

Our Way Back?



**Submission by Youth Work Ireland to the Consultation on the Establishment
of the new Further Education and Training Authority – SOLAS**



Youth Work Ireland

www.youthworkireland.ie

20 Lower Dominick St

Dublin 1

01 8584500

Introduction

Youth Work Ireland is a Federation of 22 local youth services led by local people. Our members through our network of integrated services play a key role in delivering in the field of education and training to thousands of young people throughout Ireland, as part of an integrated approach to Youth Work

Our model is one of an Integrated Youth Service. Such a service informs and accords with the national policy agenda in terms of the new Department of Children and Youth Affairs. Government policy has long sought to ensure different policy agendas can be brought to bear on cross cutting issues. The Department of Children and Youth Affairs brings together the policy agendas relating to Health, Education, Justice, young people and early childhood and development.

Our local youth services operate in a similar fashion in local communities with services offering healthy choices, dealing with potential offending and with a basis in the voluntary informal learning of youth work. Young people can engage with the service in a number of different ways and can progress through different levels and types of provision through the youth service in their local community.

We see a number of key challenges for young people and Further Education at this time. The number of people dropping out of second and third level should raise concerns. There is often a negative perception of some elements of provision for young people. We believe there are distinct and discrete needs relevant to young people. Many of these issues are not covered by the generic idea of "Further Education". Issues such as severe educational disadvantage and the plight of early school leavers need to figure very prominently in the work of Solas.

While the National Skills Strategy is an important document there are already issues emerging in it such as the improved performance of agriculture which was not predicted. Flexibility is clearly the name of the game. Overall we know that future employment needs will combine the traditional concepts of technical skills with more broad skill sets such as teamwork, problem solving and initiative. The latter can often be ignored and a key outputs of the Youth Work process.

Youth Work Ireland members offer formal educational opportunities through running local Community Training Centres and Youthreach centres but they also provide other supports in terms of guidance, counselling and general advice this can be relevant to formal education, students looking to PLCs, FAS Training and a whole range of other areas. These are key community based resources for young people. The involvement of local youth services in this area is flexible and responsive to the needs of young people and communities. We provide training, advice and support for young people to enter the more basic jobs and training particularly if they come from a particularly disadvantaged background. This is an area that can be expanded in conjunction with policy makers.

Youth Work Ireland sponsored one of the 26 YOUTHSTART EU Community Initiatives projects in the late 1990s. The project entitled "Pathways" examined the role of tracking, guidance and counselling in dealing with early school leavers. Much of this learning has been mainstreamed through the FAS advocates programme.

General

Youth Unemployment is clearly a huge problem and it is increasingly clear that it is associated with high levels of emigration amongst our young people. This is a major social tragedy for many communities and moreover this is increasingly a major economic issue as young people who have been educated at considerable cost to the Irish State actually contribute to the economic growth of a competitor country. Increasingly we also need to focus on the group not in employment, education or training (NEETs) [Live Register Household Survey]

New provision must be driven by best practice, for example the approach set out and delivered under Individual Learning Plans (ILPs)

The traditional unemployed generally have needs very different to young people; this is an important starting point for us. Many may not be on the live register if there are under 18. Many have a recent and a negative view of the education and training system. The ESRI tells us that early school leaving is rarely a simple decision but the culmination of a long process of disengagement from schoolⁱ

While responsibility for the new National Employment and Entitlements and Service and Community Employment Projects is transferring to the Department of Social Protection, [guidance and advice for young people] is central to any education and training provision and youth services have strong relationships and reach in this area.

Similarly responsibility for Youth Work and the Youth Work Act 2001 lies with the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, however a considerable responsibility is envisaged therein relating to Youth Work locally for VECs and their successors in the LETB. There has been limited implementation of the Youth Work Act since 2001. Significantly there is no mention of Youth in LETB Heads of Bill published and considered by the recent Oireachtas Committee even in the area of Objects and Functions. The key feature appears to relate to the provision of formal education, schools and adult education, this needs to be addressed we feel.

Central to the methodology of youth work is Youth Participation, in considering a focus on “Customer Experience” the role of young people as recipients of courses and customers should be considered by Solas. This is also absent from the LETB heads of Bill.

We feel there is a place for tendering and competitive provision in this area but it needs to be open to voluntary and community providers.

Issues Relating to Vocational Education and Training for Young People

Regardless of the structures or bodies put in place there are overarching issues that need attention in this field. Despite recent initiatives the simple volume of places for young people in PLCs, FAs and other provision has not kept up with the huge increase in demand due to the construction downturn and the growth in youth unemployment. There are still major accessibility issues in relation to education and training for young people.

The founding of Solas needs to pay more attention to the relationship with Third Level and Institutes of technology particularly in the areas of qualifications, assessment and PLCs. There is a lot of

segregation in our systems. Access to education and learning should be more open now given the huge level of demand.

The work of Solas needs to be linked to the reform of second level, for example it is unclear what the respective roles of a number of institutions is in relation to the Leaving Cert Applied.

Policy Area One: Administration and Funding

The integration of funding envisaged in the consultation document is valuable but we are involved in community delivery and see this as a key pillar of accessibility to education and training for young people. We know that Youth Services are willing to tender as community providers in this area.

The education and training system for young people needs to move from just being outputs based, to one based on outputs and outcomes from funding. It is important that young people who are early school leavers or those in receipt of poorer Leaving Certs are included in any calculations or any model as inputs.

It is similarly important that vocational education and training is not simply abandoned because of a race to the top in terms of qualifications. Second chance education and training opportunities have a proven value in successfully engaging learners and bringing them to a level where they have been able to claim their rightful place in employment. Youth Services for example provide supported Junior Certificates with one to one support and special education initiatives in Youthreach, however this is by no means universal. We want training and education measures for young people to be strengths based drawing on the assets and positive attributes young people possess.

We endorse the submission by a number of our members who run CTC's and Youthreach, for example;

“A standardised reporting system which eliminates the siloed reporting currently operating per funding source and which clearly links the objectives and inputs to clearly stated outputs and outcomes is important.

Over the past number of years FAS have invested in developing planning and reporting systems which are strongly in this area and it would be helpful if the current CTC Strategic Planning and Business Planning models were explored to further focus on targeted outputs and outcomes. It is critical that qualitative and life improvement targets are incorporated into this model At national level structures which create joined up thinking would be a progressive model - for example links with the Department of Social Protection supporting ease of transfer to and from training programmes in supporting early school leavers and the unemployed to access relevant training and employment”

Consideration should be given to the added value of the provision of education and training programmes from established training organisations with a proven track record. It is our experience that the placement of Youthreach and Community Training Centres within an Integrated Youth Service provides significant benefit to the learners. Learners are for example able to access additional supports in terms of positive mental health, alcohol and drug free

social outlets, information and advocacy services and a range of Youth Work initiatives.

Encouragement should be provided to support the maximum utilisation of resources which includes the use of buildings, staffing and programmes all of which occur naturally as part of an integrated Youth Service.”

Policy Area Two: What Courses to Deliver

Education and training providers need to rise to the challenge of the online environment and the respective opportunity. While the skills needs must be analysed we must also see the importance of generic and general skills, project work, real world experience and the flexibility that can arise from experiential learning rather than “chalk and talk”.

Our services take a genuinely whole person approach with a life long learning perspective as a starting point. The vocational educational system must also consider how to build citizens as well as employees. Young people need to be flexible and adaptable for the world of work and as active citizens. Our education and training systems can often be old fashioned, bureaucratic and outdated. We propose a partnership with the Youth Work Sector to create better linkage with young people as peer educators in areas such as multi-media and modern technologies.

Our members have submitted;

“Community Training Centres have a proven track record in the delivery of basic skills courses and an important role in community education – continue to support this. Engage with a range of voluntary community and statutory groups with local knowledge. Consult with recognised National and Regional Not for Profit organisations with proven record in the delivery of community education programmes.”

Policy Area Three: Guide and Support Learners

There is a crucial role for guidance for young people throughout the education and training system. Youth services do much of this work and that there is an opportunity for the state to involve community providers more. There could be a productive involvement in activation measures by Youth Services which would prepare young people for the more formal aspect of the system which could be on a fee per person. Change and reform in employment services has been debated for a considerable time with developments such as the LES, NEES and changes to school guidance. There is a gap in provision here which can be filled by Youth Services.

Once more it is hard to map this out precisely as the consultative paper is very reliant on the Department of Social Protection and the live register measurement, but many young people are coming from schools as early school leavers or in to PLCs not the Live Register. There are few specialists in dealing with young people in this system. This is important and the role of Youth Services as community providers needs to be recognised. Youth services have operate in a community setting and have considerable existing infrastructure. We have real credibility with population and reach with this population group.

Youth Workers effectively deliver many forms of guidance. They provide information and advice in a whole range of crucial areas which contribute often to stabilising the lives of many young people to allow them participate in education and guidance. This is often related to other areas such as housing, probation, psychological services, counselling, help with relationships and support for basic self confidence and coping skills.

We propose the current network provided by youth services for example through Information Centres, Youth Cafes, Drop in Centres and other locations could be designated as part of the NEES for young people in the community. The existing staff could be trained and connected into the NEES at little extra cost but extra core costs could come from existing budgets thus filling a critical gap in the referral jigsaw. Such a system builds on existing capacity, reaches more young people and is cost efficient and consistent with the approach to the CRE in Ireland and elsewhere

The absence of qualification should be a clear criterion in terms of second chance education regardless of age. It is easy to dismiss “participant needs” but these are the customers. A narrow technical education is becoming less relevant generally; today employment seeks flexibility and adaptability this will work better if there is an aptitude or interest in the topic (within reason).

In terms of tracking, LETBs may not be only providers; there is a need for a simplified and integrated provision using PPS numbers. There is still poor communication within and between departments and agencies. Given the well established nature of FETAC at this stage one simple system for all should be feasible to eliminate any duplication and overlap.

Our members point out;

“Young people initially come to the Youth Service and we prepare them to go to FÁS for interview and support them through same. It is important to have a simple system of eligibility criteria with the potential to allow for exceptions based on the needs of the learner”

Policy Area Four: Managing and Supporting Staff

In terms of staff there clearly needs to be a prioritisation of frontline staff. There should be an examination of potential outsourcing to community providers where that makes sense in terms of reach and community setting. Staff need to be responsive to a range of ages and abilities and have high quality ability in communications as well as technical skills. Understanding of disadvantage and early school leaving is critical. While it is important that standards are maintained through for example registration with the teaching Council it is also key that staff have an understanding of and exposure to disadvantage in all its forms. We feel a background in or connection to youth work could be a “desirable” attribute. It is necessary to focus on the skills rather than just qualifications of staff.

The Learners Charter is a good idea but it needs to be used and enforced, it should also refer to the participation and rights of young people. Under 18s not given role in LETB Heads of Bill and generally this group have little role in the planning and management of Education and Training. There should be space for 360 degrees evaluation recognised in many learning environments. Increasingly coursework should integrate feedback and engagement rather than a paper based exercise at the end.

Our members have suggested in relation to staffing;

- “Responsibility for staff management and support must remain with individual employers – management at the point of delivery is most effective in ensuring the delivery of a high quality service.
- Develop overall policies / strategic planning / in-service framework. If there are to be relevant they need to be informed by the reality of further education. Such systems should focus on supporting and informing delivery rather than simply adding administrative layers.
- Provide funding for training
- Consult and engage with providers re: local (regional) issues
- Engage with other departments to agree on one NQSF rather than the current numerous ones”

Concluding and General

Education and training should be as integrated as possible to facilitate progression there are economies of scale to be achieved in this manner. Measures should generally be delivered in a neutral environment focussed on the learner regardless of the institutional setting.

We do not see the need for a merger of Youthreach and CTC’s as broadly one is more focussed on return to traditional second level and the other more vocational despite there being an overlap. We again draw the attention of policy makers to the importance of an integrated Youth Service in the lives of young people and in dealing with relevant issues relating to education and training. The reach and community basis of Youth Services positions them well to act as community providers and as potential partners in employment services and Guidance and Counselling Measures.

Our members say;

“They certainly should not merge – It is important that the early school leaver has options best suited to their needs. The Education system fails many young people as it operates from the principle that ‘one size fits all’. Community Training Centres and Youthreach programmes offer different experiences and opportunities to re-engage in meaningful vocational training and education. Both are relevant and necessary”

The integrated nature of the service means it is an efficient use of resources and provides clear progression routes for young people. There is an in depth knowledge of young people and their lives amongst staff and a flexibility of provision which is necessary in the modern environment. The Youth Work method puts greater responsibility on young people and thus produces better outcomes.

We would be more than happy to meet as a delegation with the Minister or any officials with responsibility in this area and will naturally circulate our submission to other stakeholders in this field.

ⁱ *No Way Back? The Dynamics of Early School Leaving*, by Delma Byrne and Emer Smyth (ESRI), is a joint publication of the ESRI, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA), and the Department of Education and Science (DES). The study was funded by the NCCA and the DES.