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**Department of Education
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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of

An Evaluation of the Work of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI)

Inspected: January-February 2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI) is a Non-Departmental Public Body (NDPB) which was established by order in January 1990. As part of its functions, YCNI is required to advise the Department of Education (DE), the Education and Library Boards and other relevant bodies on the development of the youth service; to encourage cross-community activity; to encourage the provision of facilities especially beneficial to young persons; to encourage and assist the co-ordination and efficient use of the resources of the youth service and to assist the efficient provision of resources, training and administrative services by voluntary headquarter organisations.

1.2 The current work of YCNI has moved beyond the original remit of the organisation and the aims expressed in The Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. A review of these aims by DE is long overdue; however, through frequent communication with DE and its Youth Services Branch, the organisation has been flexible in adapting its broad role to the changing landscape of youth provision and in giving a lead to the sector, even where there is an absence of a clear policy directive. In so doing, it has expanded to take account of the differing needs of the youth sector and to advise on ways of improving youth provision in the interests of young people.

1.3 The YCNI has a staff of 17 which includes the Chief Executive Officer (CEO), the deputy CEO, a corporate team of six, each with specific areas of responsibility, and a team of administrative and support staff, some of whom are appointed for specific short-term projects.

1.4 The role of the Board of the Council (Board) is to provide leadership, vision, continuity of purpose and accountability to the public. The current membership has representation from across the wider youth sector, although each person is appointed in his or her own right and not necessarily as a representative of a specific interest group. The current Chairperson has completed two terms of office.

1.5 In the past two years YCNI has received almost £4m per annum from DE with just under one-half of the monies being distributed directly to Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations (RVYOs). About one-quarter of the funding is directed through YCNI to specific short-term initiatives, the majority of which support the implementation of DE's current Youth Work Strategy.

1.6 Under the proposals within the Review of Public Administration (RPA), YCNI will not continue as an NDPB beyond the end of March 2009 and its functions will become part of the Education and Skills Authority (ESA). The current Board has ten members appointed through the Public Appointments process to serve for a period of three years commencing in 2004. With the impending establishment of ESA, the term of office of the present Board has been extended to March 2009. The majority of the members have continued to serve on the Board. It is timely to assess the various strands of work within YCNI in order to inform the future delivery of the youth services within ESA.

1.7 The YCNI has a detailed three-year strategic plan which covers six core aims (see Appendix 3). The operational plan which derives from the strategic plan is presented to, and agreed by, the Board annually. It is against this plan that the management draws up the individual work plans and the percentage of time allocated to various duties for each member of staff. Within recent years DE has requested six-monthly accountability meetings to report on the business plan. The purpose of YCNI and the extent to which it works independently of DE, and the lines of accountability to DE have also been more clearly defined.

1.8 The inspection of YCNI was commissioned by DE. In evaluating the work of YCNI the inspection team attended a presentation by the corporate team, spoke with each member of the corporate team about their respective areas of responsibility, with the Chairperson of the Board and with representatives of those who work with YCNI in the statutory and voluntary youth work sectors, in addition to members of groups or individuals who work in partnership with the organisation. Members of the inspection team also attended support and training sessions led by YCNI personnel. Much of the evidence is derived from the viewpoints expressed to the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) about the work and influence of YCNI, as well as from the reading of minutes, reports and support materials provided by YCNI.

2. HOW WELL DOES YCNI FULFIL ITS FUNCTIONS?

2.1 ADVISING DE, EDUCATION AND LIBRARY BOARDS AND OTHER BODIES ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE YOUTH SERVICE

2.1.1 The stakeholders value the quality and the usefulness of YCNI research, which includes formal inputs to policy, the provision of ad hoc advice on policy issues and the publication of documents with good quality information to guide the youth sector's thinking. The YCNI also comments on issues beyond the youth sector which may have an impact on young people. For example, it played an active role in the development of 'Our Children and Young People - Our Pledge', the ten year Strategy for Children and Young People, and in influencing the legislative powers of the Commissioner for Children and Young People.

2.1.2 The number of formal submissions to various departments and bodies averages around five each year. In most cases, a submission is only made where the policy is deemed to have potential strategic impact on the youth service. In other instances YCNI is requested by Ministers to provide advice, or YCNI chooses to raise the profile of the youth service with a particular government department or agency. The DE and other bodies have regularly used the expertise within YCNI to comment on the needs of the sector, to gain information and to clarify issues.

2.1.3 In providing advice, YCNI promotes the interests of the youth sector and focuses on what will be in the best interests of young people. On occasions, the turnaround time for responses to public consultations or to requests for advice limits the possibilities for consultation. The view of many stakeholders is that there needs to be wider consultation which is more representative of the views of practitioners within the sector, and of young people across Northern Ireland (NI).

2.1.4 The YCNI, in conjunction with representatives from both the statutory and voluntary youth sectors, has played an important role in developing the model for the Youth Service Liaison Forum (YSLF) and acts as the secretariat. The YSLF brings together all the main youth sector partners and it has developed a comprehensive Youth Work Strategy (2005-2008) to improve the coherence of organisation and the delivery of outcomes for young people in what has been a fragmented sector. The YSLF and the responses from the various working parties provide a good basis on which to build the future of the youth sector and to improve the quality of provision for young people.

2.1.5 The implementation of the various elements of the Youth Work Strategy has been slow. The DE is carrying out a timely review of the role and remit of the YSLF to inform the direction of the Youth Work Strategy in conjunction with YCNI and the other youth partners.

2.1.6 The youth sector within NI has grown more complex since the establishment of YCNI, and now includes a large number of separate bodies. There is therefore a need for government to provide a greater clarity of purpose for youth work to enable more effective cross-departmental working, and to enhance the overall quality and coherence of the provision by the statutory, voluntary and community sectors and in conjunction with the formal sector. The YCNI has worked on behalf of the YSLF to create a robust information system which will better inform decision-makers about the distribution of funds and the efficacy of provision within certain areas. Many of the stakeholders appreciate the work that YCNI has begun in mapping out the youth population and the youth provision across NI. It is generally accepted that the process has been slower and more complicated than anticipated because of the different ways in which parts of the sector record the potential constituencies. The YCNI has commissioned further research in this area; the findings will be of central importance in determining the future needs of young people across NI.

2.2 ENCOURAGING CROSS-COMMUNITY ACTIVITY BY THE YOUTH SERVICE

2.2.1 The Joined in Equity, Diversity and Interdependence (JEDI) Initiative, set up in 1998, aimed to produce a cultural change within the youth service through embedding the principles of Equity, Diversity and Interdependence (EDI) and developing a coherent strategy for community relations work. Many of the stakeholders acknowledge the good work played by YCNI in leading the initiative and, in particular, of the high quality of the training provided by YCNI personnel. There is evidence that many of those who received EDI training have gone on to develop the work well within their respective organisations.

2.2.2 There has been much good work across the ten years of the initiative including a series of high profile projects such as 'Windows on Practice' to develop self-evaluation and policy development processes. The steering group has produced a series of useful documentation and training modules to highlight good practice and to assist groups in the assessment of EDI principles within their organisation. There still remains the need for leaders and practitioners at all levels to embed the EDI principles more consistently within their practice and to assess the improvement for young people and their communities.

2.2.3 The Community Relations Youth Service Support Scheme (CRYSSS) is administered by YCNI and, in conjunction with the JEDI Initiative, over £80k is provided annually for this work. To celebrate and disseminate the learning from the success of the scheme, YCNI has promoted events such as RshaRd FutuR, which provides a range of examples of successful community relations work with RYOs and other organisations.

CRYSSS	Short-term projects	Three-year projects
2005/06	7	2
2006/07	5	3
2007/08	14	5

There is a good representation of different types of youth provision and thematic areas in the grants which have been awarded. It is appropriate that a strong focus is given to building the capacity of organisations to develop the principles of EDI and improved relations. The capacity-building is reflected in the training days provided for staff and young people in which YCNI familiarises the groups with the EDI principles and how they relate to the project.

2.3 ENCOURAGING THE PROVISION OF FACILITIES FOR THE YOUTH SERVICE AND FACILITIES WHICH ARE ESPECIALLY BENEFICIAL TO YOUNG PERSONS

2.3.1 The Youth Work Training Board was incorporated within YCNI at its inception. Under the expert guidance of the deputy chief executive of YCNI, it has assessed the needs well and has ensured that the standards of training are quality assured and maintained for those who work in the youth sector in either a full-time or part-time capacity. There are clear progression routes based firmly on youth work practice for youth workers at all levels within the sector. The opportunities for training are available to all, with bursaries to help those who work within particular project types or areas of need.

2.3.2 The YCNI has adopted a facilitative approach to its work in training. The view of stakeholders is that YCNI provides excellent support for trainees and their trainers. Various organisations pilot programmes which meet the training needs of their personnel; they provide evaluations to YCNI and suggest changes to the programmes. The YCNI personnel monitor the portfolios of trainees effectively and have played an important role in developing critical reflective practice among youth work practitioners.

2.3.3 The youth sector acknowledges as a particular strength of YCNI, the excellent links it has established with other jurisdictions in the United Kingdom and the contribution it has made to the development of the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work, supported by other partners within the sector. The YCNI has developed equally strong links with the Republic of Ireland through the North/South Education and Training Standards Committee for Youth Work which was launched in January 2006. The role of the committee is to assess all aspects of the quality of youth work training; it has set the standards for training in youth work offered by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and conferred professional endorsement on HEIs including Dundalk Institute of Technology, the University of Ulster, and the National University of Ireland, Maynooth.

2.3.4 Through the work of the highly-committed deputy chief executive, YCNI developed and reviewed 'Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice'. It has worked effectively with the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) to provide training and support for youth workers. The YCNI has helped to build capacity in organisations through monitoring the range of programmes and modules to ensure a consistency in training standards. A strategy to quality assure the effectiveness of training on improving the outcomes for young people should be further developed.

2.3.5 The YCNI has promoted the increased participation of young people through its work with a range of government departments. Through the production of the ‘Turning up the Sound’ publication it helped develop a network through which the public sector could solicit the views of young people and it supported the establishment of the Participation Network. The YCNI and other youth partners are represented on the committees of several groups which are encouraging the increased participation of young people. They need to use their overview more effectively to ensure that there is less duplication and more effective participation. The YCNI chairs a cross-sectoral working group to advise DE on the options for a Northern Ireland Network for Youth (NINFY). The NINFY will ultimately be the responsibility of ESA and a potentially significant communication channel between young people and government.

2.3.6 The International Committee, which YCNI inherited, gives young people and youth workers the opportunity to develop their skills through a series of North/South, European and International Youth Programmes. The YCNI acts as the agent for the ‘regional co-ordination’ of the European Union (EU) Youth in Action programme; it has also promoted and directed Causeway and NcompasS, which are cross-border projects for young people, youth workers and teachers. Working in partnership with a range of groupings, including Leargas and the British Council, YCNI has provided advice and training on how to gain the most benefit from an exchange visit and has jointly published documents such as ‘Child Safety and Youth Exchange: Guidelines for Good Practice’ which has been adopted by the European Commission. Currently YCNI is promoting the EU’s Youth in Action Programme (2007-2013) which encourages youth and youth worker mobility within and beyond the EU borders, to give them the opportunity to expand their horizons and gain valuable life and work experiences.

2.3.7 According to independent evaluations and feedback, international exchanges have provided many young people with opportunities to visit a range of countries and have had a positive influence on the personal and social development of the young people. The programmes in NI are well supported at the planning stage and the visits are monitored by members of the committee.

European Exchanges

Year	Exchanges	Numbers of young people in	Numbers of young people out
2004-05	31	459	214
2005-06	41	504	263
2006-07	34	415	288

Does not include multi-lateral exchanges (more than four countries)

The exchanges involve a range of groups from faith-based groups to individual youth centres, youth councils and other youth organisations. The countries visited include America, Israel and a range of European countries with a particular emphasis on Eastern European countries. As with all such projects, there is a need to develop monitoring systems which will evaluate the benefits of international exchanges for youth provision, and to track any sustained benefits for youth workers, and more especially, for young people.

2.4 ENCOURAGING AND ASSISTING THE CO-ORDINATION AND EFFICIENT USE OF THE RESOURCES OF THE YOUTH SERVICE

2.4.1 Almost all of the core-funded groups accept that YCNI is well-placed strategically to assist RVYOs in the provision of additional resources. As part of its programme funding and in line with government policy, YCNI has, over the last two years, operated a programme which reflects the priorities contained in the Youth Work Strategy: volunteering, citizenship, the mental health of young people, ethnic minorities, partnership working and the use of information and communication technology (ICT). The grants are administered effectively and YCNI provides professional advice and support to organisations on a wide range of topics, including finance, governance, funding opportunities, ICT and human resources. It has aimed to work in partnership with the voluntary sector to develop and promote best practice in youth work and in governance.

2.4.2 In response to the needs identified by RVYOs, the ICT officer has developed his role from looking after internal systems to providing support and advice for member groups. Organisations report that the software training provided was of a high standard and relevant to their needs, that the financial assistance received in relation to ICT has improved their effectiveness, and that, as a result of the training, some were able to develop a more effective ICT strategy.

2.4.3 In common with the statutory sector, YCNI commissioned a fundamental review of its funding policy to make it transparent, fit-for-purpose and equitable so that it would benefit organisations that work with young people. The stakeholders acknowledged the need for a funding review. A few RVYOs expressed disquiet at the way in which the review was being carried out although the dates for consultation had not closed and there was the opportunity to provide feedback. The review of funding for the statutory sector has been put on hold until a later date and it is felt that this should happen in the voluntary sector. The acceptance by both the statutory and voluntary sectors of the need for a funding review provides DE with a timely opportunity to consider the appropriateness of the overall funding mechanisms for the youth sector.

2.4.4 Within the past two years, YCNI has established monitoring systems which support organisations to achieve their specified outcomes for the young people with whom they work. It has piloted a service-level agreement with two RVYOs with ongoing professional monitoring and support to make the administration and evaluation more effective. The evaluation of the effectiveness of the pilot and any lessons learned could provide useful feedback for the development of more robust monitoring systems. Many RVYOs have used effective means of monitoring the work they do and the benefits for young people; this information could have been used more effectively in the past. It will be important that the evaluation of the benefits and outcomes for young people is an integral part of all programmes.

3. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

3.1 The Chairperson of the Board is well-respected by stakeholders and has guided it well in setting the strategic direction for the work of YCNI. The management team has an in-depth knowledge of the youth sector both within NI and beyond which has been used to good effect in taking forward a range of initiatives. There is a strong commitment to improving the youth provision for young people.

3.2 A well-informed team with a good knowledge and experience of their particular strands of work supports the management team. The individual work plans for most of the members of the team are well-conceived; there is a need to ensure that there is consistency in reporting procedures. There are examples of effective liaison between those departments within YCNI which have projects with broadly similar aims. Such co-operation between departments and other agencies which support their work should be developed further.

3.3 Planning for the continuation or the redistribution of the various areas of work within YCNI will have to be considered in response to the implementation of RPA. Such considerations should be based on the best way to take forward areas such as training, community relations work and international work and the connections which need to be made with other providers, including the formal sector, to provide the best support for young people. The assessment of the improvement which the different areas of work make to the outcomes for young people is a major area for development.

3.4 The representation on the Board and on the various sub-committees reflects strongly the diversity of the youth sector and benefits from a range of experience and expertise, which is used well in making decisions and providing advice to improve the work of the youth sector. Many of the members provide their services in a voluntary capacity and in the interests of young people.

3.5 In a sector which is diverse in its provision, YCNI does not have any managerial influence or authority on strategy or action planning. Yet the co-ordinating role it has played has been a crucial element of most of its work. In working with and bringing together a range of practitioners and groups, YCNI has used well the skills of diplomacy and persuasion. Such events as 'Investing in Youth Work', staged at Queen's University, Belfast in November 2007, was but one example of YCNI's commitment to promoting youth work across departmental and sectoral boundaries through the dissemination of good practice across the youth sector. In several of the departments within YCNI, the importance of providing good examples of practice and encouraging critical reflection has been well developed. Overall, there remains the need to provide those who are funded by the various sections within YCNI with the tools to evaluate the value of the outcomes for young people.

4. CONCLUSION

4.1 Among the strengths of YCNI are:

- the commitment and the range of expertise of the CEO, the deputy CEO and the staff, and the members of the Board and the sub-committees who fulfil, and go beyond, their remit in the areas for which they have responsibility;

- the good work of the youth work training board which has focused on raising the standards of training and delivery, and responded well to the needs of the sector;
- the provision of high quality research and advice which has made an effective contribution to improving the provision within the youth sector;
- the strategic function that YCNI has played in representing the sector directly to DE, to other relevant departments and to other bodies to articulate the needs and to promote the benefits of the youth sector; and
- the effective administration of grant aid and other means of support to RVYOs and to other stakeholders.

4.2 Among the areas for improvement are:

- the development of robust quality assurance methods to provide feedback about the outcomes of YCNI funding for young people to inform better the planning and funding decisions; and
- more informed partnership working across the various strands of YCNI's work to reduce duplication and to provide the best delivery for young people.

4.3 The Youth Council for Northern Ireland has fulfilled its remit well and has adapted well to the changing landscape of youth provision. There are many important strengths in its work with a number of minor areas for improvement which it has the capacity to address.

APPENDIX 1

The Youth Council for Northern Ireland was established under the Youth Service (Northern Ireland) Order 1989. The Council's functions include:

- advising the Department of Education, Education and Library Boards and other bodies on the development of the youth service;
- encouraging cross-community activity by the youth service;
- encouraging the provision of facilities for the youth service and facilities which are especially beneficial to young persons; and
- encouraging and assisting the co-ordination and efficient use of the resources of the youth service.

The Youth Council may also assist the efficient provision of administrative services by regional voluntary youth organisations.

MISSION STATEMENT

To champion the well-being, rights and participation of young people:

- by supporting the development of effective youth policies and quality youth work practice; and
- by facilitating meaningful collaboration between youth organisations and all sections with responsibility for young people.

CORE VALUES

The work of the Youth Council is underpinned by the following values, which the Council will actively apply to all areas of its work.

- **Young People Focused** – The Council believes all young people are citizens in their own right and are of equal value.
- **Equity, Diversity and Interdependence** – The Council is fully committed to the principles of Equity, Diversity & Interdependence and will apply them in all aspects of its work.
- **Excellence** – The Council believes in the importance of quality in meeting the needs of the Council’s stakeholders and young people generally.
- **Partnership** – The Council believes that the needs of young people can only be fully met by effective inter-agency and inter-sectoral working.

CORE AIM 1

Promoting Participation of Young People

Ensure the promotion of the participation of young people in the development of policies and practice that affect their lives.

CORE AIM 2

Shaping Youth Work Policies and Strategies

Ensure effective collaboration in developing, implementing and reviewing youth work strategy and policies.

CORE AIM 3

Promoting Youth Work and the Rights of Young People

Promote youth work, the youth service (statutory, voluntary and community) and the aspirations, rights and needs of young people with relevant external bodies.

CORE AIM 4

Peace-Building, Inclusion and Active Citizenship

Promote and develop the contribution of youth work to active citizenship, peace-building, understanding of diversity and inclusion.

CORE AIM 5

Developing Youth Work Practice

Promote and develop youth work by building on local, national and international best practice.

CORE AIM 6

Supporting and Resourcing Regional Voluntary Youth Organisations

Ensure regional voluntary youth organisations receive appropriate support in the delivery of efficient and effective youth work, through the provision of information, advice, training and financial and other resources.

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