

Report of a Pilot Inspection

Lurgan YMCA, Lurgan

November 2023



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1. INTRODUCTION

A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Lurgan Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) is a voluntary youth service provider established in 1986, delivering youth work programmes across the town of Lurgan. In 2013 the centre moved to the current purpose-built accommodation in the town centre. Lurgan YMCA (the centre) is part of YMCA worldwide and the regional YMCA Ireland.

The centre's youth work team consists of two full-time staff, a Chief Executive and a centre leader in charge, and seven part-time youth workers, a part-time administrator and a housekeeper who are managed by a board of nine directors. The centre is open five nights each week, welcoming young people aged nine to 18 years from across the surrounding local community.

Over the last four years there has been a steady increase in membership numbers, doubling the membership which currently stands at 337 young people. The young people engage in a range of activities, including drop in sessions, health and wellbeing, independent living, leadership development, and school-based programmes offered in the centre. On average, approximately 170 young people from a range of community and cultural backgrounds attend the provision on a weekly basis.

The key areas of need identified by the centre staff include providing the young people with: a safe, welcoming space; a sense of belonging; and opportunities for personal and social development. The centre has a highly inclusive ethos reflecting their values of welcome, opportunity, wellbeing, and peace and justice. The staff have developed a wide range of collaborations with other youth service providers, schools, the Health Trust and the local community to support their work with the young people.

B. VIEWS OF PARENTS, YOUNG PEOPLE AND STAFF

Inspectors spoke with a small number of parents/carers about their children's engagements with Lurgan YMCA. The parents/carers spoke highly of the passion, commitment and warm approachability of the staff in the centre, and how their children have grown in confidence. They commented on the well-considered range of programmes that the young people are involved in planning and participating in, expanding their horizons, widening their friendship groups and providing them with experiences and skills that impact positively on their lives. The nurturing approach of the staff is recognised by the parents/carers who also stated that they have confidence in the child and adult protection arrangements provided by the centre and said that they feel their children are safe and well looked after.

The inspectors also held discussions with a small number of the young people and volunteers. The young people spoke highly about the inclusive ethos of the centre and about how the opportunities to participate in and lead programmes have enabled them to learn new skills, develop a sense of responsibility, acquire respect for self and others, and grow in confidence. They talked about their opportunities they have

availed of to be the voice of young people, to make changes and, through social action, to impact positively on the lives of others by giving back. They spoke about how constructively they are listened to and responded to, ensuring that their views are valued and make a difference. The young leaders and volunteers talked about the transformative impact that youth work has had on them. They spoke about: being change agents, being participants in the international development and social justice forum for young people, improving the local environment, raising money and supplies for those in need, giving back and being an integral part of the community.

In discussions with inspectors, the staff stated how they are valued and well supported by the senior staff and the Board of Directors. They appreciate the training they have received and the varied opportunities to further their learning. The staff described working in Lurgan YMCA as being part of a family.

C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION

The ETI worked alongside Lurgan YMCA staff to consider how well the provision:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS

- The centre's vision, designed by young people, staff and management is clear, shared, well embedded and informs the planning and provision at all levels.
- The diverse range of programmes offered ensures the provision is inclusive, flexible and agile in responding appropriately to the identified needs of the young people.
- The staff plan for and deliver high-quality intentional youth work-based learning opportunities enabling the young people to acquire and build on their skills and dispositions in line with their needs and interests.
- The staff engage in high-quality detailed formative and summative assessment to inform future learning and practice.
- The staff value the young people and help them to develop the necessary skills to enable them to give back to their peers and the local community.

- There is a varied and well-defined continuum of learning provided for members, volunteers, and leaders at all levels, resulting in a mutually beneficial community of learning, focusing on continuous improvement of the provision.
- Through robust self-evaluation the organisation has identified appropriate actions going forward, including the further development of the volunteer support meetings and the diversity of programme activities.
- The young people, at all levels, engage in and lead purposeful discussions with staff where their voice is heard and responded to, ensuring that their views are valued and make a difference.
- The young people, through the progressive leadership programmes, grow in confidence, develop skills for future education and employment opportunities.
- Through the acquisition of personal, social and transferable skills, the young people are becoming responsible citizens within their community.
- The young people are making creative use of digital skills to explore issues related to their needs and, through this, are supporting others.
- There are highly appropriate links with external stakeholders, including the joint strategic planning and delivery of programmes to engage the young people of Lurgan.
- The arrangements for child and adult protection take full account of current policy and guidance.

Area for further consideration:

Continue to increase engagement with the local community.

3. MAIN REPORT

A. SETTING THE VISION

Lurgan YMCA's vision was designed by their young people, staff and board members to reflect the context of the needs within their local community, and is: "to inspire young people, their families and the wider Lurgan community to flourish in body, mind and spirit." This is underpinned by their mission statement: "We strive for inclusive spaces, where everyone feels welcomed while providing enriching opportunities for all, building good relations and social inclusion within our community." Both the vision and mission statements are clear, well embedded and inform the planning and provision at all levels.

Young people from Lurgan YMCA also engaged in face to face consultation meetings with YMCA Ireland to inform the wider vision for YMCA across all of Ireland. The consultation was based on looking at the previous vision statement and identifying the elements that needed to be included in a new vision statement going forward as part of YMCA Ireland's strategic plan. In addition, some young people from the centre were engaged in the development of the vision at YMCA Europe level and attended the event in Berlin where the Europe-wide vision was agreed.

Ongoing robust self-evaluation is carried out at a strategic level, focusing on the three pillars of the provision, namely "our people, our programmes and our organisation". The Lurgan YMCA staff have identified strengths across the three pillars and, through their detailed reflections, have identified three clear areas for future development which, in turn, have led to concise action-planning for the organisation going forward to achieve more fully their vision. The actions include further developing the volunteer support meetings, diversity of programme activities and increased community engagement.

The board of directors brings a wealth of experience from a wide range of backgrounds to support the centre staff in their professional development and in the delivery of the programme. The directors are well informed of the needs of the young people in the area and, along with the centre staff, help to identify appropriate funding for curriculum development to address these needs.

The young people recognise the impact that being part of YMCA Lurgan has on their lives, including their ability to develop personally and socially as well as the opportunity to be part of and help to inform the direction of the organisation at local, regional and global level. The young people have ownership of the centre and are able to "be themselves". The young people create displays recognising and celebrating events and their achievements through artwork and photographs, resulting in a space which belongs to them.

B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION

The staff are highly effective in realising their vision through rigorous self-evaluation, identifying appropriate areas of focus based on quality engagement with the young people. Intrinsic to this ongoing process are the views of the young people which inform and shape the provision. The young people value being listened to, heard and responded to by the staff, particularly in the programme development, which in turn is making a positive difference in the lives of others.

The purposeful curriculum offer is appropriately designed specifically around the needs identified by the young people and is flexible and agile to adapt to their changing needs. The staff create detailed planning which guides sessions appropriately and includes intentional learning opportunities, thorough evaluations, progression, and reflections from the young people. Through this, the young people acquire and build skills and dispositions in line with their needs and interests.

The highly effective youth work provision delivered by the staff engages the young people in an inclusive environment, enabling them to develop their personal and social skills. When engaging with the young people, the staff's informal conversations are consistently supporting the young people to make good choices, grow in confidence and build respectful relationships with their peers. The young people with additional needs recognise their learning and are able to articulate the skills they have developed through the programmes, such as life skills of cookery, on-line and fire safety, in an inclusive and welcoming environment.

The staff are highly reflective and carry out effective evaluations and rigorous reviews of each session linked to youth work outcomes, which clearly articulate the progress of individual young people and inform the planning for future sessions. There is a clear focus on continuous improvement and developing opportunities to build on the personal and social skills of the young people attending the sessions to enable them to flourish. Regular staff team meetings focus on the needs of the young people and how the staff can best address these needs.

The centre staff exemplify YMCA's commitment to developing young leaders and encouraging life-long learning. Often beginning as senior members, then volunteers, they are supported in completing the accredited OCN Level 2 Youth Work qualification. Subsequently, as interns, they gain relevant experience by working in the centre while completing a degree in Youth Work, often returning as part-time workers. This pathway enables young people to participate and grow to achieve their potential.

The health, safety and wellbeing of the young people is fundamental to the planning and delivery of the youth work sessions in the Lurgan YMCA. For example, the 'EsTeam' wellbeing programme is about improving the mental health and wellbeing of the young people, building confidence and resilience. The young people spoke to the inspectors about how producing the podcast on mental health helped them to talk about life challenges and hearing others' views with no judgements. Risk assessments are appropriately carried out and acted on in a measured way.

C. BUILDING EQUITY

Lurgan YMCA has inclusion and equality at the core of its values. The centre celebrates a positive, inclusive cultural identity by running programmes and events promoting and accepting all. For example, the 'Enable' programme and the neighbourhood renewal projects draw attention to poverty and deprivation. As a consequence, this impacts on how passionately the young people want to give back to others. The young people spoke about having a greater respect for diversity and improved positive engagement with others from different backgrounds. They talked about the cultural knowledge and digital skills they developed when they produced a podcast on inclusion, 'Let's Talk about Y'. The young people have delivered and participated in a range of cultural events in the town. The parents that spoke to the inspectors indicated that the centre was a "beacon of light" in the town, accessible to all young people.

The centre runs a weekly Independent Living Programme tailored to the needs, interests, and ambitions of the young people, building their personal skills, growth in confidence, and supporting them to identify and work towards future aspirations and goals.

The staff and young leaders take an individual approach to supporting the young people to overcome personal barriers. They are confident in meeting the young people where they are at. They accept them for who they are whilst raising the aspirations of the young people as to what they can achieve. One-to-one and group support for emotional health and wellbeing is sourced for the young people as and when appropriate. There is a high level of consideration given to how the young people can develop the necessary skills to enable them to give back to their peers and the local community. During the inspection, a group of young people displayed confidence when negotiating with members of staff. The young people spoke about how they view themselves as responsible citizens within the community. They have acquired personal, social and transferable skills through, for example, participating in an intergenerational project building planters and planting them out to improve the local environment, encouraging wildlife and the beauty of the local area.

The young people are growing in confidence, developing skills for future education and employment opportunities through the progressive leadership programmes. They are able to articulate to inspectors their learning journey and the effect that belonging to the centre has on them. During the inspection, the young people and staff provided examples of being given, and availing of, opportunities to spread their wings as the youth workers stepped back to allow them to step up. An example of this was the Annual Gathering where this year young people from the centre joined over 100 other staff, volunteers and young people from across YMCA Ireland to take time to further unpack and share how their vision and mission continue to guide and lead their work and impact. The young people spoke about how the skills they are developing from programmes run in the centre have helped them in their academic and work-related prospects.

D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS

Clear personal and social targets, appropriately based on the YMCA's core values, are set for junior members and their progress is recognised in, for example, "champion of the week" awards. The achievements of all the young people are recognised in a more formal "celebration week" in late March and shared on social media. Appropriately, these events are spread across a number of evenings in order to involve as many young people and families as possible in recognising the young people's attendance, participation, personal and social growth, and accreditations gained.

The staff capture the young people's journey through case studies which focus on how they are involved in the youth work programme, what they have learnt, how they have been able to develop and what they see as their future in the YMCA. Through this, the young people reflect on their personal and social development and are given the tools to articulate clearly their progress.

The staff leading the collaborative programmes with two local post-primary schools consider carefully the level of accredited courses taken by the young people in order to give them the best chance of experiencing success. Parents and representatives of the schools are invited to, and attend, the associated celebration events, highlighting the importance placed on these accreditations by all stakeholders.

The Health and Social Care Trust works closely with the centre to provide an Independent Living Programme designed to help a small group of young people acquire the personal and social confidence they will need to progress to the next stage of their development. Lurgan YMCA staff provide weekly evening sessions, practical skills development in the local community on one Saturday morning per month, a one-week summer scheme and a short residential. This bespoke one-year programme, delivered by sensitive and skilful staff, supports effectively the young people's holistic development. These young people make significant progress which is recorded in a journal of their experiences throughout the course: this important record highlights their personal and social development and, as part of their celebration of success, is presented to them and their parents at the end of their year's work with the centre.

E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING

There are strong links within and beyond Lurgan to support a community of learning. The staff demonstrate their readiness to learn through their engagement with researchers from the Ulster University in the Taking Boys Seriously initiative and applying these practical and effective principles to their work with young people. Lurgan YMCA carry out ongoing training needs analysis to identify and access training most urgently need by staff, for example, in trauma-informed practice. On occasions training is also delivered in partnership with Portadown YMCA if similar staff needs have been identified. Staff within Lurgan YMCA also offer training opportunities to others which have been availed of by both voluntary and statutory youth work providers.

Lurgan YMCA co-operates strategically with a local statutory youth service provider and the Police and Community Safety Partnership (PCSP) through detached work over the summer in a local park, offering a safe space in the park itself and engaging positively with the young people in order to address and improve behaviours. To support this strategic working relationship, neighbourhood police make informal visits to the centre to meet the young people, break down barriers and build trust. In addition, Lurgan YMCA participate in workshops delivered by partners such as PCSP in response to emerging concerns among young people which Lurgan YMCA and other partners have highlighted: recently, for example, in firework safety.

The practical working relationships with two local post-primary schools have resulted in two different programmes delivered by staff. "EsTeam", delivered by Lurgan YMCA, is designed to increase self-confidence and self-respect among a specific group of female pupils. "Enable", delivered in a second school in partnership with Portadown YMCA, provides support and an accredited course for pupils at risk of disengaging from education. In evaluations of both courses, the schools recognised the impact on the young people participating who gained accreditations, improved their attendance at school, grew in self-confidence and in self-esteem.

As well as learning in local contexts, YMCA's international dimension enables young leaders to join online training with their peers from across Europe and to experience representing YMCA Ireland at international gatherings in, for example, the Netherlands and Germany.

F. CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTION

At the time of the pilot inspection, the evidence provided by the centre demonstrates that the arrangements for child and adult protection take full account of current policy and guidance.

4. GOING FORWARD

Lurgan YMCA is providing high quality, inclusive youth work for the young people of the area. Working with their members the staff have developed and embedded a clear vision which is facilitating the young people to be welcomed into a safe place of diversity, inclusion and acceptance. Through a youth and community-led approach, the staff create opportunities for the young people to grow and develop skills for life.

ETI will continue to work with the Lurgan YMCA, including to share examples of the highly effective practice from which others may learn.

The aspects of highly effective practice which should be shared more widely include:

- the inclusive collaborative approach to all aspects of developing and delivering the provision;
- the planning and delivery of high-quality intentional learning opportunities;
- the high-quality robust self-evaluation to inform future learning and practice;
- the pathways for young people to acquire and build their skills; and
- the highly effective links with external stakeholders in order to engage the young people of Lurgan.

Lurgan YMCA is well placed to take forward the area for further consideration detailed in this report.

The Education and Training Inspectorate

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