



**wwetb**

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*Waterford and Wexford  
Education and Training Board*



# REVIEW OF THE Bunclody Youth Connections Pilot Programme

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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Objectives

The aim of this assignment was to undertake an independent review of the Bunclody Youth Connections (BYC) pilot programme.

The pilot programme has been in operation for two years (2020-2021 and 2021-2022). The Year 2 participants attended their last module sessions in May 2022 prior to the start of this review, and their work portfolios will be submitted soon to QQI for assessment.

This draft report presents the finding, conclusions and recommendations of the review.

## 1.2 Research methodology

The review involved a review of the documentation on the Bunclody Youth Connections pilot programme and interviews with relevant WWETB staff.

The main documents that I reviewed included the WWETB Strategy Statement 2018-2022, the Review Bunclody Local Education and Training Plan 2018-2021 and the Bunclody Youth Connections Interim Report.

Most of the interviews that I carried out were face-to-face and took place in the Bunclody Further Education and Training Centre. The remaining interviews took place via Teams/Zoom or by telephone.

I would like to thank the WWETB staff members who made themselves available for interviews.

## 2. POLICY CONTEXT

### 2.1 National and local policy for early school leavers

#### 2.1.1 National policy

A range of national policies relevant to young people reference inclusion, lifelong learning, diversity, mental health and wellbeing and the importance of organisations and practitioners working together more cohesively and collaboratively to ensure integrated service provision, early intervention and prevention. The importance of young people being engaged and involved in all aspects of society as active citizens is stressed.

Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (BOBF) guides national policy for children and young people. It recognises the importance of pathways to education, training and employment for young people. The Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) were set up to plan and coordinate services for children and young people on a county basis and their work aligns with the framework set out in BOBF.

The National Youth Strategy 2015-2020 complemented BOBF and had as an objective that 'Young people's core skills, competencies and attributes are enhanced and promoted through accessible, responsive, formal and non-formal education and learning opportunities' (objective 3).

Under Goal 2 (to reduce health inequalities) of the national framework for health and well-being, Healthy Ireland, early school leaving is one of the domains and increasing retention rates of pupils in second-level school is the related key performance indicator.

The Department of Education's Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 continues to emphasise the need to support all students, including those who need extra support, or who are at risk of exclusion or early school leaving.

Under the Education Welfare Act 2000 if a child is absent from school, the parents must inform the school. There is a legal obligation on parents to ensure their children receive an education. Under the Act, Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) is tasked with working with parents, children and schools to support school attendance. It has three elements — the Educational Welfare Service (EWS), the School Completion Programme (SCP) and the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme. The EWS is the statutory arm of TESS and in compliance with the Education (Welfare) Act 2000 it is charged with ensuring that all efforts are made to make sure that children attend school. As a last resort the EWS can issue legal proceedings against parents who fail to ensure their child is in school. The SCP and HSCL programmes are school support services that work with parents and children to support school attendance and retention. SCP and HSCL are only in DEIS schools.

The Tusla Corporate Plan 2021-2023 names alternative education as one of Tusla's response pathways to ensure 'the right response at the right time for the right reasons.' Alternative education is a component of Tusla's preventative strategy combined with interagency collaboration.

The SOLAS strategy document, Future FET: Transforming Learning 2022-2024, highlights that under the strategic pathway, Creating Pathways, FET should support early school leavers by offering them routes back into education and training and potential careers through Youthreach centres and CTCs. While a recent evaluation found clear value from this provision, there is a need to more closely link it to pathways within FET and beyond, and to ensure that it continues to evolve to meet the changing and more complex needs of its learners.

Recent research reveals, however, that there is a dearth of programmes and initiatives aimed at young people who are in danger of disengaging with the school system.

### *2.1.2 Local policy*

Established in 2013, the mission of Waterford and Wexford Education and Training Board is to provide a wide range of education and training programmes, services and supports for children, young people and adults across the Waterford-Wexford region.

WWETB's strategy statement covering 2018-2022 includes under Strategic Goal 1 (to provide high quality education and training programmes for students and learners) an action to develop a model of best practice that links formal education and non-formal education (including School Completion Projects) to ensure a holistic approach when providing for young people, including those at risk of early school leaving (1.4.3).

## **2.2 Bunclody Local Area Plan**

The WWETB FET vision in 2018 was to develop Local Education and Training Plans (LETPs) in line with the SOLAS community-based approach to FET provision. Several geographic areas were identified and each LETP was to be led by a member of the FET Management Team.

Bunclody was chosen as the first pilot area. Research undertaken by Teagasc in 2014 had identified Bunclody as the most economically depressed town in Ireland. The Teagasc report was based on an analysis of 302 towns using information from the 2011 Census of Population, with a particular focus on unemployment and emigration rates.

It is understood that Bunclody has a large Traveller and non-English speaking population.

Preliminary research was undertaken in early 2018 in Bunclody with each FET programme (VTOS, BTEI, PLC, Adult Guidance, Adult Literacy & Language, Youth Services, Community Education, Services to Business, Contracted Training). This was supplemented by CSO data, discussions and analysis in October/November 2018 prepared by Data Analysis Unit in WWETB. Key actions were identified from the data gathered. This preliminary research and key actions were used to inform the Funding Allocation Request submission to SOLAS in December 2018.

SOLAS approved funding for the Bunclody LETP in May 2019. The delivery timeframe for the Bunclody LETP was May 2019 to December 2021, but this was extended due to the COVID-19 Pandemic.

## 3. BUNCLODY YOUTH CONNECTIONS PILOT PROGRAMME

### 3.1 Programme outline

One of the key elements of the Bunclody LETP was Youth Provision for those who have left school early, for which a budget of €75,000 was allocated. Initially, the conversation centred on young members of the Travelling Community, but it soon emerged that early school leaving was also an issue with the settled community.

The focus then turned to developing a pilot programme for young people in school attending 3rd to 5th year with reduced or sporadic attendance who have anxiety, low confidence, and or mental health issues and may be potential early school leavers. The programme would aim for a maximum of eight and a minimum of six participants.

Liz Duffy, Adult Education Officer, Youth Services, developed a draft programme which ultimately became the Bunclody Youth Connections programme.

The programme incorporated the following:

- Schools in the area would be invited to submit candidates, i.e. those with poor attendance records or considered at risk for early school leaving, for inclusion in the programme;
- The candidates put forward by the schools would be interviewed by WWETB staff;
- The delivery of two or three QQI Level 3 accredited modules and the Bronze Gaisce Award;
- The selection of the modules would depend on the participants' interests and needs;
- A number of trips, some of which were to be suggested by the participants, were also to be part of the pilot programme.
- The location for the programme would be the Bunclody Further Education and Training Centre;
- The programme would largely mirror the participants' school timetable and would be delivered two afternoons a week over the academic year;
- A healthy snack would be provided to the participants;
- The outcomes of the programme would be that the participants would be encouraged to remain in full-time attendance at their current school or avail of suitable provision in the FET system, such as Youthreach;
- The programme would be delivered by Community Education with an annual budget of €20,000 to cover tuition and other costs;
- Regular progress reports would be provided to the FET Director while updates would be given to the Bunclody LETP Implementation Group.

It was also envisaged that the pilot programme would be independently reviewed. An interim report was prepared on the experiences and outcomes of Year 1 of the programme.

Several schools were approached including Bunclody Vocational College and FCJ Secondary School in Bunclody to participate in the pilot programme. The enthusiastic response from Bunclody Vocational College to the pilot programme and, to a lesser extent, COVID-19 restrictions meant that all of the YC Year 1 and 2 participants were pupils of the College.

Though the Community Education programme was the sponsor of the pilot programme in Year 1, the Back To Education Initiative was the main sponsor programme for Year 2.



### 3.2 Year 1 (2020-2021)

The first year of the pilot programme commenced in 2020 and concluded in 2021.

As noted above, the WWETB team approached several colleges in the Bunclody to ascertain their interest in identifying suitable candidates for the Youth Connections pilot. Bunclody Vocational College signalled its interest in the programme's aims and indicated that it had identified six students that might be considered for the pilot programme. All were deemed to have attendance issues or were classified as being potential early school leavers. The students were subsequently interviewed by the Adult Educator, and they agreed to take part in the programme.

The participants were all female and were in Fifth year. Two of the participants were Travellers and English was not the first language of two other participants.

The programme was structured that two QQI Level 3 modules would be delivered two afternoons a week over the period September-May. The Personal and Inter-personal Skills module was delivered first and then Personal Effectiveness module followed during the second half of the programme.

The COVID-19 lock-down during January-March 2021 had a detrimental impact on the programme as all centre-based activities were cancelled and the programme moved to remote learning. The Bunclody Youth Connections Adult Educator was in regular contact with the participants by email and telephone. She was also in constant communication with their parents. She delivered learning materials and assignments to the participants' homes.

However, the online learning was not suitable to four of the participants as two had English as their second language and two did not have Internet access.

The Bunclody Youth Connections Adult Educator and the College's Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator were in regular contact throughout the programme. Their workload increased substantially during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Two participants who were members of the Traveller Community dropped out of the programme completely for personal reasons.

One of the highlights of the programme was a trip to the Youthreach centre in Gorey to which the participants were accompanied by the Principal of Bunclody Vocational College. The visit was an eye-opener for both the participants and the Principal. Three of the four remaining participants on the programme are now attending the centre. A minibus brings them to Gorey every day as there are no public transport links between Bunclody and Gorey. The Youthreach centre in Enniscorthy was full so this was not an option.

The fourth participant to graduate from the Bunclody Youth Connections pilot returned to Bunclody College.

All four participants gained certification for the two QQI Level 3 modules and three also were awarded the Bronze Gaisce Award. In respect of the latter, the pilot programme was fortunate in that the Adult Educator has a trained President's Award Leader (PAL), and was thus able to support the Bunclody Youth Connections participants with their Gaisce activities.

Community Education was the sponsor programme for Year 1 of the Bunclody Youth Connections pilot programme.



### 3.3 Year 2 (2021-2022)

The second year of the pilot programme involved five participants. Seven candidates had been nominated by the College and all were interviewed by the Adult Educator. One candidate decided the programme was not for him and a second candidate who had a poor attendance record did not participate in the programme (it is thought that had the programme started earlier — it was delayed due to the lack of tutor availability — she might have joined the programme otherwise).

The second-year cohort included learners who had special education needs and two of them had a Special Needs Assistant. A second Special Needs Assistant also attended the afternoon sessions as another programme participant was in receipt of shared SNA inputs.

The College deemed the participants to have learning needs or require additional supports that if not addressed could potentially lead them to dropping out of school, though it did not have any concerns that they would not return to school after completing the programme.

The second-year group participants were all Fourth Year (Transition Year), students in the College and ranged in ages between 15 and 18. The group included two males and three females.

Through the Bunclody Youth Connections application interview process, it was established that the participants had low levels of self-confidence/self-esteem. They also had limited social and sporting interactions outside of school.

The Year 2 programme included two modules, Personal Effectiveness and Art & Design (both QQI Level 3), that were delivered on a Monday and Thursday afternoon. The modules were delivered by separate tutors, one of whom had experience of teaching young people. It had been envisaged that a single tutor would deliver both modules to allow for an integrated learning approach, but the tutor identified to deliver the programme became unavailable in September.

There were several issues with the clashes between the timing of the Youth Connection modules and classes in the College. Some participants were frustrated that they could not, for example, attend PE or home economics classes in the College because it overlapped with the Bunclody Youth Connections programme afternoons.

Four of the participants will achieve certification for the two QQI level modules (the fifth participant will obtain certification for the Personal Effectiveness module but not for the Art & Design module as they missed a number of the sessions). They will also achieve the Bronze Gaisce Award.

The Bunclody Youth Connections pilot programme sponsors for the most of Year 2 was the Back To Education Initiative; Community Education programme was responsible for the early part of Year 2.

### 3.4 Pilot programme governance and administration

The governance structure for the Bunclody Youth Connections pilot programme comprised a steering group which had responsibility for overseeing, monitoring and reviewing the project. The steering group reported to the FET Director and provided updates to the Bunclody Local Education and Training Plan Implementation Group.

The membership of the Bunclody Youth Connections steering group in the first year comprised:

Liz Duffy	Adult Education Officer, Youth Services
Fran Kennedy	Adult Education Officer, Community Education
Sarah Lavan	Community Education Facilitator
Linda Livingstone	Adult Educator
Margaret Kinsella	Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator, Bunclody Vocational College

The steering group met once a term to review progress.

The steering group structure for the second year was more fluid and had a smaller membership. Regular progress reports were provided to the FET Director.

### 3.5 Formal and informal learning

The Bunclody Youth Connections pilot programme incorporates formal and informal learning approaches to help the participants gain QQI Level 3 certification and develop their self-esteem/confidence. Its ultimate aim is to encourage them to remain in the education system — either by staying in school or participating in Youthreach. The pilot programme comprises many aspects of a youth work approach in that it was participant-centred and provided a more inclusive and expressive approach to learning.

The formal element of the YC pilot programme included the delivery of two QQI Level 3 modules, the selection of which was informed through the interviews with the candidates put forward by the school. As the majority of participants gained Level 3 certification, it means that they now have qualifications that they can show to future employers and to which they can add other QQI qualifications to their portfolio at another time.

Participation in the Bronze Gaisce Awards is another formal and national recognition of YC participants' endeavours/achievements. The Gaisce programme led to several positive outcomes for participants, including closer linkages with their local community.

The pilot programme incorporated informal learning elements, e.g. by allowing the participants to take ownership of planned group activities. The trip organised to the Youthreach Centre in Gorey was instrumental in three of the Year 1 intake deciding to attend the programme there; the Principal of Bunclody Vocational College also participated in the trip and was very impressed with the facilities in Gorey Youthreach.

The provision of healthy snacks during the two weekly afternoon sessions provided a welcome “fun” break for the learners and an opportunity to incorporate healthy foods into their diets.

The small programme numbers provided the platform for close interactions between the adult educator/tutor and participants. This provision of one-to-one support was crucial for developing the participants' self-esteem and communication skills.

The location of the pilot programme in the Further Education and Training Centre was an important factor in that it provided a different learning and adult-oriented environment for YC pilot programme participants. It was also a physical reminder to the participants that they were not in a school.

### 3.6 Budget

The estimated budget for the Youth Connections programme in Bunclody over the two years of the pilot programme is €56,712. One element of the Year 2 budget was the cost of transporting three of the Year 1 participants by minibus to the Youthreach centre in Gorey. As these participants are enrolled on a two-year Youthreach programme, the minibus costs will need to be factored into the budget for the third year of the Bunclody Youth Connections pilot programme.

The table below outlines the four main budget categories over the first two years of the pilot programme in Bunclody:

Cost factor	€
Tuition	24,048
Coordination & support	8,016
Class materials & overheads	9,618
Bus (Bunclody-Gorey Youthreach) Year 2	15,030
Sub Total	56,712
Bus (Bunclody-Gorey Youthreach) Year 3	15,030
<b>Total</b>	<b>71,742</b>

Some elements of year 1 costs were covered by the overall Community Education programme budget.

### 3.7 Outcomes

The majority of the participants who started the Bunclody Youth Connections programme have completed it and have returned to education. Two first year participants who did not continue with the programme did so for personal reasons.

All of the Year 1 participants who completed the pilot programme gained QQI Level 3 certification. Similarly, all Year 2 participants are expected to gain QQI Level 3 accreditation for the two modules they studied.

Most of the Year 1 and Year 2 participants achieved the Bronze Gaisce Award. Participating in this award programme has helped develop their connections with the local community.

All of the four participants who completed the first-year programme remain in the education system (one returned to Bunclody College, and three are now attending Gorey Youthreach. All of the Year 2 participants are anticipated to return to Bunclody College.

The feedback from Bunclody College on the outcomes of the Bunclody Youth Connections pilot programme is very positive, and it is keen to continue its participation. The College also reports that the participants' parents have expressed their satisfaction with the Bunclody Youth Connections programme. It is understood that some of the parents have expressed an interest in participating in WWETB adult programmes.

At an WWETB organisational level, the Youth Connections pilot programme addresses the educational needs of a cohort of young people — those considered at risk of early school leaving — for which research has found there is a shortage of supports. It is understood that WWETB is considering a similar initiative to the Youth Connections pilot programme for children in the 13-15 age group who are considered at risk of disengaging with school. WWETB is also piloting other initiatives for young people, including a project based at the Rag Tree Equine Assisted Learning Centre involving children with mental health issues.

## 4. FINDING AND RECOMMENDATIONS

### 4.1 Findings

The Bunclody Youth Connections pilot project complements national and local policies regarding young people aged 16+ who have a sporadic school attendance record or who are at risk of early school leaving. It is one of the few examples of an initiative aimed at young people who are in danger of dropping out of the education system.

Bunclody Vocational College (BVC) was one of the schools in the area that WWETB approached to identify potential candidates for the pilot programme. The College enthusiastically endorsed the aims of the Bunclody Youth Connections pilot programme and committed to identifying potential candidates for the programme. WWETB was responsible for interviewing and selecting the candidates put forward by the College. BVC was the primary communication channel with the participants' parents/guardians. The College's Home School Community Liaison Coordinator played a crucial role in identifying the participants and in securing their parents' agreement to participate in the pilot. She maintained an active interest in the programme and, in Year 1, was in regular communication with the Adult Educator involved in the BYC programme and was a member of the BYC steering group.

Both Year 1 and Year 2 of the pilot programme involved the delivery of two Level 3 QQI modules and the Bronze Gaisce Award. The participants thus gained certified awards that they can use for future education and training opportunities. The selection of the modules was designed so as to build their self-esteem and communication skills and to engage in an area that appealed to them, such as art/design/furniture up-cycling.

The Bronze Gaisce Award element of the pilot programme was helpful to the participants, particularly in developing connections with their local communities.

Other beneficial elements of the pilot programme included the provision of healthy snacks during the two-afternoon sessions and the organisation of trips.

The first year of the pilot programme was severely impacted by COVID-19 restrictions as in-classroom sessions were not possible.

The outcomes of Year 1 of the pilot programme were that four of the six participants remained in the education system: one returned to full-time education in her school, and three opted for the Youthreach programme. Two participants had dropped out of the programme during the COVID-19 lockdown for personal reasons.

The programme has facilitated the three of the Year 1 participants to attend Gorey Youthreach by providing a daily bus connection as there are no public transport links between Bunclody and Gorey.

The profile of the Year 2 participants put forward by BVC differed slightly in that they presented with a higher level of special education needs and were less at a risk of leaving school early.

The Year 2 outcomes are that all participants have completed the programme and submitted their portfolios for QQI assessment. All of the participants are returning to Bunclody Vocational College.

The feedback from Bunclody Vocational College has been very positive in relation to the outcomes of the YC programme for the participants.

The location of the programme in the Further Education and Training Centre in Bunclody was helpful for several reasons. It provided a different environment for the participants from their normal school existence. It was also a "safe" space where they could develop their self-confidence and self-esteem. The participants (and their parents) gained exposure to the range of WWETB programmes they could consider at a later date.

Year 1 of the Youth Connections pilot programme in Bunclody was sponsored by Community Education,

while the Back to Education Initiative was the main sponsor programme for Year 2. A steering group was established to oversee the running of the pilot, and in Year 1 included the Adult Education Officers for Community Education and Youth Services, a Community Education Facilitator, an Adult Educator and the Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator in Bunclody Vocational College.

The budget for the Youth Connections pilot programme for the two years under review amounted to just under €57,000, of which a large element was the cost of the minibus to bring the three Year 1 participants to the Youthreach centre in Gorey. As these participants are enrolled on a two-year programme, the minibus cost will need to be factored into a third year.

The programme has strengthened links between Bunclody Vocational College, Bunclody Further Education and Training Centre and Gorey Youthreach. It also represents an integrated WWETB approach to developing and delivering a programme aimed at a cohort of young people who were in danger of leaving the education system early. In addition, the Bunclody Youth Connections programme has forged enhanced cooperation between several WWETB funding programmes such as Community Education, BTEI and Youth.

Bunclody Vocational College has augmented its suite of Leaving Certificate programmes by its decision to introduce the Leaving Certificate Applied programme in September 2022. The new option will present the participants exiting the YC programme with a wider choice of programmes.

## 4.2 Conclusions

The Youth Connections pilot programme in Bunclody has led to positive outcomes for the majority of participants in Years 1 and 2, primarily in persuading those deemed at risk of early school leaving to remain in the education system on completion of the programme — either by returning to school or enrolling on the Youthreach programme.

Most Youth Connections participants have or are expected to gain certification in two QQI Level 3 modules which they can add to their portfolio of Junior and Leaving Certificate results. Additionally, the majority of participants also achieved the Bronze Gaisce Award. Perhaps more importantly, the participants benefitted from the one-to-one supports the Youth Connections Adult Educator and subject tutors provided. The feedback from Bunclody Vocational College has been very positive, and it is understood that the parents of the participants also believe the outcomes have been beneficial for their children.

Close communications between Bunclody Youth Connections and Bunclody Vocational College were critical to the smooth running of the programme. In both years of the programme, there was ongoing communications and collaboration between the Bunclody Youth Connections Co-ordinator and the College's Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator in Year 1 and the Deputy Principal in Year 2. Having a dedicated contact person in the school who can identify suitable candidates for the Youth Connections programme and has good links with their parents/guardians is essential for the programme's success.

It is critical that schools are fully briefed on the aims of the Youth Connections programme and that they are encouraged to identify students who have poor attendance records or who are considered at risk of leaving school early. The Year 1 participants fell into this category, though this may not always have been the case with the Year 2 participants.

The importance of early identification by candidates for the Youth Connections programme cannot be over-emphasised. This facilitates the selection of participants for the programme but, more importantly, the identification of their needs/wants in terms of module selection. This greatly aids the identification and selection of subject tutors, preferably those with experience in teaching young people, for the following academic year.

The Gaisce Award adds value to the Bunclody Youth Connections programme. Gaisce activities encourage

the participants to link with their communities and also incorporate a fun element. It also helps the participants to engage in physical and sporting activities.

The provision of a healthy snack for the Bunclody Youth Connections participants was useful in terms of enabling a break in their afternoon schedule and introducing to them to the benefits of healthy eating.

Organising trips for the Bunclody Youth Connections participants was helpful and indirectly led to three Year 1 participants joining the Youthreach programme in Gorey.

It was also helpful that the Bunclody Youth Connections programme coincided with the school year and that the two afternoon sessions were within the normal school finishing time. The Year 1 provision meant that one of the Youth Connections afternoon sessions was a Wednesday which was a school half-day.

The location of the Bunclody Youth Connections programme in a separate location (Bunclody Further Education and Training Centre) to their school helped the participants to delineate the programme from their school activities. It also set the programme in an adult environment where the participants could interact with adults and other FET courses.

The participants (and their families) have developed a better understanding of the courses and supports open to them within the Further Education and Training system. The Bunclody Youth Connections programme has also increased the awareness of FET supports within Bunclody Vocational College.

## **4.3 Recommendations**

### *Youth Connections programme*

The pilot programme has achieved its objectives and, subject to the availability of resources, should be continued as a pilot for a third year.

WWETB should consider mainstreaming the Youth Connections programme to other locations in Waterford and Wexford, particularly those within the vicinity of a Youthreach centre. This proximity to a centre will remove the need to fund the provision of a minibus for young people exiting the Youth Connections programme to bring them to a Youthreach centre if one does not exist in their town. This was and is the case with three of the Year 1 programme participants: a minibus brings them from Bunclody to the Gorey Youthreach centre. The Youth Connections pilot programme is meeting the minibus cost.

### *Target groups*

The target group for the Youth Connections programme should be young people in the 16+ age group who are sporadic school attenders or in danger of dropping out of the education system.

Ideally, the participants should be drawn from Fifth Year students who have a variable school attendance record or are in danger of leaving school.

It is recommended that the number of participants in any future Youth Connections project is kept at a minimum number, e.g. six to eight, to take account of their development needs and to maximise the provision of one-to-one supports.

It is also imperative that the schools and other stakeholders (such as HSE and Tusla) approached in connection with the Youth Connection programme are fully briefed on its aims and objectives. It should not be perceived as an option for schools for pupils who are struggling academically; the programme should focus primarily on young people at risk of disengaging from the education system.



## *Programme structure and delivery*

The delivery of QQI Level 3 modules and the Bronze Gaisce Award should be integral elements of the Youth Connections programme for Year 3 and beyond.

Where possible, the selection and recruitment of Youth Connections programme participants should take place during April or May to facilitate the recruitment of tutors to start in September. Any special needs the selected candidates may present with, e.g. poor literacy skills or English not being their first language, should be identified at the interview stage. This early identification will facilitate other supports, outside of the Youth Connections programme, to be put in place.

While the primary focus should be on selecting young people at risk of leaving school early, the selection process should be careful to avoid the risk of the programme being solely associated with this cohort and hence its possible stigmatisation within the general student population.

The participants selected for the Youth Connections programme should be encouraged to visit the Centre before the commencement date. For the proposed second iteration of the pilot, it is recommended that the recruitment and selection of the participants should take place during September-December 2022, with a truncated Youth Connections programme being delivered during the Easter and Summer terms in 2023.

It is also advisable that the selection of modules should allow for cross-over possibilities. Careful consideration should be given to the timing and delivery of the modules. There may be an argument to deliver one module in its entirety during the first part of the year and then allow the participants to use the learnings and activities from the first module to lighten their workload for the second module. It is also vital that “fun” activities be incorporated into the delivery of the modules to avoid the programme having an overly academic focus. For some participants, e.g. those with low self-esteem/confidence, a shorter Youth Connections programme might be more beneficial.

The Gaisce Award should continue to be part of the Youth Connections programme as it assists the participants develop their self-confidence and it can promote a healthy lifestyle. It also helps them to forge connections with their community.

The provision of healthy snacks during the afternoon sessions was important for breaking down barriers and encouraging both socialisation and demonstrating the benefits of healthy eating and should be retained. On a minor point, consideration should be given to easing the procurement administrative burden on Youth Connections staff, given the small expenditures involved in buying snacks for the programme.

An important feature of the programme should be on encouraging the participants to develop their self-confidence and self-esteem and taking them out of their normal comfort zones by exposing them to new activities or ways of doing/thinking about things. In addition, the Youth Connections programme should also focus on developing the participants' communication and teamworking skills.

The programme should dovetail with the school timetable and should not be offered on school half-days. The Youth Connections programme steering group should work with the participating schools to mitigate significant timetabling clashes.

It is recommended that the Youth Connections programme should continue to be delivered in non-school locations such as the Bunclody Further Education and Training Centre. This location endorses the notion that the Youth Connections is not a school programme. It also creates a link between the participants and the adult FET system.

Guidance should be provided to Youth Connections programme tutors on the group's needs and should highlight the importance of getting to know the participants and building in time within the schedule so that they can play games or have downtime. The tutors ideally should be trained in or have knowledge of youth



work; it may be preferable to use tutors who have experience with Youthreach. A case could be made for having one tutor deliver the modules.

If participants have a Special Needs Assistant, Youth Connections subject tutors should leverage their knowledge and insights to maximise the participants' learning experiences. It is also important that the SNAs are briefed on the programme's approach to participants, i.e. that the learning environment is not an extension of their normal school education.

### *Project management and governance*

The programme steering group should comprise the AEOs for BTEI and Adult/Community Education and the relevant Adult Educators (the AEO for Youth should also be a member for continuity reasons). The group should meet once a term to review progress reports submitted by the facilitators/tutors.

The programme steering group should collect data on the outcomes and pathways followed by the participants on completion of the programme. It is advisable that further follow-up should take place with the participants on their journey after the programme, e.g. at a 12-month interval, to maximise programme learning and to facilitate adjustments to future provision.

Close communications should be maintained between the schools and the Youth Connections programme, particularly about timetabling issues. It may be advisable in the short term to focus on schools having a Home School Community Liaison Co-ordinator. They would have good knowledge of the student population and good communication linkages with their parents/guardians. Communications with parents/guardians should primarily be the school's responsibility. The provision of any counselling inputs identified for the participants should also be part of the school's remit.

The objective of the Youth Connections programme should be communicated to participants (and their parents/guardians) and repeated at intervals during the programme.

In the context of future Youth Connections programmes in Bunclody, the BYC programme should develop linkages with the Bunclody Adventure Hub, which could add a physical/fun element to the programme and attract the interest of both male and female candidates to the programme.

Consideration should be given to holding a Youth Connections graduation event —something that had not been possible in Year 1 due to COVID-19 restrictions — for the participants to formally receive their QQI and Gaisce certificates. Their parents/guardians should also be invited to the event.



**wwetb**

Bord Oideachais agus Oiliúna  
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