



*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
Promoting Improvement*



Providing Inspection Services for
**Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure**



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of an Inspection

Youth Link: NI

Inspected: May 2008

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Youth Link: NI was established in 1991 by the four larger churches - Roman Catholic, Church of Ireland, Presbyterian and Methodist - to be the inter-church youth service to support and resource church-based youth work. The vision of the organisation is of 'churches working together to develop excellence in youth work and ministry, enabling young people and youth practitioners to be agents of transformation in a divided society.' To achieve that vision, Youth Link provides training programmes for youth leaders and young people, mainly in faith-based settings, to enhance their skills in delivering youth work and developing youth ministry, and to develop their potential in addressing the issues associated with peace building and reconciliation.

1.2 Youth Link receives core funding from the Youth Council for Northern Ireland and its member churches. It also receives grants for its community relations work from the Department of Education and a range of trusts and foundations. In addition, the organisation has accessed funding from the Youth Education and Social Inclusion Partnership (YESIP) through the Special European Union Programmes Body. For the year 2006-2007, Youth Link received income of just over £500,000, the majority of which was spent on its work with young people and youth workers and a small percentage on work with volunteer management committees.

1.3 The governance, management and administration of Youth Link are carried out by volunteers who sit on the Executive Council, the membership of which is made up of eight representatives from the Roman Catholic church and 12 representatives from the Protestant churches.

1.4 There are nine full-time members and one part-time member of staff including the Director. To meet the increasing demands for training, the organisation calls on the support of over 20 experienced 'sessional' workers.

1.5 A report commissioned by YouthNet on 'Faith Based Youth Work in Northern Ireland' found that almost 70% of registered youth groups are faith/church-based and that 43% of full-time youth workers and just under 75% of all volunteer leaders in registered groups were working in faith/church-based groups. The figures do not take account of groups which have not registered with the Education and Library Boards. Youth Link is presently the largest provider of accredited training for volunteer and part-time youth workers in Northern Ireland (NI). Plans to expand the work of the organisation to meet the increasing demand are at an advanced stage.

1.6 For the inspection, Youth Link submitted a detailed self-evaluative report on the various strands of its work, including the training programmes for youth workers and young people in youth work and in community relations, the training for those involved in youth ministry and the infrastructure of the organisation. The high quality of the self-evaluation documentation reflects the evaluative culture which permeates the work of the organisation and the clear direction which is evident in the planning of the work to fulfil its core aims.

1.7 The inspectors met with a range of stakeholders including funding organisations, members of the Executive Council, representatives from the youth headquarters of the four larger churches, adults and young people who have been involved in the various training programmes, and a broad spectrum of organisations and committees which have benefited from the support and advice of Youth Link.

2. LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT

2.1 Since its inception Youth Link has reflected within its own organisation the challenges and the benefits of building up trust across the churches, of engaging in dialogue with a range of partners and of embedding the principles of equity, diversity and interdependence (EDI) into the workings of an organisation. The individual members of staff display a strong personal and corporate commitment to the work of Youth Link, and to sharing their expertise to ensure that young people and adults receive quality training and support.

2.2 The Director has been in post for seven years, having previously been a member of the staff. With the effective support of his colleagues, he has developed the vision of meeting the churches' needs and its delivery through a three-year strategic plan drawn up in consultation with the Executive Council and colleagues from the youth departments of the larger churches. The planning process and the rigorous and effective procedures for evaluating the progress of the annual operational plan reflect the strong sense of purpose, collegiality and a willingness to effect improvement which is a key feature of the organisation. Roles and responsibilities are clearly understood by all members of staff.

2.3 As part of the strategic plan, Youth Link has been reviewing a number of its policies and procedures such as those for the Safeguarding of Children and Vulnerable Adults to ensure that they remain up-to-date and reflect any changes in legislation. In their work with other organisations Youth Link ensure that they have appropriate child protection policies in place and agree appropriate protocols so that there is clarity and consistency for parents and young people.

2.4 Youth Link has built up effective working relationships with the four larger churches and others across the sector to support the development of training and leadership courses, and to develop relevant accredited programmes which are well received and often over-subscribed. The youth departments of the four larger churches and other organisations report that they value greatly the quality of the work and the support offered by Youth Link. In particular, they value the opportunity for committed volunteers to achieve a qualification and an acknowledgment of their important contribution to youth work.

2.5 Over the last three years, most of the Youth Link staff have participated in a range of comprehensive training and development programmes which are linked appropriately to the business plan. There is clear evidence that the additional training has benefited not only Youth Link but the organisations which it supports.

2.6 Youth Link benefits from the availability of excellent sessional staff, who are suitably qualified and experienced practitioners in the youth sector, and who have a strong commitment to the vision and values of Youth Link. The full-time staff provide strong and practical support for these practitioners.

2.7 Youth Link ensures that their effective working relationships with external agencies will promote support for young people based on their needs. For example, members of the organisation sit on a range of panels and committees and bring the combined intelligence and experience of the organisation to any discussions involving the training of young people and leaders. In this way, the staff ensure that Youth Link has a ‘prophetic voice’ and is ‘constantly aware of critical and emerging issues in youth work and ministry, peace building and reconciliation’.

3. QUALITY OF PROVISION

3.1 Over the past five years, Youth Link has delivered over 250 training programmes to almost 5,000 participants and has provided an input in ten conferences on peace and reconciliation which attracted 4,450 participants. The growing demand from the churches for training for their volunteer workers and young people has increased significantly with consequent demands on the services of Youth Link.

3.2 Youth Link achieved Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) Recognised Centre approval in December 2007. It continues to provide its suite of programmes through the Northern Ireland Youth Work Training Board and through the Institute of Theology in Queen’s University, Belfast. It has increased its programmes from 15 to 25 over the past two years, during which time the number of young people and youth practitioners receiving accreditation has increased from 240 to 400.

3.3 There has been a marked increase in the demand for Youth Link’s community relations training programmes, including a demand to support schools. The organisation is also asked to provide advice on how to develop a more professional approach to the organisation of youth work within a church setting and how to develop the EDI principles within organisations.

3.4 While Youth Link, in consultation with the churches, has plans to increase its staff and its current operations, there is a recognition that the organisation has to strike a balance between the delivery of programmes and the building of capacity among the church-based groups to provide training for their volunteers and young people. It is timely that the organisation is reviewing and consolidating its work and that it is drawing up useful documentation to help other organisations to assess the quality of their own provision.

3.5 The youth work department has played a significant role in developing and piloting the range of ‘Training for Youth Work Programmes’ available to young people and adults. The courses are tailored to facilitate trainees from diverse contexts; they acknowledge that the addition of cultural diversity as part of their studies is a significant and valuable aspect of the group experience. Youth Link ensures a good geographical spread of provision with a focus on building capacity within electoral wards which have been identified as having high levels of disadvantage. The majority of the trainees work through the different programme levels and there are a number who progress to more formal study each year.

3.6 Youth Link acquired YESIP funding to employ a full-time worker for an inclusion, capacity building and citizenship training initiative. The funding has increased by 50% Youth Link’s capacity to deliver youth work training to community-based youth groups from areas of disadvantage and social exclusion. The accredited training and empowerment programmes have met their target of providing many young people and leaders with a greater

understanding of the core principles of youth work and the knowledge, organisational, management, team-work and communication skills required to provide good quality youth work to young people in a range of contexts. The Youth Link assessment processes for individuals leaving the courses are excellent, providing the individual trainee and the tutors with a record of progress across a number of these key skills and personal competences.

Community Relations Training

Cultural Diversity	18 young people
OCN Level 2 Community Relations	20 youth leaders
OCN Level 3 Community Relations	4 youth leaders

3.7 The community relations department aims to equip young people to be agents of change and to support peace building and reconciliation. In the single identity phase of the Kairos programme, a cross-community programme which helps young people explore their own faith and that of other churches, the young people gain an understanding of, and self-confidence about, their own identity, faith, culture and history. Participation in a range of programmes provides young people with the skills to recognise sectarianism and racism within themselves and to challenge them in others. A further strength of this provision which promotes sustainability is the opportunity for young people to progress to leadership roles through the Kairos facilitator training.

3.8 As communities in NI become more diverse, it is appropriate that the development of courses dealing with diversity, to help participants understand and treat all citizens in an equitable manner, is an area which has been identified for development. Over the past two years, the community relations department has been working with 30 schools across NI to build the capacity of teachers in the areas of peace building, reconciliation and citizenship. As the work develops it will be important that there are links made between the accredited courses delivered by Youth Link and the courses already offered in schools.

3.9 Through its work which connects the churches, youth work and community groups, the community relations department is constantly developing relevant and imaginative EDI induction, awareness raising and wider citizenship programmes. The community relations department has developed a number of effective processes to monitor and evaluate the quality of the teaching and the outcomes for the participants including pre- and post-course questionnaires to assess the level of change in attitude. The community relations department has identified the ongoing development of evaluation processes to support the refinement of clear learning outcomes for each programme as an area for development. An external agency is developing a tool-kit for evaluation including an on-line communication forum.

Number of Participants

Module/Year	2006/07	2007/08
Youth Ministry 1	33	42
Youth Ministry 2	24	11

3.10 Youth Link staff support the churches in the development and provision of courses. For example, over the past ten years, a Certificate in Youth Ministry has been run through the Presbyterian Church in Ireland's Youth and Children's Department and awarded by Union Theological College, Belfast. An average of over 30 young adults each year have taken the

course. Youth ministry modules are delivered as part of the Diploma at Belfast Bible College to both full- and part-time students, and as modules of the degree courses in Divinity and Theology through the Institute of Theology in Queen's University, Belfast. Students who have completed the modules and staff from the various institutions commented favourably on the practical aspects of the course, the relevance of its application to youth work within their churches, the rigour of the modules and the discipline and usefulness of the reflective journal which forms part of the assessment procedures.

3.11 In all of the courses provided by Youth Link the trainers have established excellent working relationships with the wide range of client groups. There is evidence of planning and provision of a very high quality which takes into account the needs and values of the individuals within a group. As the constituency of the various groups changes from course to course and from year to year, there is effective planning before the courses begin and an attempt to match the particular expertise of the staff to the group's needs. The consultation process ensures that the content and assessment procedures are relevant and appropriate.

3.12 The trainees and school pupils report the good use of active learning approaches and good opportunities for talking and listening which challenge their views and which encourage them to apply the theory to practical situations. The trainers are aware of the need to establish a good balance between the presentation of information and opportunities for active involvement with very good practical and relevant resources across a range of courses.

3.13 To address the needs of individual trainees, the trainers provide them with effective support in how to pace their learning appropriately. There is one-to-one tuition, the availability of notes prior to the course and the promotion of informal 'buddying' links within the group of trainees. Throughout the programme there are effective assessment procedures through the support and challenge from a range of individuals, including a supervisor who works alongside the trainee within a specific youth work context, the course tutors and assessors.

4. ACHIEVEMENTS AND STANDARDS

4.1 The high standards in the quality of the training are endorsed by the reports from external quality assurance co-ordinators and through the feedback from trainees and from supervisors who observe the trainees' improved practice and personal development. A personal reflection section at the end of each module allows the trainee to apply knowledge to a practical situation and to draw out personal learning points. In this way the trainee celebrates success and identifies further training needs and continuing professional development.

OCN Level 1 Young People/Trainee Leader/Leadership in Youth Work for Young People

Year	Registered	Completed	% completed
2004/05	96	88	91.7
2005/06	88	79	89.8
2006/07	90	84	93.3
2007/08	68	60	88.2
TOTAL	342	311	90.9

OCN Level 2 Introduction to Youth Work

Year	Registered	Completed	% completed
2004/05	105	101	96.2
2005/06	194	172	88.7
2006/07	147	130	88.4
2007/08	162	152	93.8
TOTAL	608	555	91.3

OCN Level 3 Working with Others/Programme Development

Year	Registered	Completed	% completed
2004/05	55	48	87.3
2005/06	55	47	85.5
2006/07	60	47	78.3
2007/08	65	50	76.9
TOTAL	235	192	81.7

As the tables above indicate, over the last three years the majority of the students in youth work training have successfully completed the various levels of accreditation.

4.2 The accredited training programmes for young people and adults offer progression and pathways to professional development and qualifications. A number of the young people interviewed, having completed courses with Youth Link, progressed to university and obtained professional youth work qualifications. The young people clearly attributed their preparation for further educational opportunities to their involvement with Youth Link.

4.3 At the initial application stage, Youth Link uses its procedures effectively to assess both the individual and group learning needs, particularly for those who identify specific learning needs. In discussions with trainees, they recalled the increase in their self-esteem and self-confidence in achieving, often for the first time, a qualification. In these instances, formal accreditation is particularly significant for learners, often enhancing their employability and capacity to contribute to their organisation and to improve the provision for young people.

4.4 In fulfilling its strategic aim to develop the understanding of young people and the skills of youth leaders to deal with issues and conflict, the community relations department has piloted a successful model in one geographical area. The Youth Link trainer has built up very good working relationships with a wide number of agencies and at a number of different levels. For example, through working with the schools, the wider community and the church leaders and youth workers in the area, the trainer has successfully fostered and improved communication, and acted as an effective resource and catalyst, with the support of the young people, to bring about significant change within and across communities.

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Among the strengths of Youth Link are:

- the dedicated and creative staff who display a high level of commitment and professionalism in their delivery of training and support to the member churches and to a range of other groups;
- the effective working relationships within and beyond the organisation, in particular the good communication with the churches and other agencies to assess and meet their needs;
- the excellent quality of the training and the training materials, and the effective pastoral and academic support which meets the needs of the individual learners;
- the high quality of the outcomes for the learners in youth work training, community relations work and youth ministry as identified by the high levels of satisfaction expressed by the learners;
- the excellent self-evaluative assessment procedures in the organisation which encourage a reflective and strategic approach to improvement both by the staff and the learners; and
- the effective contribution made by the Director and the members of the Executive Council, who encourage successfully, with the excellent support of the staff, a collegial approach to attaining the core aims of Youth Link.

5.2 The quality of the training provided by Youth Link is excellent. The organisation is attaining its core aims fully. The educational and pastoral needs of the learners are being very well met. The funders and the churches can have confidence in the organisation's capacity for sustained self-improvement.

No follow-up inspection is required.

1. Vision

Churches working together to develop excellence in youth work and ministry, enabling young people and youth practitioners to be agents of transformation in a divided society.

2. Mission statement

Youth Link's mission is to work together to:

- provide excellence in all aspects of youth work and leadership training;
- encourage and equip young people to participate in Church and society and in the building of a shared future;
- collaborate with Church bodies, youth organisations and all sectors with responsibility for young people;
- facilitate strategies for the development of youth ministry within the Churches; and
- integrate equity, diversity and interdependence into all aspects of policy and practice in youth work and ministry.

3. Core aims

Meeting Churches' needs – Youth Link, through dialogue, will be constantly aware of the changing needs of the Churches with regard to youth work and ministry, peace building and reconciliation and will respond effectively.

Training – Youth Link will make available to those involved in work with young people training in youth work and ministry, peace building and reconciliation, informed by the latest theory and practice.

Active citizenship, peace building and reconciliation strategies for young people – Youth Link will work with others to provide opportunities for young people of different traditions and cultural backgrounds to develop mutual understanding, tolerance, acceptance and respect, and to be agents of transformation in a divided society.

Prophetic voice – Youth Link will be constantly aware of critical and emerging issues in youth work and ministry, peace building and reconciliation, providing a prophetic voice to the Churches and the wider community.

Networking – Youth Link will network strategically with agencies, Churches and youth workers at local, national and international level to enhance best practice in youth work and ministry, peace building and reconciliation.

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