

EDUCATION AND TRAINING
INSPECTORATE

Youth Insights Report

September 2021 – September 2024

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Introduction

Youth provision offers young people opportunities to engage and participate on a voluntary basis in an important aspect of non-formal education. Participation in youth services funded by the Department of Education (DE) aims to support the learning and development of young people aged 4-25 years.

Young people are supported through youth work which makes a distinctive and positive contribution to their education, employability and life skills by facilitating them to engage positively as active members of their own and wider communities. Youth work encourages young people to identify their social, emotional and development needs and they are directly involved in shaping the services designed to meet those needs. Young people can gain the necessary skills and confidence to be active citizens and to navigate the world around them.

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) is committed to being the voice for equity and excellence for all learners by identifying, reporting and promoting impactful practice and informing improvement through enhanced professional dialogue. Youth provision delivered by the statutory and voluntary sector is inspected and visited regularly by ETI inspectors.

The findings within this report are collated from first-hand observations and evidence from a wide range of engagements with youth providers, including: 55 district visits; Development of Inspection meetings; five follow-up inspections; one prototype inspection; four pilot inspections; observations of 12 summer programmes; and policy advice commissioned by DE in relation to the impact of the Education Authority's (EA) revised youth funding scheme on voluntary provision and meeting the needs of young people.

The DE summary and response to that policy advice has been published. It sets out the key findings and how the Department has been using the advice as part of the review of the current 'Priorities for Youth' policy. ETI has been commissioned to review the wider implementation of the policy actions in 'Priorities for Youth' and that evaluation will draw on the advice provided to DE.

This report distils the main findings from all youth sector inspection activity over the reporting period 2021-24, which includes an extensive period of engagement with the education sector to co-design a new inspection framework. The report provides insights on ETI's evaluations of what is working well in the sector and identifies where improvements can contribute to optimising the benefits for young people. Inspectors are appreciative of the open and willing engagement across the youth sector in the development of new approaches to inspection and hope to facilitate further collaborative working within and across the sector in support of our young people.

Key findings

An empowering vision designed with and for young people

In the most effective practice observed, the organisation's vision was inclusive, empowering and designed with the young people. In addition, it was shared with all stakeholders and informed every aspect of provision, evidenced through the young people talking about how they were actively involved in the planning, delivery and evaluation of programmes. In these organisations, young people, at all levels, engaged in and led purposeful discussions with staff, where their voice was heard and responded to. This ensured that their views were valued and made a tangible difference to the quality and nature of the provision. It was evident that when the organisation's vision was co-designed by young people, the young people's decision-making skills were developed, with planning and delivery of provision at all levels better informed.

Listening to young people

Young people benefitted from working alongside their youth workers to identify their needs and interests. In discussions with young people, they told the inspectors that they prefer face-to-face engagement with youth workers about their needs and issues, rather than this information being gathered through questionnaires.

Formal group work was a key feature in full-time youth settings. It was most impactful when it was supported by prior and ongoing non-formal group work and individual conversations, with opportunities to discuss topical and sensitive issues and challenge beliefs and values in a supportive, inclusive and secure environment.

Youth work across the sector continues to provide effective opportunities for young people to develop leadership skills which benefit them, their peers, and their youth provision. Young people talked of their pride and enjoyment in 'giving back' through volunteering within their youth centres or in social action projects. There were examples of progressive programmes where young people acquired and effectively used leadership skills, enabling them to access accredited qualifications, including relevant youth work and leadership qualifications. Young people benefitted from volunteering, developing a wider sense of responsibility and active citizenship. There were particular examples of young volunteers helping staff to lead junior sessions or fundraising for local causes which they found rewarding and meaningful. Going forward, supporting young people's engagement in volunteering is an important aspect for the youth sector to develop further.

In the most effective planning, staff engaged in detailed formative and summative assessment which informed future learning and practice. Effective planning led to a purposeful and flexible curriculum, appropriately designed around the specific needs identified by the young people, including their health and wellbeing. A cycle of considered planning and robust self-evaluation enabled the organisations to identify appropriate actions for improvement, for example, developing support for volunteers.

Where youth work staff evaluated their practice regularly, this built their capacity as practitioners, both individually and collectively. Through the evaluation of their practice, youth workers implemented strategies and approaches which improved the quality of the provision. Nevertheless, planning for improvement processes throughout the sector need to include more effectively the development of proportionate, measurable and realistic targets, such as those related to recruitment and attendance to capture more effectively the positive impact of youth work on the personal and social development of the young people.

The extended summer programmes by the EA Youth Service during July and August 2024 were designed to maintain the engagement of young people with their youth workers over the summer holidays by providing continuity of service. The programmes provided a range of activities which the young people enjoyed; the focus on fun, team activities and relationship building was beneficial and matched well to the young people's interests, needs and abilities. Across the provision, the youth workers established mutually beneficial, collaborative partnerships with other youth organisations and community groups, such as churches, other youth centres and a residential care setting for the elderly. The young people's emotional health and wellbeing benefitted through their engagement in relevant and enjoyable programmes.

A youth sector supporting young people

The pandemic was a particularly difficult time for many young people, bringing with it a heightened sense of separation from the world around them. Youth workers reached out to young people through organised online activities and events. However, young people reported they did not find these as engaging or enjoyable as attending face-to-face youth work in their local centres and projects.

The youth sector is ideally placed to support effectively young people facing a range of issues, including social isolation, emotional health and wellbeing difficulties and the impact of poverty. There has been a particular focus on supporting and enhancing the health and wellbeing of young people across the sector. The youth workers had a clear understanding and knowledge of the issues faced by their young people. In the best practice the young people were facilitated to voice their concerns and talk about and respond to the issues relevant to them, this was reflected in the strategies and programmes the youth workers deployed to help address the young people's personal and social development needs. In an increasingly complex world, including the virtual world, youth workers were skilled in identifying and responding appropriately to the changing needs of the young people in today's society.

Beyond the impact of the pandemic, for young people living in rural communities, work continued to be required to address the specific issues they faced in respect of access to services in the evening and the challenges of social isolation.

Personal and social development at the heart of youth work

In the effective practice, young people developed a range of personal, social and transferable skills through their engagement in programmes bespoke to their needs, interests and abilities. The young people understood and valued the transferable skills they acquired, which they stated prepared them well for their future education, employment opportunities and adult life. The young people involved in effective leadership development, confidently and competently organised programmes and advocated effectively on behalf of themselves and others.

The young people benefitted most where the staff had high levels of interpersonal skills, and responded sensitively and with understanding in building and maintaining relationships. Inspectors observed sessions where it was clear that young people with additional needs were nurtured and empowered to overcome personal barriers, enjoyed friendships with their peers and engaged more fully in programmes. Across the provision inspected, the staff were inclusive and responsive, working sensitively with young people who had additional needs, or who experienced social and communication difficulties. In a small number of sessions, the young people made creative use of digital skills to explore issues related to their needs and interests, and through this, supported others.

Where appropriate, young people and volunteers had access to youth work qualifications, which added to or complemented their educational achievements, including providing a pathway to further youth work qualifications for participants. Similarly, in the effective practice, staff reported that they were supported well by their managers who provided a comprehensive range of professional learning opportunities such as mentoring, which helped them develop their skills and gain the required experience and qualifications to progress to undertaking leadership responsibilities.

Inspectors observed full-time youth workers working alongside their teams of part-time and volunteer staff, building and developing further the staff's group facilitation skills. By contrast, group work practice was not effective enough when it was overly directive, with ineffective questioning resulting in the young people not being sufficiently engaged.

Across the youth sector, the young people's successes were celebrated both formally and informally, from graduation ceremonies to youth worker affirmations during weekly sessions. Recipients reported that this recognition was invaluable in helping to raise self-esteem and their continued enjoyment of learning.

Working together to support young people in a community of learning

The invaluable contribution of volunteers in a wide variety of youth work settings has been consistently recognised as a key feature of youth provision. Volunteers need to feel valued and supported in the vital role they play in helping young people to enjoy and benefit from safe and effective provision. The youth sector has significant

expertise and experience in encouraging and fostering volunteer leaders and management committees. This important aspect of capacity building should be supported at strategic and programme level to ensure that the volunteer workforce, including young people who volunteer as leaders, are trained to undertake the role and their contribution is recognised and celebrated.

The young people benefitted from staff working closely with other organisations in their community to share knowledge and expertise to assist in planning to meet the young people's needs and interests. In the effective practice, referral to external agencies provided the young people with much needed support; examples included working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and counselling services to understand and address risk-taking behaviours.

Through youth fora, such as Youth Voice, young people had good opportunities to participate in various consultations, for example with their local council. Going forward, it is important that young people continue to influence and make decisions that directly impact on their lives.

Settings where inspection had previously identified areas for action have shown improvement

All youth settings have now exited the follow-up process. The organisations which had follow-up inspections were able to demonstrate discernible and important improvements in the quality of their provision. Examples of the actions that led to improvement included having a clear focus on quality assurance and the involvement of young people in the evaluation of programmes and greater involvement in participative structures within and beyond the setting. There was investment in the professional development of youth work staff, which supported their work with young people, including examples of self-evaluation and reflective practice of youth work staff, improving the provision overall. Young people were able to reflect on, value and articulate their learning progression. Where necessary, attendance had improved and collaborative partnerships were established to support young people's development.

Key challenges

Inspections across the 2021-2024 period confirm that the youth sector continues to provide a valued service to many of our young people. This report highlights the many strengths that are evident in the wide and varied range of youth provision across Northern Ireland. It also serves to highlight a number of key challenges for the sector and for government to ensure the ongoing vibrance and relevance of the sector for future generations.

Retaining and increasing attendance of young people

The DE 'Priorities for Youth' policy set out the general focus for youth work funded by the EA across the different age ranges. In the provision where there is a significant reduction in the numbers of young people registered and attending beyond the junior age range, staff need to develop improved approaches to retain and increase the registration and attendance rates of young people progressing to intermediate and/or senior programmes.

The effective practice observed by inspectors, needs to be incorporated comprehensively into both policy and practice to ensure that young people across all of the targeted age groups get access to innovative and age-appropriate youth programmes to optimise the considerable benefits that are self-evident in the findings of this report.

Reflective practice

Inspectors were able to highlight effective practice in most of the provision they visited across the time period. The benefits of involvement in youth provision are clear and in the most effective practice, organisations can demonstrate the impact and benefits to young people of participation, which complements and augments their formal education experiences. Continuing improvement in provision across the sector relies on knowledge and understanding of the unique needs and circumstances of each young person or group of young people, being integrated into an effective cycle of planning, implementation and evaluation for learning and further action. The nature of youth work and youth organisations varies across Northern Ireland both regionally and locally. The challenge of bringing coherence remains and is as important today as it was when 'Priorities for Youth' was published in 2013.

Supporting volunteers and volunteering

The evaluations by inspectors across this time period and repeatedly in Chief Inspectors' reports across many years have highlighted the necessary and invaluable contribution of volunteers within the youth sector. A consequence of the pandemic has been the reduction in the number of volunteers across the sector. Recruiting, training and sustaining volunteers is therefore a key area for focus going forward. 'Priorities for Youth' emphasises the need to support, recognise and celebrate the contribution of volunteers as essential to the success of youth work delivery. It is timely that supporting volunteers is being taken forward through the 'EA Youth Service Volunteer Strategy 2023-2029' which sets out the sector-wide approach to supporting the recruitment, development and retention of youth work volunteers. ETI will monitor and evaluate the impact of the actions taken to deliver the strategy aims.

Adult safeguarding

Registration with the EA requires a Safeguarding and Child Protection Policy and for settings working with young people aged 18-25 years, an Adults at Risk of Harm policy is also required. The evidence from inspection findings is that there is a disparity in access to professional learning and training for youth sector staff in the voluntary and statutory sectors in this crucial area of their work. While staff in the voluntary sector have accessed training on adult safeguarding, this training in the statutory sector has not been developed nor implemented. The EA's Child Protection Support Service will need to develop bespoke training for the statutory sector to address this inequitable approach and to mitigate any associated risks for participants and staff.

Conclusion

There are many strengths which have been detailed in this report and which have been rightly celebrated in the youth settings. There have been challenges over the last number of years, including the challenges in relation to the constrained economic context, and undoubtedly new challenges will emerge. However, the insights in this evaluation indicate youth workers are well placed to overcome the challenges, as outlined in this report.

DE is in the process of reviewing the existing policy 'Priorities for Youth', which provides a timely opportunity to more adequately reflect the current context for young people. The review of the policy also provides an opportunity to reinforce the importance of working collaboratively across statutory and voluntary partners to deliver improved services for young people in line with the core purpose of youth work and critically to celebrate and maximise their respective strengths. It is important that the views of young people and the efficacy and learning from the work of youth workers continues to inform policy and planning decisions.

We appreciate the engagement of the youth sector in all of our work to inform this report.

Appendix: Reference links

[Youth Inspection Reports](#)

[Development of Inspection: Empowering Improvement - New Framework for Inspection](#)

[Chief Inspector's Reports](#)

[DE Priorities for Youth](#)

[DE Priorities for Youth \(PfY\) Policy Review](#)


[DE Summary and Response to the ETI Review of the Impact of the Revised Funding Scheme for the Voluntary Youth Organisations](#)

[Youth Service Volunteer Strategy](#)

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