes. Some centres had a commendable range of audio visual resources including overhead projectors, televisions, videos and DVD equipment.

Features of good practice

- Classrooms in most of the centres were attractively presented
- In the main, staff and learners did not allow unsuitable premises to unduly curtail or hinder the quality of their work
- Most centres had well-equipped computer rooms in place, which were being fully utilised
- All centres had a health and safety statement in place
- Good relations existed between organisations in those centres where accommodation or facilities were shared
- Many centres were proactive in making good use of community facilities
- A good range of teaching and learning resources was available in most centres

Concerns

- There was significant disparity in the quality of accommodation in the centres: the quality of accommodation in a number of centres was poor
- Access to most centres was poor for persons with physical disabilities
- Health and safety statements were not subject to regular review
- Storage space for teachers' materials and learners' work was limited in most centres
- Classrooms in the majority of centres were small and cramped
- Literacy and numeracy resources were limited in most centres

3.7 Centre administration

Co-ordinators in most of the centres visited were supported in their administrative duties by a secretarial or clerical officer. This support came in different forms, including on-site and off-site support (usually at VEC head office), as well as in a full-time or part-time capacity. While almost all centres were of the view that they would benefit from the services of a full-time on-site clerical officer, it was clear from most evaluations that a combination of on-site and off-site administrative support, which operated in most centres, worked well. It was clear from all evaluations that the work of the designated secretarial staff was appreciated by the teaching staff in centres.

Some centres had no on-site clerical assistance. It was noticeable in those instances that the co-ordinator carried a significant extra administrative burden. Those tasks that would be more efficiently undertaken by a clerical person, such as typing letters, making telephone calls, placing orders, processing learner payments and compiling returns to VEC head office, normally fell to the co-ordinator in these centres. Further, in these centres the co-ordinator was effectually "on-call" during the course of the day, which meant that they were prone to being easily distracted from their core duties, as detailed in Circular Letter FE 12/2003. In such instances it was common for the inspectors to discuss with the co-ordinators various strategies for preserving their time in the classroom.

Features of good practice

- A combination of on-site and off-site administrative or secretarial support worked well in most centres

Concerns

- Some centres had no on-site clerical assistance, which led to co-ordinators carrying an increased administrative work load



Chapter 4

The quality of planning

4.1 Introduction

This chapter addresses the issue of whole-centre planning and will highlight how the Quality Framework Initiative has led to improvements in the planning practices and operation of centres. It begins by looking at the structures established and the processes that centres engage in for developing their plans and policies. In this context, reference is made to the impact of the QFI process and the FETAC quality assurance process in centres. The links between positive leadership, collaboration and effective planning are also highlighted. The centre plan is then considered. Many centres generated a centre development plan as a result of their involvement in the QFI. The range and quality of policies in place in centres is also considered. Finally, the extent of the implementation of plans and policies in centres is addressed. Programme and lesson planning is considered separately in chapter 7.

4.2 The planning process in centres

4.2.1 The QFI process

The inspectors found that whole-centre planning in Youthreach centres was based primarily on the principles and practices of the QFI. At the end of 2007 a total of seventy-nine centres around the country had engaged with the QFI: forty-four with the internal centre evaluation (ICE) element and thirty-three with the centre development planning (CDP) process.⁶ Centres could choose whether to engage with ICE or CDP first. Almost all the twenty-five centres evaluated up to the end of 2007 had engaged with one or other, and in some cases both, of these processes.

While centres were engaging with the QFI process at varying levels, it was found in general that the process had contributed to the adoption of a culture of self-review and planning in centres. A few of the centres visited had been involved in the QFI pilot process, which began in 2003, and so were well advanced in their whole-centre planning. Most centres at the time of their evaluation, however, had either just completed CDP or ICE or were engaged in one of those initiatives. It was clear from the inspectors' reports that engagement with these processes reaped significant benefits for individual centres. In the case of one centre that had just completed the ICE process, for example, the inspector reported that the ICE paid dividends, "in that it identified key strategic areas for development which, if planned and implemented accordingly, will ensure that the centre progresses from strength to strength." A separate report, this time commenting on the CDP process, mentioned that it had

reviewed the centre's practice in relation to a number of the twenty-seven QFI quality standards . . . The CDP enabled the staff to acknowledge elements of successful practice and to identify areas for improvement, including the specific actions to be taken. A number of more immediate priorities for the future development of the centre have been identified by the staff. Among those actions to be undertaken is the development of individual plans, communications with parents, and a review of the code of behaviour.

⁶ The QFI guidelines for ICE (2005) and CDP (2005) describe these processes in the following terms:

ICE provides an opportunity for stakeholders to examine the value of the work that takes place in centres and acknowledge the achievements of trainees, co-ordinator, staff and management. Areas for improvement are identified and actions are planned. Actions arising from the evaluation process are generally implemented in the short term; however, some of the actions are referred for inclusion in the centre development plan.

CDP provides stakeholders with an opportunity to review centre practice, identify gaps, highlight priorities and select areas for improvement. The plan is implemented over three to five years, and progress towards the achievement of goals is monitored and evaluated. The CDP process involves a focus on the key elements of the programme that are not yet in place or the areas of work which require a high degree of redevelopment.

Only a few centres were found not to have engaged with the QFI process at the time of their evaluation, but this had not prevented them from engaging in a certain level of internal planning. In each of these instances, however, the centres had made initial contact with the appropriate QFI personnel. It was stated in their evaluation reports that their involvement in the QFI process would build upon and further develop their own planning practices.

4.2.2 Leading the planning process

It was clear from the evaluations that the success of whole-centre planning was dependent very much on the vision and commitment of centre co-ordinators, as they were generally the leaders of the process. Co-ordinators in particular were regularly praised for their involvement in their own centres' planning process. Numerous reports, for example, described how they effectively facilitated, enabled (for example through the provision of adequate formal meeting time) and managed the whole-centre planning process. A few reports suggested, however, that the co-ordinator's role in whole-centre planning needed to be asserted. One report alluded to this by stating that there was a "need for greater momentum to further the planning process and to bring the plans up to date with current education legislation," while another made specific reference to the role of the co-ordinator and commented as follows:

The planning process lacks dynamism and requires greater commitment, leadership and dynamism from the co-ordinator to ensure that it is firmly established in the culture of the centre.

A few centres, normally the larger ones, had established a steering committee or planning team to lead the planning process in their centre. These groups were effective at progressing planning in a systematic way in centres. They also helped to keep a focus on planning in centres.

4.2.3 Collaborative planning

Whole-centre planning was a truly collaborative and inclusive process in some of the centres evaluated. In centres where this approach was evident it was clear that staff members were very familiar with the QFI process and that they placed value on the benefits of planning. It was the view of the inspectors that engagement with the QFI had contributed to the adoption by these centres of this inclusive approach to planning.

Facilitation or planning days, which were supported by a QFI facilitator and were usually held in the centres themselves, were an effective way of engaging staff members fully in their centre's planning process. Most centres that were involved in ICE or CDP, or both, had completed on average two facilitation days, while some had availed of up to five facilitation days. These days proved to be beneficial for centres. They provided a platform for the views of staff to be heard and valued, they enabled staff members to express opinions about their programmes and their centre, and they contributed to the development of new and improved systems of working in centres. Designated planning days also provided the staff of centres with opportunities to work together as a team and engage in activities that clarified team values and encouraged listening and respect. One evaluation report suggested that

as there is a lack of cohesiveness and unity within the staff team, this lack of unity could be addressed by all staff being engaged with the QFI process with a view to strengthening the work of the staff as a team. It is recommended that all staff engage fully with the QFI process.

In general, planning days were seen to provide new energy for management and staff as they contemplated the future of their centre.

Other stakeholders, apart from the centre co-ordinator and staff, were found to be involved in planning to varying degrees. Senior management personnel, for example, engaged with and supported fully the planning process in only a few centres. In other centres, senior management personnel had adopted what can be described as a hands-off approach. The inspectors also found that in most of the centres that had a board of management the board did not get involved in policy formulation but instead focused its attention on the policy ratification process. In centres where it was found that the senior management had not engaged to any great degree in centre planning the inspectors usually recommended that they review their approach. Members of the administrative staff were involved in the QFI process to varying degrees.

A minority of centres involved parents and local employers in their planning process. Where this happened, however, it was usually in the early stages of the process and involved only asking those groups for their views and opinions on the centre. Surveys, for example, were commonly used, but face-to-face meetings took place in some centres. Local employers were generally asked about their views on how centres organised and operated their work experience programmes. In centres where these groups were not involved in whole-centre planning the inspectors usually recommended that they be consulted.

Evaluations showed that community representatives were rarely involved in whole-centre planning. This group includes individuals working in local schools, social services, youth services, advocate service, FÁS, local partnership companies, Gardai, community development groups and chambers of commerce. The inspectors frequently made recommendations that centres consult more widely as part of their whole-centre planning process. This is one way in which they can develop and strengthen links with their local community.

Particular care was taken during planning in some centres to ensure that the learners' welfare was given priority. This generally manifested itself through involving learners directly in the planning process. Centres that had established learner councils usually involved the council in centre planning. Indeed learners' involvement in centre planning was sometimes offered by the inspectors as a reason for setting up a council in those centres that did not already have one.

4.2.4 FETAC quality assurance in centres

The evaluations took place against the backdrop of most centres working towards developing or implementing their own quality assurance system to meet requirements set down by FETAC. It was found that most of the quality assurance systems that were developed in centres, or were being developed, were organised at a VEC scheme level. This meant that a common quality assurance system operated in all schools and centres for education, where applicable, within individual VEC schemes. The FETAC regulations required centres to adopt a range of policies and procedures pertaining to quality assurance issues, such as access, transfer and progression policies, programme development, delivery and review policies, staff recruitment, and the development and assessment of learner policies. Internal monitoring and self-evaluation systems also had to be developed and implemented. The implementation of a centre's quality assurance system is subject to external monitoring by FETAC. Monitoring concentrates on the effectiveness of implementation of quality assurance and is an important pillar in FETAC's quality assurance activities. In general, the FETAC

quality assurance system was seen to be a positive development for centres. While it is acknowledged that the FETAC quality assurance system has a different impetus from the QFI, which is a type of centre development process that focuses more on total quality management, it was seen to complement the work of QFI while simultaneously placing a focus on centres meeting the needs of learners. It is important, however, to ensure that generic policies are capable of implementation in individual centres.

Features of good practice

- Almost all the centres evaluated had engaged at some level with the QFI process
- The QFI process had contributed to the adoption of a culture of self-review and planning in centres
- A clear vision for and commitment to centre planning on the part of centre management personnel was present in most centres
- Whole-centre planning was a truly collaborative and inclusive process in some of the centres visited
- A few centres had established a planning team, or steering group, to lead planning in their centre
- The FETAC quality assurance process in many centres complemented the work of QFI and simultaneously placed a focus on meeting the needs of learners

Concerns

- The need for greater commitment, leadership and dynamism by centre co-ordinators with regard to whole-centre planning was recommended in a few instances
- In a few centres there was limited engagement by VEC and board of management personnel in policy formulation
- Community representatives were rarely involved in whole-centre planning
- Staffing arrangements in some centres caused reduced involvement in the planning process

4.3 Centre plans and policies

4.3.1 The centre development plan

The majority of the twenty-five Youthreach centres evaluated had a written development plan, or a strategic plan. Most of these were developed in the context of a centre's engagement with the QFI and so their contents conformed broadly to the format suggested by this initiative.⁷ The centre plans reviewed by inspectors commonly included a centre's mission statement, as well as a copy of the stated aims and objectives of a centre. Information on the origins and history of a centre was also regularly included, along with information on the staff, enrolment details, profiles of the learning environment, the community in which the centre operated, and details of the programmes and subjects offered to learners. A summary of the outcomes of any consultations or reviews that were undertaken as part of a centre's development planning process was also included. Those consultations or reviews that were more commonly seen had involved learners, parents or guardians, and local employers. Finally, the priority areas for development were identified in centre plans, as well as their associated development strategies or action plans and proposed time frames. It was this latter content in particular that provided centres with their own unique planning identity.

⁷ QFI guidelines suggest that a centre plan should contain the following sections and information: introduction (by CEO of VEC), background to QFI, brief history of the centre, centre aims, objectives and mission, outline of the programme delivered and the staff team, the centre's planning process (i.e. dates, venues, stages, which groups participated in which sessions), profile of learners, outline of the reviews and the findings, actions identified (set out in table form), timeline for actions, monitoring arrangements, contact details for the centre, and acknowledgements.

Priority areas for development were sometimes unique to individual centres, as were the strategies that centres had chosen for implementing them. The provision of advice and templates for centre plans was welcomed by centres and clearly had a positive influence on the extent of most centres' planning.

All the centre development plans available in centres were reviewed by inspectors. Comments provided on these plans showed their quality to be mixed.

A long tradition of whole-centre planning was evident in some centres that had experience of the QFI. It was clear from the extent and quality of planning in these centres that they already had a culture of self-review and planning before their engagement with the QFI. Such centres generally viewed their engagement with the QFI as a continuation, or an extension, of their own internal planning processes and procedures. A few were found to have plans that they created as a result of their own planning traditions. While the inspectors praised these centres, they also recommended that their plans would benefit from an alignment with the QFI process.

Some centre plans were described as "comprehensive" and as having "clear goals and objectives". The majority of the plans reviewed were time-bound, and this is good practice. The more effective plans were those that were concise, had a clear focus, and were easily readable. Effective plans were also those that were achievable and that clearly identified actions that were to be undertaken. They identified target completion dates for such actions and identified the person or persons with the responsibility for implementing them.

While the time frames of most plans were considered realistic and achievable, the inspectors considered three-year plans to be optimal. It was felt that five-year plans risked a loss of momentum; neither did they facilitate regular evaluation and review. The inspectors particularly recommended three-year plans in the initial phases of centre planning.

Other evaluation reports were not complimentary of centre plans. The majority of such comments were directed at the lack of clarity in plans. One report, for example, advised "brevity and a clear focus on outcomes," while another suggested that "issues need to be reflected in the plan in a more focused way." A different report suggested that the centre plan should "clarify priorities for the staff and provide a very clear curricular focus for the coming years."

Most of those centres with a centre development plan were either mid-way or further through implementing their plans at the time of their evaluation. Some, however, were approaching the end of the life cycle of their plan, and attention was turning to evaluating the effectiveness and impact of their plan and developing a new one for a further three-year or five-year period. This built-in evaluation and review process was reported by the inspectors as being good practice.

The few centres that had no development or strategic plan were found to be in the process of developing one. It was common for these centres, however, to have already engaged with the ICE process of the QFI, a process that provided them with a solid basis for the development of their own centre development plan. Most of these centres had adopted an operational (or action) plan based on the outcomes of their ICE process.

Features of good practice

- The majority of centres evaluated had adopted a centre plan
- Most centre plans reflected the QFI guidelines and so were comprehensive yet focused, realistic, and achievable
- The majority of plans were time-bound, and actions were clearly identified with target completion dates and persons named to undertake them
- Most centre plans incorporated a provision for monitoring, evaluation, and review

Concerns

- Some centre plans lacked clarity
- The five-year plans in some centres risked a loss of momentum and hindered regular evaluation and review

4.3.2 Centre policies

While all the twenty-five Youthreach centres evaluated had a good range of policies in place, some had more policies in place than others. Relevant legislation such as equality, educational welfare and special-needs legislation, was found to be a factor in determining the nature of the policies that centres had adopted or at least in determining where the centres tended to concentrate their efforts in the area of policy development. Given that most centres had only recently started on the policy development path at the time of the evaluations, it was viewed by inspectors as good practice for centres to give priority to their policy development work and the requirements of current relevant legislation. Table 4.1, based on responses to questionnaires completed by individual centres, indicates the prevalence of formal policies, statements, strategies or procedures in centres.

Table 4.1: Policies and statements in centres

Policy, statement, strategy or procedure	Proportion of centres with a policy	Policy, statement, strategy or procedure	Proportion of centres with a policy
Mission statement or aims and objectives	100%	Substance misuse policy	96%
Health and safety statement	100%	Anti-bullying policy	96%
Health and safety policy and procedures	96%	Art, creativity, or art and crafts	40%
Code of conduct for staff	96%	Staff development policy	88%
Code of practice for dealing with sexual harassment, bullying, and harassment	100%	Self-evaluation policy and procedures	52%
Code of behaviour for learners, outlining their rights, responsibilities, and grievance procedure	92%	Communications policy and procedures	80%
Equality policy	84%	Policy and procedures for delivery and review of programme	64%
Vocational Services Support Unit: administration procedures	76%	Admission policy and procedures	96%
Staff recruitment policy and procedures	88%	Policy and procedures for initial assessment of learners	68%
Policy and procedures on assessment of learners' achievement	72%	Procedures for establishing and supervising work experience	84%
Procedures and protocols for the provision of the following supports: counselling, guidance, transport, and child care	64%	Policy and procedures for transfer and progression	64%
Policy and procedures reflective of intercultural ethos	40%	Child protection policy	88%

The more common policies found in centres included health and safety and substance misuse policies, as well as anti-bullying, admission and learner behaviour policies. Equality and staff development and recruitment policies were also prevalent in centres. Policies encountered only rarely included those dealing with social, personal and health education (SPHE) and health promotion, as well as staff and learner induction, internet safety and acceptable use, outdoor pursuits, smoking, and work experience.

The issue of child protection was discussed with VEC representatives and with in-centre management personnel in all the centres evaluated. Evidence was provided in the case of twenty-two centres to confirm that the VEC had taken appropriate steps towards developing a child protection policy in line with the provisions in *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children* (Department of Health and Children, 1999). Further, in the case of these centres evidence was provided to confirm that boards of management, where they existed, had formally adopted the VEC child protection policy and procedures. The inspectors recommended that the *Children First* guidelines be adhered to as a matter of priority in all centres that were found not to be in compliance. Confirmation was also provided in the majority of centres that the child protection procedures were brought to the attention of centre management, centre staff and parents; that a copy of the procedures had been provided to all members of the centre staff (including all new staff members), and that the management had ensured that all staff members were familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) had been appointed in line with the requirements of these Department of Health and Children guidelines in twenty-one centres. A deputy DLP had been appointed in twenty centres to act in the event of the absence of the DLP. In late 2006 the Irish Vocational Education Association (IVEA) provided professional development courses, funded by the Department, for representatives of the staff in all Youthreach centres regarding the provisions and requirements of *Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children*. This is commendable.

The range of policies in place in individual centres was seen to complement and support centre plans where they existed. Centre policies were described mostly in positive terms by the inspectors in the majority of reports. One evaluation report stated that “each policy is relevant, of benefit to the learners and adds to the overall effectiveness of the centre.” Another report stated that policies were “suitable, relevant and user-friendly,” while yet another stated that policies were “clear, concise, practical and form the basis for action as need arises.” Where inspectors made recommendations concerning policies they generally fell into one of two categories. The first category of recommendation urged centres to develop written policies in areas where no policy existed (except perhaps for certain procedures). The second category of recommendation generally advocated a review of existing policies.

The evaluations found that there was a greater focus on the development and implementation of administrative and organisational policies in centres than on policies concerned with learner and classroom issues, such as curriculum, teaching, learning, assessment, and progression matters. While it was common for procedures to exist regarding such issues, they were rarely documented. There was a distinct lack, for example, of curriculum review and development, literacy and numeracy skills development and learner assessment policies in centres. A significant number of evaluation reports recommended that the procedures at present implemented by centres in these areas, where indeed procedures existed, be examined by the staff and other stakeholders and that relevant policies be documented. A significant number of evaluation reports also recommended that centres document their approaches to the promotion, recording and reporting of attendance by learners, their

approach to the use of mobile phones and to smoking and their procedures pertaining to work experience, guidance and counselling, as well as their admissions procedures and their approach to the progression and transfer of learners.

While centre plans reviewed by the inspectors were specific to the centres, the same could not always be said of the policies reviewed. Many policies were found to be generic in nature. Such policies were usually developed by VECs for use in each of their schools and centres for education. These were developed mostly, though not always, in collaboration with personnel from relevant schools and centres. In these cases it was common for the inspectors to recommend that such policies be reviewed to ensure that they responded to the specific needs of the Youthreach centre in question. One report, for example, stated:

The centre has a wide range of policies in place to complement the ICE report and its resulting operational plan. Many of these, however, are not centre specific but have been developed at VEC level to cover all of their schools and centres for education. It is important, therefore, that in-centre management, in collaboration with staff, reflect carefully on each of these overarching policies and put in place any necessary actions to ensure that they address the specific needs of this centre. Further, it is recommended that policies on mobile phones, literacy and numeracy, and work experience be prioritised for development in the centre.

One policy area in particular that was regularly recommended for either development or review and implementation by inspectors was the area of admissions, enrolment, and exclusion. Slightly fewer than half the evaluations conducted made recommendations concerning how learners were admitted or excluded. Sometimes no policy existed in these areas, while in other centres a mismatch was sometimes found to exist between policy and practice in the enrolment, admission and exclusion of learners.

Many centres operated waiting lists. This was the case even in centres where the quota of learners had not been reached, while in others prospective learners were found to be retained on lists for excessively and sometimes inexplicably long periods. In some reports it was recommended that centres' entry criteria be reviewed. Such was the case, for example, where "finding relationships with friends/peers difficult in a large school" was named as a possible condition of enrolment. Inspectors also encountered instances where learners were retained on a centre's roll for considerable periods after their latest attendance.

Some centres had developed handbooks for their staff members, which contained, among other things, reference to some of their main policies. Some centres had also developed learners' handbooks or learner induction packs, which contained copies of some of the policies that were directed at the learners, for example the code of behaviour and smoking policies. These initiatives were viewed by the inspectors as good practices and recommendations were sometimes made that consideration be given to developing handbooks for parents.

The inspectors regularly recommended to centres that they adopt procedures for monitoring and reviewing their centre plan and policies. This work, it was recommended, could be undertaken in the context of a centre's involvement in the QFI and FETAC quality assurance processes. Further, it was recommended to a number of centres that cognisance needed to be taken of the VSSU procedures pertaining to centres for education. Some centres, for example, had developed policies that pre-dated these procedures and consequently were in need of review.

Features of good practice

- All centres had a wide range of policies in place
- All centres were conscious of relevant legislation as part of their policy development process
- Most policies in centres complemented and supported their centre development plan
- Handbooks were made available for staff and learners in some centres

Concerns

- Generic or overarching policies tended not to take account of the needs of individual centres
- Policies pertaining to learner and classroom issues were limited across centres
- A few centres had failed to develop and implement a child protection policy
- Recommendations regarding the development or review and implementation of policies in the areas of admissions, enrolment and exclusion were made in slightly less than half the evaluations conducted
- Documented approaches to the promotion, recording and reporting of learners' attendance were lacking in most centres

4.4 Implementation of centre planning and policies

4.4.1 Planning practices

In general, the evaluations found that centre plans and policies effectively informed centre practice. The process of implementing clear and collaboratively defined goals and objectives as set out in a centre's plan had beneficial and positive effects on the management, organisation and operation of a centre. The inspectors found that the successful implementation of centre planning assisted in raising morale and engendering a team spirit among the staff. They also regularly reported that engagement by the management and staff in implementing their centre plan contributed to the creation of a culture of self-review and reflection in centres. It was only in a small number of centres that the inspectors reported inconsistencies between stated policies and associated practices or procedures. In such instances they recommended that policy and practice be streamlined.

The QFI's ICE process was used successfully by a number of centres as a method of evaluating the implementation of a centre plan. In these centres a centre plan was developed, the staff went about executing it, and through the ICE process a centre team evaluated the implementation each year until the plan had been successfully completed.

While the inspectors found that collaborative planning was a hallmark of the successful implementation of plans, this approach was not always present in centres. When planning was collaborative and inclusive there was generally a sustained effort among the staff to implement the resulting plan. Staff members were also found to be familiar with the contents of their centre's plan and aware of the implications of stated policies. However, this was not always the case, and particularly so among part-time staff members. In some centres it was felt that "while [the] staff displayed some awareness of the range of policies available in the centre it is expected that they will become more familiar with their contents as time passes," while in another centre it was mentioned that "staff and learners have a vague awareness of current policies." In centres with a tradition or

culture of collaborative planning, members of the staff usually had ready access to plans and policies.

A range of structures to support the implementation of centre plans was encountered in centres. These included, among others, monitoring teams, staff meetings, focus group work and experiential learning groups. The more popular structures were monitoring teams and staff meetings.

4.4.2 Monitoring centre planning

A few centres, normally the larger ones, had a monitoring team, whose function it was to monitor or measure the progress of the implementation of a whole-centre plan. Some centres opted to establish this team after they had developed their centre plan, as opposed to establishing a planning team at the commencement of their planning process. Where centres operated both, they usually comprised the same membership, but there was missed opportunity where centres did not continue with their planning team in a monitoring capacity. Monitoring teams, where they existed, met at regular intervals, kept detailed records of their meetings, and reported to the management as appropriate. Monitoring teams (or at least a staff member with a monitoring function) were considered good practice in centres and were recommended by the inspectors in a number of evaluation reports as a means of maintaining a planning continuum once the more intensive development phase had ended. Monitoring teams, though not in isolation, also promoted the production and circulation of an annual report on the implementation of planning. The inspectors viewed this as good practice.

4.4.3 Supporting planning through staff meetings

Staff meetings provided an important opportunity for communication among members of the staff; and while both general staff meetings and planning meetings were regular features in the majority of centres visited, the frequency of meetings varied considerably from centre to centre. Some centres held daily staff meetings (usually at the start of the day), some held weekly staff meetings, but the more common practice was for a meeting to be held once every month or six weeks. Best practice was observed where staff members were provided with opportunities to contribute to the agenda of staff meetings, minutes were appropriately recorded and circulated, and an action list was agreed following meetings. Some centres rotated the chairing of staff meetings among staff members, and this was seen to work well in those centres that operated it.

The implementation of the centre plan was afforded priority at staff meetings in some centres. Where this was not the case it was common for the inspectors to recommend that the plan be included as an item on the agenda at every staff meeting. The majority of centres (as mentioned in section 3.5) experienced difficulties in ensuring that all staff members attended meetings. This was essentially because of the prevalence of part-time staff in centres, some of whom worked in a number of centres. In one evaluation report it was noted that staff meetings with the full-time staff were held weekly, minutes were kept, and these were subsequently circulated to the part-time staff for their information. This is a good example of how one centre met the challenge of difficulties in attendance at staff meetings.

Features of good practice

- Evaluations found that centre plans and policies improved practice in most centres
- Whole-centre planning contributed to a culture of self-review and reflection in many centres
- Most staff members displayed a familiarity with the contents of their centre plan
- There was a collective and sustained effort among staff members in most centres at implementing their centre plan
- Staff members had appropriate access to their centre's plan and policies in most centres
- A few centres had a monitoring team for measuring the progress of the implementation of centre planning
- Some centres produced an annual report indicating progress in implementing centre planning
- Staff meetings were held regularly in the majority of centres

Concerns

- There was a lack of consistency between stated plans and policies on the one hand and practices and procedures in a small number of centres
- Most centres experienced difficulties in securing the attendance of all staff members at staff and planning meetings
- The implementation of the centre plan was afforded due priority at staff meetings in only some centres



Chapter 5

The learning environment

5.1 Introduction

The inspectors found that the learning environment in most Youthreach centres was marked by a friendly, welcoming atmosphere in which there were varied supports for learners. This chapter begins with a look at the prevailing character and atmosphere of those centres evaluated. Attention then turns to the different types of support that centres offer learners; and it will be seen that these span the educational, vocational, personal and social areas of need. The chapter concludes with some comments on links between Youthreach centres and the communities in which they operate.

5.2 Character and atmosphere of centres

“Safe”, “caring”, and “respectful” were words frequently used in the mission statements of the centres evaluated. The inspectors found that these words described a staff’s core understanding of both the centre’s ethos and the type of relationships existing in the centres.

Learners almost invariably referred to the character and atmosphere of their centre in positive terms, using such expressions as “It’s brilliant here!” or “It’s a great place to be.” They usually contrasted the centre with their previous experience. They were seen to respond more positively in an atmosphere less competitive than mainstream schooling. Learners felt welcome in a Youthreach centre. They repeatedly expressed appreciation of the manner in which they were treated by the staff, highlighting the “friendliness” of the teachers and the “time” and “respect” they were given. These sentiments were corroborated by parents during interviews.

The positive expressions of appreciation by learners were seen to have their roots in the way they felt valued by the teachers in their centre. Such behaviour by teachers was based on their awareness of a need for a holistic form of education in a safe and caring environment for these young people. Learners were seen to respond to programmes that were meaningful to them. More importantly, they felt that the staff cared for them individually and worked with their best interests in mind. Respectful relationships and frank communication were seen by the inspectors to be a central factor in creating and maintaining this positive environment.

When programmes were based on identifying the needs and goals of individual learners, the inspectors noted higher staff morale and greater motivation of learners. Staff members in most centres took time to understand the often substantial needs of learners. As far as possible they tried to address them in a practical way. The quality of the learning atmosphere was enhanced where well-structured programmes of personal development were in evidence, even where these were considered to be the “hidden curriculum”. It was noted too in the inspectors’ reports that the working environment in centres was enhanced when the learners understood the existence of realistically high expectations of them in their acquisition of skills and knowledge, as well as of their behaviour. For many it was their first experience of belief in their abilities.

Such a warm and nurturing environment was largely absent in a few centres, where the driving force was the acquisition of Leaving Certificate accreditation in an atmosphere poorly supportive of personal development or meaningful academic engagement. The inspectors reported on learners being subjected to a programme that had little meaning or relevance to them. Striving in such a sterile way for inappropriately timed goals was all the more difficult when it was clear that possible

benefits accruing from such accreditation might ultimately be limited by the learners' deficiencies in literacy, confidence and social skills.

The inspectors reported on the delicate balance that was often achieved in establishing and maintaining a structured environment while respecting the need for flexibility at several levels within a centre. Such a balance was seen at times to be tested by displays of volatile behaviour, which staff members were generally able to anticipate or defuse appropriately. Experienced staff members, on the whole, displayed mastery in dealing with interruption of many sorts. This was achieved largely by differentiating between the learner and the behaviour being displayed. However, such balance was not always easy to achieve. Some centres suffered a degree of disarray because of poor management, the absence of a coherent vision, or an inability to create a structured working environment. Inconsistencies in staffing caused by a combination of staff members having to divide their time among a number of centres, frequent staff changes and poor co-ordination of resources were seen to be among the factors negatively affecting the delivery of a positive and stimulating programme. Co-ordinators complained too of difficulties arising from incongruities between requirements of the Youthreach framework and certain types of staff contracts. The inspectors advised on organisational measures to support order in centres where such matters as the uncontrolled use of mobile phones or consistent disruption of class made life unpleasant for all. In a small number of instances the inspectors found a degree of inertia among a number of staff members in the centre. This made it difficult for the other staff members to maintain order and momentum in the work.

Features of good practice

- Programmes that responded to the individual needs of the majority of learners were operating in most centres and were appreciated by the learners
- Many centres offered a welcoming and emotionally safe environment that supported close, warm and supportive relations between staff and learners
- Learners' self-esteem, self-confidence and motivation improved in centres where their achievements were valued
- Dedicated and collaborative working by members of the staff was exercised in most centre

Concerns

- A breakdown in morale, behaviour or achievement was observed in some centres
- Poor attendance by learners was a problem in most centres
- Access to appropriate inter-agency support was a problem for all centres
- Diversion of the Youthreach programme to providing an alternative venue for an inadequately supported Leaving Certificate programme was found in a few centres

5.3 Supporting learners

5.3.1 The aim of supports

Supports for learners in centres offering the Youthreach programme were seen to be many and varied. They aimed to improve the educational, vocational, personal and social experience of the learners. The extent of their effectiveness is referred to later in this report.

All the supports relied for their effectiveness on the attitude of staff members, on their enthusiasm for their work, and on the constant encouragement they offered the learners. Where elements of the support structures that follow were absent in a significant way, morale, behaviour and outcomes suffered.

5.3.2 Low teacher-learner ratio

The most commonly found educational supports for learners included teaching in small class groupings with much individual attention and direction. Currently the learner-to-staff ratio in Youthreach centres (as reported in chapter 3) is generally 9+:1. This favourable ratio helped to obviate the difficulty often experienced by learners of trying to cope in large class groups. It also gave learners the opportunity to compensate for gaps in their knowledge and to develop good one-to-one relations with staff members.

5.3.3 A tailored programme

The programmes offered were, on the whole, relevant to learners' needs and were perceived as such by the learners themselves. FETAC and LCA programmes were prominent, offering learners the opportunity to experience incremental progress and a measure of success. Where it was well organised and relevant, work experience tended to enhance learners' self-confidence.

5.3.4 Promoting attendance

Learner absenteeism was high in most centres, and particularly so during the summer period. The daily attendance of learners was frequently less than 50% in centres and rarely reached more than 66%. In some centres, however, the co-ordinator or resource person was seen to invest much effort in supporting learners' attendance and punctuality. A variety of mechanisms was noted, including signing-in and clocking-in procedures, and signing attendance sheets during the day. Absence frequently resulted in phone calls being made to the learner's home, either to the learner themselves or to the relevant parent or guardian. In practically all centres absenteeism was said to result in pro-rata docking of the learner's allowance. On the other hand, some centres offered inducements, such as outings, for improved attendance. The inspectors found that absenteeism was damaging to the progress and achievements of those learners who absented themselves. It also affected the progress and morale of those in attendance.

5.3.5 Provision of meals

One of the most fundamental supports, which was seen to have significant outcomes, was the provision of breakfast and a nutritious lunch, taken together by learners and staff in the centre. Linked to the meals, learners were often seen to benefit socially from the ambiance of the dining room through the possibility of engaging in conversation with staff members and fellow-learners, in games, such as cards or snooker, or in being able to have magazines or daily newspapers available to them.

5.3.6 Summer activities

Where it was seen to exist in a meaningful way, the organisation of a summer programme that extended the horizons of learners was seen to be particularly effective. The staff in centres reported

that as a result some learners engaged in new interests and were more receptive to the following year's programme. A variety of summer activities was made possible in some instances by the availability of transport. Some VECs operated a minibus for a number of youth services in their areas.

5.3.7 Supportive groups

Some centres were seen to be more successful than others in maintaining the support of parents. Greater involvement by parents was a frequent recommendation of the inspectors.

Despite the general recognition of a gap between what was needed and the availability of psychological services on offer, the inspectors noted that many centres—though not all—made good use of the budget allocated by the VEC for counselling and similar support provision. Direct provision of psychological services, such as that provided by two VECs to their centres, was seen to offer a more consistent and reliable support to centres.

5.3.8 Individual learner plans

One of the most significant supports for learners that had yet to be put in place in most centres concerned adequate initial assessment leading to a meaningful individual learning plan being devised. The implementation of this plan, with the support of a “key worker” and relevant subsequent continuous assessment, was seen as essential and was a frequent recommendation made in evaluation reports.

Features of good practice

- A range of educational, vocational, personal and social development supports was made available to learners in all centres
- Counselling appropriate to the needs of learners, and to a lesser extent guidance, was made available in some centres
- Some centres had a focus on supporting learners' attendance and punctuality

Concerns

- There was inadequate initial assessment of learners' needs in many centres
- Comprehensive individual plans for learners were operational in only a small number of centres
- Poor planning and preparation for work experience existed in some centres
- Learner absenteeism was high in most centres

5.4 Community links

The establishment and maintenance of links with their local communities were seen by the inspectors to pose a considerable challenge to personnel in Youthreach centres. This challenge is being met with varying degrees of success around the country. Parents often spoke of negative attitudes and prejudice towards the centre and its learners. While expressing their own appreciation of the value of the centre for their families, they sometimes suggested that more information and positive publicity about the work of the centres would be beneficial. Despite such prejudice, it is to the considerable credit of so many centres that they have succeeded in forging meaningful links with many sections of their local communities.

Evaluation reports indicated that, for the most part, an “open door” policy operated regarding involvement by parents in centres. This generally meant that parents or guardians were welcome to call to discuss matters concerning their child’s progress. When this happened, meetings were generally of an informal nature, and most were found to deal with attendance or behavioural matters. A recommendation encouraging a greater degree of structured involvement by the parent body, whether by means of regular parent-teacher meetings or representation on management bodies, was made in many reports. This reflected opinions expressed by parents in the course of structured interviews with inspectors. The inspectors were aware, however, that efforts made by some centres in these areas were often met with a disappointing response.

Almost all centres had a link of some kind with their local post-primary schools, either directly or through the support of the educational welfare officer or the visiting teacher service. For the most part such co-operation was seen to work in the learner’s best interest, particularly where the Youthreach programme was in a position to meet certain needs that could no longer be met in a mainstream setting. These needs usually combined learning and behavioural issues, and the transfer to the Youthreach centre happened when the student had effectually dropped out of school or was either suspended or permanently excluded, often unofficially. A few centres were found to have less than desirable contacts with their local post-primary schools. The inspectors reported instances, for example, of centres admitting to “recruiting” learners from mainstream schools to boost their numbers, while examples of “co-operation” with schools that were willing to offload students considered “troublesome” were also cited.

Most centres had some contacts with such bodies and agencies as the Health Service Executive, the Garda Síochána, FÁS and the Probation Service. The inspectors considered most of these links to be positive, in that at their kernel was the desire to enhance the quality of the learning experience for the learner. Along with other varied organisations, members of these agencies made themselves available for specific supports, for informative talks, for work placements and at times for positive role-modelling. Members of the Garda Síochána were particularly welcomed in the centres and were seen to interact effectively on a social level with the learners.

The need to provide relevant work experience and a varied summer programme was seen to encourage wider and more diverse links. Links of this nature were generally initiated and managed by staff members, given the difficulty many of the learners would have in obtaining relevant work experience. It was noted by the inspectors that when centres had a board of management that included business, artistic or sporting interests as well as parents’ representatives, more doors were open to introducing learners to a broader range of activities. Dedicated advocates funded by FÁS played an important role in establishing and maintaining relevant work-related contacts for learners in some parts of the country.

Opening possibilities for learners beyond the confined space of their social environment was seen to be a major challenge for the staff in centres. This was seen to be almost intractable in the case of trying to encourage learners to interact with peers whom they would perceive to be outside their own socio-economic network. Some centres had links with sports organisations, art or music groups and various voluntary organisations. The quality and success of learners’ involvement in areas as diverse as outdoor pursuits, art exhibitions and events hosted by public bodies were seen to rely heavily on the interest and commitment of specific staff members. Many benefits accrued where learners were enabled to participate meaningfully in such activities, particularly in the learners’ growth in self-confidence. This in turn led to a feeling of decreased social marginalisation. Some

impressive examples of learners' involvement in voluntary work or in fund-raising for charitable causes were also noted as having generated a palpable sense of achievement in those who participated.

Features of good practice

- Members of the community had opportunities to work with learners and staff in most centres
- Structures exist in many centres to enable them to communicate effectively with their community
- In most centres links were established with employers and other bodies to provide work experience and transfer and progression routes for learners
- For the most part, an "open door" policy operated regarding involvement by parents in centre

Concerns

- The existence of a level of prejudice towards young people who attend Youthreach was reported in most instances
- The nature and quality of its links with local post-primary schools was questionable in the case of a few centres
- Learners were made aware of the needs and resources of the local and wider community in some centres



Chapter 6

The learning programme

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is concerned with the learner programme offered in Youthreach centres. It is based primarily on the findings of twenty-five centre evaluations. The chapter begins by looking at the structure of programmes in centres. The curricular make-up of programmes is next addressed. In this context, reference is made to the range and content of accredited courses offered by centres. Some specific curricular aspects of programmes are also discussed, including the provision of social, personal and health education, the practical components of programmes, work experience, and the development of literacy and numeracy. Reference is also made to the make-up of the programme offered to learners during the summer period in centres. The chapter concludes with a section on timetabling practices in centres.

6.2 Structure of the Youthreach programme

6.2.1 An overview of the structure

A structured programme is all the more important when working with young people who live in unstable situations. The *Framework of Objectives* (DES, 2001) for Youthreach states that the programme delivered in a Youthreach centre should be inclusive of the following two distinct but sequential phases:

- **Foundation phase**

The aim of this phase is to support learners in overcoming learning difficulties, developing self-confidence and gaining a range of competencies essential for further learning.

- **Progression phase**

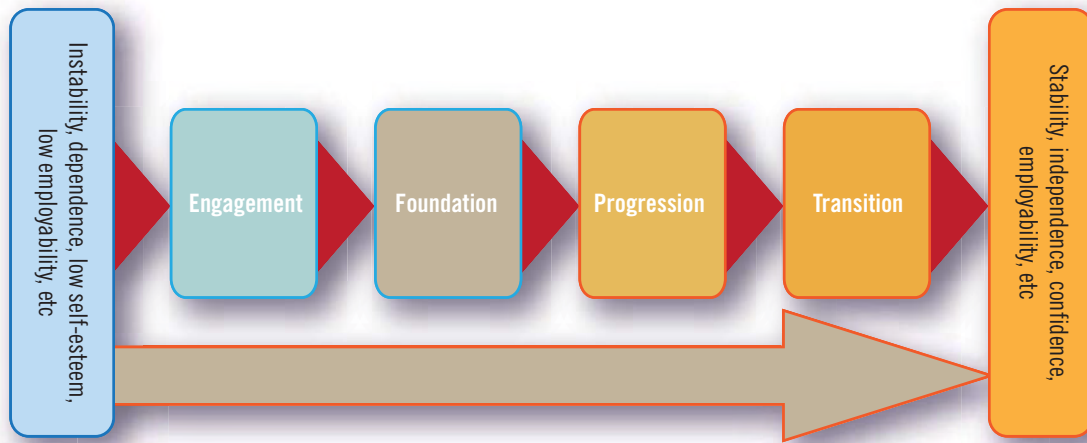
This phase should provide for more specific development through a range of educational, training and work experience options.

These phases, though not always organised in a distinct manner, were evident in the programmes offered in most of the twenty-five centres evaluated. The programmes offered in some centres, however, were found not to have any distinct parts at all, neither foundation nor progression. These centres generally viewed themselves as providing a general programme of education and training that was tailored to the needs of the individual learners and did not require curricular differentiation. In such centres the inspectors noted that learners were provided with poorer opportunities to make progress in their work within the centre. As one inspection report mentioned:

It is possible for a learner to attend the centre for two years or more and to complete modules and achieve certification at foundation level only. However, the learner may not accomplish any certification in subsequent years. Thus, there are limited opportunities for progression and certification for learners.

Inspections revealed that the most effective centres had divided their programme into not two but four distinct parts: engagement, foundation, progression and transition, as depicted in fig. 6.1. Indeed the Department of Education and Skills value-for-money review of Youthreach and senior Traveller training centres (2008) recommended that all centres adopt this approach to their curricular provision.

Figure 6.1: The four phases of the Youthreach programme



6.2.2 The engagement phase

Commendably, a clearly identifiable engagement phase (sometimes referred to as a “gateway” phase) was present in the programme offered by some of the centres evaluated. Where it did exist, this phase usually comprised two main elements.

First, a few centres provided a structured learner induction programme. The length of induction programmes, however, varied from centre to centre. Some lasted only a few days, while others continued for months. In the case of long induction programmes, however, it was common and appropriate for learners to attend on a part-time basis with a view to attending on a full-time basis upon completion of their induction period. The inspectors felt that induction programmes created an appropriate and positive attitude for learners as they commenced their time in Youthreach.

Secondly, the engagement phase provided space and opportunity in some centres for identifying the needs of learners and, within the framework of a centre’s capacity, for an individual learning plan to be negotiated and developed. At the time of the evaluations, however, most centres had yet to adopt adequate initial assessment procedures leading to meaningful learning plans being devised. (This issue was discussed in chapter 5.)

6.2.3 The foundation phase

For those centres—the majority—that did not operate a distinct engagement phase, learners were exposed initially to the foundation phase of their full programme. The foundation phase was seen to operate in a variety of ways and with a range of possible outcomes in most centres. For the most part, however, the foundation part of a centre’s programme generally served as a basis for engagement by the learner in a programme of study. The Junior Certificate programme and FETAC level 3⁸ modules were commonly provided by centres as part of the foundation phase of their programmes. While the subjects or modules offered at that level were mostly practical in nature, such subjects as English, Communications, and Mathematics featured quite strongly also. In the more effective centres, learners’ personal and social needs were given priority, as was the

8 A full explanation of the different FETAC levels of accreditation available is given in section 6.3.

development of their literacy and numeracy skills. These aspects were generally enhanced also with introductory programmes in ICT. In the better centres, accreditation was available to learners at the end of this phase which, combined with the engagement phase, typically lasted for one year for most learners.

Difficulties arose in some centres with regard to their provision of Junior Certificate subjects at this level. Practically all centres found providing Junior Certificate subjects within the time frame of a foundation programme to be challenging. Whereas the traditional Junior Certificate allows students to study their subjects over the course of three consecutive years, this level of continuity was not available in Youthreach centres. More often than not learners in Youthreach had some experience of the Junior Certificate programme from their previous school and were attempting to complete it within a much reduced time in the centre than they would have had to complete it at school.

While the Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) is not at present made available to Youthreach centres by the Department, its implementation was encountered in one Youthreach centre. The inspectors considered that this programme catered well for the needs of the learners at that level.

6.2.4 The progression phase

The foundation phase of a programme was followed in most centres by a distinctive progression phase. Successful completion of the foundation part of a programme usually provided learners with the opportunity to progress to other and higher forms of accreditation. The LCA and FETAC modules level 4 (and sometimes level 5) were commonly associated with the progression part of a programme. While many learners spent one year in a programme's progression phase, especially those following a predominantly FETAC-accredited programme, it was not uncommon for learners to spend two years in this phase. Learners following an LCA programme, for example, were generally afforded two years. The progression phase of Youthreach programmes, where it existed, was seen to provide learners with curricular progression and to offer them every opportunity to prepare for further education or training or for employment. Again, the more effective centres provided learners with opportunities to acquire accreditation in a range of areas at the conclusion of this phase of the programme.

6.2.5 The transition phase

An informal transition phase for learners operated in some centres' programmes. Where it was evident, this phase focused very much on supporting learners in their progression from the programme to further education (for example vocational training and opportunities schemes and post-Leaving Certificate courses), training, employment, or other life choices. Most of this support took place following a learner's departure from a centre. When it was encountered, the inspectors commended centres for the level of support and advice they provided to learners in their endeavours to progress in a meaningful way from the centre. In some instances centres maintained a significant level of contact for a considerable period with their learners following their departure from the centre.

Features of good practice

- The most effective centres divided their programme into four distinct parts: engagement, foundation, progression, and transition
- A few centres provided a structured learner induction programme
- Accreditation was available to learners at various stages throughout their time in a centre
- Some centres were very good at supporting learners in their progression from the programme, even following their departure from the centre

Concerns

- The programme in some centres was poorly structured, which ended up offering learners a reduced possibility of curricular progression
- The provision of the Junior Certificate in centres, where it occurs, tends to be “rushed”
- At present the JCSP is not available for Youthreach centres to implement

6.3 Curriculum provision

6.3.1 The curriculum in centres

While having certain core similarities, the curricular make-up of the programme offered to learners was different in each of the twenty-five centres evaluated. This can be explained by the fact that individual centres endeavoured to develop a programme to meet the needs of their own particular cohort of learners. Notwithstanding this, the Framework of Objectives states that the programme provided in centres should “place a key emphasis on the core skills of literacy, numeracy, communications and new technology, while providing a range of vocational options allied with a work experience programme.” In general, the inspections revealed that centres were achieving this objective to varying degrees.

The more effective programmes in centres were participant-centred and participant-led. Such programmes also aimed at fulfilling the identified interests and needs of the learners and fostered a learning process in which learners and staff operated as equal partners. The better programmes also challenged and encouraged learners while simultaneously providing them with a safe and listening experience. The development of programme planning guidelines by the QFI will assist centres in developing a good quality curricular programme for learners. The high take-up of the associated training programme is encouraging.

6.3.2 Accredited and unaccredited courses

Modules and courses accredited by FETAC made up most of the programme that was offered to learners in the centres evaluated. The curriculum offered in nineteen of the twenty-five centres evaluated, for example, was made up either exclusively or partially of FETAC modules. The majority of modules provided were pitched at levels 3 and 4, but two centres provided modules at levels 1 and 2 and at level 5, respectively.⁹ These modules may be delivered individually or integrated with

⁹ FETAC level 1 and 2 modules aim to meet the needs of learners (young and old) who may be returning to education and training or who may be engaging with learning for the first time, learners with few or no previous qualifications, and some learners who are at present in the work force. They provide certification for learners who may progress to higher levels and also for those whose principal achievements rest at those levels. FETAC level 3 modules were offered in sixteen of the Youthreach centres evaluated. No previous qualifications are required to study these modules. FETAC level 4 modules were offered in fifteen centres. The preferred entry level for the study of level 4 modules is a National Foundation Certificate, the junior cycle or equivalent qualifications or relevant life and work experiences. The preferred entry level for the study of FETAC level 5 modules is a National Vocational Certificate Level, Leaving Certificate qualifications or equivalent qualifications or relevant life and work experiences.

other modules towards a FETAC-accredited award. In most centres the modules were integrated, providing learners with the opportunity to gain awards accredited by FETAC.

The FETAC curricular system was found to provide centres with a high degree of flexibility in determining a programme to meet the needs of learners. This was feasible because of the wide range of modules available covering occupational areas in art, craft and design, business and administration, science, technology and natural resources, catering, horticulture, services, leisure and tourism, communications, performing arts, and general studies. A range of modules was also available in areas relating to social and personal development. The FETAC system also allowed learners to accumulate modules over time and provided centres (through their relevant VEC) with the opportunity to construct their own centre-specific modules. The inspectors found, however, that this latter option was rarely exercised by centres and their VEC, with practically all centres making use of currently approved, but dated, FETAC modules. The inspectors sometimes reported that a centre's curriculum would be enriched if the centre, through its VEC, was to avail of the opportunity to devise its own modules and submit them to FETAC for recognition.

Junior Certificate subjects and the LCA programme were the second most popular subjects and programmes offered in centres. Junior Certificate subjects were offered in eleven centres, with the average number of subjects offered in any one centre being six. Two centres offered eight Junior Certificate subjects (practically the equivalent of what would be offered in a mainstream post-primary school), while one offered four subjects. English; Mathematics; Art, Craft and Design; Home Economics; Civic, Social and Political Education (CSPE); and Materials Technology (Wood) were popular Junior Certificate subjects in centres. The LCA programme operated in ten centres. These centres generally provided the full LCA programme over two years. Subjects from the established Leaving Certificate were offered in three centres.

Centres usually provided other short courses, a mix of accredited and non-accredited courses, as part of their programme. These were generally integrated with the learners' mainstream FETAC, Junior Certificate or LCA programme and included such courses as the European Computer Driving Licence (ECDL) course, GAA and soccer (FAI) coaching courses, An Gaisce (President's Award), Young Mothers' Programme and courses in the development of literacy and numeracy skills. A substantial number of learners enrolled in a small number of centres were following FETAC level 5 courses under the Department's Back to Education Initiative (BTEI). A Higher Education Training and Awards Council (HETAC) accredited course was operating in one centre. The inspectors considered the provision of courses of this nature to be good practice, as they contributed to providing learners with diverse experiences, skills, and qualifications.

The credibility of the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes was very high among staff, parents, learners, and employers. However, the inspectors concluded that for these programmes to operate successfully in a Youthreach setting they require careful planning and implementation. In some of the centres that provided these programmes the inspectors observed that they were delivered in a similar fashion to that in mainstream post-primary education, while in many instances it was this system of delivery that had already failed to meet the needs of most learners previously. The inspectors found that the State certificate examinations strongly influenced the manner in which the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate curriculums were delivered in some centres. There was a pressured time frame, for example, that was not particularly flexible or adaptable. One report commented that "the suitability of the more academic mainstream subjects ... being taught in one-hour blocks, using traditional methodologies and weak assessment strategies

needs to be reviewed,” while another evaluation went further by concluding that “this raises the question of whether a Youthreach centre is the most appropriate context for the delivery of such programmes [JC and LC].”

The FETAC system and the LCA were considered by the inspectors to be appropriate programmes for the Youthreach setting. This is portrayed in the following quotation from one inspection report:

The two-year LCA programme recognises attendance and includes recognition for the work completed in tasks and key assignments. It is more suited to the needs of most of the learners, especially during the progression phase of the programme. Other than the summer programme, it is the only programme in the centre which provides the opportunity for work experience.

6.3.3 Social, Personal and Health Education

There is no clearly defined Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) programme for Youthreach centres. Nevertheless, the curriculum in all twenty-five centres evaluated had a focus, albeit sometimes delivered in an ad hoc manner, on improving learners’ life skills, including their personal, social and emotional well-being, as well as their self-confidence and self-esteem. Subjects and modules, some FETAC-accredited, such as *Personal care and presentation*, *Personal and interpersonal skills*, *Personal effectiveness* and *Life skills* appeared regularly on learners’ timetables in centres and contributed to the development of essential life skills among learners. Some centres adapted and built upon the post-primary SPHE curriculum, which was seen to be very effective in a few instances, while others relied on short courses such as *Copping On* (a crime-awareness programme that includes an element of drug education) or on inviting HSE personnel and visitors to speak to learners. Where a deficit in the area of social and personal development and health education was observed, the inspectors recommended that an appropriate programme be developed and introduced, or reviewed if already in existence. Evaluations emphasised the need for the development of a national SPHE programme for implementation in all Youthreach centres that would address, among other things, important areas of health education.

A few of the Youthreach centres evaluated were recognised by the HSE as health-promoting centres. This was highly commended by the inspectors. While health-related fitness modules or healthy eating programmes, or both, were provided in the majority of centres, there was a significant proportion of centres with a noticeable deficit in the provision of an integrated health education programme within a curriculum framework of SPHE, which would address mental health, substance use, relationship and sexuality education, gender studies, and physical health and nutrition. One report commented that

the provision of health education is not evident on the centre timetable. While elements of health education are addressed across the curriculum, it is not presented in an integrated manner. Although Social Education is part of the LCA examination, there is a focus on preparing the learners for this examination rather than actively engaging the learners in experiential learning. It is important that an integrated, systematic and timetabled programme of health education is developed which addresses mental health, physical health and nutrition, substance misuse, relationship and sexuality education and gender issues.

Some centres have specific interventions aimed at assisting in modifying individual learners' behaviour, for example anger management and smoking cessation programmes. Such interventions were found to encourage learners' participation and promote inclusiveness. A level of counselling and similar support was provided in most centres. (This provision was already commented upon in chapter 5.)

6.3.4 Practical skills development

The Youthreach programme offered in most centres tended to be vocational and of a practical orientation. This was evident from the range of subjects and modules offered by centres. Most programmes were found to emphasise the development of learners' practical skills, for example as ICT skills, as well as woodworking, metalworking, craft and domestic science skills. The inspectors reported that these practical skills contributed to supporting learners in integrating in the work-place or to proceed to further education and training. Their associated subjects also contributed to the formation of a broad and balanced curriculum for learners.

In some centres, however, the inspectors reported that the accommodation and facilities available prevented them from offering a balanced curriculum. Some centres, for example, were not in a position to offer certain practical subjects. This was particularly true in the case of such accommodation-intensive and resource-intensive subjects as woodwork, metalwork, and hairdressing. As a result it was found that some programmes, or parts of some programmes, were not adequately meeting the needs of the target group. In general, this was because the programme was not participant-focused or participant-led, but in some instances it was because the programme did not sufficiently challenge the learners.

A few centres evaluated were found to be availing of the facilities of a neighbouring post-primary school. In one instance, for example, this involved transporting learners to a school once or twice a week to undertake lessons in woodwork. This particular initiative not only succeeded in meeting the needs and interests of learners but also helped the centre concerned to strengthen its links with the school concerned. While this was considered commendable practice in the case concerned, it was not without its difficulties, not least the practical difficulties and cost implications in organising the bus transport for the learners.

6.3.5 Literacy and numeracy skills development

Most centres visited had some targeted arrangement for promoting the development of learners' literacy skills and also—though to a lesser extent—numeracy skills. For the most part, however, formal and structured curricular planning for the development of literacy and numeracy skills was lacking in all centres. It was also noticed by the inspectors that in a significant number of centres this specific provision was only recently introduced into the learners' programme. Where provision did exist it was predominantly organised so as to provide learners with an increased number of lessons in these areas, or by withdrawing learners on an individual basis for one-to-one tuition. (The provision of literacy and numeracy skills development is discussed in greater detail in chapter 7; it is sufficient to note here that the inspectors' reports frequently referred to the need to improve the quality of provision for learners' literacy and numeracy skills.)

6.3.6 Work experience

Work experience is a mandatory aspect of the LCA programme. All learners following the LCA programme in those centres evaluated were provided with this experience. Learners who were following FETAC programmes in centres were also frequently provided with an element of work experience, or work shadowing, as part of their programme. A specific FETAC work experience module was usually followed in such instances. This provision, however, was not always made available to learners, particularly to those following a level 3 programme. While it is acknowledged that some learners at this level might not be ready for work experience, not providing it runs contrary to the contents of the Youthreach programme, as defined in the *Framework of Objectives*. The inspectors regularly recommended that work experience or shadowing be considered or introduced for these learners.

There was little in common between centres with regard to how they organised their work experience. Some centres, for example, provided work experience on a block release basis, while others provided it one day per week. Some centres provided learners with up to eight weeks' work experience annually, while others provided in the region of two weeks. The inspectors generally recommended against lengthy work experience placements, especially in the same placement, and encouraged centres instead to concentrate more on providing learners with an effective experience, or a range of such experiences where feasible. Some centres spread work experience placements throughout the year, while others concentrated their provision during the summer time. This latter arrangement usually took the place of a dedicated summer programme.

Appropriate concentration on preparing learners for work experience was encouraged in many centres, as was appropriate liaison between the centre and employer, both before and during the placement period, as well as an opportunity for debriefing following work experience. Co-ordinators sometimes reported that they experienced difficulties in identifying local businesses that were willing to engage with centres for the purposes of work experience. It was expected, however, that this would become easier as a centre worked on strengthening its links with its local community. It was regularly observed that the practice of allowing learners to organise their own work placements was ineffective; learners generally needed the support of the staff to secure worthwhile placements.

6.3.7 Summer programme

The summer period provided almost all centres with particular curricular challenges. This was a time when centres felt they most needed to adapt the learners' programme in an attempt to encourage them to attend, and to engage with their work. Centres generally tended to adopt one of three approaches during the summer period. First, some centres continued with their regular curriculum, but in practically all of these cases the staff acknowledged that this proved, for the most part, to be ineffective. Secondly, some centres arranged for learners to be on work experience during the summer period. While this was one way of overcoming problems with learners' attendance associated with the summer months, the inspectors usually felt that the organisational aspects of the experience needed to be improved. Finally, the more effective centres (as mentioned in chapter 5) had devised innovative summer programmes. These were generally activity-based learner-centred programmes. Sports activities, excursions and engagement with local organisations and youth groups featured prominently in these programmes. Such programmes proved to be most effective at engaging learners.

Features of good practice

- The most effective centres had developed a participant-led and participant-focused curriculum that provided learners with diverse experiences and skills
- The curriculum in the majority of centres sufficiently challenged learners and allowed for curricular progression and accreditation
- Most centres provided a complementary mix of accredited and non-accredited courses for learners
- All centres had a focus on improving learners' life skills, while some also provided courses aimed at assisting in modifying learners' behaviour

Concerns

- The content of the programme in a few centres was not consistent with the national aim of Youthreach
- Very few centres availed of the opportunity to construct their own centre-specific FETAC modules
- The State certificate examinations strongly influenced the manner in which the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate curriculums were delivered in some centres
- Some centres were unable to offer practical subjects because of a lack of accommodation and resources
- Almost all centres lacked an integrated SPHE programme
- The arrangements for work experience were poor in many centres
- Formal and structured curricular planning for the development of literacy and numeracy skills was lacking in all centres
- Very few centres had developed innovative summer programmes

6.4 Timetabling

The value-for-money review report on Youthreach and STTCs¹⁰ states that "Youthreach should operate on a full-time, year-round basis and deliver 35 hours education and training per week to learners for forty-five weeks." It was clear to the inspectors that a number of centres were experiencing challenges in meeting this requirement. Evaluations found that 72% of centres were open for 226 days (45 weeks) or more per year, while 92% were found to be open for learners for 35 hours or longer per week. Poor learner attendance during the summer period was commonly cited by centre personnel as one of the difficulties to be contended with in ensuring the viability of a year-round programme. Some centres also experienced staffing shortages during this period in particular.

The inspectors found that anomalies were common in the timetabling arrangements practised by many centres. They raised concerns about the ways in which subjects were timetabled in several reports. Many centres were asked to examine whether the lesson periods they provided were of an appropriate length. This was particularly true of non-practical subjects. The following quotation from one evaluation report summarises this issue:

¹⁰ Government of Ireland (2008), Youthreach and Senior Traveller Training Programmes funded by the Department of Education and Science: Value for Money Review. Dublin: Department of Education and Skills, p. 80.

Currently, lessons are of one hour's duration. This is suitable for many of the practical subjects. Consideration, however, should be given to best practice with regard to timetabling for other subjects. A review should be undertaken of current class timetabling structures with a view to establishing whether hour long lessons in non-practical subjects are optimal use of centre time. Some learners tend to lose interest in some lessons as they progress. Shorter, more focused lessons may obviate this.

The practice of timetabling one-hour lessons consecutively in certain subjects was frequently encountered in centres. In effect this amounted to two-hour lessons, with even longer lesson periods encountered in other centres. The inspectors regularly recommended that this timetabling practice be reviewed. Good timetabling practice generally took account of learners' levels of concentration, while longer lessons were also associated with more practical subjects.

Best timetabling practice was observed, as one report stated, when "a judicious balance in the types of subjects offered each day is achieved." In this particular case the learners' timetable presented them with an appropriate balance of academic and practical activities daily. Another centre took the provision of this balance a step further:

The centre is to be praised for its rationale in structuring the timetable with a view to maintaining [the] motivation and interest of the learners. This is evident in the provision of the academic programme in the morning and a range of leisure and recreational activities in the afternoon.

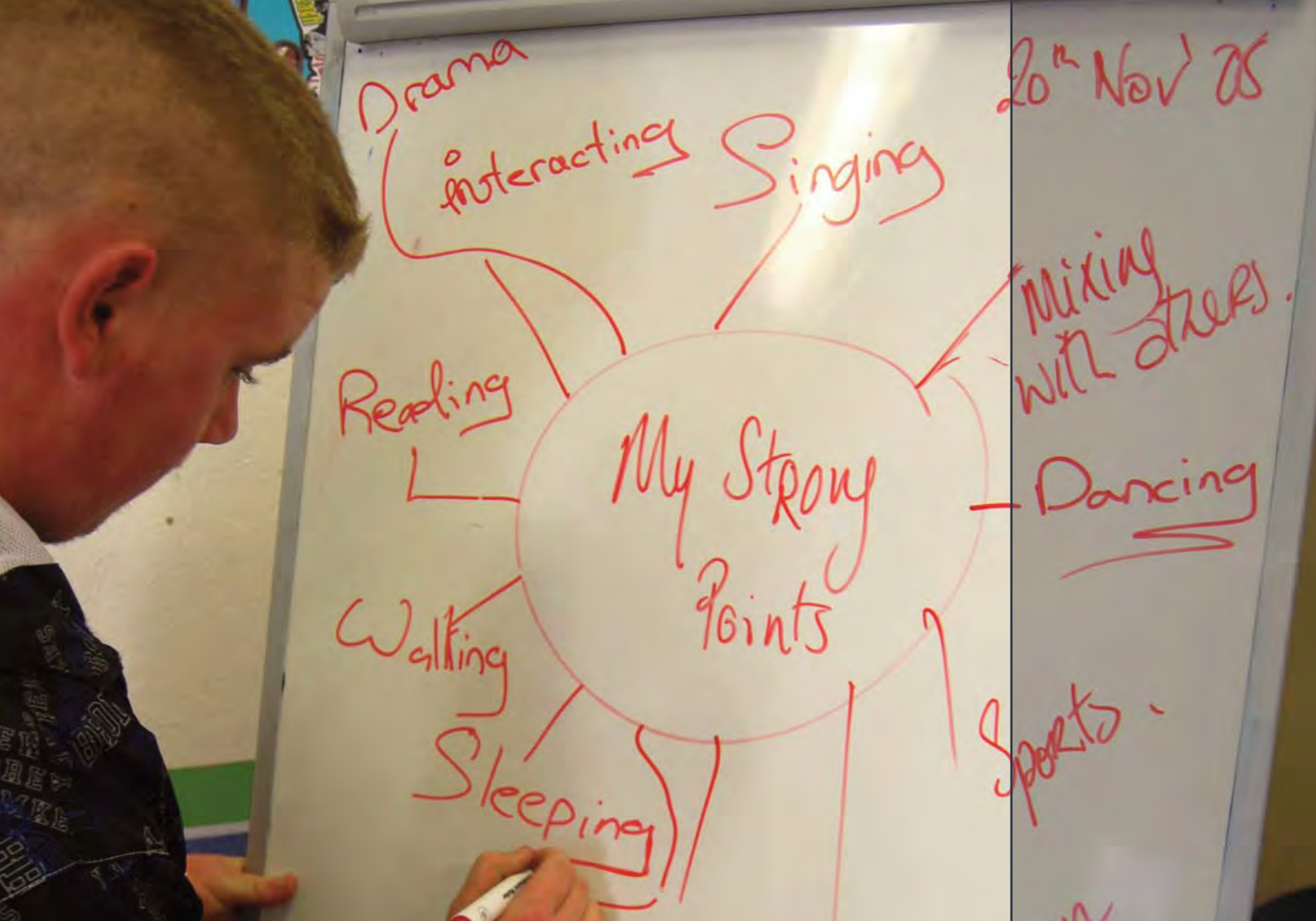
It was found in a few centres that the learners' weekly timetable did not actually reflect what took place in the centre. While the learners' timetable in one particular instance showed that the weekly class contact time amounted to 35 hours, this was not actually the case, as learners finished their day earlier than that indicated on their weekly timetable. In another centre, daily staff meetings and breaks were not factored into the timetable. As one report stated, "it is important that what is being delivered in the classroom is accurately reflected in the centre's timetable." Few centres displayed the master timetable for their programme. Its display was recommended in numerous reports.

Features of good practice

- The majority of centres operated on a full-time, year-round basis, while almost all offered 35 tuition hours per week

Concerns

- A small number of centres were experiencing challenges in getting learners to attend for 226 days per year and for 35 hours per week
- Timetabling practices in some centres was poor, and timetables did not always accurately reflect what took place in a centre
- Few centres displayed their master timetable in the centre



Chapter 7

The quality of teaching and learning

7.1 Introduction

The quality of teaching and learning in Youthreach varied considerably from centre to centre. This chapter is concerned with the teacher-learner interface in classrooms. Its content is based primarily on the inspectors' observations in classrooms and other places of learning. It begins by commenting on the quality of planning and preparation for teaching. The chapter then considers the teaching methods used in observed lessons and the levels of engagement by learners that they engendered. Issues of classroom management and discipline are also discussed. Approaches to developing learners' literacy and numeracy skills in centres are next considered, followed by a review of how learners' progress in centres is assessed. The chapter concludes with a consideration of the outcomes of the programme and the kind of standards achieved by learners.

7.2 Planning and preparing for teaching

7.2.1 The overall quality of planning and preparation

The quality of planning for teaching and learning varied among centres but was generally in need of improvement. For the most part the centres offered specific programmes, such as FETAC, Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate Applied programmes, and it was the function of individual teachers to plan and prepare for the specific programme area being taught. The inspectors found few instances of effective collaborative planning for teaching in the centres visited. The reports also indicated that there were opportunities for individual lesson planning to be informed more by a centre's development plan and by, where they existed, learners' individual plans.

7.2.2 Individual teachers' planning

Written schemes of work of good quality were presented for inspection by some members of the teaching staff in a number of centres. Such planning tended to complement and support formal syllabus documentation, and informed the teaching and learning process. The more comprehensive schemes of work reviewed by the inspectors included information on time frames, aims, objectives, content, activities, differentiated approaches, expected outcomes, resource details, and evaluation information. For the most part, however, planning was confined to working through a folder of materials prepared by the teacher to support the outline curriculum. Where more detailed plans existed they usually related to the actual lessons being observed by inspectors, with little evidence to show that there was consistent practice in their preparation.

Lessons that were planned effectively were often delivered effectively also. This was particularly true when the support materials were devised creatively. It was observed that engagement with professional development courses concerning programme and lesson planning helped to enhance the quality of individual teachers' planning. Where high-quality lesson planning was observed with well-developed schemes of work and lesson plans it was generally recommended that such planning practices be extended to other curricular areas in a centre.

7.2.3 Planning in line with curricular requirements

In the majority of centres the inspectors found that most teachers' long-term planning was based on curricular requirements. For the most part, this planning was guided by the standard module

descriptors associated with FETAC modules, or by the formal syllabuses of Junior Certificate and LCA subjects. Almost all teachers were familiar with the curriculum of the subject or module that they were teaching. However, it was also reported that “not all teaching staff were fully familiar with the FETAC modules which they were delivering.” Teachers generally retained copies of syllabuses and module descriptors in their classrooms, or had ready access to them, sometimes via the internet. This was good practice, as issues concerning subject matter and assessment procedures that arose during lessons could be clarified quickly for learners.

In some centres the tutors referred only to the specific learning outcomes contained in FETAC module descriptors as the basis for their planning. This, as alluded to in the following extract, was considered to be poor practice by the inspectors:

Tutors utilise the specific learning outcomes as a means of guiding their work. While this offers a satisfactory platform from which to work, further consideration needs to be given to planning for other elements of the programme offered in the centre.

It was observed that planning for teaching and learning that relied solely on standard or formal syllabus documents generally had a negative impact on classroom practice. Some lessons, for example, were planned with the sole purpose of completing a number of specific learning outcomes as outlined in FETAC module descriptors. In such lessons the emphasis was usually so much on getting the learning outcomes covered that classroom practices resembled rigid and mechanical exercises that fostered little or no learning. In one centre where a number of such lessons were observed the resultant classroom activities were described in the following terms:

The material studied is merely a means to an end, namely certification, with little genuine engagement or enjoyment being derived by the learners from most of the subjects.

In some centre evaluations the learners displayed inattention in lessons, as well as increased levels of frustration and very little learning. The inspectors reported that such behaviour “may be because of inadequate lesson preparation” or “an outcome of poor planning,” leading to “lack of learner interest, enthusiasm or pride in their work.”

7.2.4 Planning for learners with individual needs

Planning for programmes, subjects and modules was generally undertaken for delivery to whole-class groups. Such planning, therefore, did not generally acknowledge the wide range of individual learners’ needs and disparities in learning styles and capacity. More targeted interventions were recommended throughout the curriculum. In its summation of planning, for example, one report stated that

the planning being undertaken does not address sufficiently the specific needs of individual learners. With some exceptions, the teachers do not generally address literacy within their planning of lessons. A comprehensive learning-support structure needs to be implemented for the learners which will include the development of individual plans. Planning will need to take account of the individual targets for learners set down in these individual plans. This planning will need to take place on a collaborative and cross-curricular basis in order to implement the system of individual plans effectively.

Many of the lessons observed in centres would have benefited from individual learner planning on the part of the staff, as well as adjustments of expectations in line with the learners' abilities. Critical to this is the use of an appropriate policy of early assessment and profiling.

7.2.5 Collaborative planning

In general there was less of an emphasis in centres on collaborative planning than on individual teacher and short-term planning for lessons. It was evident however, that collaborative planning paid dividends where it did take place. The staff in one centre, for example, made use of a whole-centre devised template for programme planning. This team approach to planning proved to be very supportive for teachers. Such collegiality usually involved a sharing of ideas, schemes and resources among teachers and had the effect of enhancing the work of both teachers and learners.

Evaluation reports regularly encouraged the teaching staff to adopt a careful and co-ordinated approach to both long-term and short-term planning. An integrated approach to planning that was cross-curricular and collaborative in nature was encouraged in centres. Collaboration with external agencies to enrich the teaching and learning process was limited in centres and was also encouraged in evaluation reports. The programme planning guidelines developed by the QFI was a positive response to remedying the deficiencies in planning highlighted in early Inspectorate evaluation reports.

7.2.6 Planning for resources

In most centres, appropriate resources and materials were available or accessible for use in lessons. The use of ICT in lesson preparation was mixed across centres but was frequently dependent on the level of ICT that centres made available to the staff to support them in their planning and preparation work. Hand-outs, demonstration sheets, photocopied sheets, questionnaires, word searches, work cards and other such materials were generally preferred to textbooks, as many of the textbooks reviewed by staff members were considered inappropriate for use with the learners. Also, there was growing evidence of the internet being used in centres to obtain teaching and learning materials. The classroom materials used in many centres were generally produced by the teachers. This meant that they were learner-focused, or tailored to suit the abilities and needs of a particular learner cohort. This is good practice.

While there was a culture of members of the teaching staff sharing their teaching and learning resources in some centres, this was not prevalent in all centres. A number of evaluation reports recommended that the sharing of resource materials among the staff in centres could enhance the quality of teaching and learning.

7.2.7 Review of planning

Many centres engaged in an annual review of programmes and plans, of the appropriateness of modules, and the suitability of teaching methodologies. This formal process was considered to be of benefit to staff and learners alike. One report recommended a greater emphasis on co-curricular and cross-curricular linkage in planning documentation having regard to the priority needs of all learners.

The majority of evaluations suggested that a consistent approach to developing yearly schemes of work and lesson plans should be implemented throughout the curriculum in all centres. Many reports recommended that the staff develop and implement more directed whole-centre long-term and short-term class planning templates for lesson plans and schemes of work. Reports suggested that these would improve the quality of delivery of the Youthreach programme.

Features of good practice

- Planning for teaching and learning was mostly short-term and specific to individual teachers
- Most teachers had weekly or daily lesson plans
- Most teachers' long-term planning was based firmly on curricular requirements
- Comprehensive written schemes of work were presented by some members of the teaching staff in a number of centres
- Some teachers had engaged with CPD courses concerning programme and lesson planning, which had enhanced the quality of their planning
- Many centres engaged in annual reviews of programmes and plans
- High-quality teacher-generated teaching and learning materials were used in some lessons

Concerns

- Structured long-term planning for teaching and learning was limited across centres, as was collaborative and cross-curricular planning
- Collaboration with external agencies as part of the programme or lesson-planning process was limited across centres
- There was little planning for the individual needs of learners in centres
- The use of ICT in lesson preparation was mixed across all centres

7.3 Teaching methods and classroom management

7.3.1 The overall quality of teaching and learning

The quality of teaching and learning observed during evaluations varied from centre to centre. Collectively, a good range of teaching methods was implemented in centres, but in some centres a greater variety of active learning methodologies was needed. One-to-one teaching was prevalent in centres but was not always delivered effectively. The more effective lessons were well planned, used a variety of teaching methods, and succeeded in engaging learners in their work for the full duration of the lesson.

7.3.2 Teaching methods

The inspectors regularly commented on the variety of teaching methods used in the lessons observed. The most popular methods were whole-class and individual teaching strategies. In some reports the inspectors suggested that a better balance needed to be struck between teacher and learner inputs in the case of whole-class teaching; sometimes there was an over-reliance on "teacher-talk". A good diversity of work and a range of presentation styles were encountered in classrooms, with most learners displaying a genuine enthusiasm for their work and a willingness to learn. The content and pace of most lessons observed in the centres was appropriate.

Teacher-led demonstrations, project work, group work, brainstorming, question-and-answer sessions and focused discussions were observed regularly in lessons. Some exemplary lessons were observed that promoted learner-centred learning and included activities such as structured talk, debate, and class discussion. In these particular lessons the teachers had adopted more of a facilitative than an instructional role. The teaching staff members in some centres were advised to review their own teaching style with a view to expanding their repertoire of active learning methods. They were encouraged, for example, to experiment with such techniques as pair work, language and textual games, project work, and role-playing and to seek out ways of making more effective use of the learning environment.

Occasionally the inspectors noted that the teaching was excessively influenced by the accreditation aspect of a subject or module. This was particularly true of some lessons in State examination subjects. One report commented that “class work towards accreditation relied heavily on programme content and was largely textbook-based with work sheets and teachers’ photocopied materials in widespread use.” In such instances it was common for centres to be asked to reflect on the aims and objectives of their educational provision. They were also advised to ensure that lessons maintained the interest, engagement and enthusiasm of the learners.

Teachers regularly used questioning as a means of reinforcing learning and as a means of determining the learners’ level of understanding. The purpose, style and context of questioning used in some lessons, however, did not focus the learner on the subject at hand, or achieve the necessary outcome. Some reports recommended that teachers needed to strive to develop their repertoire of questioning strategies. To facilitate learners of different abilities, for example, staff members in some centres were encouraged to make greater use of higher-order questions, as opposed to information-retrieval questions. Open questions were recommended over those requiring “Yes” or “No” as an answer. Questions directed individually at named learners provided them with a sense of belonging and security within their classroom. When learners were given adequate time to reflect before answering questions, it generally contributed to more informed responses. For the most part, learners were regularly affirmed for giving correct answers. This encouraged them in their learning.

Many of the activities encountered in lessons were hands-on and exploratory yet directed by the teacher. Lessons that were characterised by multiple but well-planned activities were seen to be most effective. This approach had the effect of dividing lessons into manageable units of work for the learner. The most effective lessons of this type succeeded in engaging learners in their work for the full duration of lessons, as each activity was planned to last an appropriate length of time. Learning was optimal where learners were afforded opportunities to discuss and reflect upon their work, to brainstorm, and to participate in practical activities and debate. Many reports suggested that activity-based approaches would strengthen teachers’ performance and facilitate better behaviour by learners. In this regard some reports recommended that whole-staff discussions about best practice regarding appropriate classroom management techniques should be a feature of staff meetings.

Some evaluation reports recommended that more careful planning of project work was required. This was particularly true of project work in the vocational and practical subject areas. Some reports, for example, suggested that an emphasis needed to be placed on carefully phasing the completion of project work, and including focused time frames for learners. This structure was advised as a

means of exposing learners to thinking projects through, to developing their planning skills, to encouraging positive thinking, and to avoiding squeezing the bulk of work involved in a project into a short period before its presentation. The processes of reporting, analysing and presenting findings were seen to enhance and develop learners' research skills. Learning was reported to be optimal when learners were encouraged to think and to engage in open-ended tasks, problem-solving, investigations, projects, and personal research. Likewise, using their ideas, interests and experiences as the starting point for activities was seen to encourage active participation in their work. One report suggested that "the use of first-hand and personal experiences facilitated better understanding and encouraged a reflective attitude in learners."

Although a diversity of effective uses of the flipchart, blackboard and whiteboard were observed during evaluations, it was recommended that, in general, these resources should be used in a more consistent, structured and interesting way to reinforce learning, or to introduce new content, rather than for transcription purposes only. Effective use was made in many lessons of teaching and learning materials such as textbooks, hand-outs, and worksheets. Materials that were attractive, stimulating and easy to use were seen to engage learners more effectively in their work.

Because of the relatively low learner-to-teacher ratio in centres, many learners were able to avail of individual attention in their lessons. While many learners clearly benefited from this type of provision, not all of it was considered effective. While teachers were encouraged to be supportive, the inspectors sometimes pointed out that it was important to "maintain emphasis on encouraging learners to assume responsibility for the completion of their own work." A small number of reports cautioned against an over-reliance on individual tuition. One report, for example, commented that there was "predominance of one-to-one teaching . . . in several lessons which deprived learners of the opportunity to develop their social skills by working collaboratively."

7.3.3 Learners' engagement

Learners were more active, interested and involved in their learning when lessons were well planned and structured to ensure continuity and progression. They were also more engaged when their involvement and efforts were encouraged, and when their contributions were integrated in the work of lessons. It was reported on numerous occasions that the learners were well motivated and capable of self-directed learning. It was also found, however, that a lack of differentiated teaching approaches and poor flexibility in classroom practices prohibited the inclusion of reticent learners, who, when they did contribute, participated only minimally. One report encouraged the staff to consider "the suitability of the teaching methodologies" as a way of enabling disengaged young people, while another suggested that "greater involvement by the learners could be achieved by giving them a greater role in [the] discovery and exploration of information for themselves." On occasions, noting the capacity of some learners, teachers were encouraged to aspire to higher expectations and to deliver the outcome of which the learners were capable.

Many learners were seen to be engaged in purposeful learning, and a range of techniques was used by teachers to reinforce learning. Most teachers took care to ensure that the learners understood the content of the lesson, which in turn made possible the advancement and progression of their skills and capabilities. Learners' understanding of the concepts and principles of lessons was best facilitated through the use of concrete examples, clear explanations, structured questioning, and the learners' engagement with practical work. Some evaluations reported that "learners were not

always afforded opportunities to review activities,” which was generally viewed as a missed opportunity to reinforce learning. Some teachers made reference to the lived experience, locality and environment of learners, which also helped them to understand the subject matter better.

7.3.4 Classroom atmosphere

Many of the centres evaluated displayed “purposeful learning environments” and “learning-conducive” atmospheres. In many instances appropriate, effective and beneficial classroom management and leadership strategies were employed. In the context of classrooms of non-traditional size it was common for reports to contain advice on classroom design and layout, coupled with a mention of how effective classroom organisation can lead to enhanced classroom management. A number of classrooms, for example, were found to have no “teacher space”, such as an area with a blackboard or whiteboard, or a space for the teachers’ demonstrations.

The inspectors noted that the quality of teaching in Youthreach centres relied heavily on the teacher-learner relationship, on the small number of learners in each class, and on the interest and enthusiasm for their work shown by the teachers. Positive and affirmative relations between teachers and learners were present in almost all centres visited, and this helped to “ensure that the learners’ focus was on learning and obtaining accreditation.”

Learners showed their appreciation and respect for the many teachers who demonstrated commitment to them, and to their work. They regularly spoke of how their teachers “listened to them” and of how they “displayed great respect for them as individuals.” This may, in some measure, be due to efforts made by teachers to ensure that learners were engaged meaningfully in their learning.

While discipline was sensitively maintained by most teachers, its establishment and continued maintenance presented a challenge for some staff members. One report highlighted that “discipline issues prohibited significant work and useful activity,” while another commented that “the motivation of learners and management of their behaviour required a high level of organisation by teachers.” Another report stated that

most of the learners demonstrate poor regard for the future; their interests lie almost exclusively in the present and to that end, many of their actions, both within and outside of the centre, are spontaneous.

While staff members were regularly commended for their firm and sensitive management of behavioural issues that arose it was observed throughout the evaluations that inadequately prepared lessons generally exacerbated disciplinary matters. Such matters were also not helped, as suggested in a number of other reports, by a “subject matter from which learners were unable to derive little engagement or enjoyment.”

Features of good practice

- A variety of teaching methods was observed in almost all centres
- Many lesson activities were hands-on and exploratory in nature, which encouraged the learners' engagement
- The content and pace of most lessons was appropriate and effective
- Many learners benefited from individual attention in their lessons
- Effective use was made of teaching and learning materials in most lessons observed
- A range of techniques was used to reinforce learning for many learners
- Many of the centres evaluated displayed purposeful learning environments
- Positive classroom relations were present in almost all centres
- There was firm and sensitive management of classroom behavioural issues by most teachers

Concerns

- Some teachers lacked a good repertoire of teaching methodologies
- Teaching was overly influenced by examinations or accreditation in a few centres
- There was an imbalance between teacher and learner inputs in whole-class teaching in some centres
- In a small number of centres there was an over-reliance on individual tuition in lessons
- Differentiated teaching approaches were lacking across centres
- Classroom design and layout was poor in some centres

7.4 Literacy and numeracy skills development

7.4.1 The challenge of literacy and numeracy skills development

The inspections found that one of the greatest challenges facing centres was the development of the learners' literacy and numeracy skills. While the programme in some centres was found to give priority to the development of these skills, in practically all these centres their provision lacked a professional underpinning. Other centres were found not to pay attention at all to the development of skills in this area. The development of suitable and formal systems and programmes for the development of literacy and numeracy was a central recommendation for all centres.

7.4.2 The significant needs of learners

The inspectors found that specific and focused literacy and numeracy assessment of learners in the various centres was lacking. As might be expected, given the unsatisfactory educational experience of Youthreach learners before enrolment in the centres, the results of standardised tests in those centres that implemented such assessments indicated that the majority of learners, though not all, fell significantly below the national norm. Almost all centres recognised the need for targeted provision for the literacy and numeracy needs of individual learners. Indeed, most had some arrangement in place to enable promotion and improvement in the area of literacy skills in particular. Evaluations by the Inspectorate, however, showed that these arrangements were not always efficiently organised, competently delivered, or beneficial to learners. More importantly, efforts were seen to be based on inadequate initial assessment of the learners and unsatisfactory diagnosis of their significant needs.

7.4.3 Approaches to literacy and numeracy skills development

For the most part, systematic planning and formal, structured development of literacy and numeracy did not exist in most centres. Many tutors addressed the development of learners' literacy and numeracy skills in an informal manner in the course of lessons. One report succinctly stated that

limited attention is given to the development of literacy and numeracy skills in mainstream lessons. A cross-curricular or integrated approach is rarely embraced in the development of literacy and numeracy.

Another report stated that, "while there was evidence of functional literacy tasks in lessons, [the] development of literacy skills is not adequately addressed." Further, and more worrying, was the fact that significant numbers of the staff in most centres viewed the literacy and numeracy remit as the sole responsibility of one or two teachers and did not include specific provision in any lessons other than in Communications or English. In a few centres one staff member was identified as having the main responsibility for co-ordinating literacy development in the centre. This was highly praised where encountered as an example of excellent practice.

Centres with a specific focus on the development of literacy and numeracy were very successful. They set and achieved goals for improvement in literacy skills and saw this as a critical outcome of a learner's time in a centre. One report noted that "teachers are careful to include opportunities for literacy development in their respective lessons, but equally careful to avoid compromising the specific lesson objectives or placing the learner in a potentially embarrassing position in the company of his/her peers."

An adult literacy tutor (from VEC adult literacy services) worked in a few centres to provide support for individual learners. This focused provision was seen at times to meet the needs of the learners so targeted. The arrangement also provided an excellent opportunity for team and co-ordinated teaching. The practice in some instances, however, was an isolated approach, with little connection to classroom activities. One report commented on praiseworthy practice whereby the learners received "one-to-one literacy sessions, which focus on improving the learners' literacy levels through targeted learning based upon assessed need."

Evaluation reports showed that teachers needed to be more aware of the literacy and numeracy needs of the learners. Collaborative teamwork and continuous engagement by the staff in cross-curricular support were important recommendations in many reports. The reports also emphasised that attention to the development of language and literacy skills in particular should be at the heart of every lesson.

Few centres gave priority to the development of learners' literacy and numeracy skills in their centre development plan. A recurring recommendation in reports was that literacy should be given priority throughout the curriculum, a consistent and professional approach to the teaching of literacy should be developed, and staff training should be undertaken to ensure that all members of the staff incorporate appropriate teaching strategies to address literacy in their particular subject area. In this regard most reports acknowledged the willingness of teachers to undertake professional development in this area.

Despite the issue of literacy featuring in lesson planning documents in many centres, planning and organising for specific literacy and numeracy development was generally insufficient in most of the

centres evaluated. One report stated that the provision of a comprehensive literacy and numeracy developmental approach generally lacked “the professional underpinning which is necessary if literacy achievement is to be an outcome of a learner’s time in the centre.” The inspectors reported that much work needed to be done to develop literacy skills on a whole-centre basis, especially with those learners who had the greatest need. These learners required more immediate and more achievable evidence of progress in order to maintain motivation. Almost all evaluations suggested the development of literacy and numeracy policies and programmes on a whole-centre basis.

While an emphasis on the development of literacy in centres was limited, there was even less of an emphasis on the development of numeracy. Very basic numeracy assessments were conducted in only a small number of centres. In many reports the inspectors recommended that assessment techniques, such as self-assessment and peer-assessment and standardised assessment criteria, should be established. The reports also highlighted that a broader approach to the development of numeracy skills could be adopted in centres. The approaches suggested included the more systematic use of the available ICT facilities and the use of concrete materials. Reports recommended that the development of numeracy support programmes, similar to the good literacy support programmes that existed in some centres, should be provided for the benefit of learners. Timetabling for Mathematics in many centres was also seen to be unhelpful. Afternoon lessons, coupled with its delivery in two-hour weekly blocks, were seen to be insufficient to meet learners’ needs.

The inspectors regularly recommended that centres develop an appropriate range of resources to support learners’ acquisition of literacy and numeracy skills. When it was available, teachers generally made good use of illustrative material to support their teaching and to promote discussion of topics. One report commented on “the dearth of age-appropriate materials available” with which to enhance and develop literacy and numeracy skills and cautioned that not having age-appropriate materials placed “an extra burden on tutors.” ICT was used effectively by some teachers for emphasis and reinforcement and to consolidate classroom practice. One report emphasised the availability of different and stimulating resources, such as audiotapes, CDs, and ICT, as aids for the learner in the process of drafting, editing, characterisation and interpretation. It also emphasised that “the textbook is not the only resource available and is often too daunting for the learner with literacy difficulties.” Some materials and resources used in lessons, however, were not particularly stimulating or interesting for the learners when reading and writing were being addressed.

Greater use of flipcharts, ICT facilities, multimedia stimuli and concrete artefacts to cater more specifically for learners’ different learning styles and ability levels was recommended in some reports. One report asked that consideration be given to the implementation of a broader range of reading approaches and strategies, including the implementation of a whole-centre practice such as “drop everything and read” (DEAR) time.

Some teachers had made efforts to create motivational, print-rich environments to support the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy. Resources displayed in the best-equipped classrooms included posters, labels, timelines, photographs and keywords and quotations. It was found that displays of learners’ work in particular not only assisted in reinforcing learning but also acted as a recognition and celebration of learners’ achievements. Displays were considered to be “a key motivational support for the teaching and learning of literacy.” Some inspectors recommended the development of a centre library and the use of newspapers and magazines to promote and expand a reading ethos among learners.

Features of good practice

- Some centres tried to adopt some measures for supporting learners' literacy needs
- Opportunities for the development of literacy and numeracy skills were incorporated in some lessons in a few centres
- Some teachers made efforts to create motivational, print-rich environments to support the teaching and learning of literacy and numeracy
- A few centres had a designated staff member with responsibility for co-ordinating the development of literacy and numeracy
- Most teachers were positively disposed towards engaging with professional development in the area of literacy and numeracy skills development
- ICT was used effectively by some teachers in their approach to developing learners' literacy and numeracy skills

Concerns

- Many learners in Youthreach centres had very low levels of literacy and numeracy
- Initial assessment of learners' literacy and numeracy capacity was, for the most part, inadequate
- Little appropriate remediation of learners' literacy and numeracy difficulties was taking place in centres
- Almost all centres lacked a whole-centre approach to the development of literacy and numeracy skills.
- Few centres had literacy or numeracy policies in place
- Centres lacked a range of focused resource materials
- Very few staff members had engaged in comprehensive training in the area of literacy and numeracy

7.5 Assessment

7.5.1 Assessing learners' progress

Learners' progress, for the most part, was assessed through FETAC or State examinations procedures. Some centres had also devised other limited ways of charting learners' progress. Many inspection reports indicated that staff members' awareness of the value of assessment needs to be given priority.

Many centres did not have a formal assessment policy in place. It was sometimes difficult, therefore, to ascertain the value placed on assessment and in particular to determine whether assessment results were used to inform planning, teaching, and learning. Centres missed opportunities through not using formal systems of monitoring and recording learners' progress to inform teachers' planning and lead to measurable and specific learning outcomes. Centres were regularly encouraged to establish whole-centre comprehensive and consistent assessment processes and to consider the development and extension of the range of available strategies for evaluating individual learners' performance. Furthermore, some reports recommended that teachers should chart the progress of each learner in a more systematic way, and that regular testing and whole-centre approaches to class and subject assessment should be introduced, together with the introduction of opportunities and strategies for reflective practice by all teachers and learners.

7.5.2 Initial assessment of learners

Few centres had appropriate procedures in place for assessing learners upon enrolment. Standardised testing materials were used in some centres. The results of these tests were sometimes used to inform the assignment of learners to particular class groupings. Many reports recommended that learners be assessed on entrance to centres, and that the outcomes of these assessments be recorded and referred to in assessing individual progress and in evaluating system success.

A few centres maintained individual plans for learners based on rather general initial assessments. Excellent practice was noted where one centre initiated an individual plan upon the learner's entry and frequently reviewed and updated its contents, a process that involved all relevant teachers. Some individual plans included the strengths of each learner and reference to the targets, knowledge, skills and understanding that learners were expected to acquire each year. However, most plans were deficient in the extent and depth of the assessment approaches adopted. Very few individual plans made reference to the involvement of learners in their own assessment, or as part of a continuous learning process. Many reports also recommended that centres consider how best to ensure that individual plans had a greater influence at the class level by informing the specific learning outcomes to be achieved.

7.5.3 External accreditation assessment procedures

The accreditation systems and requirements associated with FETAC and LCA programmes were adhered to in centres. To that end, the teachers supported and checked the compilation of learners' portfolios and key assignments. Continuous assessment practices, such as those associated with these programmes, were found to be more suited to learners' capabilities than terminal assessments. Where learners were prepared for external and certificate examinations, much of this assessment was well structured and carefully monitored, in line with national guidelines. It was observed, however, that many centres had come to rely solely on these formal assessment forms as a means of measuring learners' progress and providing them, and their parents or guardians, where applicable, with feedback on their progress. The inspectors regularly recommended that other forms of assessment be explored for this purpose, such as monitoring class participation and co-operation, as well as teamwork, leadership, and self-organisation skills and projects. In a few centres, learners' progress was discussed frequently among the staff, programmes were reviewed regularly, and formal assessment tools were used to continuously gather information.

7.5.4 Internal assessment procedures

A variety of in-centre formative and summative assessment approaches were in evidence in many centres, including the use of teacher observation, class questioning, teacher-designed tasks and tests, examination questions, worksheets, written tasks, and project work. Other approaches observed included the regular monitoring of learners' continuing work, check-lists, portfolios, and the monitoring of learners' copybooks and folders. Daily records, log books and notebooks of activities were maintained by learners in some classrooms. Some informal assessments were used in a few centres and included personality tests, career inventories, informal interviews, behavioural observation, and interviews with parents. Learners demonstrated an interest in and understanding of their work and were confident and competent when discussing completed tasks and assignments where a mix of approaches was used. In a few instances the inspectors recommended that "consideration be given to developing and extending the range of strategies that evaluate individual learner performance."

The correction of and feedback on learners' copybooks was observed in some centres. The inspectors noted that regular correction and feedback to learners on their work was good practice. However, the "increased use of dated, comment-based and formative feedback . . . of learners' work" was sometimes recommended as a way of developing this practice.

Formative assessment strategies proved valuable when used effectively in classrooms. They readily facilitated programme review and staff self-appraisal as well as the maintenance by teachers of progress records on individual learners. The use of formative and summative assessments and the preparation of learners' portfolios provided important information on learners' progress and achievement. Despite this, most centres did not have a central system for recording and tracking learners' progress, with information being conveyed to learners in an ad hoc fashion, if at all, in many instances. Indeed, much of this information remained in portfolios and was not discussed by teachers, or even with the learners themselves.

In some centres learners maintained their own reflective diary, which helped to record a subjective view of progress. Some learners also recorded their personal reflections on their learning experiences and discussed them regularly with class tutors. These strategies were complimented as good practice in attempting to involve learners and encourage responsibility in their own learning. One report stated that

the development of self-assessment and peer-assessment techniques would be useful as a developmental tool for young learners engaging in lifelong learning and improvement programmes. Such an approach values each learner as a cognitive participant, through informed reflection on his/her own performance.

7.5.5 Reporting on and celebrating learners' achievement

Many centres issued written end-of-term reports. Comments included reference to attendance, punctuality, the completion of specified assignments, and the learner's engagement in their work. Some teachers reported on their formal evaluation of assignments completed and the work presented by learners. A number of evaluation reports made reference to centres that did not conform to any type of regular monitoring or dating of completed assignments. Where pieces of work were regularly dated this assisted in documenting the progress of learners and enabled self-evaluative processes for learners. One report suggested that all learners' work should be dated and recorded so as to "afford [the] potential for peer and self-evaluation together with options for continuity, sequencing and progression of the total programme offered." Maintaining good assessment records and tracking learners' achievement should help teachers identify and respond to both academic achievement and under-performance.

A number of reports recommended that greater emphasis be placed on recognising, rewarding and celebrating the work of learners. One report recorded that "learners' achievements are affirmed and celebrated by the centre throughout the year by the award of "Learners of the Month" and "Learner of the Year". This was commended as being very good practice. Craft fairs, sales of work, open days, certification days and focused projects were all suggested as ways of celebrating learners' achievement.

Features of good practice

- Accreditation systems and requirements associated with FETAC, LCA and other such programmes were adhered to where encountered
- A wide variety of summative and formative assessment strategies were implemented across all centres
- Correction of and feedback on learners' work was a regular practice in some classrooms
- Learner assessments informed the development and review of learner plans in some centres
- The assessment strategies employed in some centres were effective in encouraging learners to take responsibility for their own learning
- Many centres recognised, rewarded and celebrated the work of learners
- Exhibitions of learners' work served to motivate the learners and to engender in them a positive attitude to their work

Concerns

- Many centres did not have a formal policy on learner assessment
- The assessment recording and tracking systems were poor in most centres
- Centres missed opportunities to use assessment results to inform teachers' planning
- Many centres had come to rely on summative assessment procedures as a means of providing learners with feedback on their progress
- Most individual learner plans were deficient in the extent and depth of assessment approaches adopted

7.6 Outcomes and standards

7.6.1 General outcomes for learners

In general, an appropriate balance was achieved in many centres between the provision for personal and social development of the learners and support in achieving certification and progression.

On the whole, learners appeared happy attending their Youthreach programme and exhibited a sense of enjoyment and achievement from their experience. The staff in most centres created a caring and supportive atmosphere that contributed appreciably to the educational outcomes of the learners. It was clear to the inspectors from discussions and interactions in centres that practically all learners were experiencing success to some degree in a range of areas, including educational attainment and social development. The inspectors acknowledged that centres contributed significantly to the development of acceptable and sometimes improved standards of behaviour by learners. They also regularly concluded that many learners displayed a sense of achievement, pride and ability in the wide range of practical training activities in which they engaged and that levels of performance in a range of skills had improved, especially in the practical skills areas. In one centre, for example, learners' portfolios demonstrated the acquisition of a range of skills, including cognitive and creative skills evidenced in the completed woodwork and craftwork assignments.

In most instances learners' attitudes were developed by engaging fully with the programme. They experienced improved self-esteem, a sense of self-worth, and enhanced personal and social development. While it was reported in some centres that learners initially experienced difficulty in interactions with members of the staff, these difficulties tended to subside as time progressed.

The most significant outcome for learners, as reported to the inspectors in most centres, was the retention of a significant number of young people in the education system. As one report stated:

Accreditation aside, among the more significant outcomes for the learners is the fact that they are retained purposefully in the education system, and the sense of achievement they experience. It is also evident that, as they progress through the centre, learners develop a sense of maturity and responsibility.

The inspections revealed that Youthreach provided opportunities for learners to re-engage with education and training and for many young people provided the critical step to beginning a fulfilling journey towards work or learning. Success was achieved, therefore, by many learners, insofar as they spent an average of two years in an educational environment or, as reported by some learners, “off the streets” and “out of trouble”.

7.6.2 Learner certification

Numerous evaluation reports acknowledged the expressed ambition of learners, their desire to further themselves, and their wish to pursue and complete relevant certificate examinations. Many learners achieved the certification for which they came to their centre. A commendable achievement in many centres was the progression of learners through a series of FETAC modules, or the completion of the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. The standards of achievement, engagement and retention for these learners were most impressive. Many successfully presented completed FETAC portfolios for external assessment, while significant numbers also worked towards advancement to the next FETAC level available within their centre. It was recommended in some reports, however, that the appropriateness of the programme provided should be analysed to determine why learners did not complete various modules. Further, while significant numbers of learners achieved component certificates, which can stand alone or build towards the achievement of a full certificate, a much smaller number were achieving full awards at FETAC levels 3 to 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications. Typically, these awards require the completion of a set of at least eight FETAC minor or component awards at a particular level. Such achievement would make it easier for learners to successfully progress from the programme to further studies, employment or other life choices that are on a par with their peers.

Certification was seen to provide learners with opportunities to gain apprenticeships, work and other progression routes. Certification also offered learners the possibility of a choice of employments, further education in colleges offering post-Leaving Certificate courses, and third-level courses in the case of mature learners. It was seen that many learners preparing to take higher-level examinations were motivated and focused on specific, individual goals. The outcomes and standards achieved by these confident and capable learners, however, contrasted sharply with other “challenging, more problematic learners,” who “needed to engage more fully to achieve their potential.” Some reports asserted that learners were not challenged enough by the curriculum offered to them, as it was clear that they were able to learn at a higher level. Others did not fulfil their potential because of persistent absenteeism.

7.6.3 Learners’ progression from centres

It was obvious to the inspectors that many learners had developed clear goals for their future, which they were pursuing realistically. Various co-ordinators and staff members recognised that learners

were more motivated and committed if they were working towards achieving a clear progression option. In one centre an inspector reported that “the majority of learners spoke enthusiastically about their plans for the future and many had a clear understanding of the progression routes available to them.” While many learners were able to identify realistic and viable options for their future, however, others had not come to that realisation. A minority of learners lacked any sense of where they might go on their departure from their centre and were unaware, unable or reluctant to obtain relevant information. Some reports, therefore, highlighted that learners would benefit from tailored guidance. One report strongly suggested that “career guidance provision would help create a greater awareness among learners of the different progression opportunities available to them and help them to identify and know how to access different career options.” Other reports indicated that learners’ prospects might be improved by more carefully tailored work experience.

Learners were supported in a few centres by an advocate who identified and helped them to obtain viable options for their future. The advocate continued to assist them for some time in integrating in further education, training opportunities, or the labour market. Some centres adopted the expertise of FÁS in facilitating learners seeking apprenticeships and appropriate work experience. Unfortunately, this did not always contribute to improved outcomes in the form of employment opportunities for the learners.

As part of their evaluation, centres were asked to provide the inspectors with information on the destination of all the learners who were enrolled in their centre during the year before their evaluation. Some centres were unable to provide accurate details regarding learners’ progression. Notwithstanding this, when added together the destinations of 939 learners, as shown in table 7.1, were recorded from the twenty-five centres evaluated.

Table 7.1: Learners’ destinations

Continuing in the centre	Employment	Unemployment	FÁS training centre	Further education	Other
46%	15%	11%	4%	6%	18%
<i>n = 939 learners</i>					

Table 7.1 shows that 46% of learners were continuing their education in their respective centres. Many centres were pleased with the success achieved in retaining learners to complete the centre’s programme. Further analysis revealed that many had completed part of their programme, or year 1 of a two-year schedule. Of the 15% who gained employment, many were working in a part-time capacity. Some learners proceeded to FÁS training courses, while others continued in further education. Different interpretations or understandings of “Further education” were revealed in the completion of questionnaires. In the completion of this section of the questionnaire the learners’ destinations recorded included a national learning network, a learning-support environment, the armed forces, apprenticeship programmes, and PLC colleges while one learner was enrolled in a registered third-level college. Five learners were reported to have resumed study in mainstream post-primary schools.

Centres provided valuable information with regard to “Other” destinations, which accounted for 169 or 18% of learners. These destinations included other Youthreach centres or STTCs, health or personal reasons, moved from the area or emigration, pregnancy or full-time parenthood, prison, and JLO workshops. The largest number in this category stayed at home to become full-time

parents, with a small number leaving the programme during pregnancy. No centre was explicit regarding the sex of those pursuing full-time parenthood, but an analysis of those learners attending centres suggests that a very small number were fathers. Four learners had left their centre to get married and two others to care for relatives. Some learners emigrated, moved away from the area or moved house and so did not complete their programme in the centres. A significant minority of learners left the programme for health or personal reasons. One report stated that some learners had health issues “beyond the remit of the centre,” while another cited “difficulties coping with the programme” as reasons for the learner’s departure. The destination of some learners was unknown, as pertinent information was not recorded by the centres concerned.

As this data indicates, progression from centres to potential and promising options was a major challenge both for centres and for individual learners. This, however, is in keeping with international research, which suggests that learners moving from such supported educational provision will need continuing support to sustain them in meaningful work or further study. Absenteeism among learners was a cause for concern in almost all centres as one of the greatest impediments to their progression. The inspectors strongly suggested that learners’ progression should be linked, as much as possible, to meaningful work-experience options and appropriate employment opportunities.

7.6.4 Recording learners’ destinations

It was apparent that specific tracking or information systems regarding learners’ progression and destination were maintained by few centres. Many reports, therefore, strongly advised that centres develop formal systems for monitoring, assessing and recording learners’ progression. Some centres continued to maintain good relations with learners after they had left the centre. One inspection report commented that learners had returned to give talks to current participants. Recurring recommendations in reports advised the management to develop their practices and procedures for assisting learners in their progression from centres.

Features of good practice

- Practically all learners were experiencing success to some degree in the centres visited, whether from an academic, personal or social viewpoint
- An appropriate balance was achieved in many centres between the provision for personal and social development of the learners and support in achieving certification and progression
- Many learners achieved the certification for which they came to their centre
- Learners had clear goals and a vision for their future in many centres
- Most centres offered learners worthwhile internal progression routes, while some were also successful in securing meaningful external placements for learners
- Many centres were successful in retaining learners to complete a comprehensive Youthreach programme

Concerns

- Learners in some centres had unclear and unrealistic expectations and goals
- Progression from centres to viable options was a major challenge for most centres and learners
- The lack of work experience in some centres tended to stifle the progression opportunities of learners
- The tracking of and support offered to learners following their progression from a centre was less than might be desired in most instances



Chapter 8

Improving Youthreach: Issues and recommendations

8.1 Introduction

This chapter looks at ways of improving Youthreach. While individual centre evaluations identified the strengths of each centre, they also suggested areas for improvement. A number of significant issues emerge when the range of suggested improvements across all centres is examined. It is clear that there are challenges for centres in such areas as management and staffing, programme development, lack of access to the services of national agencies, and accommodation, as well as challenges in such areas as learners' attendance, retention, assessment, certification and progression. It is equally obvious that improvements in these areas would lead to more efficient and effective operation of the Youthreach programme, as well as to more rewarding educational experiences for learners.

This chapter discusses the more common improvements that the inspectors recommended in centres. It will be seen that while centres have the capacity to make changes in some areas they may require external assistance to effect change in other areas. This chapter should be read in conjunction with the features of good practice and areas of concern that were reported in previous chapters.

8.2 Does Youthreach work for the learner?

The value-for-money review of Youthreach carried out by the Department of Education and Skills found that, while requiring significant change in its organisation and delivery, "there exists a strong argument for the continued allocation of public funding for the programme" (p. 13). This was a significant endorsement of the programme. In a similar fashion, the findings of evaluations of Youthreach centres carried out by the Department's Inspectorate suggest that Youthreach is "doing a good job" as a provider of second-chance education, but also that there is considerable room for improvement.

Inspections of centres indicated that the Youthreach experience was working for the majority of enrolled learners. Many centres had succeeded in providing an individualised, flexible and balanced programme that facilitated learners in moving towards positive participation in society. The programmes offered to learners in the different centres varied, and this was due to centres developing programmes to meet the identified needs of their own cohort of learners. The inspectors found that Youthreach provided many learners with a secure and stable learning environment and that it succeeded in meeting their varied needs to a far greater extent than that achieved in a mainstream education setting. The inspectors also found that those learners who engaged fully with the programme that was on offer to them in their centres had positive learning experiences, improved self-esteem and self-worth, and enhanced personal and social development. The programme also provided learners with opportunities to achieve and have their efforts recognised through various forms of certification. Learners and their parents were generally very positive about the provision of the programme.

Evaluations also revealed, however, that Youthreach simply did not work for a significant minority of learners, and that the quality of the educational experience for others was poor. Significant numbers of learners, for example, simply failed to engage at all with their Youthreach programme. This was most evident from the high rate of absenteeism in most centres. Other learners were found not to be sufficiently challenged by their programme. Gaps, such as the development of literacy and

numeracy skills, health education and the application of individual learner plans, were also prevalent in centres. Some centres had established good relationships with relevant local service providers and agencies. However, as pointed out in the value-for-money review report of Youthreach,¹¹ several national agencies have no formal remit for Youthreach, and linkage between these services and centres is limited. Finally, while Youthreach was seen to be effective, to an extent, in terms of certification achieved, particularly when the differing contextual variables and limitations are taken into account, there is room for improvement in the number of learners who obtain certification, as well as the levels at which they obtain certification.

In general, the inspectors found some evidence across centres of successful delivery of appropriate educational programmes to learners. However, a number of important recommendations for development exist. Centres could implement more effective change, with external assistance in the case of some of these recommendations, while in the case of others it is well within the capacity of individual centres to implement change. Externally, centres could be further assisted by the Department of Education and Skills, VECs and relevant agencies and services.

8.3 Areas for improvement that require external input

8.3.1 Operators' guidelines

At present, individual centres have significant autonomy in how they are managed and how they operate. While there are no guidelines in place for centres, the numerous circular letters and directives that have been issued over the years by the Department of Education and Skills specify certain parameters within which centres must operate. In the absence of the collation and universal application of these circulars and directives, however, many have been interpreted and applied differently in centres. Inspections indicated that widely different practices have emerged in a range of areas in different centres. There have also been limited opportunities, except perhaps in the context of staff professional development courses, for Youthreach management and staff personnel to share examples of best practice.

Recommendation

- Operators' guidelines for Youthreach should be developed and circulated. These guidelines should include advice on such areas as the management and organisation of centres, recruitment and referral of learners, the induction of learners, early leavers, and the follow-up of learners. The development of these guidelines should be an inclusive process, and all official documents relating to the programme should be collated with these guidelines. The guidelines should respect the holistic and flexible nature of the education provided in centres while at the same time offering a framework for improved operations.

8.3.2 Management and staffing of centres

Management structures and practices in the twenty-five centres evaluated varied considerably. In some centres, for example, the chief executive officer of the VEC or the relevant education and adult education officers, or both, played an active role in the management of their centre, while in others the senior management had adopted what could be termed a hands-off approach. In

11 See note 4 for relevant reference

extreme cases this approach resulted in the near-neglect of centres by the senior management. Some centres were found to have active boards of management, while others had no such board. While the inspectors found the quality of the work of centre co-ordinators to be effective in most centres, this was not always the case. Practice also varied considerably between centres in relation to such issues as staff appointments, staff training, and the implementation of the procedures of the vocational service support unit (VSSU) for centres.

Recommendations

- VECs should establish a board of management (or VEC sub-committee) for centres, the members of which should avail, as appropriate, of relevant in-service training.
- The senior management within VECs should make sure to keep themselves informed of the progress and development of Youthreach centres within their scheme and engage, as appropriate, with the QFI process as it affects the centres.
- VECs should apply the procedures and practices in respect of Youthreach as provided by the VSSU. Also, the VSSU guidelines should be updated at regular intervals to take account of new programme specifications and other pertinent developments.

8.3.3 The deployment of staff

Each of the centres evaluated employed a number of well-qualified staff members from a variety of professional and vocational backgrounds, including teaching, adult education and training, youth work, welfare, and health. This mix yielded a cross-fertilisation of expertise from the different disciplines. Problems regarding staff deployment and timetabling, however, were encountered in some centres. In some centres staff members were poorly deployed across their centre's timetable; for example, subjects taught did not match a teacher's qualification or expertise. Many centres had members of staff who were shared with other schools or centres for education. This had many practical benefits, provided that timetabling was well managed. Poor timetabling practices, however, were observed in some centres; for example, Mathematics could be taught only on Mondays, when a teacher was available, and had then to be timetabled in two-hour or even three-hour blocks. Differing conditions of employment for different members of the staff (an issue that is generally beyond the capacity of the centres' management to address) were found in other centres to lead to a fragmentation of the staff team. This in turn resulted in difficulties that hindered the effective management of a centre, contributed to learner attendance difficulties, and affected staff morale. In one instance the different conditions of employment meant that there were inequalities in the allocation of work between staff members. Indeed it was clear in a number of centres that work outside class contact time seemed to be undertaken in an unequal manner by staff members, with some shouldering very significant work loads and responsibilities. This was counterbalanced by many teachers who attended their centre only to deliver their individual lessons.

Recommendations

- All members of the teaching staff in centres should work in a collaborative and co-operative manner and should be provided by their management with real opportunities to contribute to the work of their centre.
- The management of centres should ensure that the needs of learners and the provision of balanced learning opportunities should be given priority when decisions on timetabling are being made.
- Centres' managements should be directly involved in the delivery of teaching and learning activities. While the size of a centre may have a bearing on the amount of class contact time that

a centre co-ordinator can be timetabled for, it is recommended that co-ordinators have some timetabled class contact in their centres.

8.3.4 Access to services and programmes

Many Youthreach learners manifest significant problems in behaviour, motivation, special education needs, or early leaving. In recognition of these challenges, Youthreach centres benefit, relative to post-primary schools, from a generous learner-to-staff ratio. This level of provision is intended to enable the staff in centres to provide targeted support that can seek to address the considerable learning needs of young people in the centres. Consequently, many agencies that provide support to mainstream schools do not have a remit for Youthreach centres. However, the inspectors found that access to the expertise available within relevant agencies would be of benefit to the staff and learners in the centres.

Certain resources are provided by the Department of Education and Skills to all VECs for the provision of guidance, counselling and psychological services in Youthreach centres. Since 2002 the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has assigned a psychologist to advise on and support the co-ordination of these services. This NEPS engagement takes place predominantly at the system level. An educational psychological service to centres, operating at both a whole-centre and individual learner levels, remains largely unavailable to Youthreach teachers and learners despite the incidence of significant learning needs among Youthreach learners.

The relatively favourable learner-to-staff ratio in Youthreach centres helps centres to meet learners' special needs. Further support has been provided in some centres to cater for the needs of learners with special educational needs. This support has been provided under the Youthreach Special Education Needs Initiative (SENI). This initiative was established by the Department of Education and Skills in January 2007 and operated as a pilot project in twenty Youthreach centres until June 2008. The overlap between these twenty centres and the twenty-five centres on which this evaluation report is based was minimal and therefore provided no basis on which to provide evaluative comment on the initiative. The SENI, however, provides individual centres with a general allocation of funds that are used to address high-incidence special education needs (for example emotional disturbance or behavioural problems and specific learning disabilities). The extra resources allow for such interventions as mentoring, individual planning, additional teaching and support and staff training to be made available in a timetabled and systematic manner.

Evidence emerged in the inspections that some of the Youthreach centres had links, albeit unofficial links, with the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB), which has a specific remit to encourage school attendance by young people up to the minimum school leaving age of sixteen. The inspectors believed that greater linkages between centres and the NEWB would have the potential to lend significant support to Youthreach centres, particularly with regard to learners' age and attendance issues.

The different elements of the School Support Programme (SSP), the most notable being the School Completion Programme and the Home-School-Community Liaison scheme, were designed to support mainstream schools and school communities that experience significant and concentrated levels of disadvantage. The focus of these programmes is to ensure that students from disadvantaged backgrounds are facilitated and supported in their efforts to remain in and achieve in mainstream schools. Youthreach staffs, and the programme itself, could benefit significantly from

learning about the experiences and good practices generated within these programmes and applying them in their own settings. Consideration should therefore be given to exploiting opportunities for shared or peer learning between Youthreach staffs and those employed by the SCP and HSCL schemes, and other such schemes or programmes.

While the evaluations highlighted that the staff in most centres had a good record of engaging with relevant continuing professional development courses, they also revealed that certain skills shortages existed in centres. This was particularly acute, for example, in the case of training in the development of literacy and numeracy skills. The Department of Education and Skills and VECs should ensure that suitable professional development opportunities are provided for Youthreach staffs in these areas.

The Junior Certificate School Programme (JCSP) is not made available at present to Youthreach centres by the Department of Education and Skills. The inspectors considered that this programme, which is an intervention within the junior cycle aimed at those students who are identified as being at risk of early school-leaving, is an appropriate programme to cater for the needs of many Youthreach learners.

Recommendations

- Given the significant learning needs among Youthreach learners, the findings of the inspection reports support the recommendation of the Department's value-for-money review report on Youthreach that links between Youthreach and the services offered by such agencies as the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS), the National Educational Welfare Board (NEWB) and the National Council for Special Educational Needs (NCSE) should be formalised.
- The Department of Education and Skills and VECs should ensure that suitable professional development opportunities are provided for Youthreach staffs, particularly in the areas of literacy and numeracy teaching.
- Greater co-operation and sharing of information, both between centres and with national and local programmes, groups or agencies with similar objectives to Youthreach, should be fostered.
- Consideration should be given to extending the provision of the JCSP to include Youthreach centres.

8.3.5 Accommodation

The evaluations showed that Youthreach centres can be housed in a diverse range of building types, such as former schools, factories, renovated shops, and community buildings. While it was found that some of these buildings were practicable, others were considered to be unsuited to the effective delivery of the programme, and in a number of instances there were serious health and safety implications. These health and safety risks were not always reflected in a centre's health and safety statement. The notion of placing learners from mostly disadvantaged backgrounds in less than desirable accommodation is contrary to best practice (both here and in other countries), which suggests that education for disaffected young people should take place in a pleasant setting that would also be unlike a formal school environment.

At present no specific capital fund is available for Youthreach, and the programmes are mostly accommodated in buildings owned or rented by VECs. Evaluations showed that those owned by VECs (such as former vocational schools) are frequently in need of renovation, often on a considerable scale. When VECs are renting they must compete in the market with other prospective

occupiers. The very large increases in rental costs have been acknowledged by the Department in its institution of a rent supplement mechanism whereby rental costs are met in full. With an emergent competitive rental market, as lease agreements fall due for renewal, VECs should seek to eliminate the need for a rent supplement from the Department by renegotiating the terms of the lease for their centre.

Recommendations

- Accommodation issues pertaining to Youthreach centres need to be addressed strategically at both the system and the local level. Consideration should be given to including Youthreach in the capital programme of the Department of Education and Skills.
- Centres' management personnel should be proactive in endeavouring to ensure the appropriateness of the buildings in which their centre is housed. All centres should have an up-to-date health and safety statement in place, as required by legislation. This should be reviewed regularly.

8.4 Areas for improvement that are within the capacity of individual centres to address

8.4.1 Attendance and retention

The inspectors found that learner absenteeism was high in most centres, and particularly so during the summer period. It was widely accepted by the inspectors that the strategy of reducing the amount of a learner's weekly allowance in line with uncertified time missed, as applied by practically all centres, did not seem to have a positive effect on learner attendance levels. Reasons recorded by inspectors for the high level of learner absenteeism in centres regularly included the absence of a policy on attendance. Other reasons included reference to the curriculum being unsuitable for learners, unsuitable teaching methodologies being implemented in classrooms, and a lack of meaningful individual education plans for learners. The mode of transport used by learners sometimes contributed to their poor attendance, but also, as mentioned in one evaluation report, the fact that "entitlements to 'leave days' for sick leave or personal leave are now regarded as rights by the [learners] and are fully exploited in that spirit." It was also intimated by some inspectors that for certain learners their centre reflected their previous school too much, and that this may have influenced their attendance patterns.

There is a problem regarding the number of learners who leave Youthreach early, whether that happens before they fully engage or at some other point during the course of the programme. In practically all evaluations the inspectors encountered situations where learners remained on the centre's roll book despite having left the programme. In the case of most learners this was obvious from their lengthy period of absence from the centre. Worryingly, in some instances, it was common for centres not to have followed up lengthy learner absences to determine their status.

Recommendation

- Centres should ensure that they have strategies in place aimed at promoting, encouraging and improving learners' attendance and retention.

8.4.2 Assessment and individual learner plans

There was considerable room for improvement in the assessment procedures being implemented by practically all the centres evaluated. Few centres, for example, assessed learners upon enrolment, and fewer still had procedures in place for obtaining relevant information on learners' previous educational status. In effect, the lack of procedures in this area meant that the staff in the majority of centres had limited knowledge of the skill levels of learners upon entry. This made the development of individual plans for learners difficult. Indeed many centres did not operate individual plans for learners. Where they did exist, most were deficient in the extent and depth of assessment approaches adopted. Further, very few made reference to the involvement of learners in their own assessment, or as part of a continuous learning process. Many inspectors recommended that learners be assessed on entrance to centres, and that the outcomes of these assessments be recorded and referred to in assessing individual progress and in evaluating the system's success. The inspectors also recommended that centres develop specific plans for each individual learner.

The inspectors found that some centres had come to rely solely on formal assessments, such as FETAC and LCA assessments, as a means of measuring learners' progress and providing them, and their parents or guardians where applicable, with feedback on their progress. Inspectors regularly recommended that other forms of assessment be explored for this purpose, such as the monitoring of class participation and co-operation, as well as teamwork, leadership, and self-organisation skills and projects.

Recommendations

- All centres should have appropriate procedures in place for assessing learners upon entry. In this context, appropriate consideration should be given to the need for the assessment of learners' personal, social and emotional needs as well as their educational needs.
- Centres should develop good practice in carrying out both formative and summative assessment of learners' work. Further, assessment results should be used to inform planning and teaching.
- There is opportunity for more centres to make use of the profiling web assessment process developed as part of the Youthreach special education needs initiative (SENI). This system involves learners directly in their own assessment, in the development of their own individual plan, and in the review of their progress in their centre.
- Learners' progress needs to be continually monitored. Staff members should record and date all facets of learners' progress regularly and systematically, and learners should be kept informed of their progress.

8.4.3 The Youthreach programme

The programmes offered to learners were different in each of the twenty-five centres evaluated. This can be explained by the fact that individual centres endeavoured to develop a programme that would meet the needs of their own particular cohort of learners. The inspectors found that parts of the programmes offered in centres succeeded in meeting this need. There were common deficits in almost all the programmes evaluated.

The inspectors found that the most effective centres divided their programme into four distinct parts: engagement, foundation, progression, and transition. The programmes in some centres, however, were found not to have any distinct parts at all. These centres generally viewed themselves as providing a general programme of education and training. In these centres, however, there was a reduced possibility of curricular progression for learners.

Most of the Youthreach programmes evaluated were constructed on the basis of the FETAC curricular system. While this system was found to provide centres with a high degree of flexibility in determining their programme, the inspectors expressed concern at the influence this system was having on both planning for teaching and the teaching and learning process itself. They described, for example, how many teachers had come to rely heavily on FETAC module descriptors as their scheme of work for their teaching, and how the focus on the achievement of specific learning outcomes (as contained in module descriptors) skewed significantly what happened in classrooms. Module descriptors do not provide a curriculum: they are purely a statement of standards to be achieved, on which a curriculum and suitable assessment strategies appropriate to the learners must be designed. Further, in centres that operated the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate programmes the inspectors found that the State certificate examinations strongly influenced the manner in which they were delivered in classrooms.

Certain elements of the programmes provided in most centres were also found to be poorly planned, organised, and delivered, or were simply not present at all. This was mostly the case in relation to dedicated literacy and numeracy skills development in centres. Even when arrangements existed for the development of these skills they generally lacked a professional underpinning. The development of these skills was seen by members of the staff in the majority of centres to be the sole remit of one or two particular staff members. The development of a whole-centre approach to the development of learners' literacy and numeracy, to be inclusive of all staff members in a centre, was recommended in practically all evaluation reports. It was also recommended that staff members in centres should engage with appropriate professional development courses in the area of literacy and numeracy to ensure that they were incorporating appropriate strategies in their teaching to address the issues in their particular subject areas.

The programmes in most centres also lacked a comprehensive focus on social, personal and health education. The social isolation of learners in some centres was not addressed in a specific way towards adulthood and citizenship. The provision of guidance and counselling for learners was also poor in most centres, and work experience was generally poorly organised and implemented also across centres. Finally, few centres had developed innovative summer programmes that succeeded in engaging learners.

Recommendations

- Curricular programmes offered in centres should be focused on the learning needs of participants: they should challenge sufficiently all the learners and should allow for curricular progression (for example engagement, foundation, progression and transition phases).
- Guidelines on appropriate teaching methodologies should be developed, along with associated training, for Youthreach staff.
- Centres should include a comprehensive programme in social, personal and health education on their curriculum.
- Centres should develop a whole-centre approach to the development of learners' literacy and numeracy, to be inclusive of all staff members in a centre. Literacy should be a central focus of all lessons. Relevant professional development courses in the area of literacy and numeracy should be made available to the staff.
- Centres should endeavour to include an element of work experience in the programme they offer learners. Links with local businesses, and the commitment of businesses, should be developed as fully as possible in this regard.

- Centres should provide all learners with appropriate guidance and counselling.
- All centres should review the programme that they provide for their learners during the summer period.

8.4.4 Certification

While the importance of personal development cannot be overestimated as a significant outcome for Youthreach learners, equally important is the achievement of certification by learners to reflect the best of their ability. While the evaluations indicated that many learners were achieving the certification for which they came to their centre, such as FETAC and LCA certification, this was not always the case.

The inspectors noted a mismatch in some centres between the learners' abilities and the certification type being pursued. Considerable disparity was also seen in the length of time that learners engaged with various programmes.

In relation to FETAC qualifications, the inspectors found that a significant minority of learners were simply not completing their modules. Persistent learner absenteeism was sometimes a factor here, but not always. While significant numbers of learners in the various centres were achieving minor or component awards, which acknowledge that they completed a FETAC module, relatively few had managed to achieve full FETAC awards (i.e. the completion of a set of modules in a particular subject area leading to a full FETAC award). It is understood, however, that this must be viewed in the context of the learners' low level of educational attainment at entry. Finally, some evaluation reports asserted that learners were not challenged enough by the curriculum offered to them. This generally manifested itself in centres where learners were provided only with FETAC level 3 certification when it was clear that they were capable of achieving at higher levels.

In general, Youthreach is effective, to an extent, in terms of learner certification achieved, particularly when the differing contextual variables and limitations are taken into account. However, there is room for improvement in the number of learners who obtain certification, as well as the levels at which they obtain certification, so that they can successfully progress from their centres to appropriate further education, training, or employment.

Recommendations

- More learners should, where their ability allows, be encouraged to strive for certification during the foundation phase of their programme and seek follow-on certification by the end of their progression phase.
- Certification outcomes should show a greater spread of achievement, particularly for learners in the progression levels. Learners who stay in Youthreach for two or more years should leave with certification that will enable them to progress to further studies, training, employment, or other life choices. This will require that they be motivated, encouraged and challenged more in their classrooms and workshops.
- Learners need to have high expectations of their own abilities in order to achieve higher award outcomes, and the staff of centres need to give priority to the development in learners of a belief in themselves.

8.4.5 Progression

A minority of learners encountered during the evaluations lacked any sense of where they might go on their departure from their centre and were unaware, unable or reluctant to gain access to relevant information. Some reports, therefore, highlighted how learners would benefit from targeted guidance. The evaluations showed that progression from centres to potential and promising options was a major challenge both for centres and for individual learners. Absenteeism among learners was a cause for concern in almost all centres as one of the greatest impediments to learners' progression. Inspectors regularly suggested that learners' progression should be linked, as much as possible, to meaningful work experience options and appropriate employment opportunities. Some centres were unable to provide accurate details regarding learners' progression.

Recommendations

- Learners should be provided with career guidance in centres.
- Centres should consider assigning each learner a key worker. The use of a key worker system leading to the development of a good relationship between learner and member of staff is a crucial factor in helping learners become more resilient and effective.
- Centres need to proactively support learners in obtaining work opportunities and in progressing from their centre.
- Centres should develop tracking systems to monitor the progression of learners after they leave centres.



Appendix

References

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Vocational Services Support Unit (2004). *Procedures in Respect of Youthreach/Senior Traveller Training Centres*. Keadue (Co. Cavan): VSSU, c/o Co. Cavan VEC.

Useful web sites

www.education.ie	Department of Education and Skills
www.youthreach.ie	Youthreach programme
www.fas.ie	Foras Áiseanna Saothair: Ireland's National Training and Employment Authority
www.sttc.ie	National Co-ordination Unit for Senior Traveller Training Centres
www.fetac.ie	The Further Education Training and Awards Council
www.hetac.ie	The Higher Education Training and Awards Council

An Evaluation of Youthreach

Youthreach is a key national provider in the Irish education and training continuum and has been an important element of the response of the Department of Education and Skills and the Government to early school leaving and educational disadvantage in Ireland. It provides a way in which young people and adults may return to, or complete their education in a non-threatening learner-centred environment. Youthreach centres cater for almost 6,000 learners annually. This report from the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills is based on a detailed analysis of evaluations conducted in twenty-five of the country's 103 Youthreach centres in the period 2006 to 2007.

This report highlights features of good practice and positive aspects of the Youthreach centres that were evaluated. It acknowledges the considerable successes of the Youthreach programme, including its focus on the holistic development of individual learners, the wide range of supports that it offers learners and the culture of planning that exists in Youthreach centres. The report also highlights and makes recommendations to address the extensive challenges that still exist for Youthreach in such areas as lack of access to the services of national agencies, accommodation, programme development, teaching methodologies and learner assessment, and shows that while centres have the capacity to make changes in some areas, they may require external assistance to effect change in others. The focus for these recommendations is on improving the quality of the learner's experience of Youthreach and ensuring that every learner gains the greatest possible benefit from the time spent participating in Youthreach.

P R O M O T I N G T H E Q U A L I T Y O F L E A R N I N G



Inspectorate Evaluation Studies

Inspectorate Evaluation Studies present the outcomes of focused and thematic evaluations of aspects of the educational system carried out by the Inspectorate, which has statutory responsibilities for the evaluation of schools at primary and second level in Ireland. The reports in the series focus on practice in schools and are intended to disseminate good practice and policy advice based on evaluation outcomes.

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