

WWETB Youthreach Programme

Listening to our learners and
showcasing good practice



wwetb

Bord Oideachais agus Oiliúna
Phort Láirge agus Loch Garman
Waterford and Wexford
Education and Training Board

The Gardener does not make a plant grow
The job of the gardener is to create optional conditions

Sir Ken Robinson

Foreword

Irish and international evidence shows that education and training centres like Youthreach and Community Training Centres (CTCs) have a positive and long lasting impact on the lives of young people. Here in Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB), we are proud of our Youthreach programme, of the dedicated staff that run these centres, and of the amazing young people that attend Youthreach and CTCs every year. We want to acknowledge and highlight what is working well and we want to push ourselves to enhance our services, supports and provision across all 10 centres in the region.

This report originated in our desire to better understand what brings young people to Youthreach and CTCs and, crucially, what keeps them there. We are determined to take a strengths-based approach to developing our Youthreach programme by identifying, capturing and building on the good practice and considerable strengths and successes that exists at local level.

What better way to start than to ask the learners themselves what works well and where improvements are needed? Therefore, we commissioned an external consultant, Doody Facilitation and Consulting Ltd., to engage with learners across the region in order to get their perspective on what works and where we can do better. Also, to build on the Youthreach Programmes considerable strengths and successes.

This report is the culmination of months of work by a wide range of people who share an interest in supporting young people's learning and development in Waterford and Wexford. We would like to thank the following people:

First and foremost, sincere thanks to the 90 young people across the ten centres who participated in the focus groups. Their willingness, honesty and enthusiasm meant that the focus groups discussions elicited great insights into what is working well and where there are opportunities to improve things on the ground. Many thanks to each and every one of you.

Many thanks to the Coordinators of the Youthreach Centres and Managers of the Community Training Centres for their support in designing the consultation process, their flexibility and commitment during site visits and the overall commitment to process.

Many thanks also to the centre staff for participating in focus groups and online survey, and for helping out with the site visits.



Liz Duffy, Adult Education Officer

Background to this Report

The main aim of this research was to listen to the voice of learners. The goal was to identify how WWETB can work to enhance the Youthreach experience by hearing directly from learners. The research took place over 6 months and involved a comprehensive process of front-line engagement with learners and staff. The diagram below sets out the methodology in numbers.



90	Learners
25	Staff Survey Respondents
20	Staff Workshop Participants
10	Learner Focus Groups
10	Centre Coordinators
07	Locations
06	Month Process
05	Coordinator and Staff Workshops
02	Counties
01	Adult Education Officer
01	Researcher



Youthreach Centres and Community Training Centres in Waterford and Wexford

Wexford

Enniscorthy Youthreach

Spring Valley, Templeshannon, Enniscorthy

Gorey Youthreach

Ramstown Lower, Gorey

New Ross Youthreach

Harte Complex, Butlersland, New Ross

Wexford Youthreach

Whitemills Industrial Estate, Wexford

Youth Train Community Training Centre, Wexford

Whitemills Industrial Estate, Wexford

Waterford

Dungarvan Youthreach

Rinnashilloogue, Dungarvan

Subla, Waterford Youthreach

Lacken Road Business Park, Waterford

Tramore Youthreach

Seapoint Business Park, Riverstown, Tramore

Waterford Youthreach

O'Connell Street, Waterford City

**Waterford Youth Training and
Education Centre (WYTEC)**

Ballinaneashagh Business Centre, Waterford

About The Youthreach Programme

Youthreach is a programme of education, training and work experience for young people who leave school early. It is sometimes referred to as “second chance” or “alternative” education. The programme was established in 1989 and continues to be the government’s main response to early school leaving. It is funded by the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS, The Further Education and Training Authority and offers a wide variety of courses, including the Leaving Certificate (Applied) and QQI Levels 3 and 4.

The objectives of the programme have not changed significantly since 1989. A key aim is still to support young people make the transition from school to work through the provision of training, education and work experience. However, the programme’s objectives have broadened over time and there is now a strong emphasis on enabling learners to “develop personally and socially while increasing their self-esteem in order to prepare them for adult life where they can participate fully in society”¹.

Youthreach’s current objectives include:

- Personal and social development and increased self-esteem
- Second-chance/alternative education and introductory level training
- Promotion of independence, personal autonomy, active citizenship and lifelong learning
- Integration into further education and training opportunities and the labour market
- The promotion of social inclusion

The Youthreach programme is offered in two settings: Youthreach Centres and Community Training Centres (CTC).

1. Youthreach Centres offer education and training to young people aged 16 – 21 years. They are funded, managed, and administered by Education and Training Boards and are considered “centres of education” under the Education Act, 1998.
2. CTCs offer education and training to young people aged 16 to 21 years. They are owned and managed by local community organisations and are funded by Solas, through Education and Training Boards.

¹ ERSI Report



The Youthreach programme teaching and learning approach is considered innovative and dynamic, with a mix of education, training and youth work approaches². It is based on active and experiential learning, with considerable flexibility built into the delivery of modules and programmes.

Although there is some variation between Youthreach centres and CTCs, they share common characteristics³

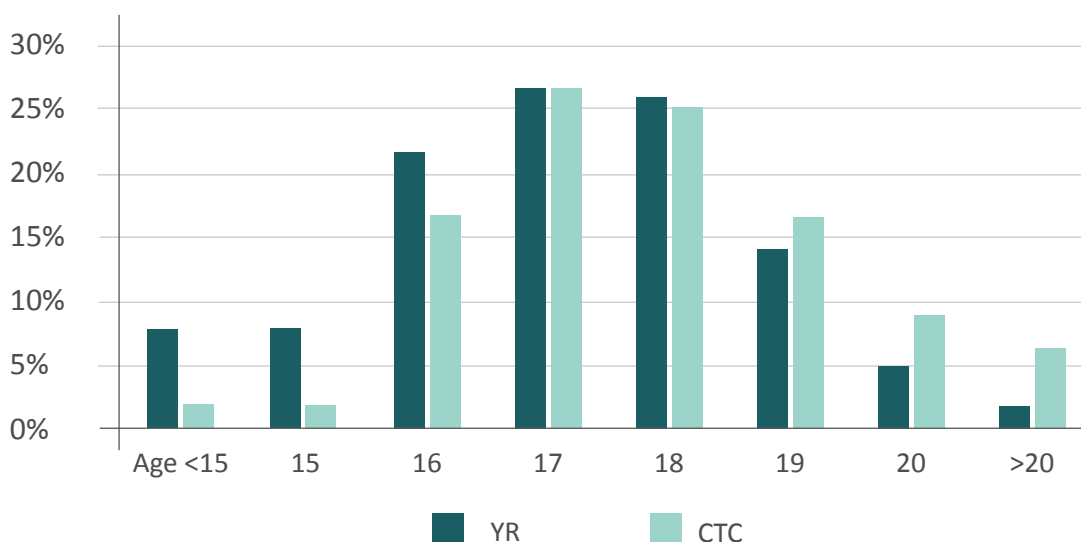
- Small class sizes
- High Teaching staff to learner ratios
- One on one interaction between teaching staff and learners
- A learner-centred curriculum
- Flexibility in structure
- A supportive and safe environment
- Positive rather than punitive behaviour management

Who Are Youthreach Learners?

Youthreach learners can be broadly categorised under four headings:

1. young people who struggle with the mainstream academic system
2. young people who had challenging experiences with other learners or teachers in mainstream school
3. young people experiencing mental health challenges
4. young people experiencing behavioural challenges

The chart below provides an age breakdown of learners nationally⁴. This shows that the majority of Youthreach learners are 16 – 18 years old.

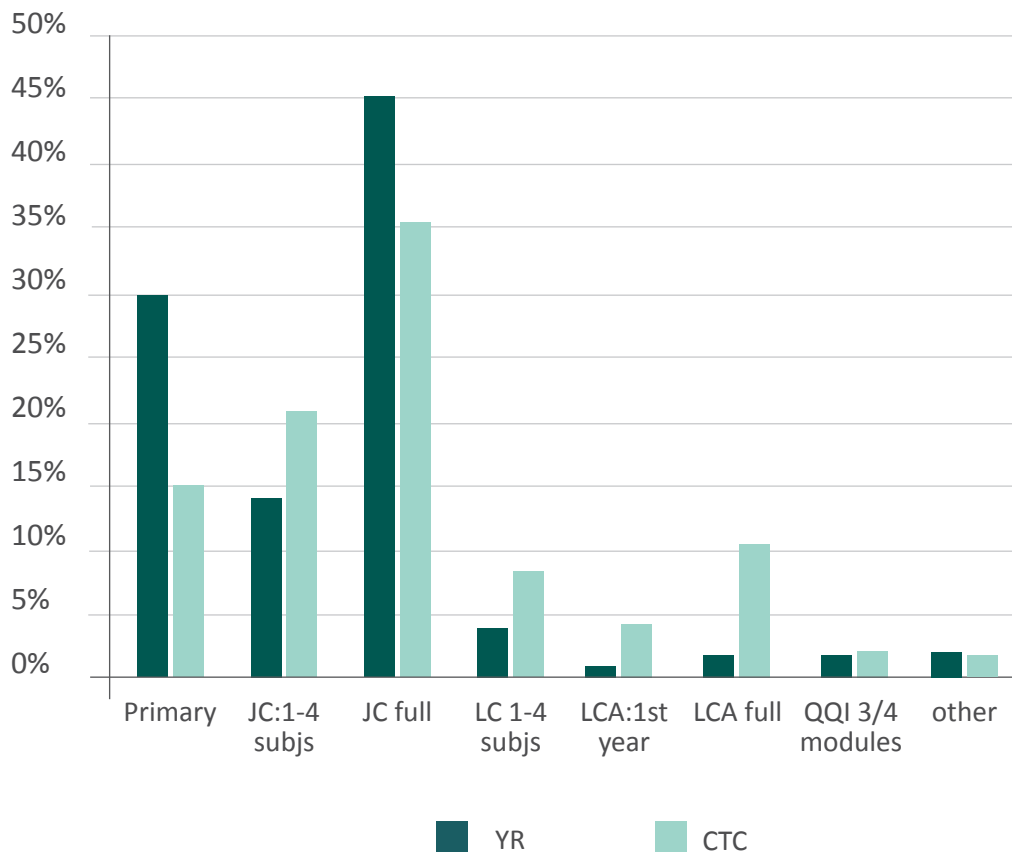


² <https://eslplus.eu/youthreach-programme>

³ O'Gorman et al., 2016; Lehr, 2004; Edgar-Smith and Baugher Palmer, 2015

⁴ ERSI

The chart below depicts learners' level of education on entering the Youthreach programme nationally. This shows that the vast majority of learners left mainstream school after completing primary school or after partially or fully completing their Junior Certificate.



The Role of Youthreach in Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB)

WWETB's vision is to "lead learning through the delivery of high quality, inclusive, responsive and innovative education and training services". The mission is to provide a "wide range of education and training programmes, services and supports".

WWETB vision and mission are underpinned by four principles which guide its work. These are:

1

Respect

What it means:

We treat others as we would expect to be treated ourselves, we assume positive intent, consider everyone to be of value and treat all with courtesy.

How it works:

We value diversity and challenge all stakeholders to consistently demonstrate empathy and fairness; to reward effort; and to treat all equally.

Accountability

2

What it means:

We take full ownership of the delivery of the delegated responsibilities of our roles and the collective responsibility of the immediate and wider team, with a view to achieving the highest professional standards.

How it works:

Being professional; being loyal to the organisation; striving for results in an open, honest and transparent way; and being fully compliant with statutory responsibilities.

Learner Focus

What it means:

Our focus is on enabling our learners to maximise their potential.

How it works:

Staff working together to provide an inclusive, responsive, innovative, positive and supportive service for learners.

3

Quality

What it means:

We strive to deliver the highest standards with a view to maximising learner potential.

How it works:

Quality assurance is achieved through leadership; by 'raising the bar'; setting high standards with regard to work ethic and demanding them of others; and being dedicated, professional and results oriented.

4



The Youthreach programme is an essential part of WWETB's efforts to ensure that it is responsive to learners' needs and that it provides inclusive, learner-focused options for young people. It recognises that the prevailing post-primary Junior and Leaving Certificate system does not work for everyone and, so, Youthreach aims to give young people:

- A second chance to gain education and training
- A chance to develop new skills
- A chance to gain national certification and to progress to further education or training
- A chance to find employment

There are 10 Youthreach Programme Centres across Waterford and Wexford; 5 in each county.

Waterford

1. Dungarvan Youthreach
2. Subla, Waterford Youthreach
3. Tramore Youthreach
4. Waterford Youthreach
5. Waterford Youth Training and Education Centre



Wexford

6. Enniscorthy Youthreach
7. Gorey Youthreach
8. New Ross Youthreach
9. Wexford Youthreach
10. Youth Train Community Training Centre, Wexford



SECTION 2

What the Evidence Tells Us

The Youthreach programme “works well as second-chance provision for young people with complex needs, providing them with a positive experience of teaching and learning, fostering personal and social skill development, and equipping many with certification to access further education, training and employment options. Programme provision shows flexibility in adapting to learner need, with centres tailoring accredited and non-accredited courses to the prior educational level and broader needs of young people”⁵.

“It definitely changed my life. I was going down a bad path in my first school I was getting in trouble, I was arguing with people, but this changed my life completely”

(Learner, ESRI report)

The 2019 ESRI Youthreach report emphasises its significant value in re-engaging vulnerable young people with learning; providing courses and approaches tailored to their needs; and embedding education/training provision within a broader network of supports. International studies also highlight a range of benefits of “second-chance” education:

- second chance/alternative education centres have a positive impact on “learners’ peer relations, academic commitment and school performance”⁶
- the innovative approaches focus on “creating a cycle of success which motivates young people to engage in learning and to continue in education”⁷.
- learner opinion of second-chance education is ‘overwhelmingly positive’ with learners often feeling ‘welcome’, ‘valued’ and ‘proud of their successes’⁸
- second-chance education can build a bridge between a young person’s personal, often difficult, circumstances and their desired future⁹

⁵ ERSI

⁶ Lehr

⁷ Nouwen et al., 2016)

⁸ McCluskey et al., 2015

⁹ McGregor et al., 2015



Life Changing Impact

The life-changing impact of the Youthreach programme is well documented¹⁰ and goes well beyond education, training and employment outcomes.

- For some learners, Youthreach enables them to learn basic skills such as reading and writing - this has a potential knock-on effect on families for generations ahead.
- For others, Youthreach enables them to take responsibility for their education and to chart their next steps forward.
- For more again, Youthreach equips them with certification to access further education, training and employment options.
- Youthreach encourages positive communication between learners and staff; effective communication is an essential life skill and forms the foundation of human relationships.
- Through access to counselling and other supports, Youthreach can help young people to manage complex personal and family situations and can help with issues relating to trauma, depression and anxiety.

The Importance of Soft Skills

Youthreach is designed to build a wide range of soft skills which equip young people to become active citizens, and which provide the building blocks for learners to continue into further education and training or onto part-time or full-time employment. The Youthreach Soft Skills Framework¹¹ emphasises that, by focusing on soft skills, the Youthreach programme places young people's wellbeing at the centre of its approach. It highlights the personal and social skills that form a core part of the programme and are a major part of the work of centres.

Youthreach plays a key role in supporting young people to develop a wide range of soft skills which provide a foundation for their lives;

I think (the primary goal of Youthreach) is to build the learner, to build their problem-solving skills, build their resilience, build their confidence and self-esteem, you know, and then the academic will come. It will come, but if they have all those skills, they'll be doing really well.

(Coordinator)

Empathy	Consideration
Communications	Knowledge
Sense of Identity	Listening
Resilience	Self Regulation
Motivation	Power
Cooperation	Responsibility
Awareness of Others	Sense of Purpose

¹⁰ Impacts mentioned here are taken from the ERSI report

¹¹ ERSI Report 2019

The Voice of Learners

We asked our learners to tell us what they like about the Youthreach programme. Their answers provide a rich vein of information on what is working well and on where we can do better.

We have grouped learners' responses under the following headings. These are

1. Relationship with Staff
2. Friendships
3. Teaching and Learning
4. Learner Support
5. Learner Wellbeing
6. Work Experience
7. Hang-Out and Recreation Facilities
8. Creativity, Activities and Excursions
9. Food

1. Relationships with Staff

The positive relationship between learners and staff is a prominent feature of the Youthreach approach and is one of its key strengths. It is the glue that holds the Youthreach model together. The high ratio of staff to learners lends itself to building relationships based on an ethos of trust and mutual respect, with staff working hard to ensure that the environment is caring, supportive and non-judgmental. The strength of learners' relationships with staff significantly contributes to a positive Youthreach experience for learners. These relationships extend to all roles across the centre - coordinators, teaching staff, advocates, guidance, caretakers, bus drivers, kitchen staff – and are a critical factor in supporting the young people to re-engage with, and remain in, learning.

"The staff are brilliant, some of the kindest, best people I've met so far"

"Expulsion is rare, as is suspension, boundaries are not based on discipline"

"The staff are kind and supportive"

"It's the casualness of staff, there's no people in a higher position than others, everyone's treated the same"

"It's more like they're talking to normal people"

"The staff treat you with respect"

"The laugh you can have with staff"

"It's more like they're talking to normal people"

2. Friendships

Learners thrive on friendships in Youthreach and from the support they receive from their peers. This is one of the main reasons learners enjoy the Youthreach experience. Learners value the Youthreach approach of promoting positive peer relationships and proactively managing tensions or conflict. This is particularly important for those learners who experienced challenging relationships with peers and teachers in mainstream school.

"I like how we're all like a big family"

"I like my classmates"

"I like that they allow piercings, tatoos and hair dye"

*"Sometimes the atmosphere isn't good, it depends on who comes in. One person can f*** up a whole day"*

"I like my friends"

"The overall ambience is friendly and productive"



3. Teaching And Learning

The teaching and learning approach used in Youthreach has been described as a mix of education, training and youth work (DES, 2008a). Learners value the informal and flexible approach, with smaller classes, small group settings, practical activities, a variable pace of learning, a needs-based approach and a relaxed environment. Learners also appreciate the fact that there is no homework, meaning that they can spend their evenings with family and friends, and/or engaged in sport, hobbies or recreation.

"I find it easier to learn"

"We get a lot more stuff done here"

"The staff are unjudgmental / understanding"

"There are no tests except the end of year exams for LCA"

"The staff are friendly, patient, and really work with us as individuals to make things easier"

"I love music here"

"Many of the subjects feel actually helpful for life"

4. Learner Support

A defining feature of the Youthreach model is the significant emphasis on learner support. Staff understand the complex relationship between learning, personal circumstances and life events. In this context, they seek to ensure that young people are actively and holistically supported on their learning journey. Centres strive to provide learners with tailored support in response to their diverse, individual needs, including learning supports, group and one-to-one career guidance, counselling and disability support. Staff also signpost and/or refer learners to external organisations to receive specialised / targeted supports.

"Its more flexible than school"

"I like the routine, we get breaks so I have a chance to destress a bit"

"They understand our needs better because we do individual learning plans with our key worker every 6 weeks"

"I got good finance advice to help me get sorted out"

5. Learner Wellbeing

Mental health and wellbeing are prioritised by Youthreach. The tone and approach of staff is all-important in this regard. All Teaching Staff take time to interact with learners in a respectful, supportive way, ensuring to check-in with them regularly. Staff meet learners “where they are at”, and give them space to discuss issues in a safe and non-judgemental way. In many centres, learners have access to a counsellor or advocate who provides confidential support to help learners to engage in learning, manage life challenges and plan next steps. Two centres have access to an in-house advocate as part of their team, while others access counselling hours through ETB funding arrangements.-

“The teaching staff can always tell when I’m out of sorts”

“I get way more help and understanding here”

“The classes are smaller and there are no uniforms, so you can express yourself in unique ways”

“I prefer to talk to one of the teaching staff about my issues – I don’t want to talk to a random stranger”

“There’s no bullying here”

“I like the positivity here”



6. Work Experience

Work placements form an important part of the Youthreach experience. In some centres, advocates and guidance counsellors play a key role in helping young people to find work placements. In other centres, learners are encouraged to obtain their own placements in order to build skills and confidence. Work experience gives learners a chance to move further outside their comfort zone, to experience the world of work, and to explore options in terms of employment, education or training.



7. Hang Out and Recreation Facilities

Many centres have dedicated indoor hang-out spaces for learners, variously referred to as the “rec room”, “hang-out room” or “leisure room”. These spaces, which are usually furnished with sofas and bright colours, form an important element of Youthreach’s learner-centred ethos. They provide learners with somewhere to chill out and relax, separate from the more formal classroom environment. They are conducive to conversation, relationship-building, and fun, and often have an activity area with board games, pool table and/or a dart board. Many centres also have outdoor spaces, known variously as the shed, the smoking hut, the gazebo. These are often regarded by learners as their zone (or as “our space”). The “separateness” of these spaces is respected by staff and greatly contributes to the sense of trust and mutual respect between learners and staff.

“There are good services for people’s needs – like the smoking hut”

“I like the chill-out room”

“Our own laptops, our own boxes, the chill out room, the smoking area”

“I like the shed, we don’t get bothered there, it’s great to get time-out with no interference from pesky adults!”

8. Creativity, Excursions and Activities

Non-academic activities are a central part of the Youthreach programme. Staff strive to ensure that formal classroom learning is regularly punctuated with informal, fun activities. Creative and sporting activities are built into weekly timetables to facilitate young people to explore their creativity, find artistic expression and enhance their physical and mental wellbeing.

Most centres have an art room, and many have a small gym - both of these are very popular with learners. Outdoor activities can be simple and local, such as going for a walk or cycle during the day, or can be more organized such as kayaking, a trip to the beach or participating in a soccer tournament. These activities and excursions not only give learners “something to look forward to” by breaking the routine of academia, but they also facilitate the development of soft skills, such as communication, cooperation, team-building and self-esteem.

Non-Academic Activities

Badminton	Gym / fitness equipment
Beach walks and swimming	Kayaking
Carboot sale	Lasertag
Cliff jumping	Table Tennis
Darts	Soccer Tournaments
Dodgeball	Surfing
Football	Tennis
Go-carting	Theatres / plays
Greenway walk	Ziplining

“The day trips are great”

“We really need new gym facilities”

“We should go the gym every week, but sometimes we’re too busy finishing our work”

“If we are learning about stuff, the staff brings us to see it – like the graveyard near here”.

“We don’t have a choice of leisure activities; we have to go or sign-out”



9. Food

Food plays an important part in the Youthreach experience. Many learners associate breakfast and lunchtimes with a sense of being cared for and nurtured by staff. It helps to connect learners and staff by facilitating informal, subtle engagement. It also provides nourishment to which aids learner concentration and learning, particularly for those who have chaotic home environments. Learners particularly value where there are efforts to provide varied lunch options, which suit different dietary requirements.

"They provide lunch"

"We're asked what lunch we want"

"The canteen is nice"

"I like that they give us food packages every month"

"We get free coffee"

"I like hot chocolate and the coffee machine"

"There's lovely food and drinks"

SECTION 4

The Essential A to Z of the Youthreach Programme

- ✓ Activities – weekly and monthly
- ✓ Advocates/Mentors/Support Person
- ✓ Bright furniture and walls
- ✓ Counselling Support
- ✓ Comfortable couches
- ✓ Den / hang-out space / rec rooms (indoor)
- ✓ Equality between learners and staff
- ✓ Energy and positive vibe by staff and learners
- ✓ Fun!
- ✓ Food – tasty, varied, plentiful
- ✓ Garden
- ✓ Gym – onsite or ample access to
- ✓ Inviting and welcoming
- ✓ Holistic and integrated learner support



- ✓ Juggling chaotic lives
- ✓ Kitchen – accessible; breakfast club
- ✓ Learning – flexible, learner-centred
- ✓ Mechanisms in place to hear learner voices (i.e. Learner Council)
- ✓ Movement of learners between classrooms
- ✓ No negativity
- ✓ Outdoor hang-out spaces – dry, secure, private
- ✓ Photos and art on walls
- ✓ Quiet space – for learners to get away from it all
- ✓ Referrals and signposting – to external supports and services
- ✓ Respect, responsibility
- ✓ Staff – caring, respectful, engaged, supportive
- ✓ Technology enhanced learning
- ✓ Varied room layouts
- ✓ Wall art and photos
- ✓ Well-kept buildings
- ✓ Welcoming atmosphere
- ✓ The X-Factor: the hard-to-describe tone, approach and value system!
- ✓ Youth-centred
- ✓ Ziplining and other activities!



Summary of Key Themes Emerging from Consultation with Young People

- The relationship between learners and staff is strong, with learners describing staff as being “caring and interested”. Emphasis is placed on building trusting and respectful relationships. Learners like that staff relate to them more as young adults, rather than as children. This environment facilitates the development of meaningful relationships with young people, many of whom have experienced significant challenges in their lives.
- Learners reported that boundaries are clear and fair and not implemented as “harsh discipline”. The phrase “give respect, get respect” was regularly used by young people during focus groups.
- Other learners spoke about finding school difficult due to having additional education needs. Many of these highlighted that Youthreach provides much more additional support compared to school.
- The atmosphere in Youthreach and CTCs is convivial and fun. The Centres are purposely designed to convey a sense of informality, with emphasis placed on creating an informal, casual atmosphere. For example:
 - where possible, Youthreach buildings are bright, open and airy with bright colours and art on the walls
 - many learners commented that, as there are no uniforms, they can express themselves more freely through their clothes and individual style
 - centres have in-house recreation facilities for learners, such as pool tables, dart boards, basketball hoops and board games
 - Many centres have “hang-out / chill-out rooms” with comfortable furniture and relaxed surroundings. These facilitate learners to switch off from the demands of learning and study.
 - Most centres have an outside smoking area which young people regard as their space, where they are not “bothered” by the staff. Staff make every effort to ensure that these spaces are protected from the elements and that learners’ privacy is respected.

- A key success factor is that formal classroom learning is regularly punctuated with informal, fun activities away from the centre. This gives learners “something to look forward to” and breaks the routine of learning and timetables. Activities can be simple and local, such as going for a walk or cycle during the day, or can be more organized such as kayaking, going to the beach, or other day-trips.
- Many centres have a small gym or have access to a nearby gym or sports facility. This was highlighted by many young people as a key attraction for them. Many centres also have an art room or music room, which provide learners with an opportunity to explore their creativity and to immerse themselves in mindful activities, away from learning, books and exam pressures.
- Class sizes are small, which helps to ensure that learners receive more intensive input and support. The low ratio of staff to learners enables more individual attention to be given, and for teaching staff to develop strategies with learners to address identified issues. Where appropriate, learning support is made available to learners with specific needs.
- Mental health and wellbeing are prioritized by the centres. In all cases, learners have access to a counselling service or advocate, which is an essential part of the supports provided to them. It helps learners to manage challenges in their lives and to feel that their voice is heard, their experiences real and their concerns valid
- Learners very much like the fact that there is no homework. As a result, they are free to relax and meet up with friends in the evening without the constant pressure of homework hanging over them.
- Food! Most learners spoke of the importance of food, with many saying it provides a key motivation to attend, particularly on days when they don’t feel like coming in. Mealtimes provide an opportunity to catch up with staff and friends in a relaxed, informal setting, and many connect the food to a sense of being looked after and nurtured by staff. Mealtimes also ensure that young people are well-nourished during the day, which significantly aids concentration and learning in the classroom.



What We Can Improve On

- In some centres, learners reported that they would like more slots in weekly and monthly timetables for activities and excursions. Some centres succeed in embedding regular and interesting activities and day-trips in their timetable, while others struggle with this.
- Some learners would like to be given longer notice of excursions and activities, rather than hearing about it on the day itself. This would enable them to bring in spending money for the trip, arrange lifts and so on.
- Some centres offer a variety of food options during the week, while others have limited or no options. Most learners liked having a variety of food options during the week, and those in the centres with less variety spoke of being “sick of the same thing”. Some also mentioned the need to offer appropriate options to vegetarians, vegans and learners with special dietary requirements.





- Some learners talked about classes numbers being too small, with less than 5 learners. They would prefer larger classes to inject more energy, discussion and fun into their day. Some would also like more subject options, such as science or geography.
- The size and layout of centres greatly influences the learner experiences. Learners in smaller centres talked about the lack of space, the insufficient number of classrooms and an absence of hang-out facilities and recreational areas (indoor and outdoor) .
- A few learners talked about not being allowed to wear certain clothes. Clear guidelines on clothing, consistently and appropriately applied by all staff would help to reduce confusion or upset in this regard.
- A majority of learners highlighted that they do not like the Summer programme. They would prefer to be free to hang-out out with their friends in June / July when other young people have school holidays.
- Some learners felt that the break times are too short. Others would like the day to start a little later and find the early starts difficult.
- When asked “What would bring you in here on a day that you didn’t feel like coming in?”, answers included:
- “if I knew my friends would be in that day”; “if we were doing an activity or my favorite subject”; “if my favorite lunch was on”; “nothing, if I’m feeling down or tired, I don’t want to come for anything, even though I know I will be docked a day”

What Staff Said

While the overall goal of this report is to present the voice of the young people, staff were also asked to give their views on what is working well and where improvements can be made. Staff input was sought on factors that can be readily changed or improved at local level, rather than those that are outside the control of the programme, such as factors relating to national policy or funding. In terms of what is working well, all elements highlighted by learners, and set out in this report, were echoed by staff; relationships, fun, friends, activities, mealtimes, learner support, wellbeing and so on. Staff views in relation to where improvements can be made are summarized as follows:

- Staff highlighted that there is a lack of understanding amongst wider stakeholders of the role and value of Youthreach. Much more needs to be done to promote Youthreach (for example, through social media) to strengthen awareness of the programme's benefits and value, and to counter Youthreach's sometimes poor reputation, which staff feel is underserved.
- Often, parents are not aware that Youthreach exists, and/or they have misconceptions about it. This can act as a barrier to young people attending, as parents may not know that it is an option for their child, or they may be reluctant to send their child to Youthreach due to misconceptions.
- Staff emphasised the importance of properly signposting and supporting young people who are struggling in mainstream education to transition to Youthreach (where appropriate). In the absence of this, some young people "haphazardly discover" Youthreach and have to "figure out themselves" how to access a place on the programme. Staff feel that more needs to be done to build links with schools, particularly with principals, and to put in place better supports and information for young people.
- The importance of supporting staff wellbeing was highlighted regularly. Staff emphasised that many young people who attend Youthreach have chaotic home environments or experience personal, health or family challenges. Staff need to be well supported so they, in turn, are in a position to adequately support these young people. More teambuilding activities are needed to support staff wellbeing and build connections between teams and centres. "The staff need to be taken care of too, to mitigate burnout". "Learners need staff that are 'fresh' and motivated so that they can bounce off their enthusiasm and ambition".
- Anxiety and mental health present ongoing challenges for many young people in Youthreach. Staff emphasised the importance of ensuring that all centres have adequate access to counsellors and advocates to support these vulnerable young people. These roles help to ensure that young people engage and remain in learning and that they are signposted/referred to external services, such as mental health, addiction, money advice or child protection services.. "There is a lack of counselling supports available in-centre that would catch issues while they are small"

- Many staff feel that there is a need to enhance budgets to enable more sport and recreation activities outside the Centres. “The last few years have seen a real squeeze on operational budgets that affect the scope of external activities”.
- Staff commented that there is an increasing focus on the academic side of the programme, which is not benefitting the young people. “We need to be careful that we don’t become too much like school”. There is also an increasing emphasis on administration and paper work which results in less time for one-to-one with learners.
- Staff spoke of the disparity in resources and facilities which leads to inconsistent services and learner experiences across the 10 centres. It was emphasised that centres are doing their best to meet the complex and diverse needs of learners with the resources available to them and within the limitations of their facilities and environments. It was felt that a more consistent approach to resourcing and facilities across all centres in Waterford and Wexford would greatly benefit learners and staff.
- Staff highlighted the problem of learner absenteeism and the ongoing challenge of finding ways to support learners to engage and remain in learning.
- Some learners find the 28-hour week difficult. More flexibility on this might have a positive impact on attendance and retention.
- Staff highlighted that the summer programme and reduced holidays is not very popular with many learners. “In comparison with their peers makes them feel singled out and looked at as being different”



Staff Examples of Good Practice

- Certification day once or twice a year
- Create an achievement wall, shelf or cabinet, and tee-up some wins
- Develop and improve connections and understanding with business owners, on the basis of developing meaningful progress routes for learners
- Many of the staff are timetabled for sport building rapport
- Offer meals
- Profile learners once a month - have a meeting between keyworkers and learners to discuss progress and setting goals. Collaborative approach of all support services to create an overall holistic plan for learners.
- Rules are important but the fewer the better, respect is a big value in our centre. We offer counselling services
- Set up a mini enterprise in the catering side
- Staff take time to engage with learners and in activities with learners i.e. soccer/football/table tennis/darts/walks
- Suggestion box for ideas
- The learners are provided with a laptop each which has great benefits for research and task work
- The use of Teams and Office 365 in our Centre has made all our lives easier and was great for posting work in Covid. Having all your notes and resources up on files is really helpful
- Try to always wish them a good morning and be available for chat in the morning, it all starts from good relationships
- We do BKSB here which is a great tool to see how the learner is progressing in Maths and English
- We hold regular reviews with the learners to offer feedback on their progress. We take brief notes from the discussion and list a few goals or areas to improve on. We find it beneficial for the learner as they can chat to staff about their attendance, subjects, relationships in the centre etc.
- We provide a box of stationary for each learner which is left on their desk - this helps to create less disruptions in class
- We take learners out of the centre once a month for activities
- Weekly Friday look-backs





Conclusion

We undertook this process to understand where we can make improvements locally to enhance young people's experience of the Youthreach Programme in Waterford and Wexford. We listened to our learners, and they told us what they like about Youthreach and the Community Training Centres, and where we can do better. By hearing the learners' perspectives, we are now better placed to work systemically over the next few years to bring about small and not-so-small changes that we hope will make a difference.

Across the ten Youthreach and Community Training Centres, there is a multitude of good practice. We look forward to building on the excellent work delivered at local level by our committed and professional staff and to sharing this good practice between the Centres. The views of our staff are also crucial to understanding where we can do better. While this process focused on our learners, we recognise that there is merit in undertaking further engagement with staff teams in each individual centre to build on the findings of this report.



A Note From the Author

It was a great privilege to undertake this research and to have the opportunity to hear the voices of Youthreach and CTC learners across Waterford and Wexford. We sought to shine a spotlight on these young people, to get their perspective and to hear about their experiences of the youthreach programme.

This report focuses on their voices, and on their suggestions. This is not an evaluation report, and it does not duplicate the approach of the ESRI's 2019 comprehensive evaluation of the Youthreach Programme. Instead, it is a chance to hear directly from the young people themselves. In this way, it provides Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB) with one set of perspectives on how the Youthreach Programme can be strengthened and helps the ETB to meet its obligations under the National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making which emphasizes that young people are "entitled to have a voice in decisions that affect their lives"¹².

SINEAD DOODY

¹² Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2015) National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making, 2015 – 2020. Dublin: Government Publications





YOUTHREACH



Rialtas na hÉireann
Government of Ireland



EUROPEAN UNION
Investing in Your Future
European Social Fund



wwetb
Bord Oideachais agus Oiliúna
Phoirt Láirge agus Loch Garman
Waterford and Wexford
Education and Training Board

Youthreach is co-funded by the Government of Ireland and the European Union