

Report of a Youth Inspection  
Mountain Hill Youth Centre

January 2025

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Throughout the report the use of an asterisk \* denotes further information included in Appendix 2.

# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Mountain Hill Youth Centre is situated on the Ligoniel Road in Belfast and operates out of a 19<sup>th</sup> Century mill building. The centre is managed by the Education Authority (EA) and is one of seven statutory units within the North and East Belfast Area Youth Team. The area has experienced a growth in housing over recent years, which has contributed to a significant rise in the local population.

The centre provides youth services for young people aged 6-18 years from mainly across the Old Park District Electoral Area. Over the last four years, there has been an increase in the registration. At the time of the inspection, there were 156 young people registered, with an attendance of over 70 young people on each of the generic nights during the week of the inspection. The centre's work is facilitated by one full-time youth worker, six part-time youth workers and young volunteers, and is supported by a building supervisor.

Due to the Ligoniel area's high ranking on the multiple deprivation scale, there are various challenges in meeting the needs of the young people. The key areas of need for the young people, as identified by the staff are the need for a safe space, inclusion and diversity, and mental health and wellbeing. The provision within the centre includes: junior and senior clubs; DJing; dance; healthy living; Together: Building United Communities\* (T:BUC) and a young men's programme. In addition, four young people from Mountain Hill attend the Go Global programme held in Hammer Youth Centre facilitated by the Mountain Hill staff in partnership with FLARE\*. There is an established senior members' committee, and the staff are developing a junior committee, further empowering the young people. The centre building is in a state of disrepair and has been identified as the top priority by EA Youth Service for major capital investment going forward.

## **B. VIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS AND STAFF**

The young people spoke of how they enjoy making new friends in their youth club and of the variety of programmes through which they are learning new skills and developing further their interests. The junior members spoke of their enjoyment of arts and crafts, and the opportunities to visit new places with the club. Similarly, the senior members spoke of the friendships they are developing within the club, but also with young people from other neighbouring communities. They highlighted how they are valued by the youth workers and are regularly asked for their views. A particular concern raised by the young people is the poor state of the building and the need for a new youth club facility.

In discussions with a small number of parents, they expressed strongly their appreciation of the staff's understanding of their children and commitment to building relationships based on trust and mutual respect. They value highly the summer scheme and day trips which extend their children's experience beyond the local community. According to the parents, key benefits to their children include, their increasing confidence to take up new programmes, to work with a wider range of young people within and beyond their youth centre and to take on leadership roles.

In discussions with the staff, they highlighted the support they receive from their senior managers and how much they enjoy working within the centre. They also value the support they obtain from one another, and enjoy the strong sense of community within the centre where they know their work is valued and making a difference in the young people's lives.

## **C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION**

The ETI worked alongside Mountain Hill Youth Centre 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 staff and young people live out their vision for 'A safe space to be yourself – empowering young people, creating opportunities and building connections', which is reflected in the young people's strong sense of belonging to and pride in their youth club.
- There is a welcoming and inclusive ethos where young people of all abilities and backgrounds are valued for their uniqueness.
- The staff demonstrate excellent interpersonal skills and have established highly effective conditions for youth work practice, which benefit the personal and social development of the young people.
- The young people's holistic development is given a high priority in the planning of the youth work curriculum, and the facilitation of the programmes by the staff.
- To recognise fully the impact of the effective youthwork practice, the systems used for reporting and evaluating should capture more sufficiently the young people's progress in their personal and social development.
- The young people are learning new skills and being supported to overcome barriers, which is having a positive impact on their ability to engage in formal education.
- The young volunteers are highly respected by their peers and show mature, confident leadership when facilitating sessions with other members.

- The well-established community partnerships are purposeful and mutually beneficial, both extending and enhancing the youth work experiences for the young people.
- The young people's health and wellbeing are promoted through their high levels of engagement in energetic physical activities and well-targeted mental health programmes.
- The young people's successes are recognised appropriately within the centre and are celebrated more widely with friends and families through the staff's pro-active use of social media.
- At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the organisation demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance. The staff would benefit from training by the EA in adult safeguarding arrangements in the youth environment.

Area for action identified by the organisation:

- for the staff to develop further the systems used for reporting and evaluating to capture more sufficiently the young people's development of their personal and social skills.

### **3. MAIN REPORT**

#### **A. SETTING THE VISION**

The staff and young people, worked together to develop their agreed vision 'A safe space to be yourself – empowering young people, creating opportunities and building connections', reflecting the needs of the young people within their local community. In addition, the staff were involved in developing and are living out the wider vision statements for the North and East Belfast area. Through this process and the synergy between the vision statements, the staff recognise the role they have in the development of the young people attending Mountain Hill, as well as their role within the wider North and East Belfast Area Youth Team. Through discussions with the young people and staff, their vision is clearly embedded in the delivery of the programmes which are meeting the young people's needs. The young people have a strong sense of belonging and talk of their youth club with pride. The parents expressed their appreciation of how much their children are benefitting from membership of Mountain Hill Youth Centre, particularly the increase in their self-confidence and readiness to 'go beyond their limits' by trying new experiences.

The self-evaluation carried out by the staff has appropriately identified the strengths within their provision and the aspects of their work that they wish to improve. In addition, the staff have a thorough knowledge of the local community and through their direct conversation with the young people and the effective links with schools and other community groups are enabled to identify appropriately the needs of the young people in the area. The care and empathy which the staff show is valued by the young people and reflects their vision. The staff make use of their interpersonal skills to effectively engage with the young people with a focus on developing their personal and social skills.

## **B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

Across the management and staff team there is a highly supportive environment for the planning and delivery of youth work. The team are reflective practitioners with a focus on continuously improving their youth work practice to benefit the young people. The staff have a clear understanding of the needs of the young people attending the centre and plan the broad range of youth work programmes and approaches matched to these needs. The young people are actively involved in determining their own programmes.

The personal and social development of the young people is central to the design, planning and delivery of the centre's youth work curriculum. The young people's holistic development is given a high priority in the planning and facilitation of youth work programmes by the staff. The provision for the young people is informed by the staff listening to and understanding the young people's abilities, interests and needs. The young people know that they are valued and that the youth workers are empathetic and trustworthy. The effective youth work relationships enable the young people to have meaningful conversations with the staff and their peers, which support them to overcome the range of issues that many of them face.

There are examples of reflective practice in the staff recordings, for example, where nightly briefing notes contain insightful verbatim feedback from the young people on the quality of their programmes. In the most effective examples of self-evaluation, the views of young people are detailed effectively. However, at an overall centre level, the systems used for reporting and evaluation do not capture sufficiently the impact of the youth work practice on the young people's personal and social development. The staff and management are planning to work alongside the young people to discuss and record more effectively their views on the impact of the youth work programmes.

Across the provision, the young people benefit from a range of programmes exploring the link between regular exercise and good emotional and physical health. The young people's physical wellbeing is enhanced through the extensive use of the outdoor all-weather pitch and through the Dance programme and training for Mixed Martial Arts, they are developing a range of physical, personal and social skills. Opportunities for outdoor learning, for example, hill walking and canoeing at the local dam, enhance further the young people's confidence to take on new physical challenges in a safe environment.

## **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

Mountain Hill Youth Centre has an inclusive ethos welcoming young people from all backgrounds and abilities into a safe place where they can be themselves. The staff know the young people, their families and the community well. The young people with additional needs integrate well with their peers and effectively support one another in the different activities offered. The staff support young people both at a one-to-one level and in small groups to address issues and overcome the barriers they are facing with a high level of sensitivity. Effective engagement with parents ensures the staff are well placed to provide the best possible experience for the young people regardless of need.

The staff work well to ensure equitable access to opportunities for all. They have a high level of skill when engaging with young people and make appropriate use of Conflict Resolution skills to ensure relationships are maintained and restored when necessary. All staff have received training in Equality, Trauma Awareness and Ending Violence Against Women and Girls, giving them an insight, skills and understanding of how to deal with sensitive issues.

The young people embrace diversity and intentionally accept and include one another regardless of background or ability. They are also developing their social skills and personal capabilities to enable them to engage well with their peers and adults. There is a clear route for progression from membership to leadership through the centre, with senior members involved in the Youth Working in their Communities programme attaining Level 1 and Level 2 OCN qualifications. Following the Covid-19 lockdowns and an updated assessment of the young people's needs, members of staff and volunteers availed of accredited Youth@Play\* training facilitated by PlayBoard NI which enables them to meet better the play needs of the younger members.

#### **D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

The staff's definition of success recognises the wide range of starting points for the young people attending the centre. They have high expectations of the young people's behaviour and their relationships with staff and peers alike. A particular strength in the sessions observed was the young people's respectful behaviour towards one another, the staff, the accommodation and the resources. In their interactions with the young people, the staff affirm consistently the young people's positive behaviour, personal successes and achievements. In discussions with the inspectors, both the young people and their parents recognised the value of the long-term friendships being sustained and the opportunities to forge new friendships through membership of the centre and their participation in, for example, cross-community programmes including T:BUC.

The young people welcome the regular prizes and awards for competitions and for developing particular skills, such as the 'DJ of the week' award, which recognises appropriately the progress made from the young people's respective starting points. In addition, some awards are sponsored by local businesses which recognise the positive impact of the centre on the Ligoniel community. In discussions with the inspectors, the young people expressed their appreciation of the celebration events at the end of programmes. All aspects of the young people's learning experiences and successes are celebrated and shared appropriately with the wider community through photographs and videos on the centre's vibrant social media channel.

#### **E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING**

The staff and management have encouraged and are continuing to develop a community of learning. The staff and young people understand the valuable learning opportunities that the youth work programmes provide for the young people. The young people are learning new skills and being supported to overcome issues and barriers and this is having a positive impact on their ability to engage in formal education. In the group work sessions, the young people were reflecting on and setting exercise, wellbeing and academic goals for this year.

There is extensive support for staff with their professional development relevant to the needs of the young people. As well as regular staff meetings and learning from one another's practice, there is a North and East Belfast training calendar of courses bespoke to the needs of the staff. Some staff have progressed through the centre as members, and others from outside the community state that they feel accepted and part of the community. The staff work with other full-time youth workers across the area of North Belfast and this benefits the young people's access and engagement in wider youth work programmes. The centre staff make an important contribution to community relations in the area through their youth work across the three key local interfaces and the effective relationships they have with other youth and community stakeholders.

Limited resources, in particular, the poor condition of the building, mean that collaboration is crucially important for the staff working in the youth centre. They have established partnerships which are mutually beneficial with local community and youth providers. The young people benefit from the youth work staff's engagement in these partnerships, by accessing additional resources for their programmes, much needed physical space in nearby community buildings and working with other youth practitioners in their local community.

In discussions with the key partners, they spoke of the purposeful relationships they have with the youth work staff, the urgent need for a new youth centre and benefits to the local community of the youth provision at Mountain Hill. They highlighted the importance of the football pitch located at the centre, which is a significant resource used by local community groups and schools.

## **F. CHILD PROTECTION**

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the organisation demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection aligns to the current statutory guidance. The young people are well aware of what to do and who to speak to if they have any concerns about their wellbeing. The parents who met with inspectors agreed strongly that Mountain Hill Youth Centre is a safe place for their children. The staff would benefit from training by the EA in adult safeguarding arrangements in the youth environment.

## **4. GOING FORWARD**

Mountain Hill Youth Centre is living out its vision through the highly effective youth work practice which is well matched to the individual needs of the young people. The staff prioritise the building of relationships with the young people and are well placed to meet their personal and social development needs.

The ETI will continue to work with Mountain Hill Youth Centre, including to share examples of highly effective practice from which others may learn. The aspects of practice which should be shared more widely are:

- the fostering of an inclusive environment where young people are being supported to overcome barriers and thrive; and



- the extensive collaboration with youth workers and key local community stakeholders to enhance the youth work experiences.

Mountain Hill Youth Centre is well placed to take forward the priorities they have identified through their own self-evaluation processes.

## 5. APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

## APPENDIX 2: NOTES

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#### **Together: Building United Communities (T:BUC)**

Beginning in summer 2015, the programme provided a range of opportunities for young people aged 11 to 19 across Northern Ireland to come together to build positive relationships across what have become divided parts of our community. The Camps are about challenging historic positions, encouraging debate and discussion and providing a way for young people to get to know each other, try new experiences, have fun and help to build longer term relationships. The programme is funded through The Executive Office and administered by the Education Authority.

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#### **FLARE (Facilitating Life And Resilience Education) project**

Is part of the Education Authority Youth Service. It supports young people between nine and 25 years, promoting positive emotional health and wellbeing.

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#### **Youth@Play and PlayBoard NI**

PlayBoard's pilot Youth@Play programme, supported by the Education Authority (EA), clearly identified the need for playwork training, and its potential impact in raising the play offer in the participating youth settings. Youth work qualifications have typically focused on the 13+ age group so this programme sets out to enhance opportunities to develop additional knowledge towards a better understanding of playwork and play-based approaches.

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