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EVALUATION OF THE NATIONAL YOUTHREACH PROGRAMME

EMER SMYTH, JOANNE BANKS, JESSICA O'SULLIVAN, SELINA MCCOY, PAUL REDMOND AND SEAMUS MCGUINNESS

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Emer Smyth, Joanne Banks, Jessica O'Sullivan,
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THE AUTHORS

Emer Smyth is a Research Professor at the ESRI and an Adjunct Professor at Trinity College Dublin. Joanne Banks is a Research Officer at the ESRI and an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Trinity College Dublin. Jessica O'Sullivan was a Research Assistant at the ESRI. Selina McCoy is an Associate Research Professor at the ESRI and an Adjunct Professor at Trinity College Dublin. Paul Redmond is a Research Officer at the ESRI and an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Trinity College Dublin. Seamus McGuinness is a Research Professor at the ESRI and an Adjunct Professor at Trinity College Dublin.

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ABBREVIATIONS

ACEs	Adverse Childhood Experiences
ADHD	Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder
AEO	Adult Education Officer
BTEI	Back to Education Initiative
CAMHS	Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CPD	Continuous Professional Development
CTC	Community Training Centres
DCYA	Department of Children and Youth Affairs
DDLETB	Dublin and Dún Laoghaire Education and Training Board
DEASP	Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection
DEIS	Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools
DES	Department of Education and Skills
DPER	Department of Public Expenditure and Reform
DSP	Department of Social Protection
EPMH	Emotional, Psychological and Mental Health Difficulties
EPSEN	Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act
ESL	Early School Leaving
ETBs	Education and Training Boards
EWO	Education Welfare Officer
FARR	Funding Allocations Requests and Reporting System
FÁS	An Foras Áiseanna Saothair
FE	Further Education
FET	Further Education and Training
FETAC	Further Education and Training Awards Council
HR	Human Resources
HSCL	Home School Community Liaison
HSE	Health Service Executive
IACTO	Irish Association of Community Training Organisations
IAP	Individual Action Plans
ICT	Information Communication and Technologies

JC	Junior Certificate
JLO	Juvenile Liaison Officer
LCA	Leaving Certificate Applied
LCE	Leaving Certificate Established
MAGIC	Mentoring, Advocacy, Guidance, Information and Counselling
NALA	National Adult Literacy Agency
NAYC	National Association of Youthreach Co-ordinators
NEPS	National Educational Psychological Service
NESC	National Economic and Social Council
NESF	National Economic and Social Forum
NESSE	Network of Experts in Social Sciences of Education and Training
PLC	Post Leaving Certificate
PLSS	Programme and Learner Support System
QNHS	Quarterly National Household Survey
QQI	Quality and Qualifications Ireland
SCP	School Completion Programme
SEC	State Examinations Commission
SEN/I	Special Educational Needs Initiative
SICAP	Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme
SLS	School Leavers' Survey
SNA	Special Needs Assistant
SOLAS	An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh Agus Scileanna (Further Education and Training Authority)
TUI	Teachers' Union of Ireland
TUSLA	Child and Family Agency
VECs	Vocational Education Committees
VTOS	Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme
YR	Youthreach

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a comprehensive evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme. Commissioned by SOLAS, the study is part of an agreed schedule of independent evaluations of key Further Education and Training (FET) provision under the Department of Education and Skills-led FET Strategy 2014-2019 Implementation Plan. Established in 1989, the Youthreach programme continues to be the government's primary response to early school leaving by providing second-chance education for young people who leave mainstream second-level school before Leaving Certificate level. Youthreach is provided in 112 Youthreach centres and 35 Community Training Centres (CTCs) nationally, with 11,104 learners taking part in the programme in 2017 and with a total cost of €98.7 million (SOLAS, 2018).

Reflecting the multiple challenges (including socio-economic disadvantage and special educational needs) faced by many Youthreach learners and the necessity to capture a broader range of outcomes in assessing programme effectiveness, this study adopts a mixed methods approach combining survey data on centres as well as in-depth interviews with staff and learners. This report therefore draws on a range of data sources, including a survey of senior managers at Education and Training Board (ETB) level, a survey of Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers, in-depth qualitative data collected as part of case studies in ten centres and two consultative workshops with key national stakeholders in the areas of education and social inclusion. The case studies are a significant feature of the report in that they utilise the multiple perspectives of learners, staff and co-ordinators/managers. The report emphasises the voice of young people who have disengaged from school by capturing their views about the Youthreach programme. Using this broad range of data, this report examines all aspects of Youthreach provision including: the profile of learners; referral to the programme; governance and reporting structures; programme funding; curriculum and approaches to teaching and learning; and the learner experience and outcomes.

PROGRAMME AIMS (CHAPTER 3)

The official aim of the National Youthreach Programme is:

> *to provide early school leavers (16-20 years) with the knowledge, skills and confidence required to participate fully in society and progress to further education, training and employment (DES, 2015).*

It has been characterised as mainly focused on progression to education/training and as playing an important role in social inclusion (DPER, 2017; DES, 2015). The

study findings show that senior management and co-ordinators/managers see the programme as having multiple aims within this overall goal. It is widely regarded as being significant in re-engaging young people with education and providing learners with a positive learning experience, often for the first time. The emphasis on personal and social skills is seen as key to the work of Youthreach staff and these elements operate alongside learners gaining qualifications. Central to the aim of the programme is preparing learners for progression to further education, training and employment, although there is some variation between Youthreach centres and CTCs in their relative emphasis on general education or the development of vocational skills. Current metrics for reporting on the programme are seen as reflecting the aim of progression to education, training and employment but co-ordinators/managers as well as stakeholders expressed frustration at not being able to capture the value of the programme in enhancing the personal and social skills (such as communication and organisational skills) of young people using available metrics.

LEARNER PROFILE (CHAPTER 4)

There has been a notable decline in early school leaving in Ireland over the last decade, resulting in the early leaver group becoming more marginalised and presenting with greater levels of need. The findings show that among early leavers, there is an over-representation of young people from jobless households and from a Traveller background compared to the general population. There has been an increase in the prevalence of mental health difficulties among this group, with many young people entering the Youthreach programme having experienced trauma (adverse childhood experiences), and often substance abuse issues (themselves or a family member), and involvement in anti-social behaviour or crime. The increasing complexity of needs among learners has significant implications for staff working in Youthreach centres and CTCs in terms of their capacity and the adequacy of resourcing.

The report finds that informal networks are commonly used to access information about Youthreach prior to entry. This may mean that some groups of learners, particularly those with a migrant background, may not have access to these networks and are therefore unaware of the programme. Furthermore, the interviews with learners highlight the part played by negative school experiences, negative relations with teachers, learning difficulties and mental health difficulties in leading young people to enrol on the programme.

YOUTHREACH GOVERNANCE, FUNDING AND RESOURCES (CHAPTER 5)

The Youthreach programme is offered in two settings: Youthreach centres and Community Training Centres (CTCs), which have distinct governance and funding structures. CTCs offer education and training to young people aged 16 to 21 years

of age. They were set up by local community organisations and have their own board of management comprised of volunteers from the local community. Although CTC staff are employees of the centres, CTCs are funded by ETBs based on an annual submission and must report to their local ETB. Learners over 18 years of age entering CTCs must undergo a Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) means test before they can qualify and receive their training allowance.

Youthreach centres are designated as 'centres of education' under the Education Act, 1998. They are managed and administered by ETBs. Line managers for Youthreach centres can be FET Directors or Adult Education Officers. Centres receive an annual allocation of funding from their ETB depending on the number of learners. However, centres who are part of the Special Educational Needs Initiative (SENI) receive additional funding. Staff are employees of the ETBs and the report highlights issues around staff working in the same centres with different contracts. The findings also show that this is impacting on the ability of many centres to recruit and retain staff. In contrast to CTCs, learners are not means-tested in order to receive their training allowance but the amount paid varies by age.

The report highlights positive aspects of the existing governance structures such as the level of flexibility in individual centres to respond to learner needs. The findings highlight a transparency in the Youthreach operational guidelines and sufficient levels of accountability. There are, however, a number of issues arising such as variation in how ETBs approach the delivery of the Youthreach programme, with differences between ETBs in the funding of the programme overall and for specific centre activities. This reflects the autonomy of each ETB to allocate their block funding grant across the range of FET provision. There is also variation in the type of course that centres are allowed to offer to learners and in the quality of premises. The findings highlight differences in the level of contact between centres and their ETB and among centres within the same ETB.

The report highlights the role of co-ordinator/manager as central to the overall running of centres in both settings, working with Youthreach learners and liaising with outside agencies for support. Centres differ, however, in the extent to which staff collaborate and provide support to one another. In light of the growing complexity of need among learners and the implications of this for staff self-care, the findings show variation in the level of staff support, with some centres having structured supervision or daily or twice daily debriefings and others having no such supports.

TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT IN YOUTHREACH (CHAPTER 6)

QQI Levels 3 and 4 courses are the most common forms of provision, although some centres offer Level 2 courses and the Leaving Certificate Applied programme. A small number of centres offer the Junior and Leaving Certificate (LCE) programmes. In general, the types of courses provided are decided at centre level, although some senior managers at ETB level appear to influence course provision (particularly around LCA provision). Provision is largely driven by learner needs, with centres providing courses at QQI Level 2 where there are larger numbers without Junior Certificate qualifications or where there is a higher prevalence of mental health difficulties among learners. In addition to QQI and SEC accreditations, most centres offer other courses and activities designed to suit learner needs. These can include courses in health and fitness, wellbeing or specific skills such as the driver theory test or SafePass.

Centres are found to use a variety of teaching methods rather than the more didactic approaches characteristic of mainstream second-level classrooms. The teaching methods used in the programme partly reflect the types of qualifications offered, with greater use of whole-class teaching in centres providing SEC-accredited courses. The findings indicate that centres that are part of the SENI model provide learning support to a greater proportion of their learners. The learners interviewed stressed the importance of small class sizes and the more individualised support as central to their re-engagement in learning. They particularly noted the importance of being able to work at their own pace and complete assignments on a modular basis. For most learners, positive learning experiences in Youthreach stemmed from the relationships with staff which were built on trust. The learners interviewed contrasted the level of support and care they received in Youthreach with the negative relations they had with their teachers in mainstream education.

SUPPORTS FOR LEARNERS IN YOUTHREACH (CHAPTER 7)

Reflecting the increasing prevalence of mental health difficulties, personal counselling is one of the key supports provided to Youthreach learners. In some centres, counselling is scheduled each week for learners whereas in others, learners attend when the service is required. Co-ordinators/managers highlight the importance of adequate counselling services and the difficulty in securing referrals to external psychological services. Centres that were part of SENI were more likely to be in contact with external agencies and supports.

Guidance counselling is another important support mechanism offered in both Youthreach settings. Guidance generally involves CV preparation for learners, one-to-one meetings and the organisation of work placement for learners. The report shows that guidance is often provided by a guidance advocate who can also help

with the progression of learners from the centre to further education, training or employment. Most centres use local contacts in order to place learners in work experience, although this is considered 'fairly difficult' in the majority of centres. The findings raise issues around the lack of supports in the transition out of Youthreach into further education, training or employment. Some of those interviewed suggested having a wider use of 'taster' Level 5 courses to provide learners with a bridge between the two settings.

OUTCOMES FOR YOUTHREACH LEARNERS (CHAPTER 8)

The study examined a range of outcomes among Youthreach learners, including attendance, programme completion, accreditation, progression and personal-social development. The findings highlight some issues around attendance for Youthreach learners, with over half reported to have missed a day or more over the past month. Co-ordinators/managers also described how attendance becomes more of an issue during the summer holidays when mainstream schools are closed. SENI centres have higher attendance rates compared to non-SENI centres. Staff in Youthreach centres and CTCs appeared to contextualise non-attendance among learners in light of often difficult home circumstances and the mental health difficulties of learners.

Administrative data from the SOLAS FARR system show non-completion rates of 14 per cent of learners in the Youthreach programme in 2017. The survey data collected as part of the research show a higher level of non-completion, at 31 per cent of learners, which appears to reflect the way in which co-ordinators/ managers view Youthreach as a two-year programme, involving progression from one qualification level to another. Some young people were found to leave the programme for positive reasons such as finding employment or entering another education or training course. Focusing on the rate of accreditation, the report shows that in 2017 an estimated 60-61 per cent of learners who completed the programme received a full award. Taking account of all who took part in the programme (including those who did not complete it), 34-40 per cent of learners received a full award.

A key aspect of this report is to better understand the outcomes of Youthreach learners when they leave the programme. Looking at both completers and non-completers together, 38 per cent progress to education/training and 27 per cent obtain employment. Among those completing the programme, 45 per cent progress to further education or training and a similar proportion directly enter the labour market. One-in-six completers are unemployed on leaving the programme, a figure that compares favourably to the rate of unemployment among early school leavers in the population. Outcomes vary between Youthreach centres and CTCs, with those in CTCs more likely to be in employment and less likely to enter further

education compared to leavers from Youthreach centres. The report shows that where centres have higher rates of full awards, leavers are more likely to enter further education and training.

In addition to quantitative outcomes, the report shows the impact of the Youthreach programme on qualitative outcomes among leavers. These include learner appreciation and engagement with education, improved personal and social skills, increased self-esteem, and developing a sense of belonging and an overall purpose in life. Co-ordinators/managers were critical, however, of their inability to record these soft skills outcomes using the current metrics employed by SOLAS.

COSTS AND VALUE FOR MONEY

The unit cost for Youthreach provision across both settings is relatively high in the context of the FET sector as a whole, reflecting small group sizes and more intensive supports for young people. Within FET, the unit costs for Youthreach are exceeded only by those for specialist training programmes and are somewhat, but not markedly, higher than for the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). However, they compare favourably to the costs for similar intensive support programmes for vulnerable young people, such as Youth Encounter Projects.

The costs involved in the provision of the Youthreach programme must be balanced against the personal and societal costs of early school leaving. Early school leavers are more likely to be unemployed and to spend longer in unemployment; they are more likely to be lone parents; have poorer physical and mental health; and are more likely to be involved in crime. These outcomes involve significant costs for individuals in the form of higher levels of poverty and deprivation and poorer wellbeing. They involve very significant societal costs in terms of welfare expenditure, income tax foregone, health expenditure and the costs of prisons. Early leaving among the current generation also has consequences for generations to come, with poorer educational, socio-emotional and physical outcomes found among the children of mothers with lower levels of education. In sum, the relatively high unit costs of Youthreach programme provision must be set against the very high costs for individuals and for society as a whole of early school leaving, indicating that investment in second-chance education for vulnerable young people represents value for money for the State.

STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF THE PROGRAMME

The study findings indicate that the 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.

The study findings point to significant geographical variability in the location of centres, so that whether a young person can access the programme can depend on the area in which they live. The findings also highlight variation across ETB areas in how the programme is resourced, the quality of physical facilities, and in the type of courses offered, leading to some inconsistency in programme experience across areas. There is inconsistency too between Youthreach and Community Training Centres in their governance and funding structures and, among Youthreach Centres, between those with SENI funding and other centres. The findings point to the key role of relationships with staff in re-engaging young people with learning. However, contracts for some staff have led to recruitment and retention difficulties with implications for staff morale and continuity of support for learners. In addition, coping with the needs of young people, especially in terms of psychological and mental health, is seen to require CPD and additional supports for staff.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

The findings of this evaluation of the Youthreach programme have clear implications for policy and practice and provide an important evidence base for SOLAS and DES in relation to the future development and enhancement of the Youthreach programme. Overall, the study points to the significant value of the Youthreach programme in re-engaging a vulnerable group of young people with learning, providing courses and approaches tailored to their needs, and embedding education/training provision within a broader network of supports. The rest of this section, however, highlights a number of areas where Youthreach provision could be further enhanced.

The number and location of places

The significant fall in rates of early school leaving has not been directly matched by a reduction in places on the Youthreach programme, though there has been a fall-off in learner numbers in Youthreach centres since 2015. This pattern reflects the fact that early leavers are now more marginalised than previously and are more likely to require intensive supports to progress to employment or other forms of education/ training. The study findings suggest that the programme will continue to play a crucial role in supporting this vulnerable group of young people. Given that participation in the Youthreach programme has been declining in recent years, while also noting that current Youthreach learners are often the most marginalised

of their peers, SOLAS and the Department of Education and Skills should give further consideration to the most optimal use of available resources for the programme.

Like other forms of FET, the location of Youthreach and Community Training Centres is geographically variable and largely reflects legacy issues rather than current need. The recent decline in participation coupled with geographical variation in provision indicates the need for SOLAS and DES to engage in an ongoing review of the allocation of programme places at national and local level, taking account of the numbers of early school leavers and the availability of existing places. Consolidation may be feasible in some local areas but should be balanced against the poorer learner outcomes found in larger centres and the reluctance of some vulnerable young people to attend provision outside their immediate area.

Governance

The study findings highlight differences in governance structures between Youthreach centres and CTCs and differences in funding levels and the nature of provision between Youthreach and CTCs, SENI and non-SENI centres and across ETBs. In addition, while there is a good deal of contact between Youthreach centres in many areas, there is relatively little contact between Youthreach and CTCs. The study findings suggest greater scope for ETBs to play a role in encouraging the sharing of good practice across the two settings. Examples could include the provision of courses to promote personal development found in many Youthreach centres and the experience of CTCs in fostering strong links with local employers. While flexibility at local level is a crucial feature of the programme, there is a role for SOLAS in ensuring greater consistency of funding and practice across Youthreach provision nationally. While acknowledging that there are differences between Youthreach centres and CTCs in relation to funding, staffing and registration structures, it is important that the differences in the relative emphasis on general and vocational education across the two settings continues to be respected. The expansion of the DES Inspectorate role to cover all settings providing the Youthreach programme could further enhance the provision of high quality teaching and the sharing of good practice. In terms of staffing, many centres reported difficulties in the recruitment and retention of staff, with an impact on operational arrangements (particularly during the summer months). The findings also point to the need for the extension of the provision of CPD for staff in the area of dealing with mental health issues and challenging behaviour among learners. This could be facilitated by individual ETBs and supported by SOLAS.

Special Educational Needs Initiative (SENI)

The findings of the report suggest the need for SENI funding to be rolled out across all Youthreach settings to address the increased prevalence of EPMH and learning

difficulties among the learner population. Any variation in the level of needs of learners across centres should guide the level of funding received, with additional funding allocated to centres with high levels of learners with additional learning or psychological needs.

Tracking early school leavers

Given that the primary referral route to the Youthreach programme is through word of mouth, the report highlights potential difficulties around some young people, particularly those with migrant backgrounds, who may not have access to these networks. The findings highlight the extent to which young people are leaving school and often spending time out of school without any follow-up by the school or other agencies. The research suggests that the development and installation of a tracking system, linked to the Post-Primary Pupil Database, should be considered. This would follow young people as they leave school to ensure they are offered a place on a Youthreach or similar programme. Once within the FET system, learners could be tracked using the SOLAS Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) to better capture information on Youthreach leavers' progression across course and qualification levels.

Guidance for Youthreach learners

The guidance provided is variable across centres, which suggests the need to consider more focused progression planning for learners, increased one-to-one contact with staff to discuss future plans and the introduction of bridging courses to support future transitions to further education and training or employment. In addition, ensuring continuity of supports to learners over the transition, particularly in the area of mental health, is a key enabler of better learner outcomes. ETBs have an important role to play in ensuring a smooth transition from one course or provider to another and in facilitating a continuity of support for more vulnerable learners.

Mechanism to capture soft skills development

Given the complexity of need among Youthreach learners and the impact of Youthreach on the broad social and emotional development of young people, it is essential that learner progress in these more subtle areas of development is captured. The introduction of a soft skills measurement tool, which could be used in Youthreach and Community Training Centres, would better capture learner outcomes and offer an important complement to the other data on completion, progression and accreditation used to inform national and local planning and decision-making.

Lessons for the mainstream education system

Although the report has sought to understand the provision of the Youthreach programme and its overall effectiveness, the data collected provide rich insights into the experiences of mainstream school for young people who leave school early. In particular, it is evident that negative experiences of mainstream education have been a distinct issue for learners who are now engaged with Youthreach. The report suggests that the approach to working with young people with learning, behavioural and/or emotional needs in Youthreach settings could be used to inform practices of inclusion and respect in mainstream education.

CHAPTER 1

Introduction

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

The Youthreach programme was introduced in 1989 to address the then high levels of early school leaving, by providing young people with access to second-chance education and training. Although there has been a marked decline in the number of early school leavers in recent years, there remains a strong policy emphasis on educational disadvantage and the programme continues to be the Government's principal response to early school leaving. The programme is delivered through Youthreach centres and Community Training Centres. The two types of provision are now managed by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) which are grant-aided by SOLAS under the overall direction of the Department of Education and Skills, although there are different governance, funding and oversight arrangements in place for the two settings (SOLAS, 2017). In 2017, 11,104 young people took part in the programme, with a total cost of €98.7 million for programme provision across both settings (SOLAS, 2018).

Previous research on the Youthreach programme has focussed on Youthreach staff (CHL, 2006); teaching, learning and planning in the programme (DES, 2010); the profile of Youthreach learners in one centre (NEPS, 2017); and outcomes among Youthreach participants (NEPS, 2016). However, although Youthreach is almost 30 years old, there has been no systematic evaluation of the programme which draws on the perspectives of all of the stakeholders and which covers both Youthreach and Community Training Centres. In the period since the programme's inception, there have been significant changes in the number and profile of early leavers, in the governance structures for the programme and in the kinds of qualifications offered, making an in-depth evaluation of the programme all the more relevant.

This study, commissioned by SOLAS, is part of an agreed schedule of independent evaluations of key FET provision under the DES-led Strategy 2014-2019 implementation plan. The study provides a comprehensive evaluation of the Youthreach programme covering both Youthreach and Community Training Centres and all aspects of provision, including referral pathways, learner profile, governance and reporting structures, funding and resources, curriculum, teaching and learning, and learner experiences and outcomes. Programme evaluations often involve the establishment of a 'counterfactual' by comparing the participant group with a similar group who did not take part in the programme, in terms of an outcome such as unemployment. The profile of young people taking part in Youthreach makes it very difficult to assess the impact of the programme in the

usual way as a group of young people with equivalent challenges cannot be identified in the general population. For this reason, the study is mixed methods in design, drawing on information from a survey of senior managers at ETB level, a survey of centre co-ordinators and managers, and in-depth case-studies of ten centres which involved interviews with staff, co-ordinators/managers, and current and former learners. Interviews with a very large number of young people yield new insights into their pathways into the programme, their experiences of Youthreach and the impact they feel it has had on them. In addition, the study involved engagement with approximately 140 stakeholders (including co-ordinators and managers) to explore issues about the future development of the programme.

1.2 METHODOLOGY

The methodology used in the study was chosen to reflect the nature of the group of young people participating in the Youthreach programme. A previous evaluation of the Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programme (McGuinness et al., 2018) had relied on a survey of PLC and Leaving Certificate leavers three years after leaving education. Achieving a high response rate, even among a group more advantaged in social and educational terms than Youthreach participants, was challenging. Similarly, in the latter years of the School Leavers' Surveys carried out by the ESRI, early school leavers proved a very difficult group to engage. Thus, a nationally representative survey of early leavers three to four years after leaving school was considered likely to yield response rates which would be too low to allow us to reach firm conclusions regarding Youthreach outcomes. In addition, given that any strategy to identify a control group for counterfactual analysis would necessarily involve the selection of individuals who are less marginalised than Youthreach participants, the adoption of techniques such as Propensity Score Matching would almost inevitably generate a negative treatment effect by virtue of the more positive human capital characteristics among the control group.[1] In addition, the programme takes a multi-faceted approach which is designed to promote a broad set of skills and competences among young people, with a strong emphasis on personal and social development and wellbeing. It was felt that more in-depth interviews would better reflect this multidimensional perspective and capture the contribution of the programme in a broader way than a large-scale survey could.

For these reasons, a mixed methods approach, combining surveys and in-depth interviews, was adopted in order to provide a more holistic perspective on Youthreach programme provision. The study has four key research strands: (i) desk-based research and secondary analysis of administrative and survey data; (ii)

[1] In other words, young people facing greater barriers to employment are more likely to take part in Youthreach. Comparing them with young people who left school early but secure employment because they are advantaged in other ways (e.g. family networks, higher Junior Certificate grades) will risk making the 'impact' of Youthreach look negative.

a national survey of senior managers at ETB level; (iii) a national survey of Youthreach co-ordinators and Community Training Centre (CTC) managers; (iv) case-study research in ten Youthreach and Community Training Centres; and (v) consultative workshops with key stakeholders. The following sub-sections describe each aspect of the methodology in detail.

1.2.1 Desk-based research and secondary data analysis

This phase of the research involved a comprehensive review of Irish and international literature on combating early school leaving and alternative education provision. This involved an in-depth analysis of Irish and international research studies and policy documents on the topics of early school leaving and educational disadvantage. The review adopted a comprehensive conceptual framework which views non-attendance and early school leaving within the context of processes shaping broader disengagement from school (European Commission, 2013). The review provides a historical overview of policy developments in the area of early school leaving and, in particular, recent structural changes such as the dissolution of the VECs and FÁS, the establishment of the Education and Training Boards and SOLAS and the transfer of Youthreach provision, including CTCs, to the ETB sector.

In order to contextualise the study, the report provides an analysis of other secondary sources, such as administrative data, on the current spatial distribution of Youthreach places relative to the distribution of early school leavers by county. An analysis of the Quarterly National Household Survey and other data is used to examine the profile of early school leavers nationally and their labour market outcomes relative to school completers. Other data sources are also used in order to look at the relationship between early school leaving and broader outcomes such as health and crime. An exploratory analysis was conducted to assess whether data from the nationally representative regular and follow-up School Leavers' Survey (SLS) (conducted by the ESRI between 1980 and 2007) could be used to assess levels of take-up of the programme and the profile of Youthreach participants over time.

1.2.2 A national survey of Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers

A survey of Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers from all 147 centres delivering the Youthreach programme was undertaken in November and December 2017. The survey was conducted by self-completion questionnaire either on paper or online, with a telephone reminder. The questionnaire focussed primarily on the profile of Youthreach participants**,** including their age, how they were referred to the programme, their level of education on entering the programme, their socio-economic background, ethnic status and in particular identifying members of the Traveller Community and prevalence of special

educational needs. The survey also sought the views of Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers on the goals of the Youthreach programme, the courses offered to participants, approaches to teaching, learning and assessment, number of staff and staff turnover, the supports available to participants and information about work placements. Co-ordinators' perceptions of current governance structures, including details on funding arrangements, operational management, and appropriateness of existing operational guidelines, were explored in the survey.

The survey was completed by 126 co-ordinators/managers, giving an exceptionally high response rate of 86 per cent. The data gathered in this survey provide important baseline information about the profile, provision and governance in Youthreach centres and CTCs.

1.2.3 Survey of managers and senior managers

In order to place this information in the context of strategic priorities and direction for Youthreach at the regional and local level, the survey of Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers was supplemented with a survey of senior management at ETB level, including Chief Executives, Directors of Further Education and Training, Adult Education Officers (where they were the line manager for Youthreach) and Training Centre Managers. This survey collected information on some of the main themes covered in the co-ordinator/manager survey but focussed more specifically on the nature of provision in the area, where they think Youthreach sits in the policy landscape, the perceptions of current governance structures, reporting and accountability in Youthreach, and strategic priorities for the development of Youthreach. Forty-three senior managers completed the survey, 63 per cent of all of those surveyed.

1.2.4 Case-study research in Youthreach and Community Training Centres

Data from the survey of co-ordinators/managers were used to identify the key sources of variation in the operation and practice of centres nationally. The two main criteria used were:

1. Centre size, with centres grouped into small (20 learners or under), average (21-39 learners) and large (40 learners or more);
2. Profile of participants.

The proportions of learners with emotional, psychological and mental health difficulties, with learning difficulties, from Traveller backgrounds and living in jobless households were calculated on the basis of the survey data. Each was then divided into three groups, indicating low, medium or high representation of each group. This approach was taken because the prevalence of each of the categories

was different in scale. The four values were then summed to give a scale of the concentration of need in a centre, which was in turn divided into three groups: low, medium and high need profile.

A grid cross-tabulating centre size by learner profile was derived for Youthreach and Community Training Centres separately, because of significant differences in centre size. Seven centres were then selected from the main 'cells' (categories) of the Youthreach grid and three from the grid for CTCs. In selecting a centre from a cell, location and participation in SENI were also taken into account, the latter for Youthreach centres only. Table 1.1 shows the profile of centres visited in the case-study phase. Pseudonyms are based on rivers in Ireland and have no relationship to the geographical location of the centre.

TABLE 1.1 PROFILE OF CASE-STUDY CENTRES

Pseudonym	Type	Size	Profile
Bann	YR	Small	Medium need
Barrow	YR	Large	High need
Blackwater	CTC	Large	Medium need
Boyne	YR	Average	High need
Erne	YR	Average	Low need
Foyle	YR	Average	Medium need
Liffey	CTC	Average	Low need
Moy	YR	Large	Medium need
Shannon	CTC	Large	High need
Suir	YR	Small	High need

In each case-study centre, in-depth individual interviews took place with Youthreach learners, staff and Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers (henceforth co-ordinators/managers). Terminology varies between Youthreach and Community Training Centres and among individual centres. In the remainder of this report, the term 'co-ordinator/manager' is used while all other staff are described as 'staff' rather than 'teacher', 'resource staff' etc. Current and former participants are referred to as 'learners', though in the verbatim quotes from staff the terms 'students' and 'trainees' are often used.

1.2.4.1 Youthreach learners

Detailed information on the Youthreach learning experience was obtained from Youthreach learners in the case-study centres. Researchers initially carried out a focus group in each of the ten centres with groups of learners in order to introduce themselves and explain what the study was about. Overall ten focus group interviews were held, followed by one-to-one interviews with 94 current

Youthreach learners and 13 past participants. These interviews allowed us to gain insights into the learning and social experiences of young people attending Youthreach. The interviews were semi-structured in format and sought learners' views on:

- Their educational pathway to date, including their early school leaving experience, their entry into Youthreach, and the factors influencing their decision-making;
- Their satisfaction with Youthreach courses, perceptions of teaching and learning, their levels of attendance and reasons for non-attendance, levels of accreditation, their access to and use of supports within Youthreach (particularly for those with special educational needs), perceived quality of their experience, the nature and relevance of work placements;
- The quality of relationships with Youthreach staff and participants;
- Guidance provision (formal and informal) in Youthreach, their perceived opportunities, their hope and expectations for the future;
- Their perceptions of the potential influence of Youthreach on a range of outcomes, including learning, self-image, wellbeing, peer relations etc.

Information sheets on the research were sent in advance to the co-ordinator/ manager of each case-study centre. They were asked to distribute these sheets to the learners and, if the learner was under 18 years of age, to their parents/carers to inform them of the purpose of the research.[2] Co-ordinators/managers were asked to select a cross-section of learners, with diversity in terms of gender, age, EPMH and learning difficulties and being from a Traveller background. The young people interviewed were indeed diverse in profile and learners were selected across programmes (e.g. from QQI Level 3 and Level 4 courses). For practical reasons, the study team was reliant on the co-ordinator/manager to act as a liaison with the young people. It is therefore unclear whether some young people approached to take part refused to do so. In addition, it is likely that those with very poor attendance levels were not included in the study because they were more likely to be absent on the day of the case-study visit.

Where possible, qualitative interviews were also carried out with two past participants per centre. These data have provided useful complementary material to that collected through the survey and from current learners by exploring the reflections of young men and women about Youthreach in the years after they leave the programme. These interviews gathered detailed information on their

[2] The information leaflets, written in plain English, provided clear information on: what the project was about; what the information collected would be used for; how the young person was selected to participate; who was running the study (contact details of researchers provided); and what happens if the young person takes part (meet researchers in an individual or group interview). The leaflet also assured full confidentiality to young people who participated.

trajectories on leaving the programme, their experience of education, training and employment and their plans for the future. Interviewees were contacted by the co-ordinator/manager who may have been likely to showcase their 'best' leavers. Nonetheless, there was a good deal of consistency in the accounts of former and past learners so their insights should not be discounted on this basis.

The approach to interviewing young people was reviewed by the ESRI Ethics Committee in February 2018 in order to ensure that the research was carried out to the highest possible standards and that child protection legislation was fully adhered to. Parental permission was sought for those under 18 years of age, with assent from the young person themselves. Those aged over 18 gave their own consent to taking part in the interview. Two researchers were present at all times when young people were interviewed.

1.2.4.2 Youthreach staff

Twenty-three interviews were held with Youthreach staff during the case-study visits. Although our intention was to interview two staff per centre, in three of the centres it was also possible to interview an advocate, youth worker and a second resource staff member who worked at the centre. These interviews provide detailed information on:

- Methods of teaching and learning and in particular the extent to which diverse teaching methods are adopted;
- Access to, and take-up of, continuous professional development;
- Perceptions of current Youthreach provision – strengths and weaknesses;
- Perceived outcomes for Youthreach participants;
- The relationship between Youthreach and the labour market, further education and/or other agencies.

1.2.4.3 Youthreach co-ordinators/CTC managers

Seven Youthreach co-ordinators and three CTC managers were interviewed in total. Two interviews were also held with members of the board of management of the CTC. These interviews provide detailed information on:

- Perceptions of current governance structures;
- Perceptions of current Youthreach provision – strengths and weaknesses;
- Perceived outcomes for Youthreach participants;
- The relationship between Youthreach and the labour market, further education and/or other agencies.

1.2.5 Consultative research

In April 2018, the ESRI and SOLAS organised two days of consultative workshops in the Clock Tower in the Department of Education and Skills. These workshops were comprised of representatives from government departments and agencies in the field of education, training, employment and social inclusion. A list of the participant organisations is given in Appendix 1. In addition, a large number of centre co-ordinators and managers attended the events. There was a very positive engagement among stakeholders, with over 140 people attending the sessions. These events were designed to generate discussion and findings related to:

- Views on the strengths and weaknesses of existing Youthreach provision;
- The current reputation and status of Youthreach qualifications among stakeholders;
- The main challenges facing the Youthreach programme now and into the future;
- The extent to which Youthreach provision currently meets the needs of both learners and employers respectively;
- The extent, benefits and drawbacks of current arrangements for work experience on Youthreach courses;
- The role of Youthreach provision in improving levels of social inclusion;
- The extent to which Youthreach provision meets the needs of early school leavers.

1.2.6 Analytical approach

Analysis of the survey data was largely descriptive, examining the extent to which certain features of provision differed across settings, by ETB areas and across centres with different sizes and levels of need. The case-study interviews and consultative workshops were recorded and transcribed. They were analysed in terms of the main themes emerging from the interviews. Data from the different sources were triangulated in order to provide a firmer basis for the conclusions drawn and to assess the extent to which different perspectives were evident from stakeholders, senior managers, co-ordinators/managers, staff and learners.

The different strands of the study provide rich insights into the structures, processes and outcomes of Youthreach provision, placing young people's perspectives centre stage for the first time. While evidence from the workshops informs the overall report findings, Chapter 5 details some of the key themes arising from the two days' discussions. This report therefore provides a robust evidence base to inform the future direction of the programme.

1.3 REPORT OUTLINE

Chapter 2 places this study in the context of previous Irish and international research on early school leaving, focusing on its causes and the consequences of early leaving for individuals and broader society. Patterns of early school leaving in Ireland over time are also examined in this chapter. Chapter 3 examines the policy context for the Youthreach programme by focussing on systems of alternative education internationally. This chapter provides an overview of the development of Youthreach and examines trends over time in the provision of places on the programme. Levels of current Youthreach provision and geographical variation in the distribution of places are also examined. Using information from existing research and administrative data, Chapter 4 looks at the profile of Youthreach learners. This chapter also examines the profile of learners and pathways into Youthreach using data gathered as part of the survey of co-ordinators/managers and the in-depth qualitative interviews with Youthreach staff and learners. Chapter 5 examines the governance arrangements of Youthreach centres and CTCs and explores the roles of senior management and co-ordinators/managers working on the Youthreach programme. This chapter also explores levels of staff cooperation and staff access to continuous professional development. This chapter examines funding within Youthreach, focussing on the levels of satisfaction with funding and resources and the priorities for further resources. Chapter 6 focuses on teaching and learning in Youthreach by exploring the types of provision and approaches to teaching, learning and assessment across centres. Chapter 7 examines the supports for learners in Youthreach, including access to formal supports such as psychological supports and guidance counselling and informal supports through positive relationships with Youthreach staff. The impact of the participation in SENI on centre practice is also examined in this chapter. Chapter 8 explores perceived learner outcomes and the challenges involved in assessing these outcomes. It focuses on quantitative outcomes such as attendance and progression in addition to soft skills development. Chapter 9 draws the findings of the report together and indicates the implications of the study findings for policy development.

CHAPTER 2

Early school leaving: causes and consequences

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the existing literature on the factors shaping early school leaving internationally and in Ireland, by focusing on the profile of students who leave school early and the role of school organisation and practices in influencing early school leaving. The chapter specifically focuses on the role of curriculum and pedagogy in alienating some students from disadvantaged backgrounds with high levels of need. Research on the 'productive pedagogies' framework is discussed to illustrate a way of connecting with students who have become disengaged whilst maintaining intellectual challenge. The chapter then provides an overview of literature on alternative education by focusing on the key aspects of this form of provision. Early school leaving patterns in Ireland over time are then examined within the context of policies that seek to address the issue of early school leaving and the rising rates of retention in recent years. Provision for early school leavers (other than Youthreach) is also discussed. The final section of this chapter uses QNHS and other data to examine the costs and consequences of early school leaving.

2.2 FACTORS DRIVING EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Early school leaving (ESL) is regarded as a significant policy challenge internationally. Although rates of early school leaving have declined in Europe in recent decades, it is still estimated that 12 per cent of young people aged between 18 and 24 have not completed upper secondary education and are no longer in education and training (European Commission, 2017). The European Union has a target of 10 per cent for all EU countries by 2020 and some countries (including Ireland) have already achieved this target (European Commission, 2017). The 2020 targets, in particular, identify two key educational targets across countries, relating to participation in higher education and early school leaving levels. Ireland has exceeded both sets of targets.

Although patterns of early school leaving continue to differ across EU national contexts and systems of education, research consistently shows that young people who leave school early are disproportionately from disadvantaged social class backgrounds (European Commission, 2017). Research in this area often focuses on the role of individual and family factors in influencing the likelihood of a young person being excluded from, or leaving, school. Although there is no direct causal link between poor life outcomes and early school leaving, studies show that it may be 'indicative of other factors that have shaped the person's economic

opportunities' (Lamb et al., 2015). Both national and international studies show that early school leavers have common characteristics in that they are more likely to be male, have low school attainment, behavioural problems, have ongoing social, emotional or health issues, have special educational needs, are living in poverty and have ill-health or have experienced trauma (Riddell et al., 2012; McCluskey et al., 2015; Kennelly et al., 2007; European Commission, 2017). On average women have consistently lower rates of early school leaving across the EU, with a gap of 3 per cent remaining over time (European Commission, 2017). Early school leaving also varies significantly according to where people are born, with higher rates among foreign-born students compared to native born (the reverse is true, however, in Ireland and the UK) (European Commission, 2016; Kaye et al., 2017), although others suggest that it is most likely socio-economic and school-related factors driving these patterns (Hippe et al., 2018). Commentators argue that it is when multiple risk factors combine that the likelihood of a student leaving school increases (Hammond et al., 2007).

Early school leaving is often discussed within the context of broader cultural perspectives on the relationship between schools and inequality. Theories of social reproduction argue that social class differentiation stems from the unequal distribution of economic, social and cultural resources or 'capital' which influence young people's values and motivations (Bourdieu et al., 1990). The school, therefore, transmits a 'cultural capital' which incorporates these values as well as a body of attitudes. Middle-class students, who are more familiar with the 'values, attitudes, language and styles of interaction' (Byrne et al., 2010) of the dominant culture, therefore fare better academically. Students with little understanding of this form of capital can have more negative attitudes to school and their teachers, low academic attainment and low expectations for their future. Exclusion and withdrawal from school therefore takes place as a result of the mismatch between the dominant school and societal culture and the young person's own culture.

The role of school organisation and process in early school leaving has also received attention internationally (Teddlie and Reynolds, 2000). In recent years, a large-scale European study across nine EU Member States, Reducing Early School Leaving in Europe (RESL), has produced a significant amount of research on early school leaving and youth trajectories from the perspective of the school, school personnel, and risk and protective factors. One of these studies by Tomaszewska-Pękała et al. (2017) focussed on the way in which those at risk of early school leaving characterised school life and the prevailing school culture. Using interviews with young people, they highlight the perception that for some, school is interpreted as 'a somewhat artificial place with a lot of childish rules and practices' (p. 65). In Ireland, the first study of school effectiveness and drop-out considered the role of school organisation and practice in shaping early school leaving (McCoy, 2000). This study highlights the detrimental impact of a negative pattern of

interaction between students and their teachers in the progress of young people at risk. The study also points to the important role of parental involvement and the multidimensional nature of this influence. Pupil integration, through both formal and informal means, was also highlighted. These issues were similarly raised in research examining the role of school processes in shaping school attendance (Darmody et al., 2008; McCoy et al., 2007). Practices of educational streaming, tracking or ability grouping are often criticised because of how they can lower teacher expectations and how separation from other students can lead to disengagement and alienation from the learning process (Byrne and Smyth, 2010). Also in Ireland, Byrne and Smyth (2010) show that students in the lowest streamed class are 13 times more likely to leave school early compared to those in mixed ability classes. Again, the quality of relationships between students and their teachers is considered a key dynamic of school climate with negative relationships found to be an important contributor to early school leaving (Byrne and Smyth, 2010; Davis et al., 2008).

A prominent feature of Irish educational policy on disadvantage has centred on the allocation of additional resources to schools serving disadvantaged populations. Recent research drawing on the *Growing Up in Ireland* study highlights the importance of focusing on school composition in understanding educational outcomes like early school leaving. McCoy et al. (2014) provide new insights into the processes underlying differences in student outcomes across contexts. They find that the most disadvantaged schools, Urban Band 1 primary schools, are found to have a 'contextual effect' for both reading and Mathematics. In other words, students attending the most disadvantaged schools fare less well, all else being equal. Thus, there is evidence that there is a 'threshold' effect, whereby concentration of disadvantage beyond a certain point results in lower levels of achievement. This achievement gap is found to reflect differences in teacher experience and turnover, the concentration of additional learning needs, absenteeism levels and children's engagement in school. Further, school context was also found to be important in the identification of special educational needs. McCoy et al. (2012) show that children attending highly disadvantaged school contexts are far more likely to be identified with behavioural problems and less likely to be identified with learning disabilities than children with similar characteristics attending other schools (McCoy et al., 2012). This has clear implications for the nature of supports offered to these students.

2.3 PRODUCTIVE PEDAGOGIES

Much of the literature around early school leaving has sought to examine ways in which retention can be improved and in particular how pedagogy can help bring about more socially just systems of education. Using social reproduction theory, a number of studies have questioned the assumptions around how and what we teach in schools. Hayes et al. (2005), for example, use the idea of the instructional

or pedagogical core in schools which they describe as a 'taken-for-granted part of schooling' (p. 33). This 'default mode' in schools has a particular relevance for disadvantaged students whose 'social, cultural and economic backgrounds are not strongly matched to the cultural values, norms and practices of the school' (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990). Hayes et al. (2005) suggest that in order to improve the educational outcomes of these students, we need to challenge the pedagogical core of schooling. They present the idea of 'productive pedagogies' which has four key dimensions: intellectual quality, connectedness, supportive classroom environment and working with and valuing difference. In the absence of these productive pedagogies, it is argued that unequal outcomes from schooling are exacerbated (Lingard et al., 2000; 2006; Hayes et al., 2005). The productive pedagogies framework recognises that the curriculum is not always relevant for students who may not be able to connect the social practices and content of their school work to their lives at home. To overcome these issues, commentators argue that classrooms should become spaces where students are not 'afraid to fail' or be criticised for their efforts but instead are provided with the structures that can help them to achieve (Hayes et al., 2005).

One of the main elements of the productive pedagogies framework is that all students should be provided with intellectually challenging classrooms, particularly where students are from disadvantaged backgrounds. It is considered socially unjust where students are not intellectually challenged and stems from the deficit perspective where students or their families are blamed for their lack of academic success. Where disadvantaged students have high levels of need in a school, however, the approach may become one of 'care' rather than 'challenge'. In her ethnographic research in a Maltese national school, Darmanin (2003) found that the opportunities to teach and learn were being lost due to an over-emphasis on the pastoral needs of the students. She found that, as a result of the 'care' approach, student progress was slow and lacked planning, which meant that it was difficult to see how much was being achieved over time. She describes how teachers are abdicating their role as educators in favour of the 'fairy godmother' role. Possible explanations for this are poor staff qualifications, a lack of professional support among staff, the extent of the social problems among the students, and/or the relevance of the curriculum. This research points to the possibility that teachers working in this school are focusing on raising the 'self-esteem' of pupils and their parents. The desire to show they are not prejudiced towards their clients has led to 'sentimental egalitarianism' or a fairy godmother orientation (Darmanin, 2003).

2.4 ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION INTERNATIONALLY

Alternative education has a long history and can refer to anything other than state-provided mainstream education. Many alternative education programmes are designed to meet the needs of at-risk students who are disenfranchised from the

traditional school setting (Kim et al., 2008) by providing an innovative curriculum that engages students on an individual level (Robinson et al., 2016). Common characteristics of these settings include small class sizes and high teacher-student ratios, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, a student-centred curriculum, flexibility in structure, a supportive and safe environment and positive rather than punitive behaviour management (O'Gorman et al., 2016; Lehr, 2004; Edgar-Smith and Baugher Palmer, 2015). Given the development of these dynamic practices in alternative schools, some suggest that important lessons could be learned in traditional schools in order to prevent the exclusion of marginalised young people in the first place (O'Gorman et al., 2016). McGregor et al. (2015) uses the term 'meaningful education' when examining alternative education settings in Australia. They suggest the need to discuss how we view the education system, that is, whether we view it for the purpose of economic prosperity where the system produces long-term capital in the form of skills, or whether we place importance on education for personal and social development by developing skills around 'creativity, self-expression and empathy' (p. 612). They suggest that for young people in alternative education, it is important to 'build a bridge' between their personal, often difficult, contexts and a desired future (McGregor et al., 2015).

International studies on student experiences in these settings are consistently positive, highlighting the impact that attending alternative schools can have on students' peer relations, academic commitment and school performance (Lehr, 2004). The innovative pedagogies used in these settings aim to move away from failure and instead create a cycle of success which will then motivate young people to engage in school and continue in education (Nouwen et al., 2016). Many of these studies stress the importance of students' sense of school membership or belonging in a school and their perceptions of support in establishing a positive relationship with school (Edgar-Smith and Baugher Palmer, 2015). One Scottish study used qualitative data with students in alternative education and their families and national-level data on student outcomes (McCluskey et al., 2015). The findings show that student opinion of the alternative education is 'overwhelmingly positive' with students often feeling 'welcome', 'valued' and 'proud of their successes' (p. 604). These findings were, however, in sharp contrast to national-level data which highlighted the poor outcomes for these students and the variability in leadership and management across different alternative education providers. The authors conclude with the suggestion that the young people's views of alternative education are 'too partial' and are a 'sad consequence of the extremely poor experience they have endured previously in mainstream schools, often involving exclusion' (p. 605).

Some commentators raise the issue of alternative education as a system which does not challenge the broader school level and societal factors that have led to the exclusion of young people from mainstream education (Robinson and Smyth, 2016; Kim and Taylor, 2008). Much of this research points to the increasing

accountability required in schools operating in certain education systems which tend to shift problems of early school leaving onto the individual and their families. This deficit model stigmatises young people as 'different' or 'at risk' and therefore does not break the cycle of educational inequality. In the US, Baldridge et al. (2017) also note the contested space that alternative education programmes occupy as they can be seen to 'resist deficit views' of students and 'disrupt the inequalities' that they experience while in mainstream education. However, these alternative programmes might reproduce inequality by preparing students for entry-level or low status work (Baldridge et al., 2017). In Australia, similar debates exist around alternative education which question whether these programmes advantage or disadvantage students, and whether mainstream school should be more responsive to the needs of vulnerable or marginalised students (Thomas, 2016).

2.5 PATTERNS OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING IN IRELAND OVER TIME

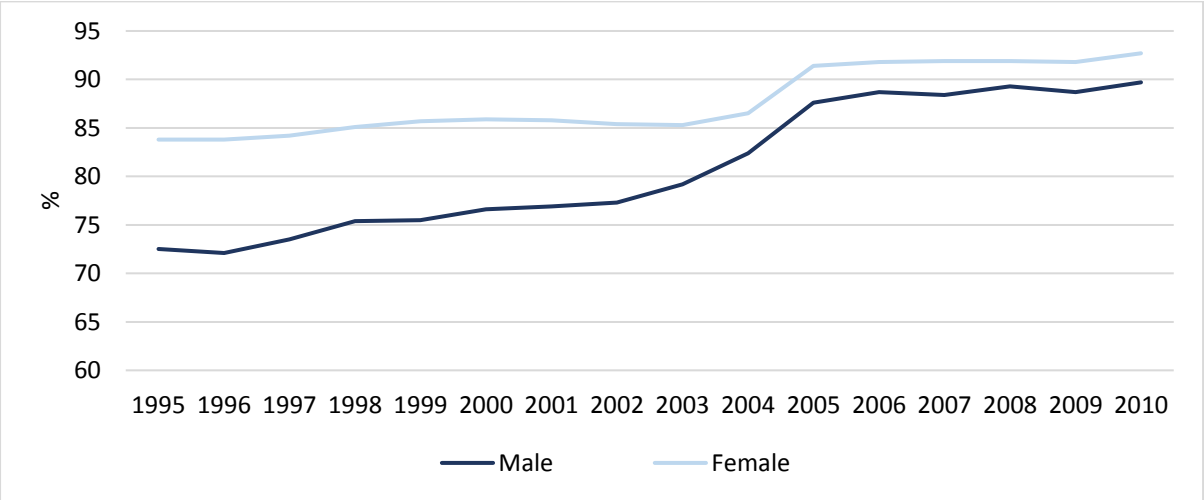
Irish Junior and Leaving Certificate completion rates are at an all-time high. Ireland has lower rates of early leaving than the average for EU27 countries, with similar rates to those in Austria and Finland. The Department of Education and Skills published a report on student retention for the cohort of entrants to the Junior Cycle in 2010 and found that of the 60,293 students, 97.35 per cent sat the Junior Certificate exams in 2013/2014 with 91.2 per cent sitting the Leaving Certificate Exams in 2015 or 2016 (DES, 2017).

This decline in early school leaving may partly reflect the impact of the Delivering Equality of Opportunity in Schools (DEIS) programme which targets additional resources and supports towards schools serving disadvantaged populations, where early school leaving is more prevalent (DES, 2005, p. 8). Average retention rates for DEIS schools was at 84.4 per cent for the 2010 entry cohort (DES, 2017). Supports from the Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) scheme and the School Completion Programme (SCP) are central parts of DEIS and both work to prevent early school leaving and ensure that intervention and prevention happen as early as possible (Smyth et al., 2015). The trend is also likely to reflect changes in labour market opportunities for young people in the wake of the economic recession, in particular the collapse of the construction industry, which meant that fewer young people were leaving school to pursue apprenticeships or take up employment. Education may, therefore, be acting as a protection for young people from unemployment in certain industries sensitive to economic conditions (Circelli et al., 2012).

The DES (2017) report found that the majority of drop-out occurs at second level between senior cycle Year 1 and Year 2 where 3.4 per cent of the original cohort is lost. Just over 2 per cent of the cohort leaves the system immediately after the Junior Certificate exams. Figure 2.1 shows a 3 per cent national gender gap

between male and female retention rates; however, this gap has narrowed in recent years.

FIGURE 2.1 RETENTION RATES BY GENDER AMONG THE 1995 TO 2010 SECOND-LEVEL ENTRY COHORTS



Source: Department of Education and Skills, 2017.

There is evidence of some regional variation in retention rates and the DES (2017) report shows that for the 2010 cohort, Carlow had the lowest retention rate at 86.2 per cent. In general, cities showed lower retention rates, with Dublin city having a retention rate below the national average at 88.6 per cent.

Given these retention patterns over the last decade, the profile of Youthreach participants is likely to have become more marginalised. A recent study highlights the learner profile of Youthreach participants which can include young people with learning difficulties and other special educational needs, those with mental health difficulties and those engaging in risk-taking and anti-social behaviours (NEPS, 2017). The profile of Youthreach participants is discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

2.6 PROVISION FOR EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS

Youthreach is one of a number of programmes offering education and training to early school leavers. iScoil is an 'online learning community that offers an alternative path to learning, accreditation and progression' and is aimed towards teenagers between 13 and 16 years of age who have left school. iScoil is a non-profit body established as part of the Government's ThinkTech programme (€1 million 'Tech for Good' Social Innovation Fund Ireland) with support from Google.org. The criteria for inclusion in the programme include being out of school for six months or more, with other interventions to keep young people in school having been tried but failed, and a supportive home environment. iScoil receives

referrals directly and solely from Tusla. The model is based on the UK programme 'Not School'. In 2007/2008 iScoil conducted a Presentation congregation-funded pilot. In this pilot, they had 25 students, the programme was delivered entirely online, the teachers were Irish and the programme was entirely email-based. The pilot was reported to be a success, and in 2009/2010 iScoil was established. iScoil currently have 11 partner centres in Limerick, Mullingar, Kildare, Longford and Dublin. They offer a blended model and online model. With the blended model, students engage in both an online learning piece and are involved in activities in Youthreach centres or CTCs.[3] There are a number of other out-of-school centres catering for this younger age group and this provision is, at the time of writing, being reviewed by the DES. The Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP) also offers employment, education and training supports to young people aged 15 to 24 years of age who are not in education, employment or training (NEETs), although only a third of the group involved in the programme are pre-Leaving Certificate leavers (Pobal, 2017).

2.7 THE CONSEQUENCES AND COSTS OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVING

Studies of early school leaving tend to focus on the consequences of early school leaving which is associated with a wide range of adverse outcomes for individuals. OECD (2018) maintains that '[u]pper secondary education is the minimum educational attainment level for successful labour-market integration' (p. 72). Research by Smyth and McCoy (2009) addresses the costs of early school leaving to the individual and to broader Irish society. Those who leave school before the Leaving Certificate are three to four times more likely to be unemployed than those with higher qualifications. When they do gain employment they are in insecure and/or poorly paid work (DES, 2008b; NESSE, 2010). Further, early school leavers have lower levels of general health, report more anxiety and depression and have a higher mortality rate. They are also more likely to be involved in the juvenile or adult justice system. Hence, early school leaving is found to have substantial costs for the young people themselves and for society as a whole. Higher rates of early school leaving mean higher expenditure on welfare, health and prisons and lower tax revenue (Smyth and McCoy, 2009; McCoy and Smyth, 2003). Clayton and Illbeck (2013) estimate the total costs of youth mental health services in Ireland as over €308 million per annum; higher rates of anxiety and depression among early leavers mean a significant proportion of spending on this group of young people.

Research has also highlighted that a number of unique features of the Irish educational and labour market systems have compounded the difficulties encountered by the least qualified in society. There have been long-term declines in the demand for unskilled employees, with growing skill requirements of jobs and increasing use of new technologies. The Irish education system has been described

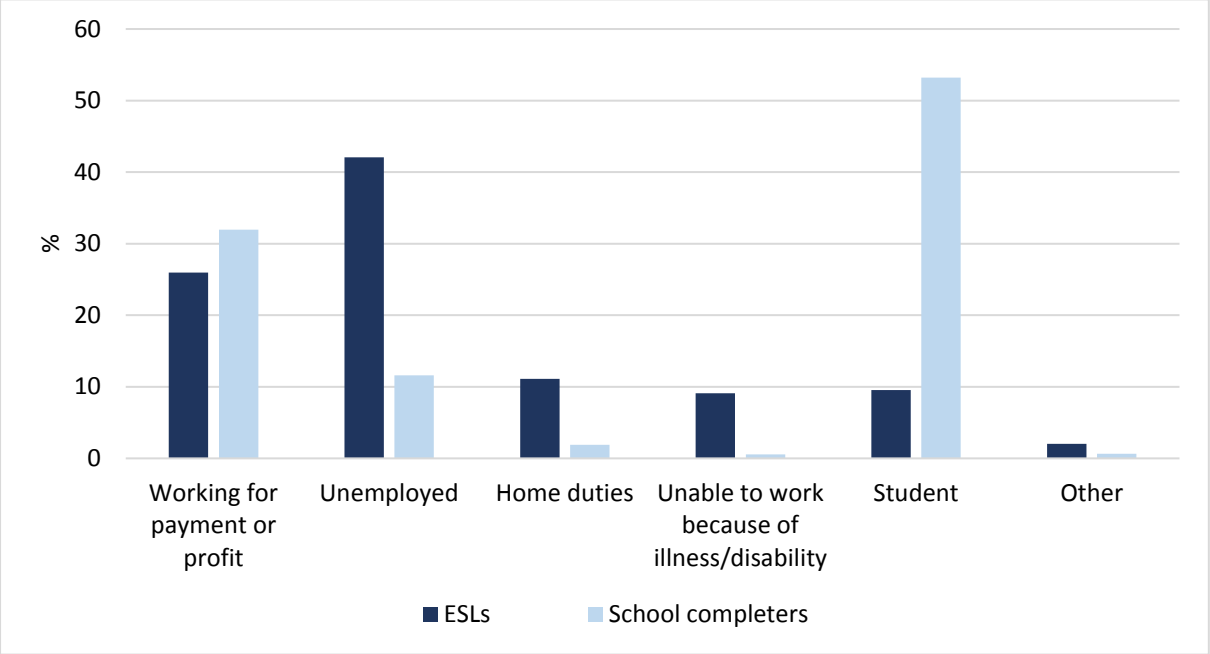
[3] Personal communication with Marianne Checkley and Nicole Mullen (iScoil), November 2017.

as a rigid, full-time model, with few alternatives to mainstream provision in securing qualifications and skills (Hannan et al., 1998; Grummell and Murray, 2015). Although access to more flexible and part-time educational provision has improved with initiatives such as Momentum and Springboard,[4] Ireland continues to have lower rates of adult participation in education and training than the EU average, with lower rates among those who left school prior to upper secondary level than for those with better initial qualifications (Eurostat database). This means that the least qualified have the highest probability of never being employed, suffer by far the longest period of unemployment, take longer to secure their first job and have more frequent spells of unemployment over the life course (Hannan et al., 1998).

The remainder of this section draws on a range of data sources, especially the Quarterly National Household Survey (QNHS) (now the Labour Force Survey), to document outcomes among early school leavers currently. Early leavers are defined as those who are no longer in education and training and whose highest qualification is Junior Certificate (lower secondary) or lower. Because of the nature of the data sources, the analyses generally rely on information on young adults (18 to 24 years old), rather than the full age range covered by the Youthreach programme. Because the number of early school leavers is now relatively small (see Section 2.5), some analyses pool patterns across years.

4 See Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) website www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/Courses-for-the-Unemployed.aspx.

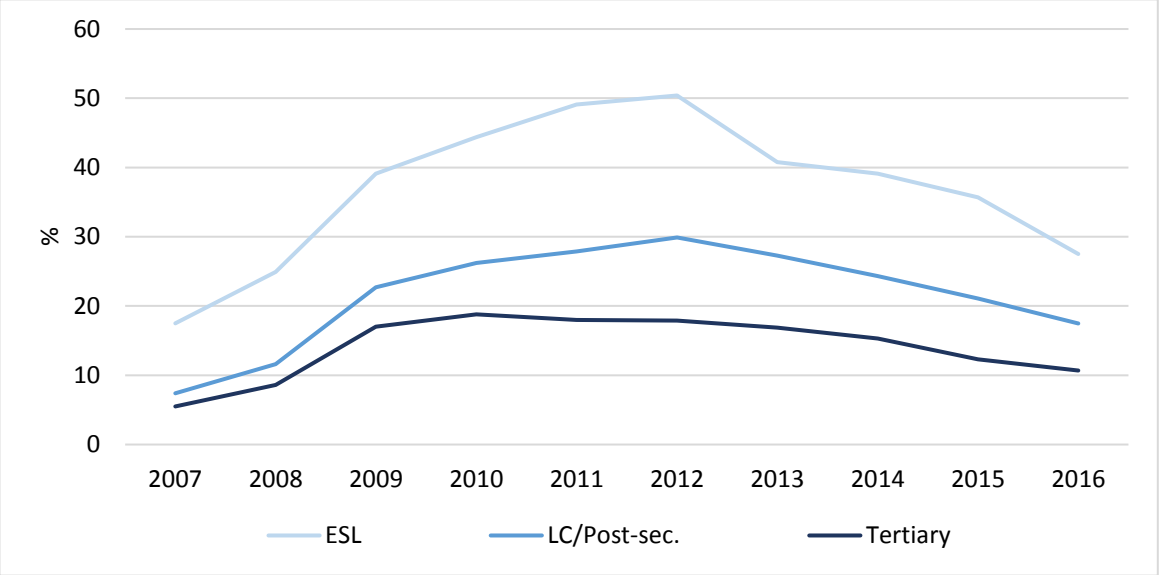
FIGURE 2.2 EMPLOYMENT STATUS AMONG EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS AND SCHOOL COMPLETERS AGED 18 TO 24 YEARS (2010-2017)



Source: Quarterly National Household Survey microdata.

Marked differences are found in the employment status of young people depending upon whether they completed second-level education or not (Figure 2.2). Over half of young people who completed school are in full-time education or training compared to less than 10 per cent of early leavers. Early leavers are much more likely to be unemployed, on full-time home duties or unable to work because of illness/disability than school completers. Confining attention only to those young people in the labour market, the unemployment rate for early leavers is 61.8 per cent among early leavers compared to 26.6 per cent among school completers. OECD (2017) highlights the fact that disparities in unemployment levels by educational level are greater in Ireland than in many other countries.

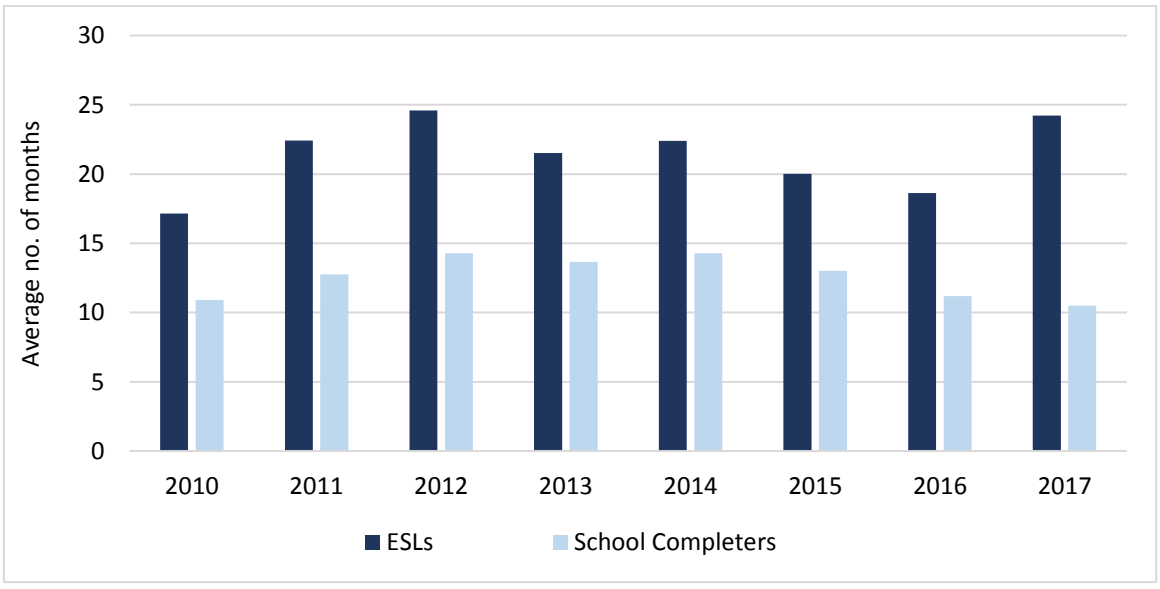
FIGURE 2.3 UNEMPLOYMENT RATES BY EDUCATIONAL LEVEL AMONG 15- TO 24-YEAR-OLDS (2007-2016)



Source: Eurostat EU Labour Force Survey tables.

Figure 2.3 shows that not only are unemployment rates higher among early leavers than among other groups but that they are much more volatile in times of recession. The gap in unemployment rates between early leavers and tertiary graduates increased from 12 percentage points in 2007 to a high of 33 percentage points in 2012.

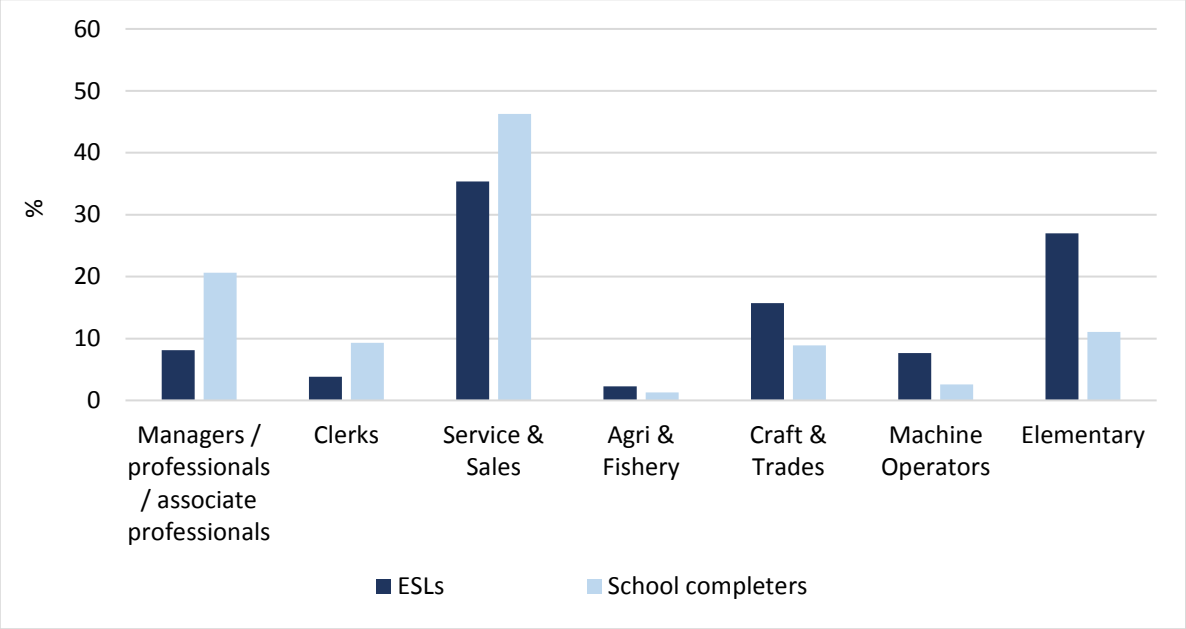
FIGURE 2.4 AVERAGE UNEMPLOYMENT DURATION IN MONTHS AMONG EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS AND SCHOOL COMPLETERS AGED 18 TO 24 YEARS (2010-2017)



Source: Quarterly National Household Survey microdata.

In addition to having higher levels of unemployment, the average duration of unemployment is much longer among early school leavers than those who have completed second-level education (Figure 2.4). The gap is sizeable, varying from six to 14 months over the period 2010 to 2017.

FIGURE 2.5 OCCUPATIONAL GROUP AMONG EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS AND SCHOOL COMPLETERS AGED 18 TO 24 YEARS (2010-2017)



Source: Quarterly National Household Survey microdata.

Even among those who access paid employment, significant differences are found between the kinds of occupations among early school leavers and school completers (Figure 2.5). Compared to those who completed second-level education, early school leavers are much more likely to be in the semi- and unskilled, machine operator and elementary occupations group, though they are also somewhat more likely to be in skilled craft occupations. They are much less likely to obtain a managerial or professional job than school completers. Reflecting this occupational profile, early school leavers are more likely to be working in a job that pays only the minimum wage level, with 47 per cent falling into this category compared with 35 per cent of school completers. This earnings gap persists into later life, with those with less than upper secondary education earning just 80 per cent of the wages earned by those with a Leaving Certificate qualification (OECD, 2018).

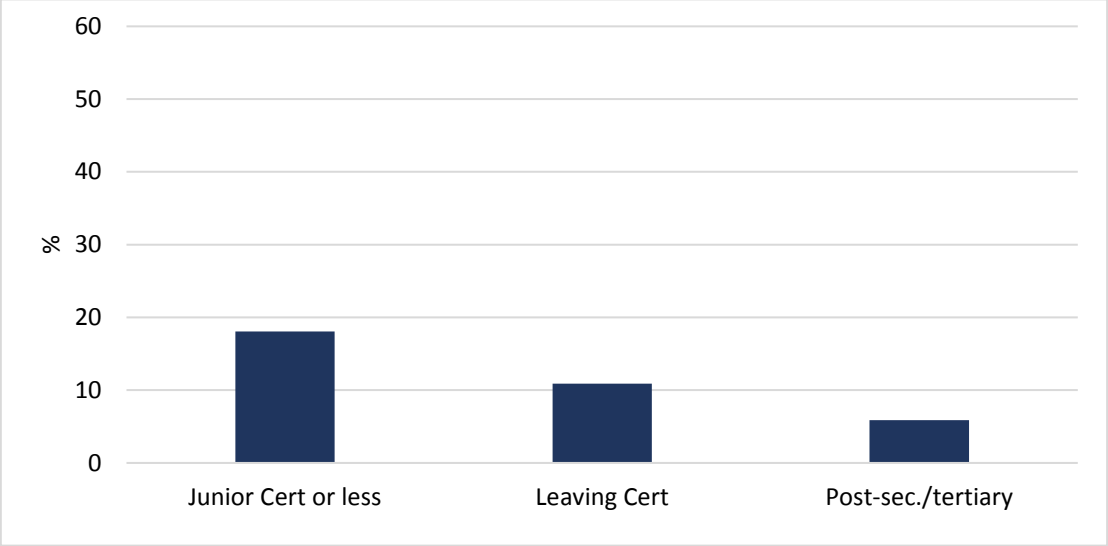
QNHS data indicate higher rates of lone motherhood among early leavers. Among women aged 18 to 24 years, 23 per cent are lone mothers compared with 5 per cent of those who completed second-level education. Coupled with the findings on unemployment, this indicates much higher rates of welfare dependency among

early school leavers, and therefore costs to society in terms of welfare payments and income tax revenue foregone. Social housing represents another potential subsidy to disadvantaged groups. In 2004, those with no qualifications or Junior Certificate qualifications only were over-represented among local authority tenants (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). More recent data (Clúid, 2017) indicate that this disparity is still evident, with those with Junior Certificate qualifications at best making up 51 per cent of those in social housing in 2013.

The QNHS data point to the intergenerational reproduction of social disadvantage (see Section 2.2). Among 18- to 24-year-olds living with their parents, two-thirds of early leavers have a mother with Junior Certificate qualifications or less compared with 34 per cent of school completers. Only 11 per cent of early leavers have graduate mothers compared with 33 per cent of school completers. OECD analyses indicate that Ireland is among the European countries with the highest level of intergenerational transmission of educational disadvantage. Along with Spain, Greece and the Netherlands, Ireland has a relatively high proportion of adults whose parents had below upper secondary education and who themselves have less than upper secondary education (OECD, 2018). In addition, QNHS data indicate that 38 per cent of early school leavers are living in a jobless household compared with 12 per cent of school completers.

Differences are also evident in relation to broader outcomes such as health and wellbeing (Figure 2.6). QNHS data indicate higher rates of disability among early leavers (13 per cent compared with 3 per cent among school completers) in the 18 to 24 age category. Among a broader age range of adults, those who had left school early are much more likely to rate their health as ‘fair’, ‘bad’ or ‘very bad’ than those with higher levels of education. For both women and men, lower educational levels are associated with a higher prevalence of depression and anxiety in the adult population (Chazelle et al., 2011). In Ireland, the gap in rates of depression between those with no upper secondary education and those with upper secondary or tertiary education is the highest in Europe (OECD, 2018).

FIGURE 2.6 SELF-REPORTED HEALTH STATUS (PER CENT 'FAIR', 'BAD' OR 'VERY BAD') BY EDUCATIONAL LEVEL



Source: Healthy Ireland Survey microdata.[5]

Those with Junior Certificate or no qualifications are almost four and a half times as likely to be in receipt of a Medical Card as those with Leaving Certificate qualifications (Smyth and McCoy, 2009). The frequency of visiting a GP varies significantly across educational groups, with the greatest frequency among those with primary education only and the lowest average number of visits found among the group with third-level qualifications (Layte et al., 2007). Rates of overweight and obesity among children, significant predictors of health problems in adult life, are found to be higher where parents have lower levels of education (Walsh, Cullinan, 2015).

International research has pointed to the strong relationship between education levels and crime rates, with crime being deemed a significant driver of societal costs, especially in countries like the United States which have a high incarceration rate (see Belfield and Levin, 2007). There is little systematic information available on the educational profile of offenders or prisoners in Ireland. However, a study of a sample of prisoners in Mountjoy Prison (O'Mahony, 2002) indicated that only 4 per cent of the prisoners had reached Leaving Certificate level or beyond, with four-fifths leaving school before the age of 16 years. Among this group of prisoners, leaving school earlier was found to be associated with earlier first conviction and a greater number of convictions overall. Similarly, O'Donnell et al.'s (2008) study of all those released from prison over the period 2001 to 2004 indicated that over half had no formal education. Furthermore, those with lower levels of education were more likely to reoffend after release. More recent figures from an unpublished survey by the Irish Prison Service (quoted in *The Irish Times*, February

[5] We are very grateful to our colleague Brendan Walsh for providing this analysis.

6, 2018) show that four out of five prisoners (80 per cent) in the three prisons surveyed left school before their Leaving Certificate, more than half (52 per cent) left before the Junior Certificate while just over a quarter (26 per cent) had never attended second-level school. A poor experience of the mainstream educational system is also found among children (under 16 years) on custodial remand. Among this group, four-in-ten have a learning disability and many have truanted (57 per cent) and been suspended or expelled from school (49 per cent and 31 per cent respectively) (Anderson and Graham, 2007). Negative experiences of compulsory education were also reported in a qualitative study of prisoners (Carrigan and Maunsell, 2014).

2.8 SUMMARY

In order to provide context to the findings of this report, this chapter focuses on existing literature in the area of early school leaving. It focuses firstly on recent literature on the causes of early school leaving, highlighting ongoing debates about the role of individual and home characteristics of the early leaver and the role of school process and organisation in influencing these patterns. The literature highlights common characteristics in the profile of early school leavers across different national contexts. These young people are more likely to have one or more of the following characteristics; being male, have negative experiences of school, experienced behavioural problems, mental health difficulties, special educational needs, low attainment, from disadvantaged backgrounds or have experienced trauma. The chapter discusses early school leaving in the context of broader psychological and sociological debates around schools and educational inequality. In particular, the mismatch between the 'cultural capital' held within the school and the young person's own cultural and social capital is discussed in addition to the impact of school social mix or composition and school processes such as streaming which influence patterns of early school leaving.

Also drawing on theories of cultural capital, this chapter examines research on the role of the 'core curriculum' and assumptions embedded within the curriculum which exclude learners from more disadvantaged social class backgrounds. Studies on the impact of 'productive pedagogies' are discussed and in particular the importance of maintaining intellectual challenge and quality for all students, allowing them to connect with school subjects and relate them to their own lives, being educated in a supportive classroom environment where there is no 'fear of failure' in front of teachers or peers and where difference among students is valued and used for the benefit of the class as a whole. Debates around 'care' versus 'challenge' when educating vulnerable students from disadvantaged backgrounds are also discussed in this section.

International examples of alternative education are also discussed in this chapter.

These settings or schools characteristically have small class sizes and high teacher-student ratios, interaction is one-on-one between teachers and students, the curriculum is student-centred and flexible and the working environment is safe and supportive. Many of the studies show extremely positive experiences among learners within alternative schools which tend to focus on building personal and social development. Other studies, however, show poor outcomes for these students and variability in leadership across different school or centre settings. Others argue that by providing these alternative settings, the mainstream education system is not addressing the problem of school disengagement and exclusion for some groups of young people.

Focussing on early school leaving in Ireland, this chapter examines rates and patterns of early leaving nationally in addition to policy measures currently in place to prevent young people leaving school early. Other forms of provision (other than Youthreach and CTCs) are also discussed.

The final section of this chapter examines the costs and consequences of early school leaving. Literature on the outcomes of early school leavers is discussed focussing on aspects of individual's health, wellbeing, employment status and qualifications. This section uses QNHS data to examine the outcomes of early leavers. The findings show differences in the employment status of young people, with early leavers less likely to be in employment and more likely to be unemployed than those who completed second-level education. Compared to those who finish school, early leavers are more likely to work in the semi- and un-skilled machine operator and elementary occupations group. For those that are unemployed, the average duration is longer for early leavers. The data also highlight the extent to which social disadvantage is inter-generational, with early school leavers more likely to have mothers with low levels of education compared to those who completed school. These differences are also highlighted in the areas of poor health and involvement in crime, with early school leavers at greater risk of both compared to those who finish school.

CHAPTER 3

The Youthreach programme

3.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide a background and context to the report. It firstly provides an overview of the development of the Youthreach programme, focussing on its initial aims, structure, funding arrangements, curriculum and approach to teaching and learning. There have been a number of evaluations of the Youthreach programme which are then discussed in addition to the policy landscape within which Youthreach operates. This section also describes the Special Educational Needs Initiative (SENI) and the use of the WebWheel mentoring model in 20 Youthreach centres. This chapter examines the numbers taking part in the programme and the degree of geographical variation in participation.

3.2 DEVELOPMENT OF THE NATIONAL YOUTHREACH PROGRAMME

3.2.1 Origins and aims

The Youthreach programme was first introduced in 1989 as a joint initiative of the Department of Education and the Department of Labour (now the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation). It was originally operated through a number of different bodies including:

- Youthreach centres managed by the former Vocational Education Committees (VECs);
- Community Training Centres (CTCs) funded by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and managed by former FÁS;
- Justice (Prison) Workshops funded by the Department of Justice, Equality and Law Reform;
- Senior Traveller Training Workshops (CHL, 2006).

The Youthreach programme was established as a temporary, experimental programme aimed at early school leavers aged between 15 and 18 years, with the age group later extended to 15 to 20 years. The concept of the programme was originally outlined as follows:

> *The aim of Youthreach is to provide participants with the knowledge, skills and attitudes required to successfully make the transition to work and adult life. Youthreach is a guarantee of up to two years co-ordinated and integrated, training, work-experience and*

> *temporary employment for the most marginalised and disadvantaged early school leavers. (Department of Labour and Department of Education 1989)*

Under the Education Act (1998), in 2004 Youthreach centres became known as 'Centres for Education' which meant that they were no longer regarded as 'temporary experimental programmes' but now a 'recognised structure' in the education system (McHugh, 2014).

CTCs began in 1977 as Community Training Workshops in response to rising youth unemployment with the purpose of bridging the gap between education and the labour market. CTCs are run by a board of management comprised of volunteers. The focus in CTCs was on practical skills and they began offering FÁS Level 3 accreditation in 1996 (NACTM, 2018).

Compulsory education in Ireland is from the ages of six to 16, or until students have completed three years in post-primary school. Youthreach is now positioned within the Further Education and Training (FET) sector of the educational system which refers to education and training after second-level school but is not part of third level. In their spending review of FET, DPER (2017) distinguished between programmes which are predominantly labour market focused, those which are predominantly progression focused and those which focus on transversal skills development. Under this typology, Youthreach is categorised as progression focused, with DPER stating the need for such programmes in order to provide learners with the necessary foundations to pursue more specific programmes and to meet broader educational and social objectives while NESC (2013) also refers to the social inclusion role of much FET provision.

The Youthreach programme is now funded by the Department of Education and Skills through SOLAS, The Further Education and Training Authority. The objectives of the programme have not changed markedly over time in that Youthreach continues to help young people make the transition from school to work through the provision of 'co-ordinated foundation training, education and work experience' (DES, 2008b). However, the programme objectives are now perhaps more holistic in nature in that there is a strong emphasis on allowing students 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 (Youthreach ND-b). Youthreach lists the current objectives of the programme as:

- Personal and social development and increased self-esteem;
- Second-chance education and introductory level training;

- The promotion of independence, personal autonomy, active citizenship and a pattern of lifelong learning;
- Integration into further education and training opportunities and the labour market;
- The promotion of social inclusion.

3.2.2 The nature of provision

Young people entering Youthreach generally have no qualifications or have incomplete qualifications from Junior Cycle. On entry into the programme, the majority of participants (93 per cent) have NFQ Level 3 or lower qualifications. Attendance is on a full-time basis and was originally for two years' duration where students participate in integrated education, training and work experience (SOLAS, 2017). More recent guidelines do not stipulate a two-year timeframe (DES, 2010).

Youthreach centres are located in cities and towns throughout the country and often in areas of social and economic disadvantage (NEPS, 2017). Although Youthreach centres are not recognised as schools, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills carries out 'Evaluations of Centres for Education' which are similar to Whole School Evaluations. These inspections examine areas such as management and leadership in Youthreach centres, the quality of teaching, learning and assessment, and the centre's own planning and self-review (DES, 2010). Two types of provision now exist with programmes operating in 112 Youthreach centres and 35 Community Training Centres:

> *Strand 1: Youthreach centres*
>
> *Designated as 'centres of education' the Department of Education and Skills allocates Youthreach places to Education and Training Boards (ETBs). They aim to provide vocational skills and address personal development needs of students and provide Levels 3 and 4 QQI qualifications.*

> *Strand 2: Community Training Centres*
>
> *The Community Training Centres are independent community-based organisations and look after the training and employment needs of early school leavers, primarily aged between 16 and 21. They are operated by the local community outside of the school system and provide Levels 3 and 4 QQI qualifications. Each CTC is owned and managed by a local community group. The Board of Directors is responsible for the overall governance of the CTC and for the employment of its general manager and staff. (SOLAS, 2017)*

Both types of provision are now managed by the Education and Training Boards (ETBs) who are grant-aided by SOLAS under the overall direction of the Department of Education and Skills, although there are different governance, funding and oversight arrangements in respect of each strand (SOLAS, 2017). Community Training Centres have their own board of management but also report to the ETB Training Centre Manager. Youthreach centres formerly had their own boards of management but now are governed by a sub-committee of the ETB. The exception to this is in Kerry, where there is a service-level agreement between the ETB and the Kerry Diocesan Youth Service (KDYS) to run the Youthreach centres. The KDYS has its own board of management. In addition to the National Youthreach Programme, some training for early school leavers is also provided through Local Training Initiatives while ETBs (previously FÁS) collaborate with the Probation Service of the Department of Justice to support Justice Workshops providing services to early school leavers who have engaged with the Probation Service. Youthreach centres vary in size with smaller centres offering up to 25 places for participants and larger centres offering up to 50 places. A continuous intake model applies in some but not all Youthreach programmes.

Youthreach participants are entitled to a weekly allowance which varies depending on the age of the participant and their level of participation (in attendance for over 35 hours per week) in the programme. For example, for learners aged 16-17 years the weekly allowance is €40 per week whereas those aged over 18 receive €198 per week. Learners may also receive a meal allowance and free childcare and for those travelling over five kilometres to the centre a travel allowance is available. Although the age of Youthreach participants is between 15 and 20 (16 and 20 in CTCs), in 2002 a report by the National Economic and Social Forum noted the need for the programme to cater for young people under the age of 15 (NESF, 2002).

The Youthreach curriculum varies from centre to centre and can include QQI certification (or equivalent courses certified by other awarding bodies), Junior Certificate programmes, and Leaving Certificate programmes. The course subjects are learner-centred and experiential with a strong emphasis on developing the capacity of individual students (Youthreach, ND-b). The learning in Youthreach centres takes place within an extended academic year. The main areas of the curriculum include general education, vocational training and work experience. Subjects available in Youthreach vary and can include vocational subjects such as Woodwork, Metalwork, Cooking, Art, computers and developing basic Maths, English and Communication skills and applying these to vocational subjects. Research by McHugh (2014) suggests that Leaving Certificate Applied programme and modules accredited by QQI Levels 3 and 4 (FETAC at the time of the research) make up the majority of courses on offer in Youthreach. In general, learners in Community Training Centres (CTCs) undertake certification at QQI Levels 3 and 4

designed to meet their training needs with a focus on the labour market, although some provision is at higher levels. A number of CTCs also offer modules leading to the Junior Certificate and the Leaving Certificate Applied.

The teaching and learning approach used in Youthreach has been described as a mix of education, training and youth work (DES, 2008a). Characteristic of youth work interventions are their flexibility and informality. The approach takes the individual child or young person's background into account. Youth work approaches tend to favour active and experiential learning over didactic forms of instruction with predetermined curricula (Dickson et al., 2013). One of the most distinctive aspects of the youth work approach, however, is the emphasis on voluntary participation by the young person. Relationships between youth workers and staff are built on respect, equity and trust, 'friendliness and informality, a concern for the welfare and education of young people and a focus on values and beliefs' (Harland et al., 2005).

3.2.3 Programme cost

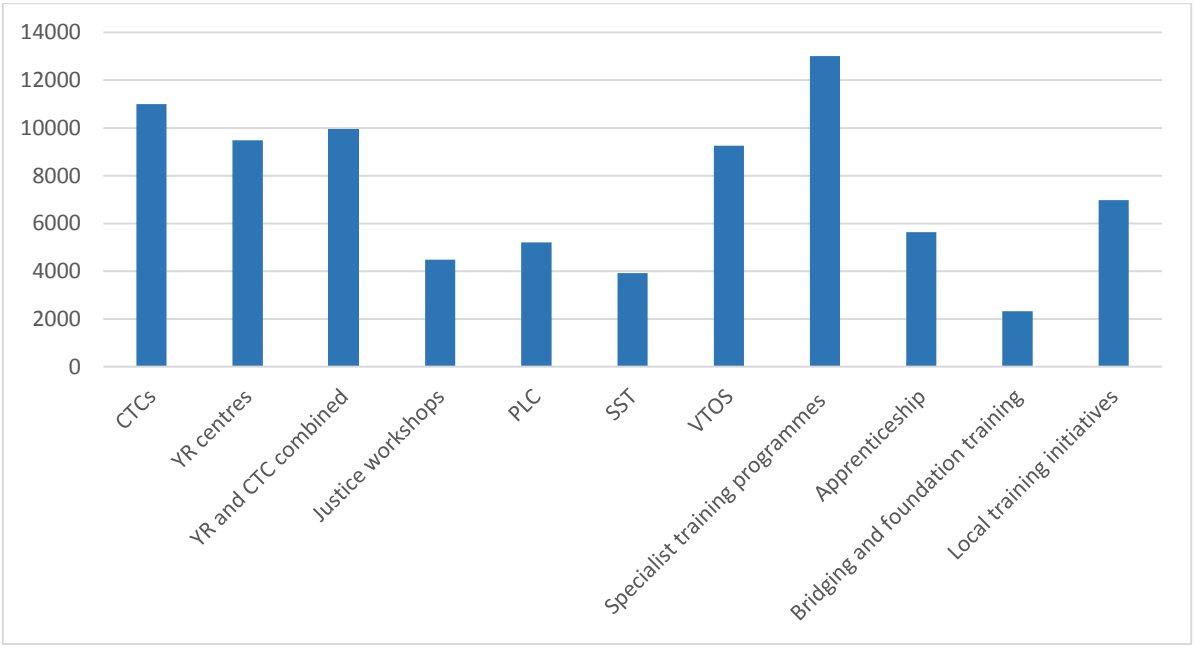
The programme cost a total of €98.7 million in 2017, including both Youthreach and Community Training Centres (SOLAS, 2017). The programme receives funding from the European Social Fund under Priority 2 (social inclusion and equal opportunities) and also receives a special allocation under the Youth Employment Initiative. In CTCs, funding is based on an annual submission to the ETB, with its level largely driven by legacy patterns, and staff are employees of the centre rather than the ETB. In Youthreach, funding is based on an annual allocation proportionate to the number of learners, although the 20 centres taking part in SENI receive additional funding, and staff are employees of the ETB. ETBs have considerable autonomy in how they allocate their annual block grant across FET provision. As a result, variation is found across ETBs in whether some funding is retained centrally to cover insurance and other costs for centres. Some Youthreach centres are part of the DEASP school meals scheme while others fund meals from within their overall allocation.

A value for money review of Youthreach and the (now abolished) Senior Traveller Training Centres was conducted by the Department of Education and Science in 2008 (DES, 2008b). The review pointed to higher unit costs than in mainstream post-primary education but costs in Youthreach centres were lower when the rates were calculated per learner hour. At that time, unit costs for Youthreach Centres were slightly higher than for Community Training Centres. The report concluded that 'both programmes are relatively efficient and are for the most part maximising output from the input available' (p. 11).

Figure 3.1 shows the current unit cost for Youthreach compared with other full-

time further education and training provision. The unit cost is calculated by dividing total expenditure by the number of beneficiaries.[6] In contrast to the situation in 2008, unit costs are found to be somewhat higher in CTCs than in Youthreach centres. The unit cost for Youthreach provision across both settings is only exceeded by that for specialist training programmes and is somewhat, but not markedly, higher than for the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). This difference largely reflects small group sizes in centres providing the Youthreach programme as well as the broader supports put in place for the young people. Given the multiple challenges experienced by Youthreach learners (see Chapter 4), a comparison with other FET provision is not comparing 'like with like'. Another type of provision aimed at marginalised groups of young people, Youth Encounter Projects (YEPs), also offer educational provision in small-group settings with individualised tuition. These centres are targeted at young people involved in minor delinquency or at risk of becoming involved. The nature of YEPs may therefore be a better comparator for Youthreach provision than other FET. Figures for 2017 indicate that the unit cost of YEP provision was €30,991 per learner,[7] three times higher than the costs for Youthreach provision.

FIGURE 3.1 UNIT COST (€) OF YOUTHREACH PROVISION IN COMPARISON WITH OTHER SOLAS FULL-TIME EDUCATION AND TRAINING PROGRAMMES



Source: SOLAS FET Services Plan 2017.

6 'Beneficiaries' is the term used by SOLAS to describe participants. Because of recording on a calendar year basis, a learner in one academic year may be counted again if they transfer to a qualification in the next academic year within the same centre.

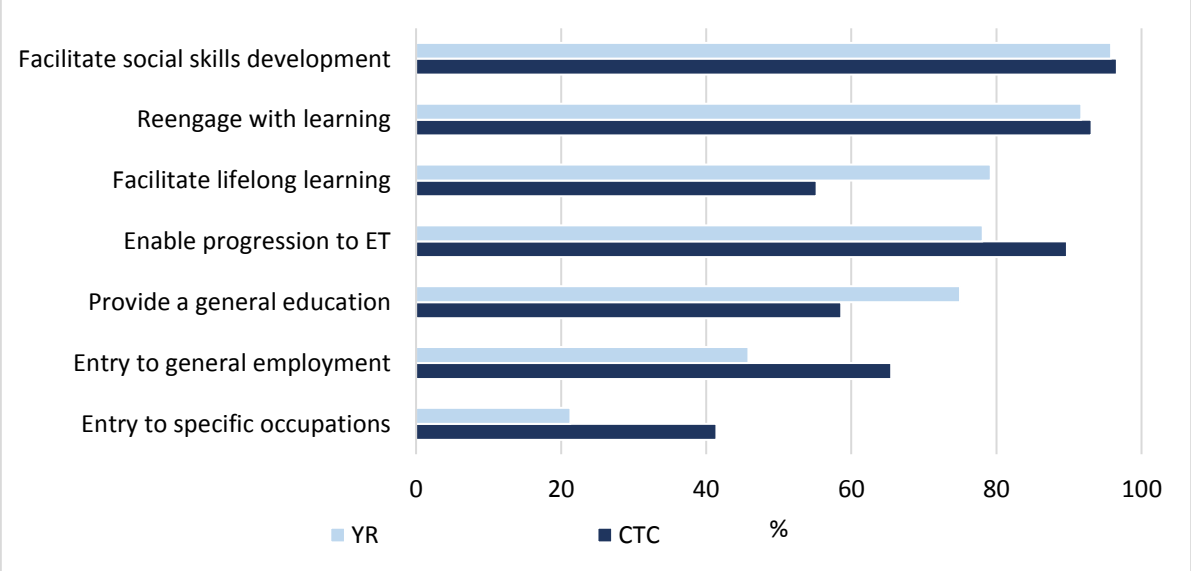
7 Personal communication, Department of Education and Skills.

3.3 PERCEPTIONS OF PROGRAMME GOALS AT CENTRE LEVEL

In the survey, co-ordinators and managers were asked the extent to which they agreed with a number of statements about the goals of the Youthreach programme. In keeping with the official aims of the programme, co-ordinators and managers saw the programme as fulfilling a number of goals, principally; facilitating the development of social skills, re-engaging young people with learning, and enabling learner progression to further education and training. The majority also saw facilitating lifelong learning, providing a general education, and equipping learners for entry to general occupations as important goals of the programme. Opinion was somewhat more divided on whether the programme should equip young people to enter specific occupations, with only a quarter strongly agreeing with this goal.

CTC managers were more likely to cite preparing learners for entry to specific occupations than Youthreach co-ordinators (with 83 per cent agreeing compared with 49 per cent in Youthreach centres). They were also more likely to strongly agree about the importance of preparing young people for entry to general occupations (66 per cent compared with 46 per cent). In contrast, Youthreach co-ordinators were more likely to emphasise the provision of a general education (75 per cent strongly agreeing with this statement compared with 59 per cent of CTC managers). Youthreach co-ordinators were also more likely to strongly agree with the importance of facilitating lifelong learning (79 per cent doing so compared with 55 per cent of CTC managers). There was little variation in responses by centre size or the profile of learners.

FIGURE 3.2 PROPORTION OF CO-ORDINATORS/MANAGERS STRONGLY AGREEING WITH THE DIFFERENT PURPOSES OF YOUTHREACH BY TYPE OF CENTRE



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

In the case-study interviews, Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers were asked what they valued as the main aims of the programme. Most co-ordinators and managers identified the provision of support and development of soft skills among learners as the most important aim of the programme. The programme was seen as providing young people with the necessary supports, especially around soft skills development, to continue into further education and training or employment:

> *It's a support opportunity. It's the soft skills. It's building on those which are really hard to measure. But sometimes for learners … it mightn't be the academics; it might simply be that they are able to be with other people and communicate and you know kind of socialise with their peer group, you know? Which is something they may not have been able to do before. (Moy, co-ordinator/manager)*

> *You are catching young people who just are maybe heading into criminality, heading into long-term unemployment, heading into long-term illness with depression, or - and you're keeping them in a safe way where they can actually stop and reflect and get the support they need. (Bann, co-ordinator/manager)*

> *I suppose for me in the centre, I think it 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. (Moy, co-ordinator/manager)*

> *The aim here is to take in early school leavers, provide a hell of a lot of soft skills, an environment in which they can train, they can mature in safety and happiness and contentment. And then with a view then to progressing them on to something that will help them in the future. You know, so … it's a means of, for want of a better word, upskilling, retraining. But they have to see them that way. A lot of them don't but when they do see it, it's great. (Liffey, co-ordinator/ manager)*

3.4 REVIEWS, EVALUATIONS AND POLICY

A number of reviews and evaluations have been conducted in recent years (DES, 2010; NEPS, 2017; DES, 2008b; Gordon, 2013; Farrelly, 2017) which have highlighted the success of the programme for many learners while at the same time pointing to issues of disengagement and non-completion among some young people. In 2010, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills (DES)

published a major evaluation report of Youthreach centres (which did not include CTCs) based on the findings and recommendations from 25 of their Youthreach centre evaluations. This report highlighted the considerable success of the programme for many learners but noted that significant numbers of learners failed to engage at all with their Youthreach programme. This was evident in the high rates of absenteeism in centres. The report suggested improvements in supports for literacy and numeracy, health education and in the implementation of individualised learning plans for learners. The Inspectorate also noted a lack of linkage between centres and local and national agencies resulting in a gap in supports and resources for Youthreach learners (DES, 2010). More recently, the DES Inspectorate raised key issues in the current operation of the Youthreach programme. Based on recent Youthreach inspections, they identified that there is not enough clarity in the objectives of the Youthreach programme in the context of the broader education system. They found that overall Youthreach provides a second chance at education for marginalised young people and noted that the overall tone of inspector evaluations is positive. They raised concerns, however, over the increased prevalence of mental health difficulties among young people and whether the staff are equipped to deal with the complex issues arising. They noted variation among ETBs in the extent to which the Youthreach programme is supported and found that the overall quality of leadership in Youthreach centres is varied.[8]

In 2008, the DES also carried out a Value for Money Review which found that Youthreach was a viable programme and should continue to exist (DES, 2008b). Both evaluations suggested areas for improvement including attendance, literacy and numeracy development, health education, the implementation of individual learner plans and improving progression opportunities (McHugh, 2014). In 2016, the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) carried out a survey of centres delivering Youthreach programmes. Its aim was to examine the social context and basic skill attainment of Youthreach participants in both Youthreach centres and CTCs. The NEPS survey was modelled on an earlier study by the Education Research Centre (ERC) which was carried out for the Department of Education and Skills (DES). The aim of this study was to collect data in order to develop an educational profile for each school (NEPS, 2016).

Since its inception, the policy context in which the Youthreach programme operates has changed somewhat in line with the emerging issues among young people. A number of national and international policy initiatives refer to the role of Youthreach within their strategic planning and objectives. EU-wide policies such as the Youth Guarantee aim to provide young people under the age of 25 with access to employment or continued education and training (European

8 Personal communication, Department of Education and Skills Inspectorate.

Commission, 2015). Individual countries have introduced the plan and in 2013 Ireland introduced the Pathways to Work which set out the implementation of the Irish Youth Guarantee (DSP, 2013). Under the guarantee, the Youthreach programme continues to be the main programme for those who have left school without completing secondary education and who wish to enter a 'quality second-chance educational/training pathway' located outside the school system (DSP, 2013). Published in 2014, the SOLAS FET Strategy aims to 'provide a focus for the setting of investment priorities, and to provide a framework for the establishment and development of a strong FET sector' (SOLAS, 2014). As part of the broad range of programmes operating in the FET sector, the report outlines the role of Youthreach in enabling young people to 'participate fully in society and to progress to further education and training, e.g. VTOS, PLCs or to gain employment' (SOLAS, 2014, p. 144). The strategy highlighted the need for evaluation of all of the main programmes provided by SOLAS and this study of the Youthreach programme forms part of this broader assessment of programmes.

In 2016, the Department of Education and Skills published Ireland's *National Skills Strategy* which sets out a range of education and skills targets to be achieved by 2025 in order to address ongoing skills shortages in certain areas and occupations (DES, 2016). The Youthreach programme features in this document as a means through which to develop the skills of young people and respond to the changing needs of employers. The Strategy outlines the role of Youthreach in developing both the skills and confidence of young people before they continue to further education (DES, 2016).

In 2014, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs published the *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures Report* which outlines the government's commitments to children and young people up to the age of 24 (DCYA, 2014). The report emphasises the importance of early intervention, ensuring quality services, inter-agency collaboration, supporting parents and giving voice to children and young people. A key aspect of this inter-departmental report outlines the government commitment to education and in particular student transitions, including the transitions of early school leavers to Youthreach settings (DCYA, 2014). Youthreach is understood under the term 'school' in both this report and the National Youth Strategy (DCYA, 2015). The Teachers' Union of Ireland (2018) suggests that policies such as the Action Plan for Education (DES, 2017) and Wellbeing in Post-Primary Schools (DES, 2013) should also apply to Youthreach learners (TUI, 2018).

3.5 THE SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS INITIATIVE (SENI)

In 2007, SENI was introduced into 20 Youthreach centres in order to address the growing numbers of Youthreach participants with special educational needs. It was developed during a time of rapid policy change in education with the publication

of the *Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act* in 2004. Since then, there has been a plethora of research reports, evaluations and policy documents, all of which have resulted in more students with special educational needs attending mainstream schools. The SENI model is based on the international best practice model of inclusive education where students with special educational needs are supported in mainstream environments. Its objectives for individualised, personalised and holistic education for learners are in line with both national and international policy objectives (Government of Ireland, 2004; UNESCO, 1994).

SENI centres receive additional funding in order to introduce specific forms of support provision and build staff capacity. In 2007, additional funding under the programme was estimated to be €52,000 per annum for a 25-place centre, with €2,000 earmarked for staff training and €4,000 for professional case supervision and staff support (Clarke et al., 2007). The staff training component was originally introduced to allow for the introduction of a model of learner support known as the WebWheel model (described in more detail below).

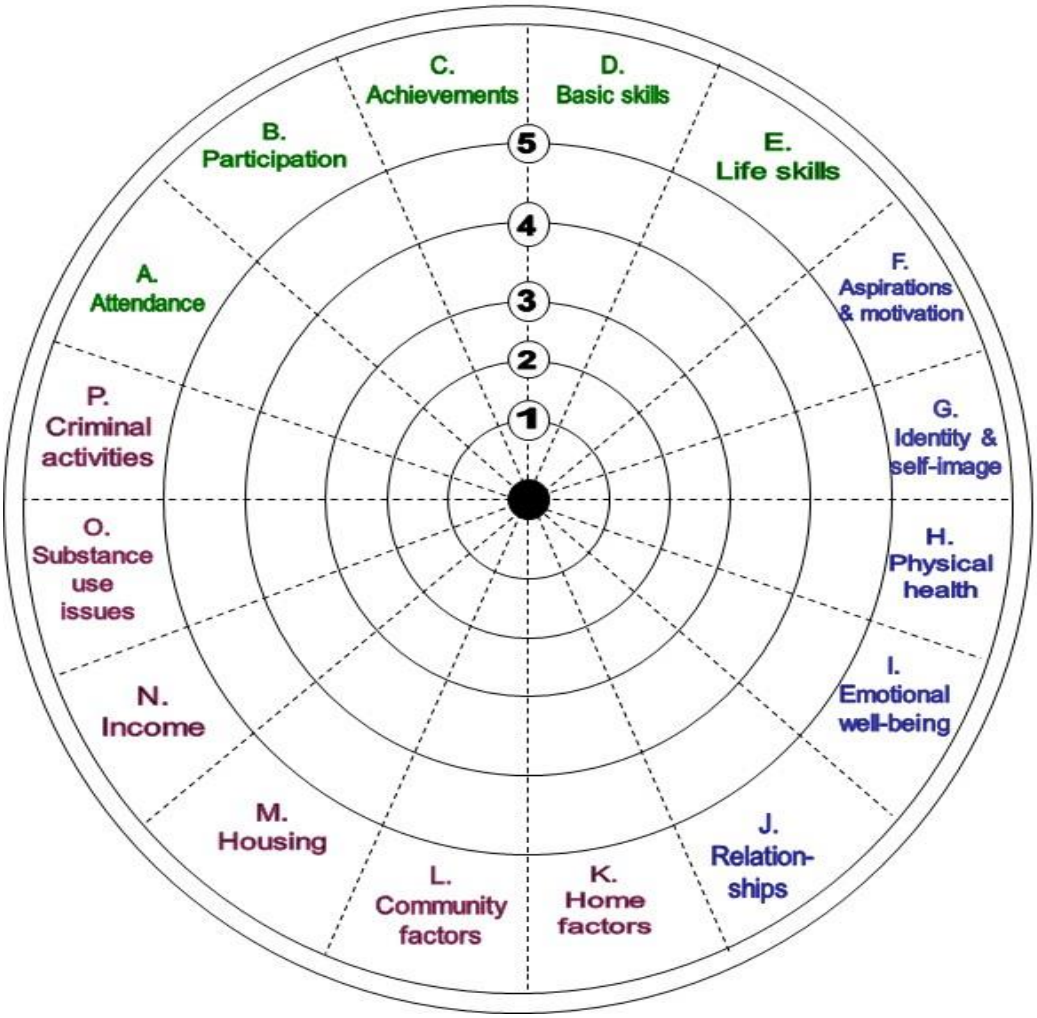
The SENI model uses key workers to provide mentoring to support students, identify needs and create individual action plans (IAPs). The WebWheel tool is used to guide conversations between mentors and learners and provide a means for learners to provide a rating of their own strengths and difficulties (see Figure 3.3). The emphasis is holistic and includes the social and personal barriers to learning of the learner as well as their education and learning needs (Clarke et al., 2007). The model is then used to identify individual student needs and provide a 'planned, holistic and integrated range of supports' to Youthreach learners and link in with external agencies for any additional supports (Clarke et al., 2007).

WebWheel involves six main elements including:

- a general overview assessment of learner difficulties;
- the implementation of a WebWheel mentoring framework involving the assignment of a mentor and the creation of an IAP;
- addressing participant needs through targeted interventions;
- building staff capacity; and
- measuring and recording learner outcomes and reviewing and planning (Youthreach ND-a).

A key feature of WebWheel is to involve the learner in their own assessment and the information gathered during mentor meetings is then used to create new goals which are recorded in the learner's IAP.

FIGURE 3.3 THE WEBWHEEL MODEL



Source: Gordon (2013, p.39).

An evaluation of SENI in 2007 aimed to assess the impact of SENI and suggest changes if SENI was to be extended to other Youthreach centres (Clarke et al., 2007). The evaluation involved interviews with stakeholders, interviews with Youthreach staff and learners, case studies, workshops and surveys. This research found that, relative to other special educational needs supports, SENI was good value for money:

> *The total allocation per 25 students under SENI is €58,500 or €2,340 per student. This represents the equivalent of the salary of one teacher and thus compares very favourably to the allocation that would be provided to the same cohort of students if they were in a post-primary school. (Clarke et al., 2007, p. 20)*

An evaluation of SENI in 2009 found that it 'led to marked and significant differences in learner outcomes across every element of the Youthreach

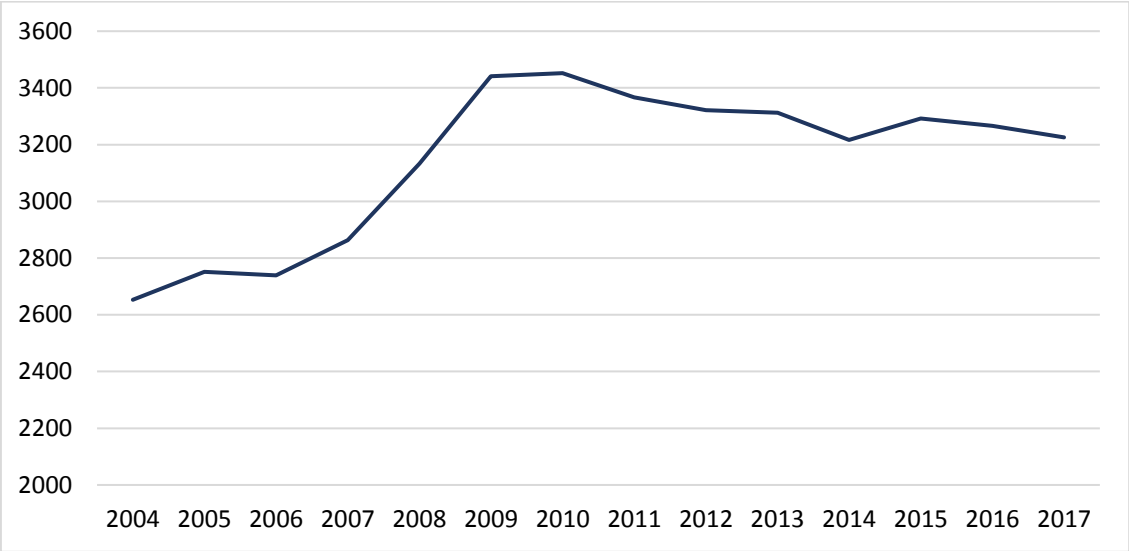
programme' (Gordon, 2009). The author of the report particularly noted the impact of SENI on retention in the SENI centres compared to the non-SENI centres.

3.6 PARTICIPATION IN YOUTHREACH

3.6.1 Trends in participation in the programme

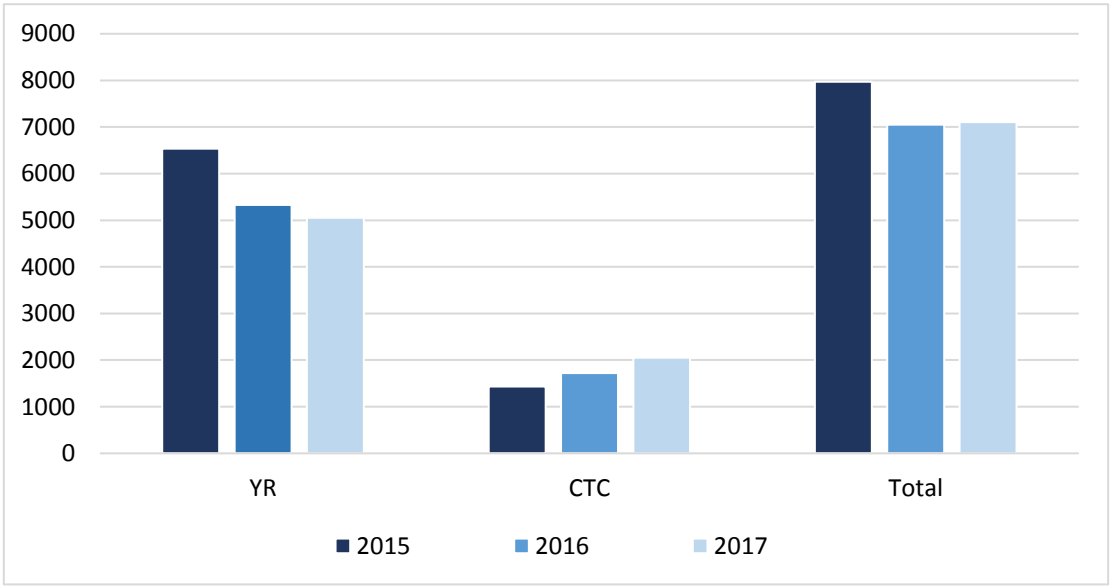
There are difficulties in obtaining a consistent picture of the number of Youthreach participants over time. The DES series shown in Figure 3.4 shows the number of learners in Youthreach centres over time (on an academic year basis). Numbers increased significantly between 2004 and 2010, especially after the start of the recession, a pattern which reflected the growing unemployment levels among young early leavers (see Chapter 2). The numbers taking part then dropped slightly from 2010 to 2017. More detailed information, which includes Community Training Centres as well as Youthreach centres, is available through administrative data from the SOLAS Services Plans for 2015 to 2017 on a calendar year basis. Using this measure, the total number of beneficiaries on the programme dropped from 10,675 in 2015 to 10,391 in 2016 with a further fall to 9,932 in 2017. This represents a fall of 7 per cent in total beneficiaries between 2015 and 2017. However, in these figures, a young person who finishes a Level 3 qualification in June 2017 and goes on to a Level 4 qualification in the same centre in September will be counted again. The figure is therefore larger than the number of individual learners. Additional data provided by SOLAS from the FARR database show the number of learners commencing or starting in a centre after the first day of January each year. Figure 3.5 shows an overall fall of 11 per cent between 2015 and 2017 in the number of learners starting on the programme. This overall figure conceals a greater drop in in Youthreach centres (of 23 per cent) and a rise (from a smaller learner base) of 43 per cent in Community Training Centres.

FIGURE 3.4 NUMBER OF LEARNERS IN YOUTHREACH CENTRES 2004-2017



Source: DES Education Statistics Database.

FIGURE 3.5 NUMBER OF LEARNERS STARTING AFTER FIRST DAY OF JANUARY IN YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES 2015-2017



Source: SOLAS FARR database.

It is even more challenging to assess the level of take-up of the programme over time. In 1997, NESF estimated that there was a shortfall of 3,000 training plans for young people who left school without qualifications and recommended an increase in Youthreach places of 1,000 in the following year. As part of this study, Annual School Leavers' Survey data were examined to ascertain the potential of the data to assess the levels of participation in the Youthreach programme over time and the profile of participants. The School Leavers' Survey ran from 1980 to 2007 mostly on an annual basis, but for a few years the survey ran biennially. The surveys

examined the experiences, pathways and outcomes of school leavers one to two years after leaving school. The survey population included all those leaving the official second-level education system during the course of an academic year, thereby including both early school leavers and school completers. Given that the Youthreach programme was introduced in 1989, surveys beginning in 1991 were examined.

For the period from 1991 to 2004, the surveys asked respondents whether they were, at the time of the survey, participating in any state-sponsored programme for young people, including the Youthreach programme. Unfortunately, the numbers reporting participation throughout this period are very low and well below what would be expected, particularly given higher early school leaving levels. In any one year, typically fewer than 50 respondents reported participating in Youthreach at the time of the survey, compared to a total early school leaving sample of approximately 1,000-1,500. While some may have completed their Youthreach programme before the survey (which took place 12 to 24 months after leaving school), the vast majority do not appear to report their participation in the programme. There is clearly a substantial level of under-reporting of participation, making the data unreliable. For the 2006 and 2007 surveys, the question changed to whether they had ever participated in a state-sponsored programme, including Youthreach, for young people since leaving school. The issue of under-reporting remains, and for 2007, for example, just 87 school leavers reported having ever participated in the Youthreach programme compared to a total early school leaving group of 675. The levels of under-reporting are such that reliable results in terms of levels of participation in the programme and the profile of participants cannot be assumed.

In addition, data sources such as the Quarterly National Household Survey (now the Labour Force Survey) and the Census of Population do not record the type of education and training taken in the level of granularity needed to identify Youthreach participants. There is therefore no reliable basis for estimating the take-up of the programme by early leavers over time, especially as we cannot determine the extent to which learners remain in the programme for more than two years or move from one centre to another.

It might be expected that the marked decline in early school leaving outlined in Chapter 2 would result in considerably fewer young people taking part in the Youthreach programme. However, there are a number of reasons why this might not be the case. The profile of early leavers when they make up one-in-six of the cohort will be very different than when they make up only 8 per cent of the cohort. When early school leaving was more common, the group, though disadvantaged, was also relatively diverse in educational qualifications and family circumstances, among other characteristics. While having poorer labour market outcomes overall,

some of this group did obtain employment. The smaller group of current early leavers is more marginalised and faces multiple challenges (see Chapter 4). This profile, coupled with a long-term decline in employment chances for early leavers (Smyth and McCoy, 2011), means that the group is less likely to obtain employment and more likely to be reliant on programmes like Youthreach. The relative stability in the number of places over a period when early school leaving dropped markedly would suggest a relatively high level of take-up of the programme, although the scale of the take-up cannot be accurately estimated.

3.6.2 Geographical variation in programme provision

The section so far has looked at national figures for the numbers enrolled in the Youthreach programme. However, it is also worth examining the extent of geographical variation in the provision of programme places. In the survey, senior managers were asked about the nature and extent of provision in their local area. Three-quarters of those surveyed felt there were about the right number of Youthreach/Community Training Centres in their local area; 12 per cent considered there to be too many centres while 14 per cent felt there were too few. The patterns of responses varied across ETB areas, with perceptions varying by actual levels of provision; those who felt there were too many centres had an average of 8.2 centres in their remit compared to 7.3 for those who felt there were the right number of centres and 5.2 for those who felt there were too few centres.

SOLAS FARR data for 2017 provide insights into the distribution of learners in Youthreach and Community Training Centres by ETB (Table 3.1). CTC learner numbers are much more highly concentrated in the two Dublin ETBs than are numbers in Youthreach Centres (41 per cent compared with 21 per cent). Furthermore, two ETBs (Cavan-Monaghan and Donegal) have no CTC places while 17 per cent of Youthreach places are in these areas.

TABLE 3.1 DISTRIBUTION OF LEARNERS IN YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES ACROSS ETBS, 2017

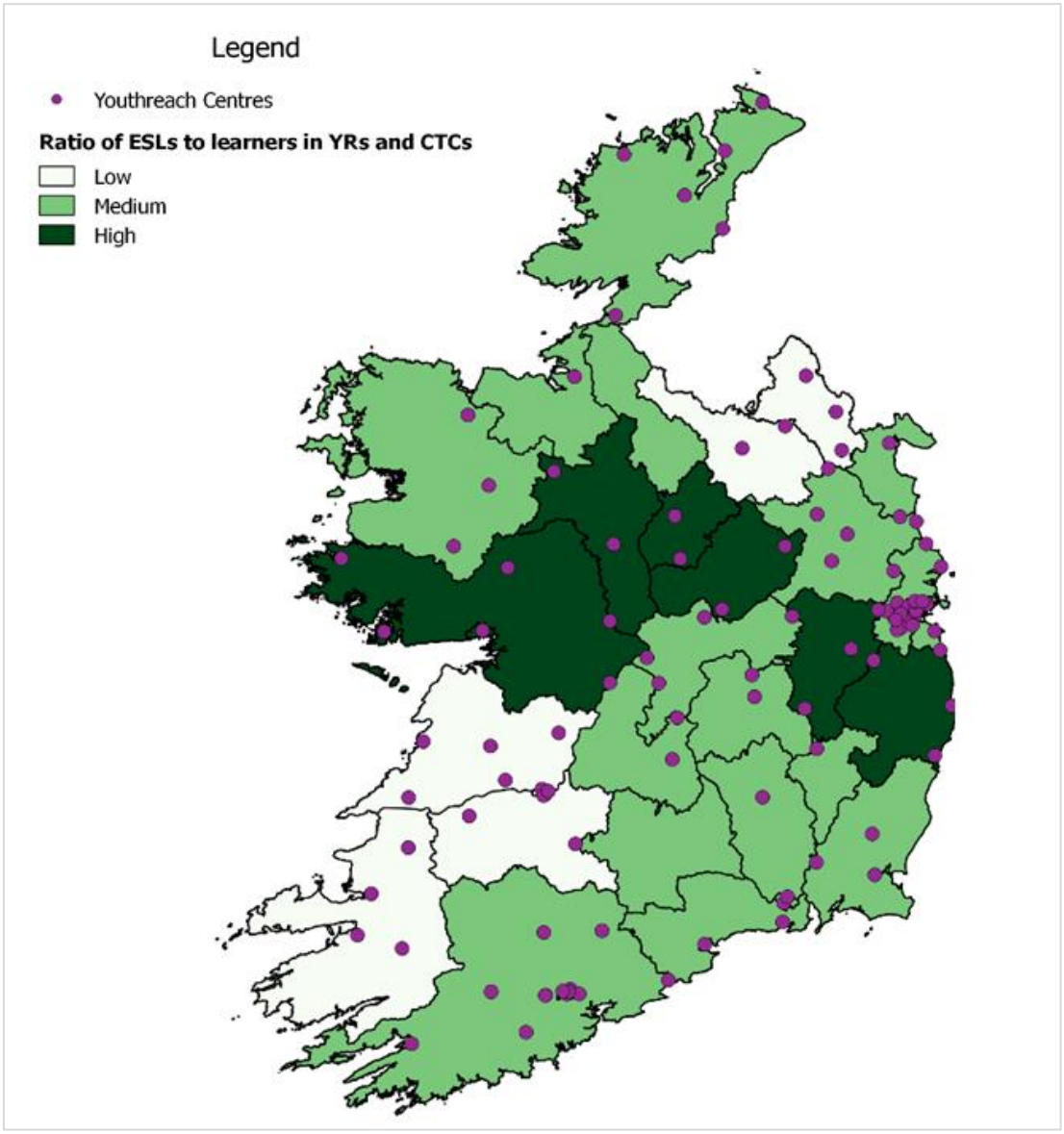
ETB	Youthreach Centres	Community Training Centres
Cavan-Monaghan	6.9	0.0
City of Dublin	14.3	33.4
Cork	11.8	5.6
Dublin-Dún Laoghaire	6.6	7.4
Donegal	10.4	0.0
Galway-Roscommon	3.8	2.1
Kerry	3.5	2.1
Kildare-Wicklow	6.0	3.1
Kilkenny-Carlow	1.1	6.8
Laois-Offaly	3.5	4.7
Limerick-Clare	7.7	7.0
Longford-Westmeath	3.1	4.6
Louth-Meath	8.3	3.1
Mayo-Sligo	4.2	4.4
Tipperary	2.5	8.8
Waterford	6.2	7.0

Source: SOLAS FARR database.

These figures tell only part of the story since they do not take account of overall population sizes or the number of early school leavers in each local area. In order to explore the degree of variation in provision more accurately, data on the number of Youthreach learners (in Youthreach and Community Training Centres) by county in 2016 were related to Census data on the number of young people aged 15 to 24 years of age who had ceased their education and whose highest education level was no formal education, primary or lower secondary (Figure 3.6). The level of provision was then calculated as the ratio between the number of early school leavers in the population and the number of learners at 1 January 2016 in the ETB area. Although making up two separate ETB areas, Dublin city and county are aggregated for the purpose of analysis as, in practice, young people attending their nearest centre may in fact be crossing ETB boundaries. Figure 3.6 shows the ratio across ETB areas as well as the precise location of Youthreach and Community Training Centres. The shading on the map shows the ratio across ETBs, with darker shading indicating more early leavers per Youthreach place, that is, lower levels of provision in relative terms. Lower levels of provision are found in Kildare-Wicklow, Longford-Westmeath and Galway-Roscommon. Higher levels of provision are found in Cavan-Monaghan, Kerry and Limerick-Clare. This should be interpreted as a very rough benchmark for a number of reasons. Firstly, young people can stay in the programme for different lengths of time and this pattern may be geographically variable. Secondly, the early leaver group used in the calculations may include young people who have already taken part in the programme. Nonetheless, the figures suggest that provision is geographically variable and

reflects legacy issues rather than the location of early leavers. In addition, the figures suggest relatively high levels of take-up of the programme among early leavers, though existing data sources do not allow for a systematic analysis of (changes in) take-up levels.

FIGURE 3.6 NUMBER OF EARLY SCHOOL LEAVERS RELATIVE TO YOUTHREACH PLACES BY ETB AREA, SHOWING THE LOCATION OF YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES



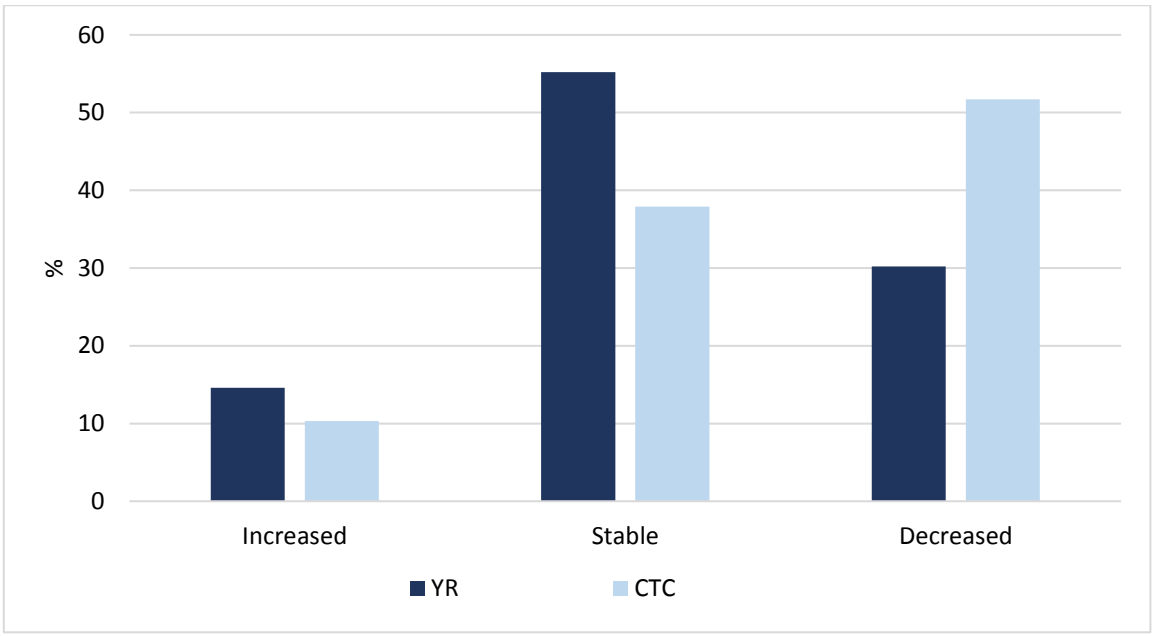
Source: Census of Population 2016; SOLAS FARR database.[9]

At centre level, co-ordinators and managers were asked about the extent to which the number of learners taking part in the Youthreach programme in their centre had changed over the past five years. Over half of the Youthreach centres indicated

9 We are very grateful to our colleague Martin Murphy for constructing this map.

that the number of learners had remained stable in recent years while 30 per cent reported a decrease in numbers (Figure 3.7). Despite the overall fall in the number of early leavers nationally, 15 per cent of centres indicated an increase in learner numbers. Although at the ETB level, CTC numbers were roughly stable (or even increased somewhat), individual CTCs were more likely to report a fall in numbers, with this occurring in over half of centres; 38 per cent of CTCs had a stable intake, with only 10 per cent reporting an increase in numbers. Changes in the profile of learners are discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

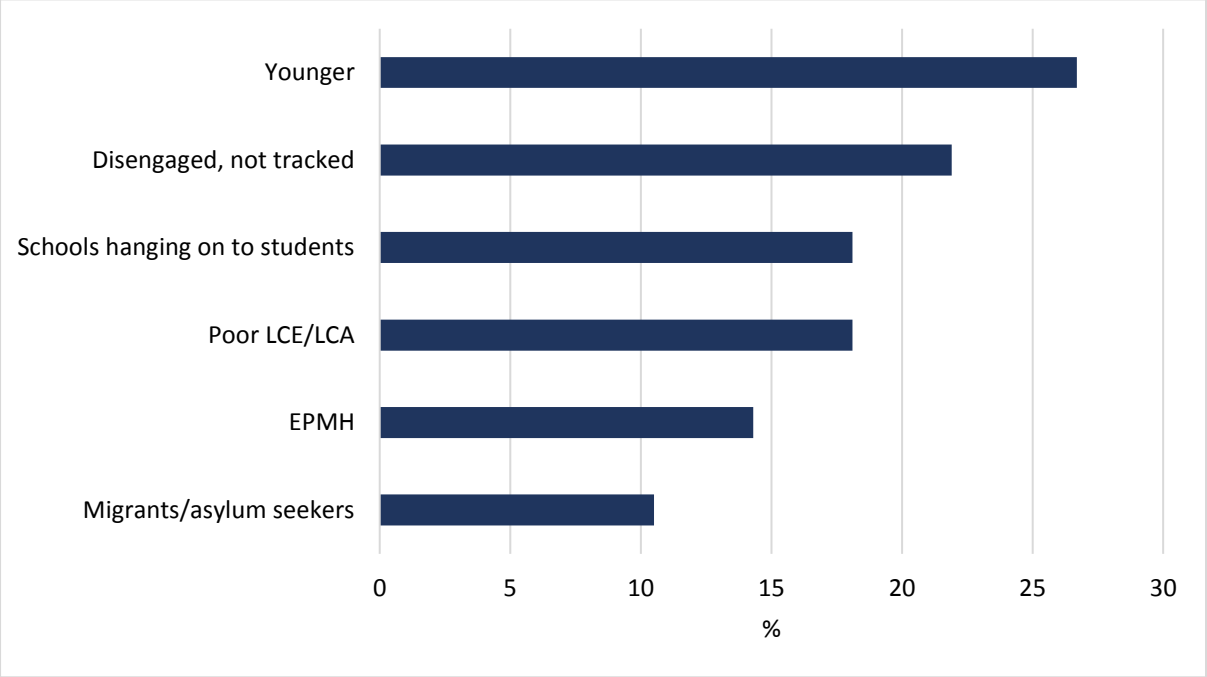
FIGURE 3.7 CHANGE IN THE NUMBER OF LEARNERS OVER THE PAST FIVE YEARS IN INDIVIDUAL YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

In the survey, co-ordinators and managers were asked whether they felt there were particular groups of young people that could benefit from the programme but did not currently do so. The vast majority (90 per cent) indicated that there were such groups of young people, though they differed in the groups they specified. The groups most frequently mentioned are presented in Figure 3.8, though a range of other young people were mentioned.

FIGURE 3.8 CO-ORDINATOR/MANAGER PERSPECTIVES ON THE GROUPS OF YOUNG PEOPLE THAT COULD BENEFIT FROM THE YOUTHREACH PROGRAMME



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

Over a quarter of co-ordinators/managers felt that there was a cohort of young people who fell below the age cut-off for entry but were out of school and would benefit from a programme like Youthreach:[10]

> *I strongly believe through my contact with Tusla and parents that there is a much younger cohort of children who do not transition well into secondary school and they need to be serviced. At present they are in limbo. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *I have noticed a marked increase in the number of enquiries from school principals and EWO for learners aged 13/14/15 years who would benefit greatly from a Youthreach type programme either on a part-time or full-time basis but geared more specifically to that younger age group who are disengaged in school, displaying some signs of emotional and or behavioural difficulties and possibly in danger of becoming engaged in anti-social behaviour. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

[10] Existing out-of-school provision for this younger age group is, at the time of writing, subject to review by the Department of Education and Skills. Preliminary findings suggest marked geographical variation in access to such provision.

Over a fifth of co-ordinators/managers felt that currently many young people who left school were 'falling between the cracks' as they were not followed up if they were 16 years or older upon leaving school:

> *If a young person leaves after they meet the legal requirement of 16 years old and/or a JC there is no obligation for a young person to be referred. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *It can be difficult to identify those students who drop out of school after the age of 16 which can lead to them not taking up places on offer due to lack of knowledge of Youthreach and other programmes. Schools should be required to report to the local ETB where a student leaves school without completing a full Leaving Cert so that they can be made aware of the options available to them. (Co-ordinator/ manager, survey response)*

Just under a fifth felt that schools were now retaining many students who had more or less disengaged and would be better suited to the Youthreach programme, a pattern that was related by co-ordinators/managers to negative perceptions of the programme:

> *As there is no real departmental promotion of the programme, there is still a lot of myths and stigma that needs to be dispelled. As a result, young people in schools who would really benefit from the programme 'hang on' or are made 'hang on' at school and leave with poor Leaving Certs and diminished self-confidence. (Co-ordinator/ manager, survey response)*

> *I think a big challenge for Youthreach is the branding. In the past Youthreach was seen as a place troubled teenagers went to, it's hard for the parents of teenagers who are quietly disengaged to buy into the programme, a fear of how their children may fit into the programme and who their new peers are going to be. (Co-ordinator/ manager, survey response)*

> *There are a lot of young people in school who are struggling for various reasons but will never benefit from a Youthreach programme because of the stigma that unfortunately is sometimes attached to Youthreach. Many schools see Youthreach as a last resort or don't value it at all and this attitude is internalised by both students and parents and going to Youthreach is then seen as a failure, a holding pen for losers and troublemakers or unfortunately as a punishment for not being good enough for school. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

A similar proportion (18 per cent) would like to be able to cater for young people who had a Leaving Certificate qualification but with poor grades and literacy/numeracy skills:

> *The Leaving Cert student who didn't do too badly but not well enough to progress to FE and in some cases not emotionally ready to progress to FE, Youthreach would be the perfect bridging programme to help support this young person with supports in developing self-esteem and confidence. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

Co-ordinators/managers also indicate the potential for greater involvement of young people with emotional, psychological and mental health difficulties and for migrants/asylum seekers. There were some differences in responses between Youthreach and CTCs, with Youthreach co-ordinators more likely to mention targeting younger learners, those seen as inappropriately retained by schools and those with EPMH difficulties, while CTC managers were more likely to refer to the needs of those with poor senior cycle qualifications and migrants/asylum seekers.

3.7 SUMMARY

The Youthreach programme represents the main strand of provision for young people who leave school early. This chapter summarises existing small-scale studies on the programme, which were mainly confined to Youthreach centres. These studies have highlighted the value of the programme but have suggested areas for further development. Twenty Youthreach centres are involved in SENI and the initiative has been found to enhance learner outcomes in earlier evaluations.

There is a lack of long-term data on trends in participation in the programme across both Youthreach and Community Training Centres. Places in Youthreach centres increased during the recession in response to rising levels of youth unemployment. From 2010 to 2015 they remained relatively stable, despite the fall in early school leaving levels (see Chapter 2). Since 2015, there has been a decline in learner numbers of around 23 per cent in Youthreach centres, though co-ordinators indicate differing trends across individual centres. It is harder to assess trends in CTC provision but available information indicates that learner numbers have increased over the period 2015 to 2017. As in other strands of FET (McGuinness et al., 2014; 2018), current provision tends to reflect legacy issues as well as levels of need, with significant variation across areas in the take-up of places relative to the number of early leavers. There are also differences between Youthreach and CTC settings in their geographical representation, with CTC learners more highly concentrated in the Dublin area. Co-ordinators and managers feel that the programme has the potential to cater for a number of groups of young people who

are not currently accessing the programme, including younger people and those who are disengaging from school who are not being tracked by the system.

CHAPTER 4

The profile of Youthreach learners

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the type of learner who enters the Youthreach programme. The first section explores existing research on the marginalised profile of Youthreach learners. Using administrative and survey data, the second section examines the profile of current Youthreach learners across centres. Case-study interviews enabled us to identify five learner typologies based on the main characteristics of those who enter the programme, including learners who: experienced negative teacher/student relationships; struggled with academic schoolwork; experienced emotional, psychological and mental health difficulties (EPMH); experienced behavioural issues; and those learners from Traveller backgrounds. Section 4.5 examines the referral pathways into the programme and the final section looks at negative school experiences among learners and the impact this has on their ability to re-engage with education.

4.2 EXISTING RESEARCH

Existing research tends to focus on Youthreach centres rather than Community Training Centres, with the result that much less is known about the profile of learners in the latter setting (for an exception, see NACTM, 2018). According to McHugh (2014), the profile of young people in Youthreach centres has changed considerably over time (McHugh, 2014). In particular, there has been a sharp increase in the range of difficulties and issues prevalent among Youthreach learners, with many learners coming from dysfunctional family backgrounds, requiring psychological support and experiencing literacy and numeracy difficulties (McHugh, 2014). The change in learner profile is also a concern for staff members who are required to manage challenging situations without the necessary training or skills for these emerging difficulties (McHugh, 2014).

Given the length of time that Youthreach has been in operation, it is perhaps surprising that so little is known about the nature and characteristics of young people who pursue the programme, or the Youthreach centres or CTCs that provide the programme. Youthreach is designed to target those who are considered to fall within Priority Group 1 or Priority Group 2 status. Priority Group 1 includes those who are unemployed, aged between 15 and 20, have no qualifications (complete) from their Junior Cycle, i.e. less than five grade Ds at Ordinary Level in the Junior Certificate. Priority Group 2 includes lone parents, drug court participants and young persons released from detention (Gordon, 2007; 2009). There are a number of small-scale studies which highlight the distinct profile

of learners in Youthreach and Community Training Centres (Gordon, 2007; 2009; NACTM, 2018). One common theme in these studies is the nature of the Youthreach target group, which is comprised of young people who 'are alienated from the formal system, economically disadvantaged, socially vulnerable and at risk of long-term unemployment' (Gordon 2007, p. 3). Previous research consistently shows how young people recruited to Youthreach typically suffer from economic and social disadvantage as well as educational disadvantage. All have left, dropped out or have been excluded from mainstream schools, with almost all participants becoming alienated from the formal educational environment.

Much of the research on the profile of learners in Youthreach centres stems from the work of Gordon (2007; 2013; 2017). Gordon's (2017) study highlighted the increase in mental health difficulties among learners, reporting that almost all the 25 learners had experienced adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). More than half of learners reported having four or more ACEs in their lives and ACEs were strongly correlated with mental health difficulties among the learners (Gordon, 2017). In the 2009 evaluation of SENI, Gordon found that the emotional wellbeing of learners was lacking, and learners reported mental health conditions such as eating disorders, irrational fears and depression which in some cases were linked to suicide or suicidal ideation (Gordon 2009, p.23). This study highlighted learners' issues with social communication which manifested in outward behaviours such as bullying, acting out and poor anger management as well as in inward behaviours such as chronic shyness and anxiety (Gordon, 2009).

CTCs also report a wide range of issues among learners, including drug addiction, mental health issues such as depression and social anxiety, body and sexual identity issues and family issues (NACTM, 2018). This research highlights the complexity of the issues among learners which can include:

> *low achievements in basic skills; reduced motivation and expectations; poor physical health and factors undermining mental health such as stress, low self-esteem, depression and lack of emotional regulation; and practical difficulties which impinge on learners' participation in the programme, possibly deriving from home or community challenges, homelessness, low income, substance misuse or engagement in criminal activities.*

Gordon (2017) also notes the incidence of participants with disabilities and, in particular, those with specific or mild general learning difficulties and those with emotional and behavioural difficulties (Gordon 2007; 2009; 2013; 2017). These findings are in line with other research which reported that over 80 per cent of learners in Youthreach centres have special educational needs, including young people with emotional and behavioural difficulties (CHL, 2006). This research also

acknowledged the high levels of disadvantage among Youthreach learners which have contributed to them being marginalised and excluded from the formal education system (CHL, 2006).

Research by WRC Social and Economic Consultants for the Equality Authority in 2007 also points to the diverse learner body in Youthreach, with many learners reporting multiple forms of disadvantage (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2007). The study found that 50 per cent of young people were from dysfunctional family backgrounds, 30 per cent had literacy and numeracy difficulties and 30 per cent needed psychological support (WRC Social and Economic Consultants, 2007). A 2010 Inspectorate evaluation of Youthreach centres found that many young people had a wide mix of individual needs often exacerbated by mental health issues and family problems:

- Emotional pressures in their private lives;
- Dysfunctional family backgrounds;
- Substance misuse;
- Literacy and numeracy difficulties;
- Poor physical health;
- Personal isolation.

The evaluation found that young people in Youthreach regularly reported feeling rejected as a result of being 'put out of mainstream education' (DES, 2010).

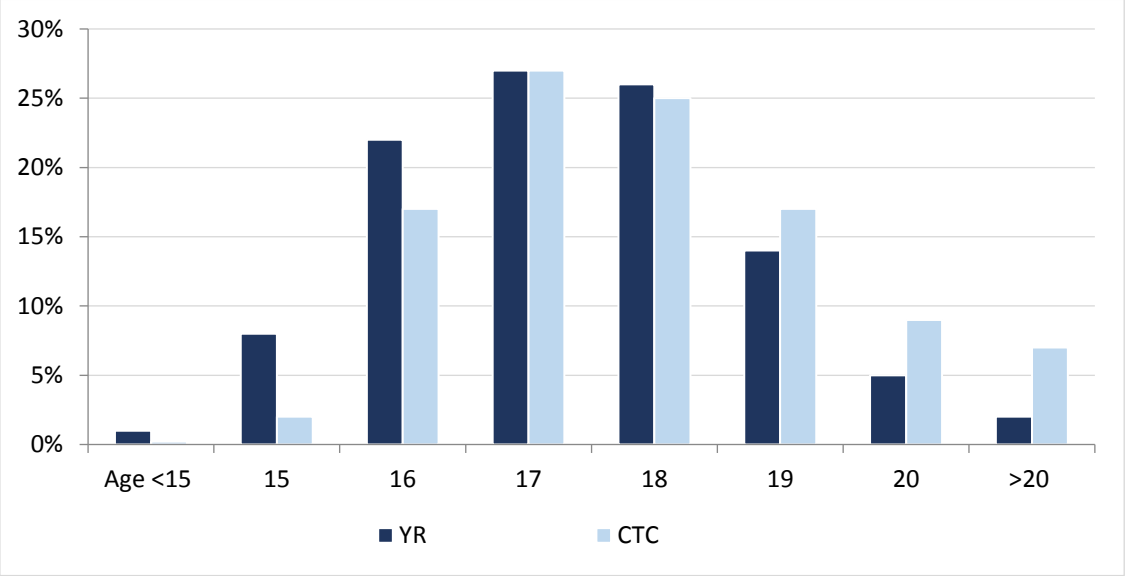
4.3 THE PROFILE OF CURRENT YOUTHREACH LEARNERS USING SURVEY DATA

The survey of co-ordinators and managers collected detailed information on the characteristics of learners, perceived changes in learner profile over time and the pathways through which young people came to the centre. Some of this information was based on objective data such as gender, age and prior educational attainment recorded when the learner enrolled in the programme. Other characteristics, such as living in a jobless household or having a mental health difficulty, could be described as reflecting the perceptions of the co-ordinator/manager. However, it became clear from the case-study interviews that co-ordinators/managers had very in-depth knowledge of the histories and family circumstances of learners in their centres. Furthermore, co-ordinator/ manager reports closely match official statistics on characteristics such as the proportion living in jobless households.

A similar gender profile was found across the two Youthreach settings, with slightly more males than females participating in the programme; 58 per cent of those in Youthreach centres and 55 per cent of those in CTCs were male. Males made up the majority of learners in almost three-quarters of centres. However, this overall figure conceals a good deal of variation between centres, with the proportion female varying from none to over three-quarters across centres.

The official age of Youthreach participants is between 15 and 20 years, and CTC centres between 16 and 20 years. Figure 4.1 shows the majority (88 per cent) of participants in the Youthreach programme are aged between 16 and 19. There is a slight variation by centre type, with CTCs more likely to have participants over the age of 19 compared to Youthreach centres. Youthreach centres appear to have a younger age profile, with higher proportions of participants aged 15 and younger. As with gender, there was a good deal of variation between centres in the age profile of learners, with the proportion aged 17 or under varying from none to over three-quarters.

FIGURE 4.1 AGE OF LEARNERS

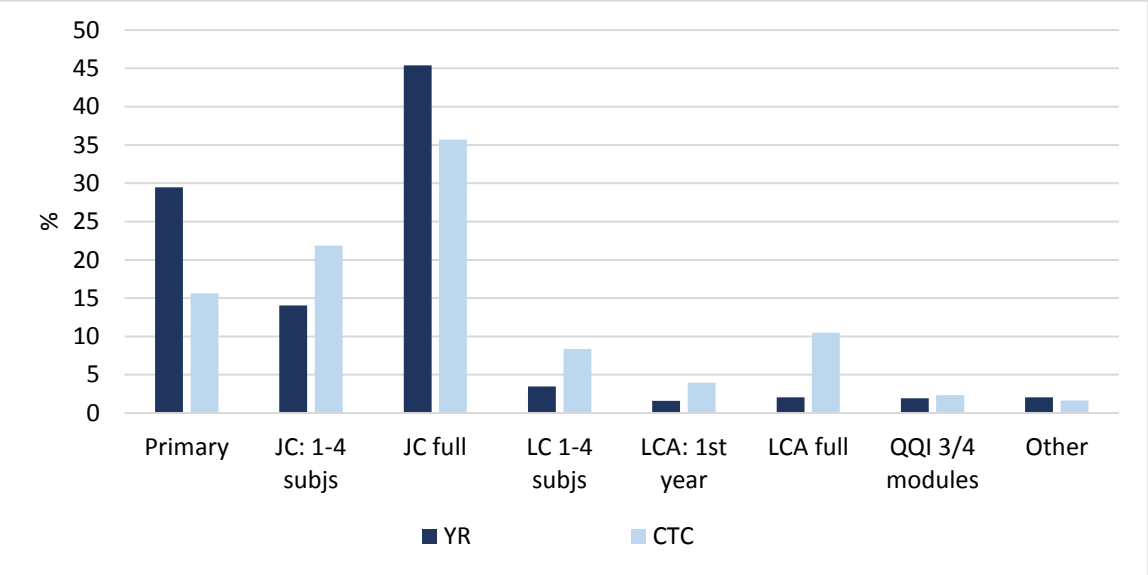


Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

The survey asked Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers about the highest level of educational attainment among current learners on entry to the programme. Learners in Youthreach centres have lower levels of education on entry to the programme compared to those in CTCs. Thus, just under 30 per cent of Youthreach learners had primary education only while this was the case for 15 per cent of CTC learners. The largest group in both settings was comprised of those with a full Junior Certificate qualification. Only a very small proportion had completed senior cycle qualifications, though this was somewhat more common in

CTC settings (with 10 per cent of learners having the full LCA compared to 2 per cent in Youthreach centres). Young men were more likely than young women to enter the programme with primary education only (28 per cent compared with 20 per cent). The educational profile of learners varied significantly across centres, with some centres having few or no young people with only primary education while in others this group made up a majority of the learner population. The implications of these differences in profile for the qualifications offered under the programme are discussed in Chapter 6.

FIGURE 4.2 HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATION ON ENTRY TO THE YOUTHREACH PROGRAMME



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

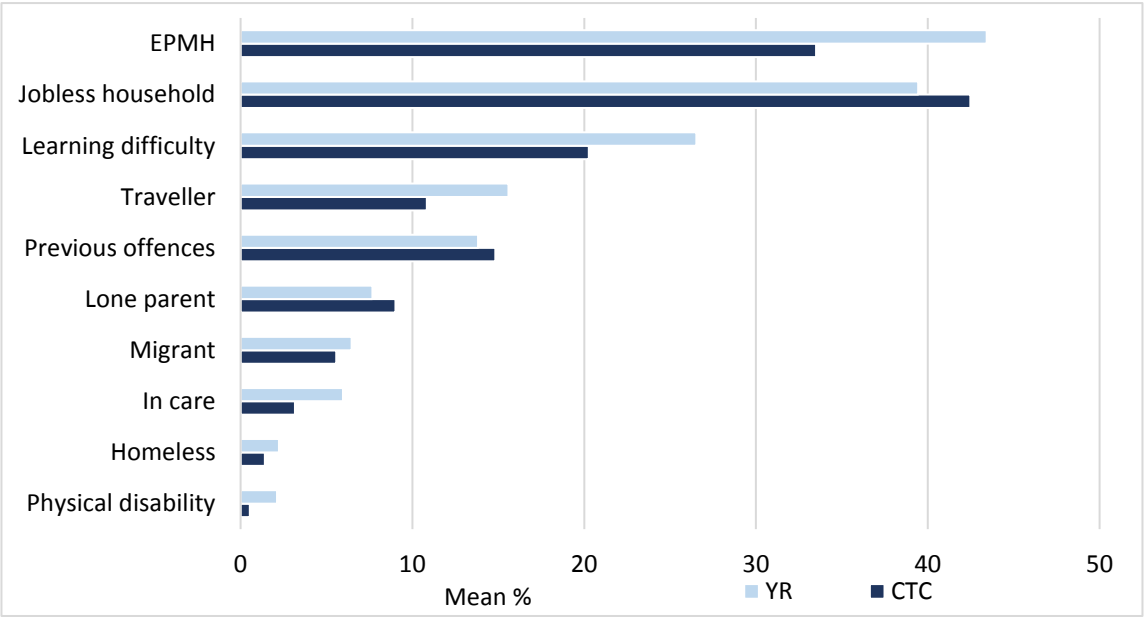
Previous research on the profile of Youthreach participants shows that Youthreach participants have 'a significant level of difficulty and risk', with many having experienced multiple adverse events throughout their life (Gordon, 2017). Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers were asked to give information about the profile and characteristics of participants currently registered under a specified list of headings. Figure 4.3 shows the average proportion of learners in each of these groups by centre. In interpreting the patterns shown, it is worth noting that learners may fall into more than one group; for example, a young person may have mental health difficulties and be living in a jobless household.

Co-ordinators/managers report a very high prevalence of emotional, psychological or mental health (EPMH) difficulties among the learner population, with around four-in-ten learners having such difficulties. A similarly high proportion of learners are from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, that is, are living in jobless households. The figures reported by co-ordinators/ managers are in line with the proportion of early school leavers nationally living in jobless households

(see Chapter 2). A very significant minority, around one-in-four, of learners have a learning difficulty. Young people from Traveller backgrounds make up around one-in-six of the learner population. Given that Travellers make up less than one per cent of the Irish population, this is a very high level of representation. A significant proportion, around 14 per cent on average, of learners have had problems with the criminal justice system. Around 8 per cent of learners are lone parents. Young people from a migrant background make up an average of 6 per cent of the learner population across centres. This proportion is lower than their representation in the population as a whole. Given that rates of early school leaving are roughly comparable between Irish and migrant youth (Barrett et al., 2017), this would appear to suggest that migrants are not taking part in the Youthreach programme to the same extent as their Irish peers.

There is some difference in profile between Youthreach and Community Training Centres, although there is a good degree of commonality. The proportion with EPMH, learning difficulties or from Traveller backgrounds is somewhat higher in Youthreach centres. Young people attending CTCs are somewhat more likely to be living in jobless households or to be lone parents. Some variation in the representation of Travellers was evident across ETBs, not surprisingly given the geographical distribution of the Traveller population (see Watson, 2017). There is also significant variation in the extent to which centres have previous offenders among their population across ETBs, with a higher representation in Kerry, Cork, City of Dublin and Louth-Meath.

FIGURE 4.3 CHARACTERISTICS OF LEARNERS IN YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES



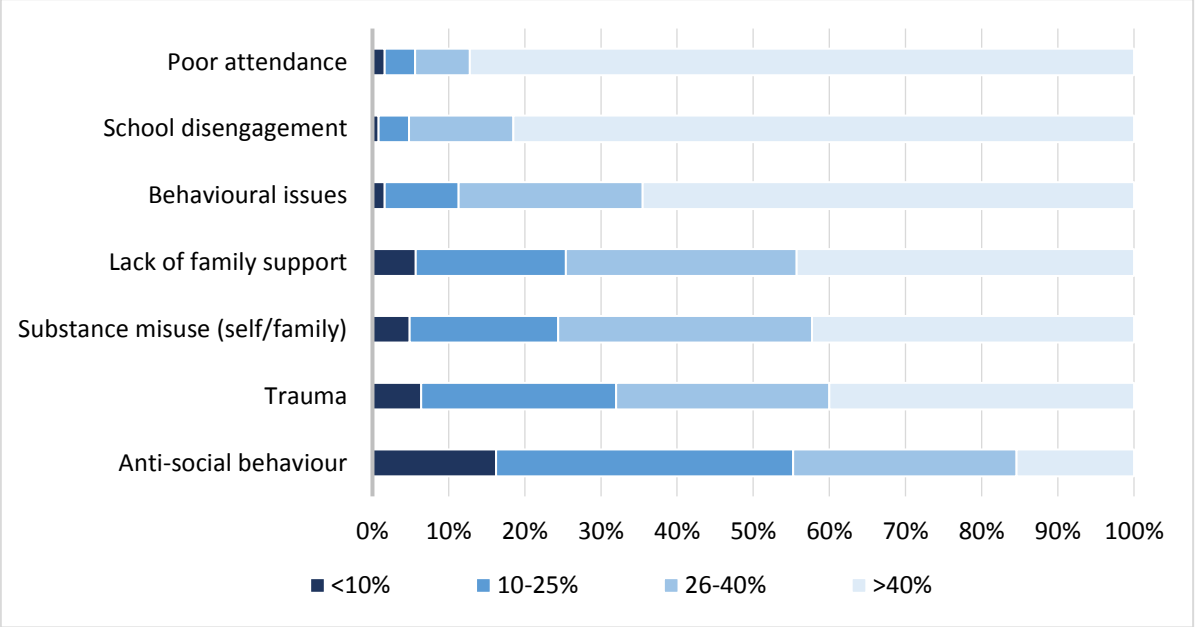
Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

Centres with a higher concentration of socio-economic disadvantage tend to have more learners with EPMH and learning difficulties and a history of previous offences. Centres with a higher representation of Traveller young people tended to have a younger profile and a higher proportion of learners with only primary education. Centres were classified into three groups on the basis of the relative representation of socio-economic disadvantage, EPMH and learning difficulties, and Travellers (see also Chapter 1). Using this classification, Youthreach centres were more likely to fall into the high need group (25 per cent compared with 15 per cent of CTCs) while CTCs were more likely to fall into the low need group (37 per cent compared with 20 per cent). The extent to which the concentration of need influences centre provision as well as learner experiences and outcomes is discussed in the remainder of the report.

Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers were also asked about their knowledge of participant experiences prior to entering the programme. Negative school experiences prior to entering the Youthreach programme appear to dominate previous experiences among learners. Eighty-seven per cent of co-ordinators/managers reported that more than 40 per cent of current learners had poor school attendance records prior to entry. Four-fifths (82 per cent) reported that more than 40 per cent of learners did not participate or engage with school prior to entering the programme. Furthermore, 65 per cent reported that more than 40 per cent of current participants had behavioural issues prior to entry. These patterns were evident in both Youthreach and Community Training centres.

Other factors also feature, with 44 per cent of centres indicating that more than 40 per cent of participants experienced a lack of family support. Substance misuse either by the young person themselves or a family member was reported for at least a quarter of learners in the majority (three-quarters) of centres. Learners were also highly likely to have experienced some form of trauma (such as a bereavement or serious illness), with over two-thirds of centres reporting this for at least a quarter of learners. Greater variation was found in the reported incidence of anti-social behaviour, with 15 per cent of co-ordinators/managers reporting a high level (40 per cent or more of learners), while this was relatively uncommon (less than 10 per cent of learners) in a similar proportion of centres. These patterns were broadly similar across Youthreach and CTC settings. The exception was in relation to trauma, which had a higher reported incidence in Youthreach centres (45 per cent indicating 40 per cent or more learners had this experience compared with 24 per cent of CTCs).

FIGURE 4.4 PROPORTION OF YOUTHREACH LEARNERS WHO HAD EXPERIENCED SPECIFIC DIFFICULTIES PRIOR TO ENTERING THE PROGRAMME, AS REPORTED BY CO-ORDINATORS/MANAGERS

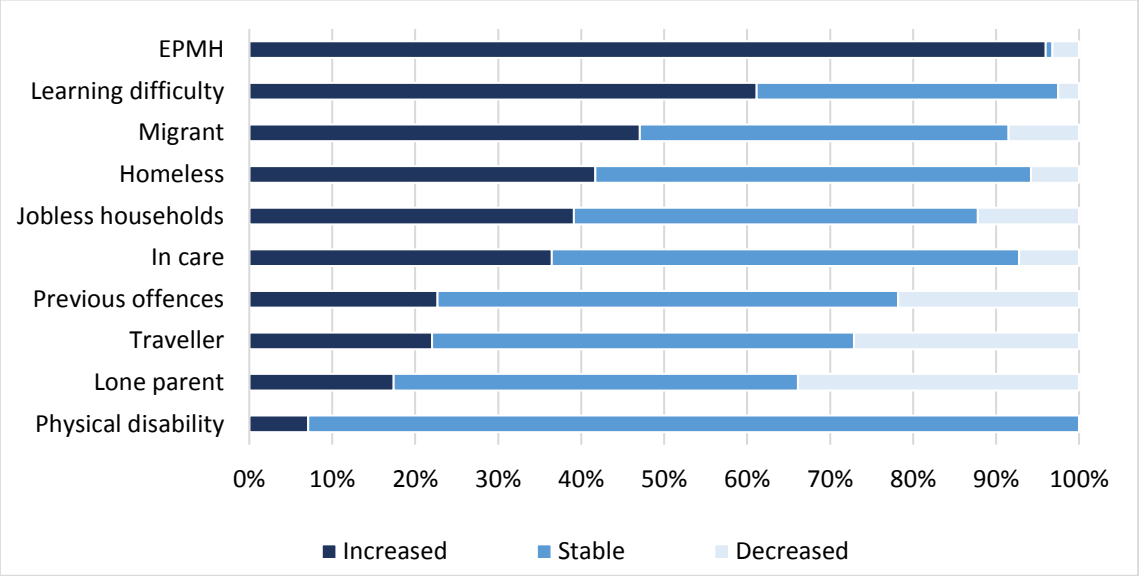


Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, retention rates in Ireland are at an all-time high which means that over the last decade the profile of Youthreach participants is likely to have become more marginalised. In particular, research has suggested possible increases in the prevalence of learning difficulties, special educational needs, mental health issues and social exclusion (NEPS, 2017). The survey sought to explore the views of Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers about any perceived changes in the profile of participants on the Youthreach programme. Almost all co-ordinators/managers (96 per cent) reported that the number of participants experiencing EPMH difficulties had increased over the past five years. The majority (61 per cent) also indicated that the prevalence of learning difficulties had increased. A significant proportion, around four-in-ten, of centres reported an increase in the representation of migrants, those living in jobless households, those experiencing homelessness and those in care.

Trends were broadly similar in Youthreach and CTC settings, but those in CTCs were slightly more likely to report an increase in the prevalence of learning difficulties (69 per cent compared with 59 per cent) while Youthreach centres were more likely to report decreasing numbers of Travellers (32 per cent compared with 11 per cent). CTCs were also more likely to report changes, either an increase or a decrease, in the representation of lone parents than Youthreach centres, and were slightly more likely to report an increase in the proportion of ex-offenders.

FIGURE 4.5 PERCEIVED CHANGES IN LEARNER PROFILE OVER TIME



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

Co-ordinators/managers were also asked about the extent to which learners came from the local area, defined for survey purposes as within a five mile radius. Responses indicated that this applied 'to a great extent' in over two-thirds (69 per cent) of centres, 'to some extent' in 26 per cent of cases, and 'not at all' in 5 per cent of centres. Not surprisingly, significant geographical variation was evident in this pattern. Centres in Longford-Westmeath, Laois-Offaly and, to some extent, Donegal were more likely to draw learners from a more dispersed area. In contrast, two areas, DDLETB and Waterford-Wexford, drew all of their learners from within the local area. Centres drawing from the local area were less likely to have a high concentration of learners with only primary education but no other relationship between catchment area and learner profile was apparent.

4.4 PATHWAYS INTO YOUTHREACH: A TYPOLOGY

The interviews with learners gave insight into the number of distinct groups among programme entrants. In order to accurately capture the type of learners who enter the programme, we identified five main learner typologies based on the main characteristics of Youthreach learners. Although learners are categorised according to their main characteristics, it should be noted that some have more than one distinguishing feature when entering the programme.

4.4.1 Learners who experience negative relationships with teachers/ students

The qualitative interviews highlighted that many learners had experienced negative relationships with both staff and students while in mainstream education. The detrimental impact of negative teacher-student relationships was conveyed in

learner interviews. For some learners, these negative relationships were identified as the main reasons for early school leaving.

Some learners reported that they enjoyed school but negative interactions with teachers made it unbearable:

> *It was like normal routine like … the school was good, I've nothing bad to say but it's the teachers that made it horrible. (Blackwater, learner)*

> *I was struggling a bit, like, but I was trying my best and I was doing well in a few classes but, like, the teachers were saying stuff to me, like, 'Oh, when you look like that and, like, give yourself that appearance, you're not going to be doing well and you're never going to get a job' and all that. So, I just, like, I don't want to be here anymore. (Barrow, learner)*

One learner identified a lack of respect from teachers as a motivation to leave school:

> *I hated it, never got on with anyone in school: the students, the teachers. I always felt like they were looking down on me and I never got any respect so I was just sick of it. (Foyle, learner)*

Some learners felt targeted by teachers for various reasons, feeling they were labelled negatively or reprimanded for minor forms of misbehaviour:

> *If I did something small, like, I - I'd just get turned around the place; they weren't really helping me in there…They were just throwing me into the back of the class and just leaving me there, basically. (Bann, learner)*

> *Some of them just, they basically pick on you because of where you're from, do you know what I mean? … I was accused of drug dealing to people in a younger year. But that wasn't true like, so that's what kind of started it all off. (Liffey, learner)*

One learner reported that he struggled to get on with teachers in school*:*

> *I just didn't like it. I just didn't like the teachers; I couldn't get along with them. (Moy, learner)*

Another learner reported that she experienced negative relationships with both

staff and students during her time in school but her interactions with staff resulted in many arguments:

> *I didn't really get along with the other classmates. I never got along with them. But I especially didn't get along with the teachers. … I mean, it's not, like, they were terrors, but I'm not saying that I was a saint either. Both - we just - none of us connected really. There was a lot of fights in class, arguments. (Bann, learner)*

Some learners also identified negative interactions with their peers as a trigger to leaving school. Learners who experienced bullying in school described lasting mental health issues long after the bullying had ended. One learner felt that her concerns were not taken seriously by the school:

> *I was bullied like, I was physically abused on the bus so my mother started bringing me in and out. Then they started in the class and all. They were making up stuff, blaming everything on me and the principal took their side. (Boyne, learner)*

One learner explained that she avoided attending school before leaving officially:

> *It was horrible. I never wanted to go in. My mother always had trouble getting me into school. I missed so many days. It wasn't nice at all. (Boyne, learner)*

Another learner described how she was targeted by bullies as a result of her piercings:

> *I wasn't getting along great in school, like, the students were bullying me a lot because I have piercings and hair lines and stuff, and then the teacher started doing it as well. (Bann, learner)*

One learner explained that he was targeted by students in school which impacted on his ability to focus, ultimately resulting in him leaving school:

> *That's what annoyed me. That's why I left school. The people, not the subjects. Yeah that's why I couldn't concentrate. I couldn't focus in that school … They'd pick on me because I was happy. (Blackwater, learner)*

Learners reported that being bullied has had lasting effects on their mental health:

> *I find it hard to come in sometimes due to like anxiety from being bullied for like the last few years. (Barrow, learner)*

> *I used to get bullied and stuff and I … and then I used to lock myself into the room - my room, like, and then wouldn't talk to no-one. (Bann, learner)*

One learner explained that she found it difficult to interact with other students in school:

> *Like it was grand but like I was always getting into trouble with like teachers and all… Just fighting with people. Not like fighting with people but like just girls, I didn't get along with much people in school like. (Moy, learner)*

Another learner spoke about struggling to cope with 'slagging' from other students while in school:

> *I was very down and I didn't get along with people in school. And I was just troubled a lot… Like people were very judging. They'd all slag or joke you. (Erne, learner)*

One learner explained that bullying contributed to her decision to leave school early:

> *I dealt with a lot of bullying issues…And I dropped out during like my Junior Cert. (Barrow, learner)*

4.3.2 Learners who struggle with academic schoolwork

Co-ordinators and managers felt that learners in Youthreach have more mixed abilities than previously as more young people enter the programme who are academically able but could not manage in a mainstream school setting:

> *Now there's a mixture. You've got like guys that are brilliant at Maths and you think like, 'Well, why are you out of school?', you know this is amazing, or the other side of it, people who are illiterate, you know, like couldn't read a sentence. (Erne, staff)*

The qualitative interviews with learners highlighted learner difficulties with academic coursework in school, particularly Mathematics and Irish:

> *I was struggling, especially with Maths and Irish because they're the really most important subjects for your Leaving Cert. I just told my dad, 'I just can't do it, I really can't'. (Erne, learner)*

Learners expressed the opinion that there was not enough support available to them in school and identified the lack of support from teachers as a challenge:

> *I was like struggling a lot. Like my results and tests weren't that great because I was, didn't really know how to understand it and there was no one to really show me if I didn't get it when everyone else did. (Barrow, learner)*

Some learners felt that they were put at the back of the class without help from teachers in school:

> *School wasn't for me, like I couldn't cope with that because, do you know, the teachers aren't - they don't really help you, like, if you don't know what you're doing in school, they, kind of, keep you at the back of class and you do whatever you want to do. So, then, I don't know, I just didn't feel like it was me so I left. (Bann, learner)*

> *They were just throwing me into the back of the class and just leaving me there, basically. (Bann, learner)*

Several young people pointed to the over-emphasis on academic work in school without enough of the practical-based work that they felt would suit their needs and abilities:

> *I didn't get on with a lot of the teachers because I disagreed with the way things were taught. Even in music, like I love music, but the way they're teaching it in secondary school, it's just not something you really need to know. It's just something to get the points and then go onto college. (Bann, learner)*

> *Like, I absolutely love learning, like, I love learning new things and that. So, like, I'd rather someone just be talking to me and then demonstrate things and do that. But in school it's more often, like, walk in class, sit down, get your copies out, get your books out, and, like, take down what's on the board. I didn't like that because - I don't know, like, I just - I'd rather, like, talk about it. (Foyle, learner)*

Exam-based assessment was seen as posing difficulties for many learners who felt unable to cope with the demands of taking the Leaving Certificate exams:

> *I just failed my exams at the start so I was. Like, I couldn't be able for the Leaving Cert so I just dropped out. (Liffey, learner)*

4.4.3 Learners experiencing EPMH difficulties/SEN

Co-ordinators and managers reported a change in the profile of learners accessing the programme, identifying a very high prevalence of emotional, psychological or mental health difficulties among the learner population. Staff members described a change in profile from the traditional Youthreach learner who is from a disadvantaged background and felt that there is now another group of young people attending who are experiencing mental health difficulties:

> *In the last number of years now, I think we're dealing a lot with mental health issues…Ten years ago it would be all kids that are being kicked out of school or about to be kicked out of school, but it is kids that are not going to school and the reasons that they are not going to school is because of bullying, you know, their own mental health issues that are happening in the home. (Suir, Co-ordinator)*

Another staff member felt that the group attending are still the 'traditional' disadvantaged group but now also come from a broader social spectrum because of mental health difficulties:

> *So we have a few middle-class students … And they're just coming with more, I think, issues around self-harm and just not being able to cope with life as it is. So that has changed whereas before I suppose you could have typically said the early school leaver was a 15-year-old from a poor socioeconomic background who wouldn't have had an educational, you know, role model, whereas that has changed, definitely. (Suir, Staff)*

Co-ordinators explained that staff members are often under pressure to cope with the increasing mental health difficulties experienced by learners:

> *A lot more mental health issues, lot more anxiety, a lot more complex issues. … And the issues like that are being presented to us and they're very difficult because they're challenging for CAMHS, they're challenging for psychological services; they're struggling to deal with them in a kind of relationship - so, in a classroom situation we're definitely struggling that way, trying to meet their needs. (Bann, co-ordinator/manager)*

One co-ordinator acknowledged the complexity of need of the young people which he felt had become more difficult in recent years. He felt that only those with the greatest level of need were now leaving school early and seeking out alternative options such as Youthreach:

> *It's changed - there's a dramatic change in it … Schools are holding on now because there's so many DEIS schools and schools are getting*

> *funding for different - for helping deal with children's social, emotional behavioural difficulties, they have to try to keep their numbers. And … what I have sort of found is that we are getting the most complex young people, or the people with the most difficult issues. The amount of young people now coming here displaying with mental health issues is just … mind boggling. (Barrow, co-ordinator/ manager)*

One staff member spoke about the lack of coping skills amongst learners, many of whom have negative experiences of school and difficult home lives:

> *A lot of the kids have issues around their own … own selves. They have anxiety, they have panic attacks, they have depression … they have ADHD, we have, okay, dyslexia and things like that we have always had but it's people that don't seem to have coping skills. They've had bullying issues in school, they couldn't cope with big classes … they were getting left behind so a, a lot more of that. We're finding that almost every student … has a separate little issue that they have to deal with. (Barrow, staff)*

This was reflected through learner interviews, with one learner explaining that she did not feel school staff understood how to cope with her difficulties:

> *I had like a lot of like I had anxiety panic disorder and depression, and I was having like three to four panic attacks every day …I had a panic attack one day and I was crying and the teacher wouldn't let me out of class … I ended up actually developing a fear of school, of like stepping foot into the building. (Barrow, learner)*

Learners spoke about struggling to cope with the demands of school along with mental health difficulties:

> *I was just so down. I just couldn't, so I left [school] and then when I heard about Youthreach I decided to try it, because I didn't just want to sit at home and do nothing. (Erne, learner)*

> *It's just I think I was having a really depressing time … I was actually in a really bad way, so I didn't feel like it was going to help at the time. (Shannon, learner)*

> *I wasn't getting the help that I needed and my mental health wasn't as great, so I decided I'd had enough and left. (Boyne, learner)*

One learner explained that she finds it difficult to attend Youthreach sometimes due to her anxiety:

> *I find it hard to come in sometimes due to like anxiety from being bullied for like the last few years. (Foyle, learner)*

Other learners spoke about finding school difficult as a result of special educational needs. Despite the fact that SEN supports do not follow the learners to Youthreach, many learners reported receiving much more additional support within the Youthreach setting compared to mainstream school as a result of smaller class sizes. One learner explained that his dyslexia meant that he required additional support in school to keep up with the workload:

> *I was struggling because I'm dyslexic as well, so, I couldn't really keep taking the teacher away trying to help me out when there's other students as well. So he wasn't able to, or he or she wasn't always able to come back and forth. So I was starting to struggle a bit with work and falling behind and I was getting a bit worried and stuff. (Bann, learner)*

One learner reported that he experienced attention difficulties while in school:

> *Unfortunately with my Asperger's also comes attention deficit, so I find it hard to sit down for that long. I also had no interest in some of the work [in school]. (Bann, learner)*

4.4.4 Learners with behavioural issues

Co-ordinators did not comment on behavioural issues among many learners, a pattern that may be due to the fact that for many learners, behaviour seems to improve within the Youthreach setting. Many learners referred to the respectful relationship between staff and learners in Youthreach as the reason for their behaviour change, many identified a maturity as the reason, while others identified the smaller class sizes as a reason for their improved behaviour. Many learners admitted to experiencing behavioural difficulties while in school. Learners were very reflective about their behaviour in school with many taking responsibility for it:

> *I was very bold… Didn't want to learn, didn't want to do this. I was very immature… There was just so many of us, like a few of my cousins and a few of my friends and they were all messers. We just all couldn't wait to leave we couldn't wait to go, you know that way? We just wanted to leave. We were just constantly getting suspended, constantly getting detention…They tried, but I couldn't see that they were trying maybe, you know? I had a very bad attitude, I wouldn't listen to no one. (Shannon, learner)*

Learners spoke about engaging in antisocial behaviour for no particular reason while in school:

> *I was fighting and getting in trouble, hitting people, like, just fighting constantly, like, do you know. So I was getting myself into bother, like. Just never really liked it. Ended up getting once or twice guards called to the school, like. (Liffey, learner)*

> *I used to be very bad when I was in there, like. And then it was just bad. And I couldn't, like - I used to love fighting, just even for the fun of it, like. I'd just go fighting even if there was no reason. (Liffey, learner)*

Some learners felt that school was too strict and this resulted in harsh disciplinary consequences:

> *I was a messer, so, like, they was very strict on us and I got fed up. Every single thing I'd do I'd get in trouble like. (Erne, learner)*

> *Every day of the week I was in the Principal's office getting in trouble or getting sent home or getting suspended. (Blackwater, learner)*

> *Like, fighting and arguing with teachers and I was mixing out with the wrong crowd in there and now I'm doing better since I came up here. (Boyne, learner)*

> *I was getting in trouble for the littlest of things, and I'd be getting sent home. (Liffey, learner)*

Some learners explained that the large class and school sizes made it too difficult for them to concentrate:

> *I was just too much of a messer to be in school and in class. I was just always talking all the time, just - there was a lot of people, just having a laugh. (Foyle, learner)*

> *I never really done work or anything because I was just - I couldn't - too many people around, so, I was always distracted, I was always just talking to them and everybody would be messing with me, so, I'd be*

messing back and I never done work…There wasn't a day when I wasn't messing. (Foyle, learner)

4.4.5 Learners from a Traveller background

One co-ordinator described a changing profile of learners in his centre, reporting a dramatic increase in the numbers of young people attending Youthreach from Traveller backgrounds. The co-ordinator explained the difficulty in trying to engage these learners with education:

It's trying to change the culture of getting them into education and the numbers – in the school – in the centre here have risen dramatically. We're about 60 per cent now of our young people are Travellers, and that has been hard. It's been really difficult. … Some of them have taken a lot of time to try to get them to buy into what we do here. (Barrow, co-ordinator/manager)

Along with literacy and mental health issues, one staff member felt that the cultural differences between young people, and in particular girls, from the Traveller community meant that they often left the course before they completed it:

There are quite a few Travellers in here, people from the Travelling community. So there might be - like, we lose a lot of the girls because - one of them's just got married so she's gone. She's 17, she's finished. (Liffey, staff)

The notion of leaving early was reinforced by one learner from the Traveller community who suggested that her Traveller background influenced the decision to leave school early:

It's just because Travellers tend to leave after their Junior Cert, do you know, because that's all they really need. So I grew up with all Travellers so they'd leave during third year, like. (Liffey, learner)

One male learner explained that the Traveller culture of leaving school early resulted in him leaving school in primary school after his confirmation:

I only went to primary school. I didn't go to secondary… Because like I'm a Traveller. I used to always move around so … I just waited there until I finished my confirmation and then I just left because I didn't like that school at all. (Moy, learner)

Many learners from Traveller backgrounds reported experiencing bullying and

discrimination in mainstream school, from both teachers and students, which resulted in disengagement and leaving school early:

> *It was very racist… there was too much teasing going on and that… bullying and racism and I just couldn't take it no more. (Moy, learner)*

> *I absolutely hated it… I found it difficult like there was loads of discrimination in the school, loads of work, loads of classes. (Moy, learner)*

> *I just didn't really like it because like, to me, discrimination and all that and I'm not into that carry on. (Moy, learner)*

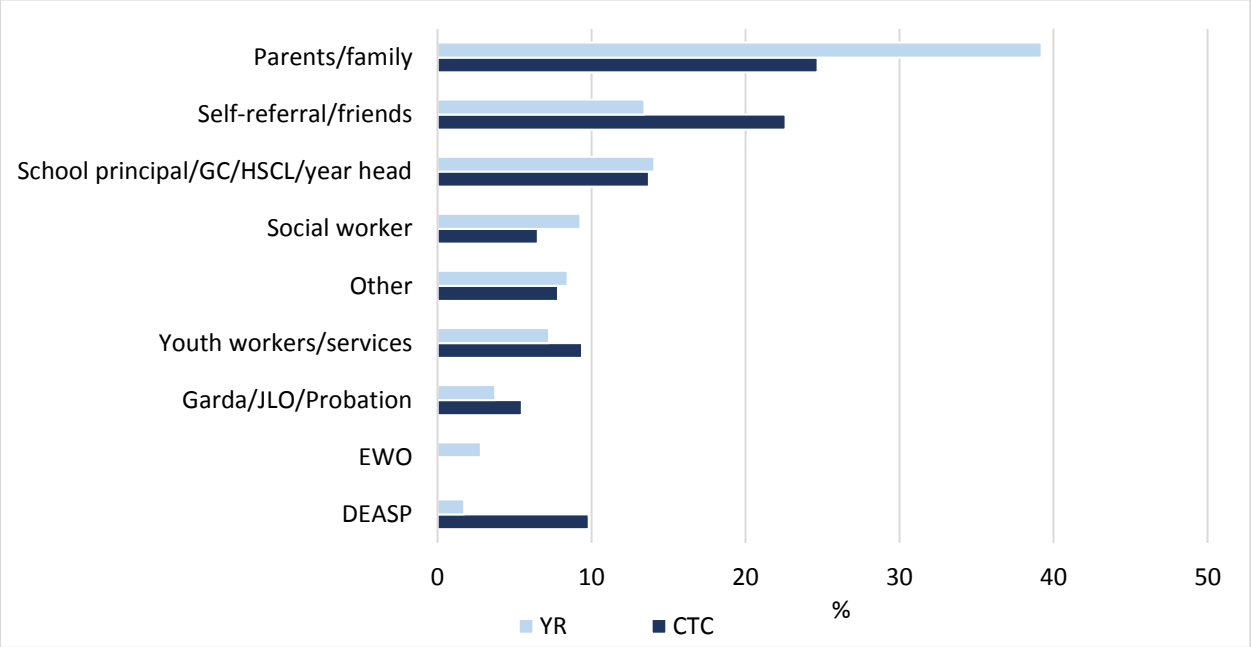
One learner expressed frustration with the lack of support from teachers with regards to the bullying she experienced:

> *It was very racist and especially at our school. Like things went on and the teachers or the principal or nothing wouldn't do nothing about it. (Moy, learner)*

4.5 REFERRAL PATHWAYS

Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers were asked how participants are referred to the Youthreach programme. Informal sources of referral were the most common pathway. Parents, guardians and other family members were mentioned in relation to four-in-ten Youthreach learners, while this was the case for just under a quarter of CTC learners, most likely reflecting the older age profile of the latter group (Figure 4.6).

FIGURE 4.6 REFERRAL PATHWAYS IN YOUTHREACH AND COMMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

Learners themselves spoke about being supported to attend Youthreach by their parents once school was no longer a viable option for them:

> *My mam told me about it… She said it was like an alternate way of like learning and then she said it was good that I, that you like get paid and like it's better than school. (Barrow, learner)*

> *My dad knew about it. He was telling me Youthreach is good… I think he did a course with Youthreach for students before for manual handling, so he knows about it. (Erne, learner)*

Some learners referred to a family history of attending Youthreach; among this cohort of learners, there seemed to be less stigma attached to their decision:

> *My whole family's been through Youthreach. (Boyne, learner)*

> *My mother is exactly the same. She didn't do well academically, but my grandmother's friend: her son used to come to Youthreach. He was here last year, but now he's going to FETAC, so I heard about it through them. (Bann, learner)*

> *My sister goes here so she told me about it… she said it was handier than school like. (Blackwater, learner)*

Self-referral or hearing about the centre from friends was not explicitly mentioned on the co-ordinator/manager questionnaire but was recorded under the 'other' category in a significant number of centres. Overall, according to co-ordinators/managers, 14 per cent of Youthreach learners and 23 per cent of CTC learners approached the centre themselves or heard about provision through friends. According to learner interviews, peer influence played a large role in the decision to attend Youthreach for many learners:

> *I knew a couple of people from here and they said 'it's good' so I applied. (Bann, learner)*

> *One of my friends that left only recently, he's only gone out of here - he told me about it. So I came down. (Liffey, learner)*

> *I had friends that had already gone and then I have friends that are in here already, like. (Liffey, learner)*

One learner explained the pull factor towards Youthreach once all of his friends in school left to attend the programme:

> *Like, we were all in one class as well, like, me and my friends. And some of them just started leaving and then, like, I had no friends really then, like, left in the class with me. So they all started coming down here. (Liffey, learner)*

Learners reported being influenced by friends who described the benefits of Youthreach, in particular the amount of additional support available from the teachers:

> *She was here long like so yeah, she was telling me about it, that it's brilliant here. And the teachers pay attention to you mostly like. Like if you were in secondary school they wouldn't really [give you individual attention] …. It was just do what you can do. But here like they're really focused on the work and stuff like. (Suir, learner)*

> *Like there were two other girls that I'm really close with came here but they were living in my park like so that's how I know it from them. Because my friend is kind of the exact same as me. She didn't really get on in school either and she was like, 'You'll fit in perfect.' And then I came here and it was just the best thing ever like. (Suir, learner)*

One learner explained that hearing about the range of practical courses available in Youthreach from friends influenced his decision to attend the programme:

> *They were like, 'This is just another place to finish your Leaving Cert and you can get all sorts of courses from this,' and I was just interested so I just went. (Moy, learner)*

Knowing other people from his community influenced one learner's decision to apply to Youthreach:

> *A few older people, like, that are around my estate went to it. And they told me about it. And then - I always knew about it, kind of, because people from around the estate went to it and all. (Foyle, learner)*

According to co-ordinators and managers, referrals through school staff, including principals, guidance counsellors, year heads and HSCL co-ordinators, were evident for only a minority of learners (12-14 per cent). Of the learners who reported becoming aware of Youthreach through school, many were informed as a result of absenteeism:

> *It was actually one of my teachers…she told me about it, cos she knew that my attendance was pretty bad so she was, like, she said that there is this place up here. It only opened recently, 'So if you want to repeat you have the option to, whether you want to or not, like'. (Boyne, learner)*

> *I think the school - I don't know. I think it was the board of management, or something, because I was missing so many days at school or something. (Blackwater, learner)*

One learner explained that her school deputy principal organised the CTC place for her once she completed the Leaving Certificate:

> *I ended up just doing the Leaving and that was that, over and done with. But my vice principal was actually the one that got me set up here. I told her that I wanted to come here because I thought, like, I would have got a, like, a SafePass out of here. (Shannon, learner)*

School referrals were relatively more important in centres with a higher concentration of learning difficulties, suggesting that some schools may be referring young people with particular special educational needs to Youthreach provision. However, contrary to what might be expected, centres with a higher proportion of learners with primary education only tended to be less reliant on school referrals, suggesting that some young people are leaving the school system

at a very young age but are not being referred to other provision.

One learner reported having numeracy and literacy difficulties prior to attending Youthreach:

> *I always used to get in trouble and that and like before I came here to be honest I didn't know how to read or spell. Then when I came here I just, my life changed. I learnt how to read properly, learnt how to do spellings and … I learnt how to do ABC, you know. (Foyle, learner)*

The use of school-based referrals differed somewhat across ETB area.

A range of other pathways were evident, including through youth workers, social workers and Gardaí. One learner reported being referred to the centre by his social worker:

> *It was actually my social worker. It was better than me just sitting at home doing nothing. I agreed with them. (Barrow, learner)*

The DEASP was the source of referral for 10 per cent of CTC learners but just 2 per cent of those in Youthreach centres. Informal pathways were more prevalent as sources of referral in centres with a medium or high concentration of learner need.

Similarly, informal pathways appear to be more prevalent in centres with a higher proportion of Traveller young people and of those aged 17 or under. Many Traveller learners report a familial link with the Youthreach centre they attend:

> *My three aunts and my… and the brother and a sister also went here. (Moy, learner)*

> *My brother and a lot of my cousins came here…They're the ones that told me about it. (Moy, learner)*

> *A few of my cousins started here so I decided just to come here just for a look and see how it goes. (Moy, learner)*

One learner from the Traveller community spoke about the appeal of getting paid to attend the programme:

> *I met a lot of the boys and they said that they were all starting Youthreach. I didn't even know what Youthreach was to be honest…*

> *They were like it's just more or less like school like with just no homework and uniform and you get paid for it. (Moy, learner)*

One learner decided to attend because he heard that he could receive extra help with schoolwork:

> *My cousins are in it… They were just like it's a good place and the teachers don't rush you or anything like they don't like you know they take your time due and stuff like that. (Moy, learner)*

In contrast, centres with a higher concentration of migrant learners are less reliant on informal pathways. This would seem to suggest that migrant families do not use informal networks in accessing provision and, given the lower representation of migrant groups highlighted above, may not be sufficiently aware of the programme. Levels of referral from schools or informal means varied somewhat across ETB areas. Centres that have greater contact with local agencies and organisations (see Chapter 7) tend to draw more learners through informal networks, suggesting that these centres are well-embedded in the local community.

During the Consultative Workshops, several stakeholders emphasised the need for a formal referral process which would force:

> *the Educational Welfare Board and the school principals to refer all students who leave prior to getting their Leaving Cert. (Stakeholder, Consultative Workshop)*

Other stakeholders also raised the lack of formal referrals 'feeding into Youthreach Centres':

> *It's a very small pool of people that are coming into Youthreach...they're friends, neighbours, cousins, relations, if you like, it's a network that way. (Stakeholder, Consultative Workshop)*

> *There's a serious public image problem with parents, schools, support agencies, like EWOs, we don't get referrals from, and I think that's a point of surprise from some people, you know, you think they would be part of the integrated network. It's not there. (Stakeholder, Consultative Workshop)*

4.6 THE PROCESS OF LEAVING SCHOOL

The study findings yielded insights into the process whereby young people came to leave school. Some learners described a situation where they were encouraged by the school to leave mainstream education early:

> *They were kind of just basically kind of trying to ease me into it, kind of saying like, 'Okay, you're slowly kind of leaving'. And then one day they kind of said, 'Okay we're done with you'. (Barrow, learner)*

Learners reported that schools told them to leave voluntarily or face expulsion:

> *Well, one of my teachers told me, like, my attendance was too bad, that I was gonna be expelled but I obviously didn't want to so I just left. 'Go to a different school,' they told me. (Liffey, learner)*

> *They told me it was either I was going to leave or get expelled. So I thought the most sensible thing was to take my name off and don't go back. (Liffey, learner)*

One learner explained that the teachers did not like him and he was told to leave:

> *I kept getting into trouble in school and stuff like and they basically just said like leave, like I was going to get expelled like, so I left…They just didn't like me that much. (Erne, learner)*

Another learner explained that he was expelled at a young age:

> *I didn't leave, I got like moved like where I was in, I got kicked out like… In second year, just start of the second year. (Shannon, learner)*

Another learner described a scenario where he was told to leave by the school:

> *Just called me into the office and said, 'We can either help you to get into Youthreach here, or you can leave on bad terms and have your name put in under Social Help' or whatever that is. (Blackwater, learner)*

Learner accounts were mixed when asked whether the school attempted to intervene before they left school. Some learners experienced no attempts to intervene on the school's part:

> *They just - they didn't want to, they didn't care. They just let me go, they wanted me out anyways. (Foyle, learner)*

> *No, they were trying to kick me out anyway… Because they said it to me. (Erne, learner)*

> *There's a woman. She come out - she didn't ask me to go back; she just said, 'You're going to get into bother'. She wasn't really bothered on how I was feeling or how like do you know people are treating me in there. She just said, 'You're going to get brought to court if you don't come back. (Moy, learner)*

Other learners reported that some of their teachers intervened to try to get them to stay in school:

> *Some of the teachers did. Some teachers that I got along with were like, are you sure? You're not making a mistake? I said no. All my mates were like I am going to miss you and all that stuff, you know. (Erne, learner)*

Learners reported that schools tried to make them stay but they felt they could no longer cope by that stage:

> *A lot of them tried to persuade me to stay. They said that I was getting on well in school; that I would be able to get the points for college or whatever. And I said I didn't want to go to college and, like, there was just too much pressure. (Bann, learner)*

> *My two favourite teachers: they came to find me about it… She thought it would be too dramatic, too drastic for my life. And the second teacher: he was very persuasive. I almost didn't drop out because of him. (Bann, learner)*

One learner felt, on reflection, that teachers tried to keep her in school at the time:

> *They tried, but I couldn't see that they were trying maybe, you know? I had a very bad attitude, I wouldn't listen to no one. (Bann, learner)*

The age at which young people are disengaging from school and leaving school early was raised as a growing issue by co-ordinators (see also Section 3.6). Many felt that young people are leaving school early and are not able to join Youthreach until they are 15 years old. This means they are out of school for a long time and have lost their routine and ability to learn. This was becoming an issue:

> *They come in this year 15 years of age and … it's 20 per cent of what we have in the centre. The thing about it is of those they were all expelled from school and they were all expelled in first year or second year so they were out of school for at least 18 months. And when they came to us then they don't have the social skills and they don't understand the nuances of the school. That's one of the reasons that they've come out of school. But then we end up having them in here… coming here to the centre, and we're expecting them to sit from 9.30am to 3.30pm on a day. You know we can put them on reduced timetables to get them in etc., but we've just had a massive issue this year with them in trying to accommodate them, no matter what we've tried. (Barrow, co-ordinator/manager)*

Staff referred to a lack of readiness among learners to engage with QQI modules or work experience placements if they have spent time outside of education prior to attending Youthreach. Spending long periods of time at home appears to make the learners' lives far more difficult when they come into the centre as they have lost their confidence and skills:

> *I've had a couple of children that never attended second-level school for various reasons and it's very hard to get them to integrate with their peers if they haven't. (Blackwater, co-ordinator/manager)*

One manager referred to the impact of young people being disengaged from the education system prior to entering Youthreach, reporting that the issues around numeracy and literacy for these young people are impacting on their ability to complete QQI Levels 3 and 4:

> *Certainly we're getting children with less ability. Originally you would have got maybe youngsters who went to second level school, did okay but just didn't really - it wasn't what they wanted. They wanted to do hairdressing. They wanted to do carpentry, engineering, whatever and so they took a different route. But now you're getting young people who maybe didn't finish their education at primary level that are coming in with - not able to structure a sentence, basic Maths – not there, and you're having to fill that gap. So there's that and there's a fair bit of that. Now you will still get the ones who just academic learning is not for them and they want to go with their hands and you get that side of it but if you transfer into second level and you haven't grasped the basics in primary, you haven't a hope. You're left behind. (Blackwater, co-ordinator manager)*

In one centre where young people appeared to be experiencing higher levels of mental health issues compared to the other case-study centres in the study, the

staff felt much of the learners' mental health difficulties stemmed from disengaging from school at a young age, leaving school early and falling out of the system:

> *They come in here and the first bit of information I try and get out of them, 'How long have you left school?' and they say, maybe three months or six months or something like that. And then when I ask the next question, 'How long have you disengaged from school?' Maybe the last four or five year. So, they've forgot how to learn. (Blackwater, staff)*

4.7 SUMMARY

This chapter describes a typology of Youthreach learners which makes it possible to identify five main pathways into the Youthreach programme. The Youthreach programme appears to target groups of students who have experienced negative relationships in school, those who have experienced difficulties with their schoolwork, those who experienced emotional, psychological and mental health difficulties, those who experience behavioural issues and those who come from a Traveller background.

The interviews and survey data indicated the marginalised profile of the learners accessing the Youthreach programme and provide a basis for understanding referral pathways into the programme. The analysis shows that Youthreach learners have a distinctive profile and are more likely to come from jobless households, have low levels of educational attainment and have experienced many adverse childhood experiences (ACEs). These learners are typically coming to Youthreach having had negative educational experiences and the challenge is re-engaging them with education.

Section 4.4 describes a typology of learners who are accessing the Youthreach programme. The Youthreach programme is designed to target a particular cohort: those who left school early and had negative experiences with school, those who experienced difficulties with their schoolwork, and those who have behavioural issues, often from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. However, co-ordinators and managers across all case-study centres (and in the surveys) described a changing profile of learners who are accessing the Youthreach programme. There has been a huge increase in learners presenting with emotional, psychological and mental health difficulties (EPMH) often exacerbated by their disengagement with education. A significant number of young Travellers continue to access the programme, many of them with very low levels of literacy and numeracy skills. Staff and learner interviews conveyed the impact of early school leaving and disengagement on learner ability to engage with learning. Similarly, learners who are disengaged from school at an early age struggle to

re-integrate with their peers, have huge literacy and numeracy deficits and experience exacerbated mental health difficulties.

Staff expressed concern at the issues that learners are presenting with following disengagement from school with regards to their own skillsets and competences. The survey data and qualitative interviews also highlighted the role of behavioural issues. Negative teacher and peer relationships emerged as a significant influence on early school leaving, with some learners feeling that they were forced to leave school. On the other hand, some learners did report being discouraged from leaving school by teachers and school principals, though learners felt the decision had been made by that stage.

Section 4.5 provided insight into the most common referral pathways for learners who access the programme. The majority of referrals come through parents and family members, with a large number of learners being referred by friends, peers or self-referrals. A small percentage of referrals, 12 to 14 per cent, come from school sources. This is particularly concerning given the marginalised nature of these learners. The ad hoc nature of Youthreach referrals is problematic as it is possible that the programme may be missing learners who would be suitable to attend, but who may not be aware of its existence.

CHAPTER 5

Governance, funding and resources

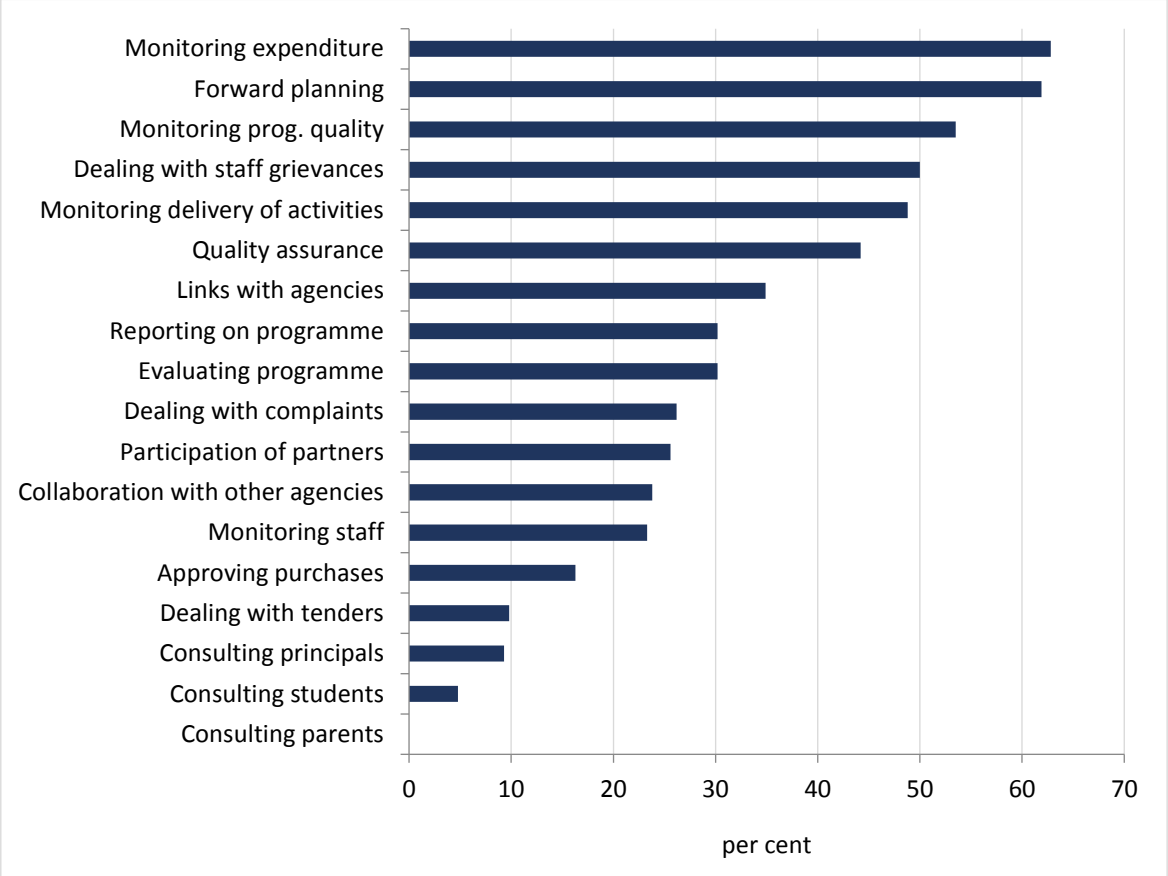
5.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter examines the governance of the Youthreach programme across the Youthreach and Community Training centre settings as well as perceptions of the adequacy of funding and resources. Section 5.2 looks at the roles of senior managers at ETB level and of co-ordinators and managers at centre level. It also examines the nature of current reporting structures. Section 5.3 explores staffing levels, participation in continuous professional development and the extent to which there is an exchange of practice between centres. Section 5.4 examines satisfaction with current funding and resources and the priorities for future funding. Section 5.5 explores perceptions of current governance structures among senior managers and centre co-ordinators/managers while Section 5.6 examines the views expressed by key stakeholders at two consultative workshops.

5.2 ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

In the survey, senior managers were asked about the extent to which they were involved in different aspects of the running of the Youthreach programme. Figure 5.1 shows that they were mainly involved in an oversight role, monitoring programme expenditure, engaged in forward planning, monitoring programme quality, dealing with staff grievances and monitoring the delivery of activities. Only a minority of senior managers reported that they were involved to a great extent in fostering collaboration with other agencies and partners or in consulting with stakeholders, including school principals, parents and learners. Not surprisingly, roles varied according to the management position of the respondent, with ETB CEOs less likely to be involved in many of these activities 'to a great extent'. Given their remit within education and training more generally, they were more likely than other groups to be involved in consulting with school principals.

FIGURE 5.1 ACTIVITIES INVOLVED IN THE SENIOR MANAGEMENT ROLE (PER CENT STATING 'TO A GREAT EXTENT')



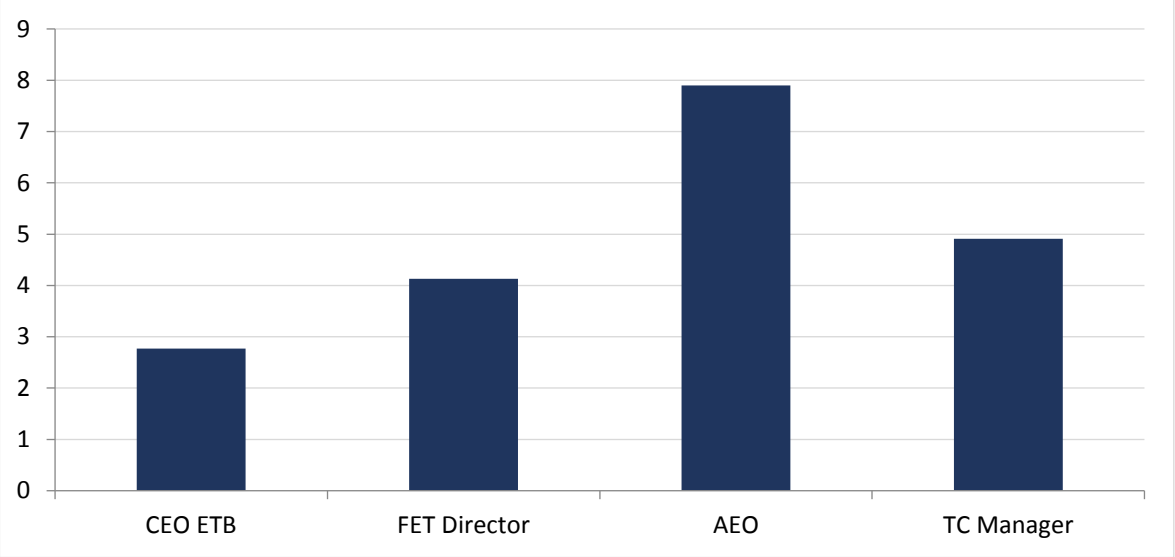
Source: ESRI survey of senior managers.

Senior managers were also asked about the frequency with which they met Youthreach co-ordinators or managers in relation to the programme. There was considerable variation across respondents in the frequency of these meetings, with the average (median) being four meetings per year. Figure 5.2 shows that the frequency of meetings is less for CEOs of ETBs than for the groups with direct line management responsibility for centres. Among the line managers, Adult Education Officers reported much more frequent meetings with centres, almost eight per year, compared with four to five for FET Directors and Training Centre Managers. In four-in-ten cases, the frequency of meetings varied across centres within the same area. Not surprisingly, variation in the frequency of meetings was more common where senior managers have a greater number of centres in their remit; those who reported variation had responsibility for 8.8 centres compared with an average of 6 among those who reported no variation in meeting frequency. This was attributed by one centre co-ordinator/manager to the wide remit of ETB managers:

> *The Director of FET has too many strands to look after so Youthreach falls low on the priority scale. The PLCs would demand the majority of [their] time. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

Meetings tended to include co-ordinators/managers giving a report on programme progress (91 per cent), planning in relation to participant numbers (79 per cent), and planning in relation to programme content (74 per cent).

FIGURE 5.2 AVERAGE (MEAN) NUMBER OF MEETINGS PER YEAR WITH CO-ORDINATORS/ MANAGERS BY POSITION OF THE RESPONDENT



Source: ESRI survey of senior managers.

In the case-study interviews, co-ordinators and managers tended not to report very frequent meetings with their line managers, except at board of management meetings (which, in the case of Youthreach centres, were sub-committees of the ETBs). Otherwise, contact was limited to email. However, co-ordinators/ managers generally tended to view their line managers as available to provide support if needed. Contact with SOLAS was in terms of reporting only. In the Community Training Centres, managers were reporting to both the Training Centre manager and to a board of management comprised of local volunteers. This governance structure was seen as creating an ambiguous position:

> *Governance can be a balancing act as a CTC Manager, on one hand we are employed by a board and on the other we must adhere to the funder's requirements. It sometimes feels like the board have all the responsibility and the funder have all the control. This is [a] particular problem in some regions where there is an unreasonable 'control' in place by the funder causing problem for the day-to-day management of the centre. A consistent approach would be welcome in a culture of trust and understanding. (Manager, survey response)*

Co-ordinators and managers mentioned an involvement in a wide range of roles and activities within the centre. The strongest level of involvement was in relation to day-to-day management of the programme, face-to-face contact with learners, planning, and meeting with other centre staff (Figure 5.3). Co-ordinators and managers were also heavily involved in managing finances, establishing the strategic direction of the centre, monitoring and evaluating programme quality and preparing reports. Almost all co-ordinators/managers mentioned having at least some involvement in maintaining links with other agencies, quality assurance and course facilitation, and identifying and facilitating CPD for staff.

FIGURE 5.3 THE ROLE OF CO-ORDINATORS/MANAGERS

Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

The multi-faceted role of the co-ordinator/manager was also apparent from the case-study interviews, with staff also emphasising the importance of the personal qualities of the co-ordinator/manager and the support s/he provides to staff in their roles.

> *Everything from teacher to like co-ordinator: booking buses to the paperwork, you know; we have to do the pay for the young people every Friday to attendance, to child protection, to evaluation, to team leader, keeping the team, minding the team in terms of team welfare and supervision; everything, we do it all. (Bann, Co-ordinator/manager)*

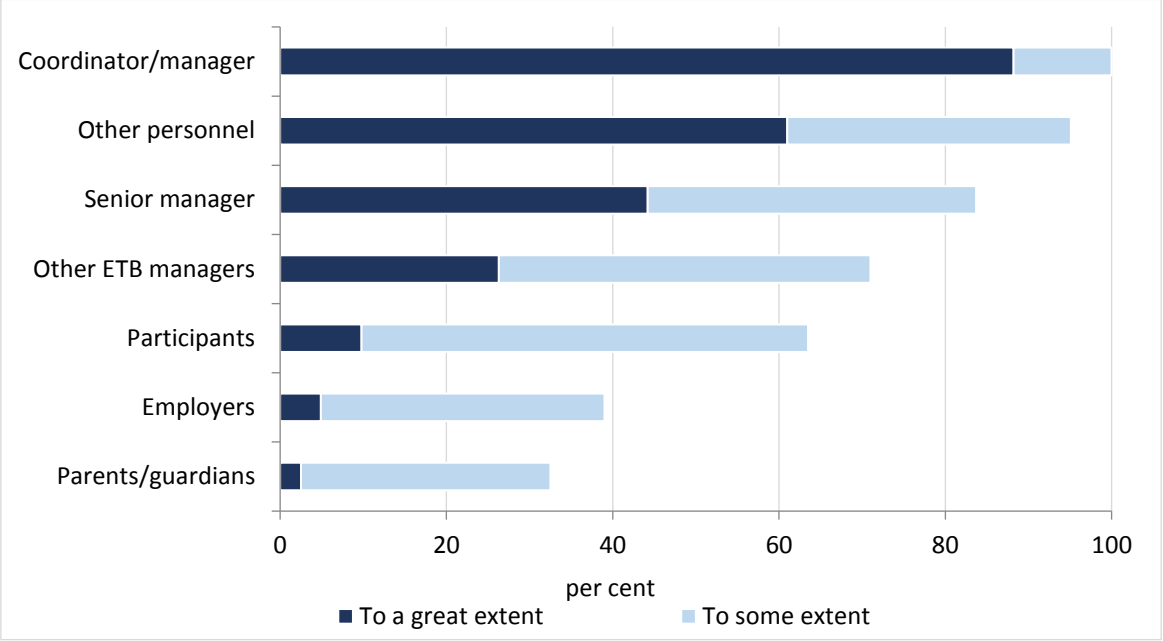
> *I think [the co-ordinator] allows us to work individually, but he also keeps us very well informed as a team. He's trying to keep the students on board, he's trying to keep the staff members on board, he's trying to keep the ETB happy, he's trying to keep SOLAS happy. … I think he trusts us that we know what we're doing and I think he's very good in*

> *leaving us off to a certain degree but at the same time he's so approachable that if there was an issue you could just go to him straightaway. … I think he does trust us, and I think he respects the fact that I suppose between us all we have a lot of experience, but at the same time, would guide us. And he's very good at listening … I mean the decision and everything would stop with him, but I just think he keeps us motivated very well as a team as well. (Suir, Staff)*

Despite differences in the governance structures within which they were operating (see Chapter 1), Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers reported broadly similar roles. However, CTC managers were somewhat more likely to report being involved in day-to-day management only 'to some extent' (14 per cent compared with 4 per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators). CTC managers had greater involvement in facilitating CPD for their staff, with 72 per cent saying they were involved 'to a great extent' compared with only 42 per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators. CTC managers reported lower levels of involvement in face-to-face contact with young people (72 per cent 'to a great extent' compared with 96 per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators). This did not seem to reflect centre size, since the difference held for small, average and large centres. Large Youthreach centres reported somewhat less involvement in maintaining links with local agencies and in monitoring and evaluating programme quality than smaller centres.

Senior managers were asked about the extent to which different groups were involved in deciding which courses were run within the Youthreach programme. Youthreach co-ordinators/CTC managers were seen as the main influence on course provision, with the vast majority involved 'to a great extent' (Figure 5.4). Other centre personnel were also seen as playing an important role in shaping course provision. This pattern was reflected in responses to other questions, with almost all senior managers feeling that centres had a lot of autonomy in developing provision. Four-in-ten senior managers reported they themselves influenced provision to a great extent with a similar proportion stating they shaped provision to some extent. Among senior managers, ETB CEOs were less likely to see themselves as influencing course provision than those in other roles. Other ETB/senior managers were seen as involved at least to some extent in the majority (71 per cent) of cases. Participants themselves were seen as involved to some extent or a great extent in 60 per cent of cases. Employers and parents/ guardians were seen as shaping course provision to a lesser extent than other groups, with over a third of both groups involved at least to some extent. The actual nature of course provision is discussed in Chapter 6.

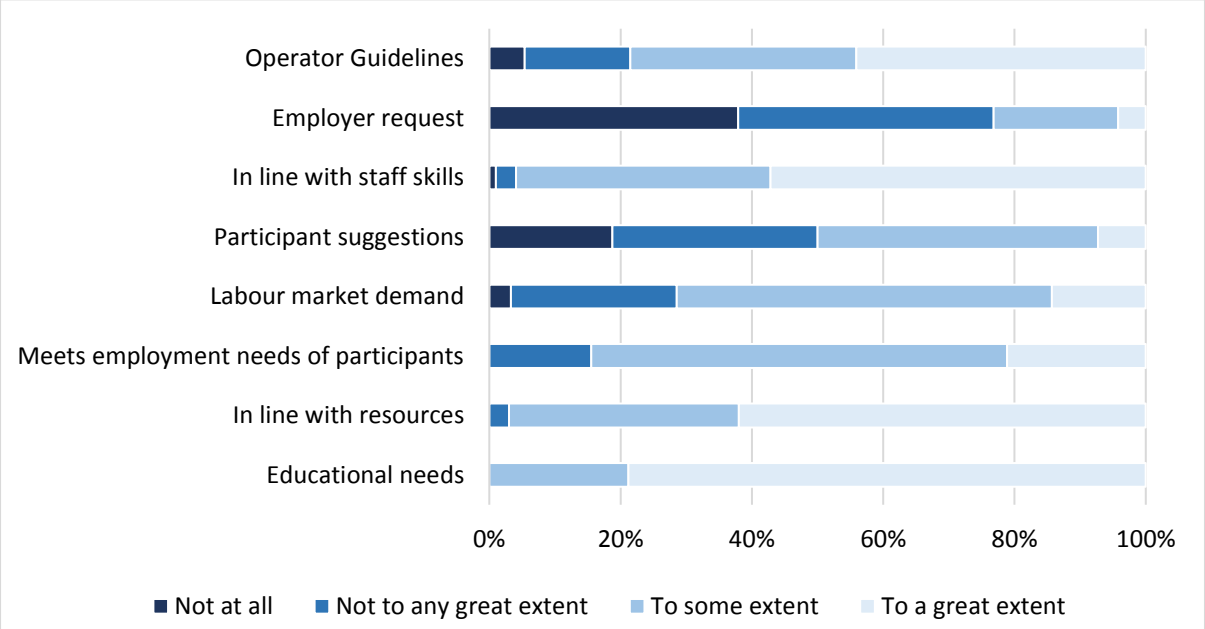
FIGURE 5.4 INVOLVEMENT OF DIFFERENT GROUPS IN DECIDING WHICH COURSES ARE PROVIDED, AS REPORTED BY SENIOR MANAGERS



Source: ESRI survey of senior managers.

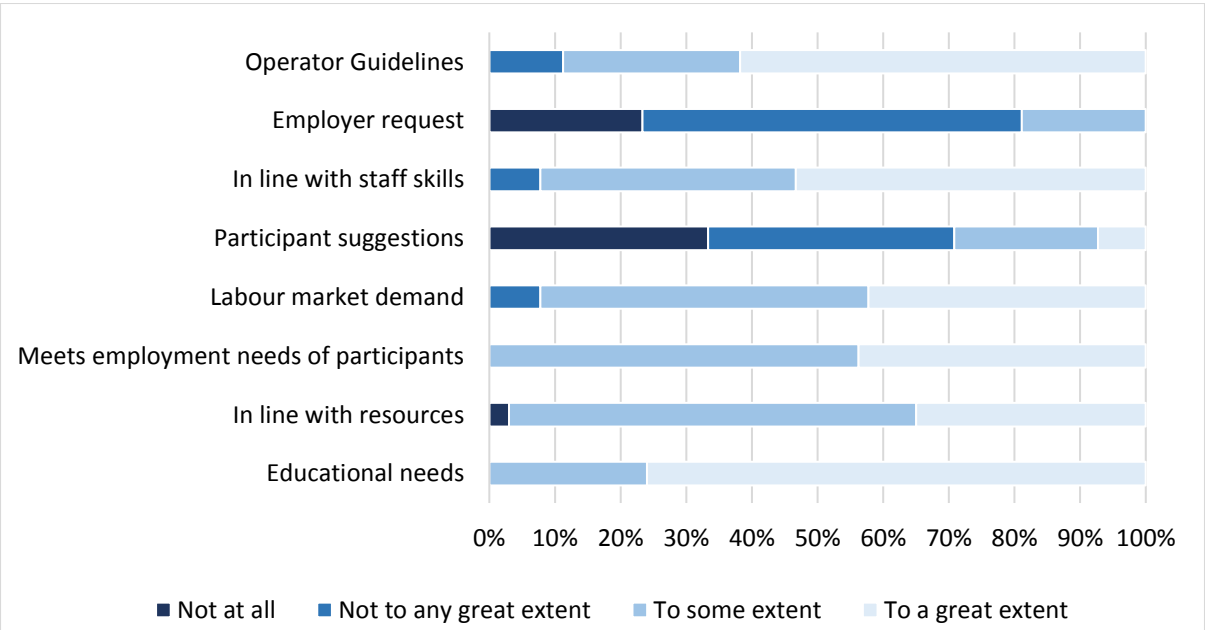
In order to better understand how decisions are made at a local level, Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers were asked about the factors influencing what courses are provided. In both settings, over three-quarters of respondents identified meeting the educational needs of students as important in deciding what courses to run (Figures 5.5a and 5.5b). Employer request and labour market demand were seen as important factors in only a minority of centres. However, CTC managers were more likely to say that labour market demand influenced provision 'to a great extent' than Youthreach co-ordinators (38 per cent doing so compared with 13 per cent). Similarly, CTCs placed a stronger emphasis on meeting the employment needs of participants in deciding on courses. Despite the emphasis on learner needs, co-ordinators and managers reported some constraints on provision relating to staffing and resources. In Youthreach centres, over half of the co-ordinators identified having staff with relevant skills in the centre as influential 'to a great extent' over the provision of courses (compared to 46 per cent in CTCs). The importance of courses being in line with existing resources was identified as influential over course provision 'to a great extent' by 62 per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators, compared to just 35 per cent of CTC managers.

FIGURE 5.5A INFLUENCES ON COURSE PROVISION IN YOUTHREACH CENTRES, AS REPORTED BY CO-ORDINATORS



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

FIGURE 5.5B INFLUENCES ON COURSE PROVISION IN COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES, AS REPORTED BY MANAGERS



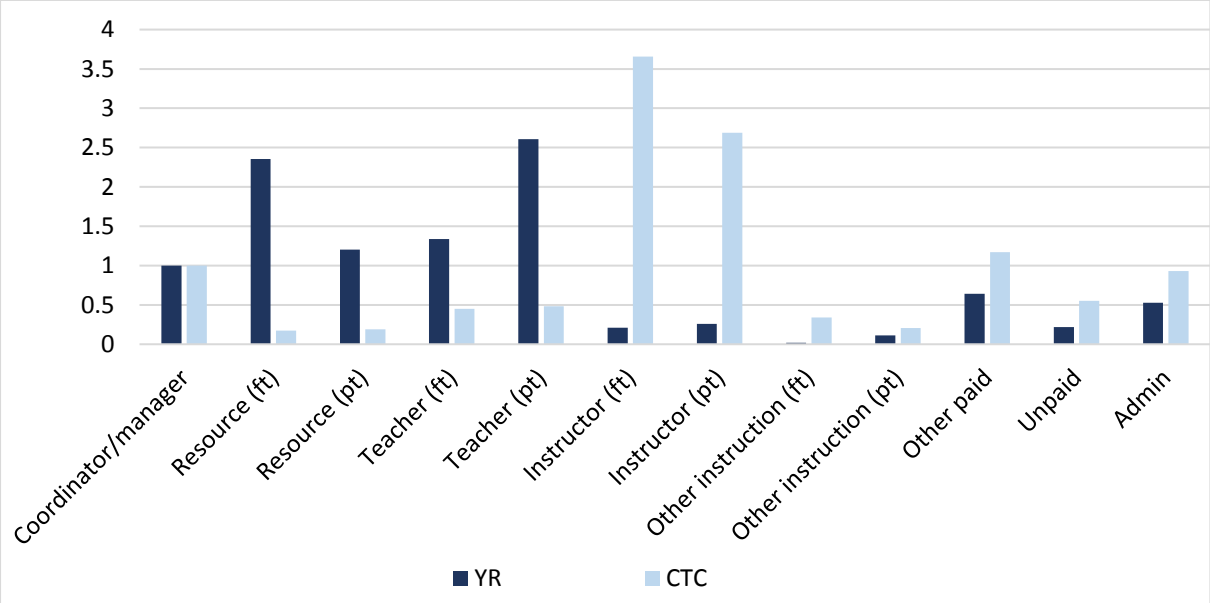
Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

5.3 STAFFING, PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND COOPERATION WITH OTHER CENTRES

5.3.1 Staffing and staff turnover

Co-ordinators and managers were asked about the number of staff in their centre, itemising them under different categories. The range of different categories reflects differences between settings, with staff in CTCs being mainly termed 'instructors'; and within settings, with some staff in Youthreach centres on teacher contracts and others on resource staff contracts (Figure 5.6). CTCs are more likely to report having administrative staff than Youthreach centres. Across all centres, an average of 10.5 staff members is reported.[11] Not surprisingly, given the allocation model (see Chapter 3), larger centres have a larger group of staff than smaller centres (Figure 5.7). However, larger Youthreach centres appear to have slightly more staff on average than larger Community Training Centres.

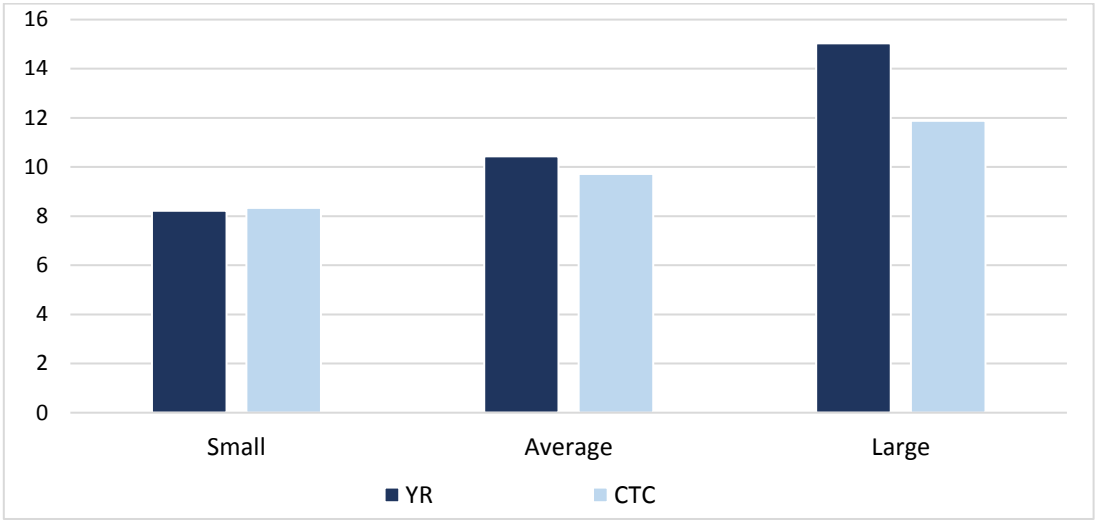
FIGURE 5.6 AVERAGE NUMBER OF STAFF IN EACH CATEGORY IN YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

11 Unpaid staff refer to volunteer tutors and/or to the provision of support from external agencies or organisations.

FIGURE 5.7 AVERAGE NUMBER OF STAFF BY CENTRE TYPE AND SIZE



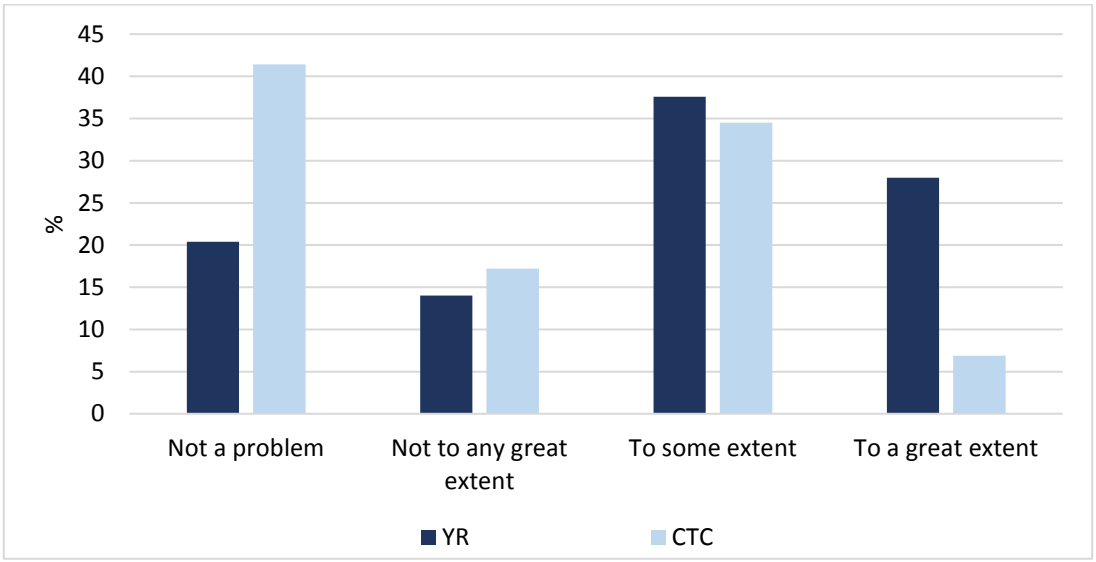
Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

The majority (74 per cent) of co-ordinators and managers were very or fairly satisfied with the number of paid staff in their centre while one-quarter were not satisfied. This pattern did not differ between Youthreach centres and CTCs. However, among Youthreach centres, SENI centres tended to have more staff on average (11.4 compared with 10.3). Not surprisingly, there was a significant relationship between the number of current staff and satisfaction with staffing levels; those who were 'very satisfied' had an average of 12.1 staff compared with 10.7 for those who were 'fairly satisfied' and 9.9 for those who were 'not satisfied'.

When asked about the qualities that were important in appointing programme personnel, almost all senior managers saw ability to relate to parents/guardians and learners from diverse backgrounds and good interpersonal skills as very important. The vast majority also saw qualifications/experience in teaching/ training as very important. Experience in youth work was seen as less important but the vast majority rated it as at least somewhat important in hiring decisions. Experience as an SNA was seen as somewhat important by two-thirds of senior managers.

When asked about the extent to which staff turnover created difficulties for provision, Youthreach co-ordinators were significantly more likely than CTC managers to indicate that this was a problem (Figure 5.8). Four-in-ten Youthreach co-ordinators reported that turnover constituted a difficulty 'to a great extent' while this was the case for only 7 per cent of CTC managers, four-in-ten of whom reported that turnover was 'not a problem'. There was some variation across ETB areas, with two areas reporting greater difficulties than others. There was no indication that staff turnover systematically varied by the profile of learners.

FIGURE 5.8 EXTENT TO WHICH STAFF TURNOVER IN THE CENTRE IS A PROBLEM

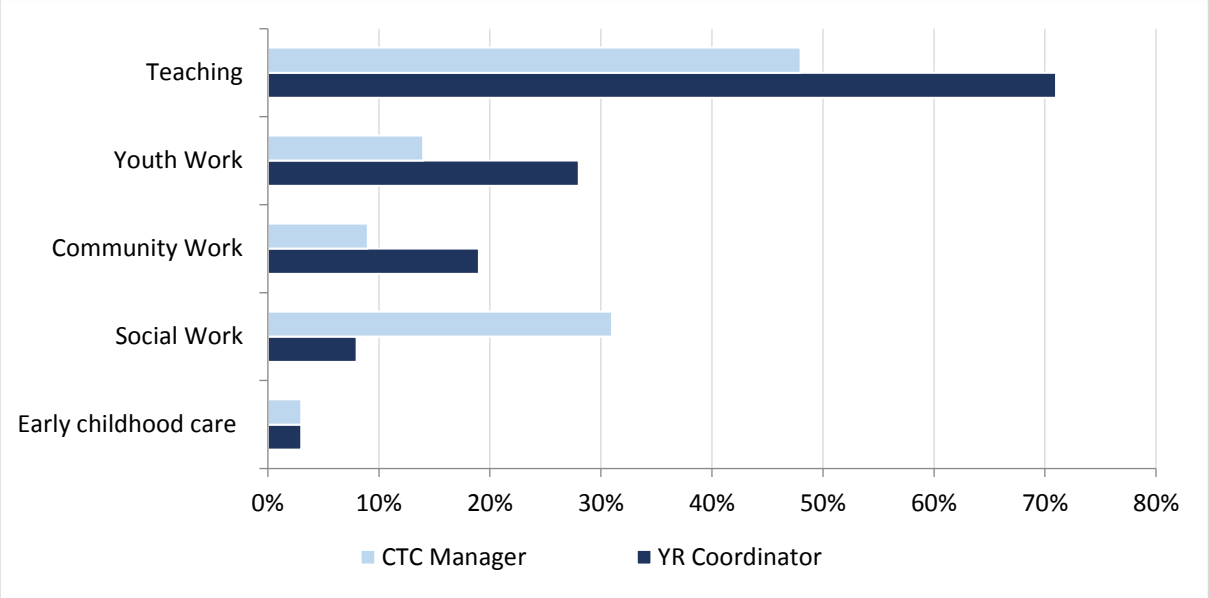


Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

The majority of Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers have been working in their positions for over ten years (this being the case for 59 per cent of CTC managers and 52 per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators). Just over a fifth of respondents have been in their positions for three years or under. There was a slightly older age profile among CTC managers, with over half (56 per cent) aged 50 or over compared with 38 per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators.

The survey also sought information about Youthreach co-ordinators' and CTC managers' professional backgrounds. Figure 5.9 shows that 71 per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators have teaching backgrounds compared with 48 per cent of CTC managers. Twenty-eight per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators have a background in youth work compared to 14 per cent of CTC managers. Social work is the professional background reported by 31 per cent of CTC managers compared to only 8 per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators.

FIGURE 5.9 PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND OF YOUTHREACH CO-ORDINATORS AND CTC MANAGERS



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

5.3.2 Continuous professional development

High levels of participation in CPD were reported for co-ordinators/managers and their staff. Eighty-eight per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators and 76 per cent of CTC managers reported receiving CPD in relation to their role over the year 2016/2017. Over half (52 per cent) were very satisfied with the training while 43 per cent were fairly satisfied. The vast majority of co-ordinators and managers (95 per cent and 90 per cent respectively) reported that their staff members had received CPD over the same timeframe. Thirty-two per cent were very satisfied with that training while 59 per cent were fairly satisfied.

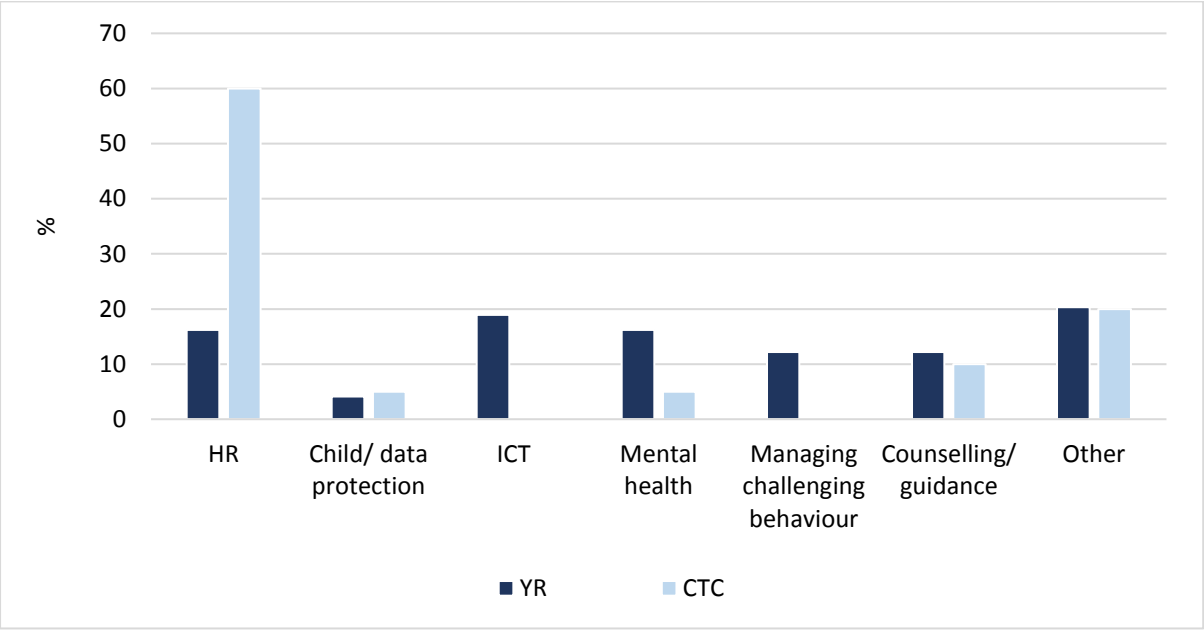
A quarter of senior managers considered that sufficient training was not provided to co-ordinators/managers and other Youthreach/CTC staff. FET directors were somewhat more critical of training provision than other groups.

> *[There is] very low funding for CPD and little training for staff and co-ordinators. (Senior manager, survey response)*

Senior managers were asked to identify training priorities for Youthreach staff in their area. Almost all (93 per cent) felt that staff required training in supporting students with additional needs, with the majority also mentioning teaching and learning methodologies (81 per cent), assessment approaches (74 per cent), teaching and learning resources (71 per cent) and subject/curriculum content (62 per cent). Co-ordinators and managers were also asked to identify training

priorities for themselves and their staff (Figures 5.10a and 5.10b). Among CTC managers, a majority (60 per cent) would like training in relation to human resources/personnel management. In contrast, Youthreach co-ordinators mentioned a range of needs as well as HR, including ICT, dealing with mental health difficulties, managing challenging behaviour and counselling/guidance. CTC managers would like to see training in managing challenging behaviour for their staff (39 per cent) as well as dealing with mental health difficulties and substance abuse. Youthreach co-ordinators also mentioned managing challenging behaviour and dealing with mental health difficulties but a significant number mentioned ICT training as well.

FIGURE 5.10A CPD REQUIRED BY CO-ORDINATORS AND MANAGERS



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

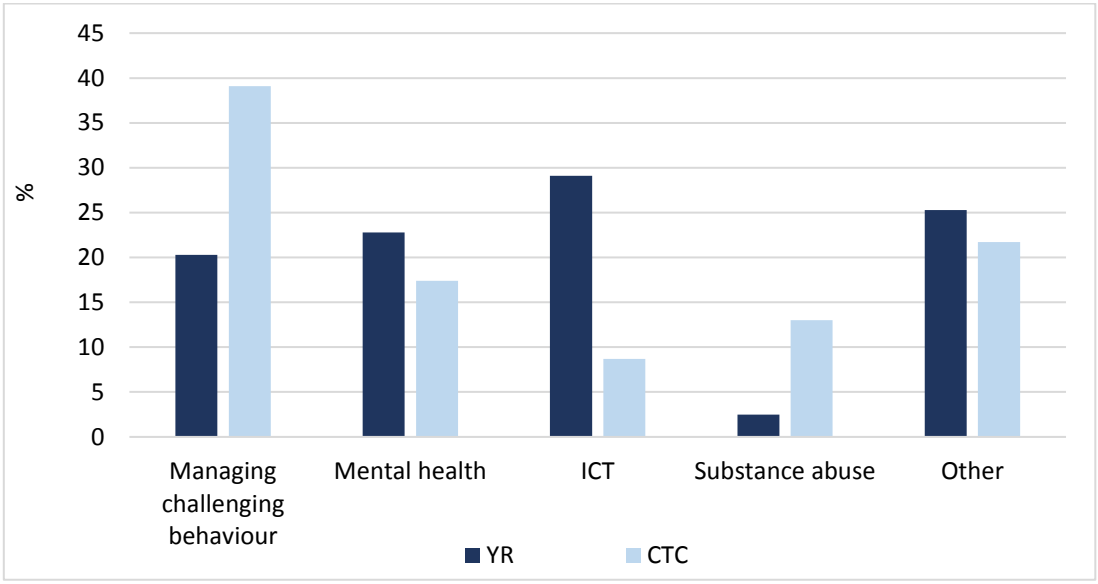
The case-study interviews highlighted similar issues regarding the need for CPD in particular areas, with the prevalence of mental health difficulties among young people seen as requiring specific skills on the part of staff:

> *That is one area that I think as Youthreach staff we couldn't get enough training in. And, you know, couldn't get enough training in it at all because it's so complex and … even the same mental health issue presents so differently and has such different needs. … It's relatively new and I think it's an area that we need to put a lot of resources and, you know, energy into, to do the young people justice really. (Bann, Staff)*

> *The increased mental health needs of our students place increased emotional and time expectations on staff. This needs to be adequately*

resourced and staff need to be equipped and given the time to deal with this effectively in a supportive role to students. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)

FIGURE 5.10B CPD REQUIRED BY STAFF, AS REPORTED BY CO-ORDINATORS AND MANAGERS



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

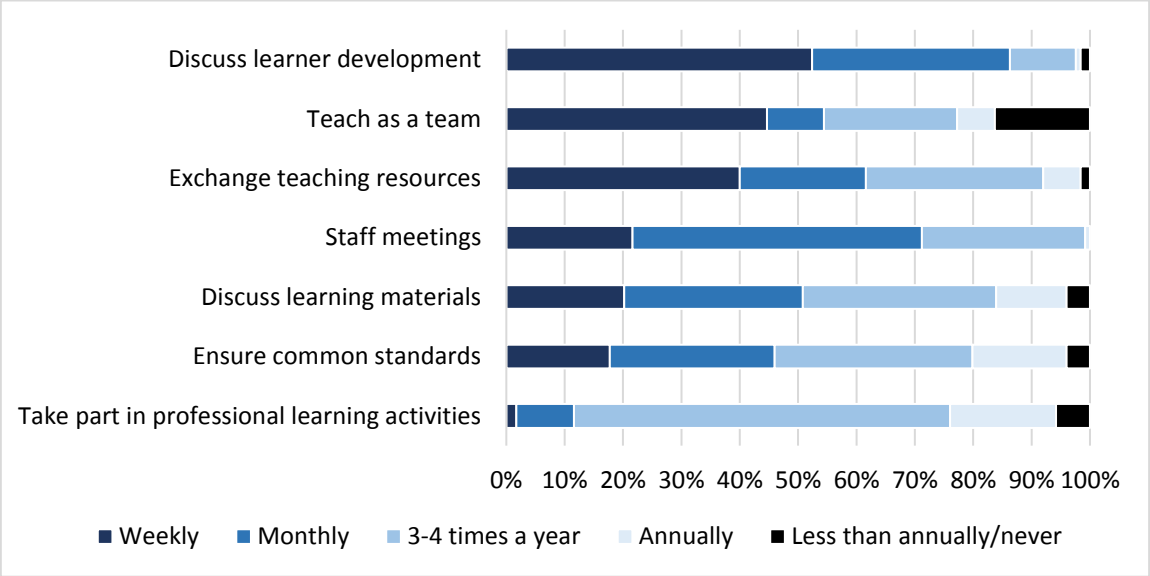
In addition to asking co-ordinators/managers about participation in formal CPD, the survey collected information on the degree of exchange of practice among staff in the centre. Just over half of centres discussed the learning development of specific participants on a weekly basis, while a further third did so on a monthly basis (Figure 5.11). However, such discussions were comparatively infrequent in 14 per cent of centres. Team teaching took place frequently in 45 per cent of centres although 23 per cent of centres rarely used this approach (doing so annually or more rarely). Staff exchanged teaching resources fairly frequently (with 62 per cent doing so at least monthly), while over half discussed learning materials with colleagues on at least a monthly basis. The majority of centres met to ensure common standards in assessing learner progress, with the most common pattern being monthly or three to four times a year. Staff took part in professional learning activities three to four times a year in almost two-thirds of centres. Formal staff meetings tended to take place weekly (22 per cent) or monthly (50 per cent).

The case-study interviews also highlighted variation across centres in the degree of cooperation among staff, with the co-ordinator seen as playing a crucial role in fostering a consultative culture within the centre:

We work very much here as a staff team … Nothing is handed to us or fed to us. We're very much part of every decision. So we would do the timetable together; we chat about the young people together; any

changes to rooms or buildings – everything's done through consultation. But his [the co-ordinator's] role really is great in terms of feeding back to us what's happening on a national level as well that we as a staff wouldn't be aware of. So, kind of, I think the role of the co-ordinator really is a good hovercraft over the programme, keeping it all together. (Bann, Staff)

FIGURE 5.11 COOPERATION AND PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AMONG CENTRE STAFF



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

There was some variation in approach across centres. CTCs were more likely than Youthreach centres to hold weekly staff meetings (31 per cent compared with 19 per cent). Staff in centres with a high concentration of learner need tended to exchange teaching and learning materials more frequently with colleagues (57 per cent doing so weekly compared with 34-39 per cent in other centres). Staff in SENI centres were more likely to have weekly staff meetings than those in non-SENI settings (40 per cent compared with 14 per cent). The frequency of staff meetings also varied somewhat across ETB areas. CTCs tended to have more frequent meetings on common standards for assessment, with 38 per cent having weekly meetings compared with 12 per cent of Youthreach centres. In contrast, weekly meetings about learner progress were somewhat more common in Youthreach centres (57 per cent compared with 38 per cent), especially in SENI settings, three-quarters of whom had weekly staff meetings. Team teaching was also more common in Youthreach centres (with 53 per cent using it on a weekly basis compared with 17 per cent of CTCs). Centres were much more likely to use team teaching on a weekly basis where they had a higher concentration of learner need (64 per cent of high need centres compared with 36 per cent of low need and 42 per cent of medium need centres). CTCs had somewhat lower levels of engagement in frequent professional learning activities, with 47 per cent having

such activities annually or more rarely compared with 16 per cent of Youthreach centres. Engagement in professional learning activities was also less frequent in centres with a lower concentration of learner need and somewhat more frequent in SENI centres.

The case-study interviews shed light on the implications for staff of working with a group of young people with multiple and complex needs. Centres took different approaches to addressing this issue. In some centres, staff supervision was in place, with support provided to staff in their roles on a group and one-to-one basis:

> *We do supervision as well. Now, we do supervision four times a year which is not enough. … Where a … counsellor comes in and speaks to the group and then I get one-to-one on my own. … None of the centres in [the county] do that. We're the only one that has supervision but I think it's really important, especially when we do so much mentoring. (Moy, Staff)*

However, such support was not evident across all centres and the frequency of supervision sessions was not seen as adequate where it was in place.

> *The high number of suicides, especially male suicides, are a concern for my staff and myself. … This high level of mental health issues affects everyone in the centre. There is some support for students with a counsellor available for three hours per week but there is no supervision of staff who constantly have to be mindful of the young people, the state of the mental health of students and how the students are impacted by critical incidents and other life changing events. There is a huge gap in the care of staff by their employer. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

In another centre, the co-ordinator had organised twice daily debriefing sessions for staff, which allowed them to discuss challenges they had faced that morning or afternoon. This was seen as crucial to staff wellbeing and as offering a way in which difficulties did not intrude into the personal lives of staff:

> *If you had an issue with a young person in the morning, you might have carried it through to other classes, but we all have a good picture of where that young person's coming from or what's happening for the young person because we've chatted about it twice in the day, ten to one and 4 o'clock, yeah, so that's great support. And I think things don't build up for you then because of debriefing. It's, you know, stress isn't building. You don't become overly stressed because you have the opportunity to leave go, get a bit of help from other people, chat it out,*

and therefore it doesn't become something you're battling. (Bann, Staff)

5.3.3 Cooperation between centres

Among senior managers, over three-quarters indicated a good working relationship between centres and other education/training providers but somewhat fewer (59 per cent) reported good working relationships between Youthreach and CTCs locally. Sixty per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators indicated that they had weekly contact with other centres, while this was the case for only 25 per cent of CTC managers. Among Youthreach centres, weekly contact was more common for smaller centres (78 per cent compared with 54 per cent). There was some variation across ETB areas. Unfortunately, the survey did not distinguish between Youthreach and Community Training Centres in asking this question. However, the case-study interviews indicated that Youthreach co-ordinators tended to meet other co-ordinators rather than CTC managers. Few formal networks exist for the exchange of practice between the two settings except a network of co-ordinators and managers in the City of Dublin that grew out of the Patchwork to Network research (Farrelly, 2017).

The majority of co-ordinators and managers had been at an event designed to share experience across Youthreach or Community Training Centres, though this was somewhat more prevalent in the Youthreach setting (87 per cent compared with 76 per cent) and less prevalent among smaller CTCs. Centres with a lower concentration of learner need were less likely to have attended such an event. Two-thirds of co-ordinators/managers were interested in increasing the opportunities for contact and cooperation between centres 'to a great extent', with a further 27 per cent being interested 'to some extent'. CTCs were more likely to report being interested to a great extent (86 per cent compared with 63 per cent), a pattern that is likely to reflect their lower level of contact with other centres currently.

5.4 FUNDING AND RESOURCES

Both senior managers and centre co-ordinators/managers were asked about their satisfaction with funding of the programme. A quarter of senior managers expressed dissatisfaction with the funding and resources to provide the programme. Adult Education Officers were somewhat more critical of funding levels than other groups while there was also some variation by ETB area. A third of senior managers expressed dissatisfaction with the premises in which the programme was provided.

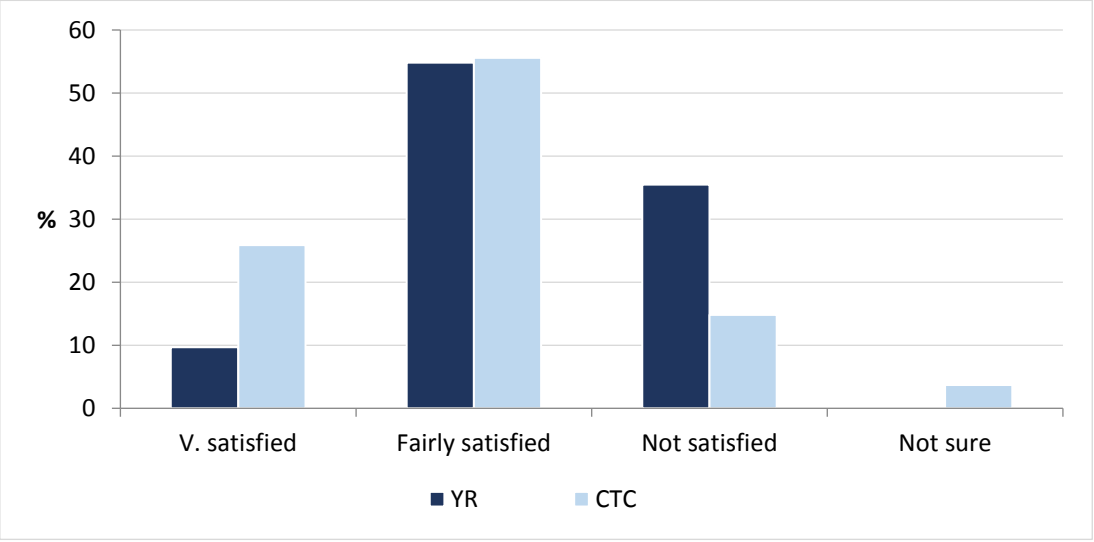
Resources are depleted. [There is a] need for resourcing of buildings to give [an] appropriate environment to enhance the programme. (Senior manager, survey response)

Lack of a capital budget – this is by far the most significant reason. (Senior manager, survey response)

Youthreach has not had the benefit of ICT investment/access to special education resources that schools have benefited from. Currently this is being partially resourced by fundraising. (Senior manager, survey response)

Among co-ordinators and managers, the largest proportion, more than half, described themselves as 'fairly satisfied' with programme funding (Figure 5.12). Thirty-six per cent of Youthreach co-ordinators and 15 per cent of CTC managers were 'not satisfied' with funding. Co-ordinators in medium and large Youthreach centres were more likely to express dissatisfaction than those in small centres (39-43 per cent compared with 23 per cent). There was some variation across ETBs in rates of dissatisfaction with funding.

FIGURE 5.12 SATISFACTION WITH FUNDING OF THE PROGRAMME BY CENTRE TYPE



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

In the case-study interviews, some co-ordinators/managers highlighted variation between ETBs in their approach to providing funding or subsidising services (see also Chapter 7). One co-ordinator argued that there was a lack of transparency across areas in the proportion of funding allocated by the ETB to the centre:

Difference between ETBs nationally regarding governance. Inequalities prevail in terms of budget allocations/levels, reporting mechanism responsibilities/roles, administrative demands, centre autonomy levels etc. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)

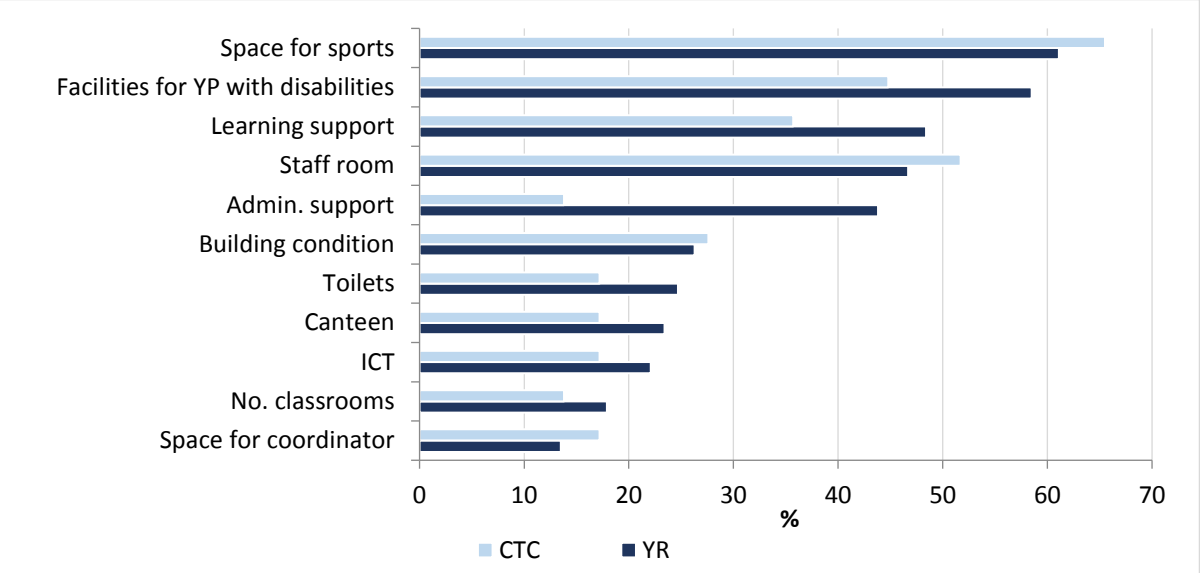
Satisfaction with different types of resources was explored in greater detail in the co-ordinator/manager survey. Dissatisfaction centres on space for sports and other activities, facilities for young people with disabilities, learning support provision and the staff room (Figure 5.13). Dissatisfaction levels were greater among Youthreach co-ordinators than CTC managers in relation to facilities for young people with disabilities, learning support provision and administrative support. In addition, Youthreach co-ordinators were more likely to report that the number of workshop areas in the centre was poor (32 per cent compared with 11 per cent of CTC managers), that technical equipment was poor (21 per cent compared with 4 per cent), and that facilities for learners with disabilities were poor (57 per cent compared with 46 per cent). Overall, dissatisfaction across both settings was highest in relation to facilities for young people with disabilities, sports facilities and a library/media centre. SENI centres were significantly more likely to see learning support provision as good or excellent than other centres (75 per cent compared with 44 per cent). Eighteen per cent of co-ordinators and 14 per cent of managers described the condition of the building and classrooms as 'poor' while 15 per cent of co-ordinators and 21 per cent of managers saw these as 'excellent'.

The poor quality of premises in some centres was seen as providing a negative signal to young people who were re-engaging in learning:

> *We encourage them to develop a love for education again and to become lifelong learners, yet we put them in buildings that are not purpose built and that in no way reflect the high quality learning environment they will have come to expect having been in mainstream schools. We work day in and day out to ensure that as a staff team we create a warm, safe, friendly and welcoming environment, and we do this very successfully, but it is not good enough to be 'compensating' all the time for the fact that we are in an old and very unsuitable building. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

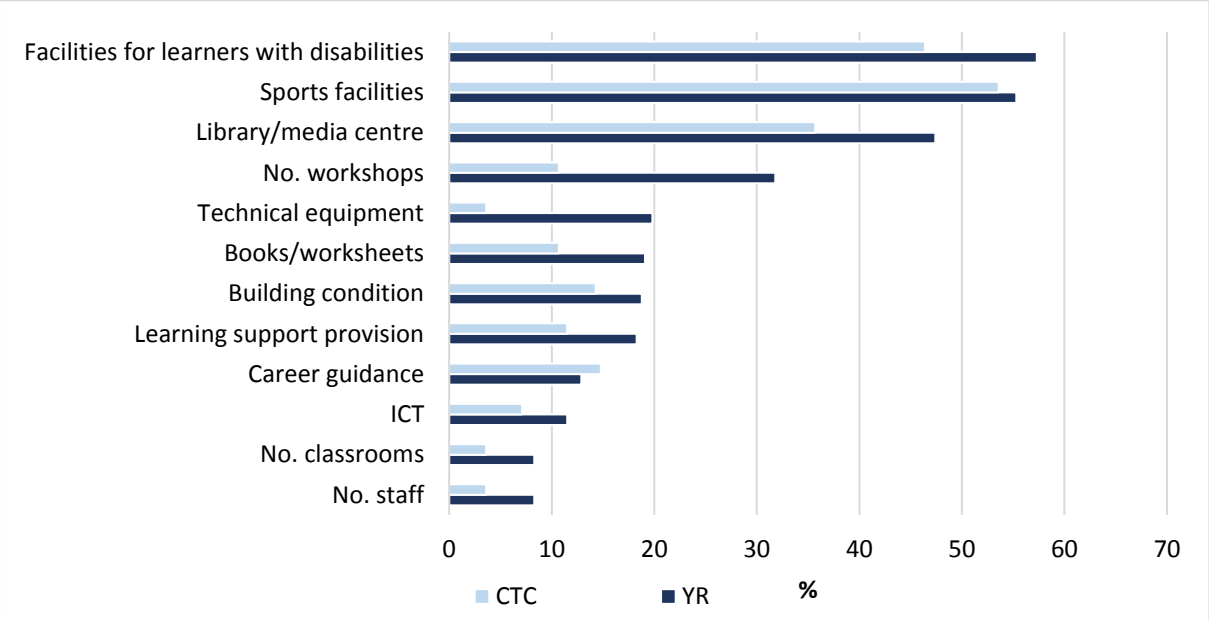
> *The quality of premises and equipment is very much less than what is available to schools. Often the areas they are housed do not give any feeling of positive self-regard for staff or students. (Co-ordinator/ manager, survey response)*

FIGURE 5.13 PROPORTION 'NOT SATISFIED' WITH DIFFERENT RESOURCES BY CENTRE TYPE



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

FIGURE 5.14 PROPORTION WHO DESCRIBE FACILITIES AS 'POOR' BY CENTRE TYPE



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

Co-ordinators and managers were asked what additional financial resources would facilitate in their centre. Their responses tended to prioritise improving the quality of the premises (59 per cent) and extending the programme to more young people (54 per cent).

5.5 PERCEPTIONS OF GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

Both senior managers and centre co-ordinators/managers were asked about the benefits of the current Youthreach model and its governance structures as well as about aspects of governance which they would change.

Senior managers saw Youthreach as providing a distinctive programme, with over half (54 per cent) seeing it as 'very different' to other local education/training provision and 41 per cent seeing it as 'quite different'. A number of different dimensions of the programme were seen as contributing to its distinctive nature. Firstly, it was viewed as highly learner centred and responsive to the needs of participants:

> *[The] Youthreach programme is tailored to the individual and pastoral needs of learners. (Senior manager, survey response)*

Smaller group sizes were seen as central to this focus on learner needs with individual learning plans being developed for participants.

> *The main difference between Youthreach and schools is that the programme is learner-centred and is delivered in a small group setting. … Care and support for the individual learner in a safe, positive environment … allows for the development of social and emotional skills as the dominant ethos of a Youthreach programme. Staff have more time to get to know the learners on a one-to-one basis, to spend time with them and address their particular needs, which allows them to development essential emotional and social skills. (Senior manager, survey response)*

> *The low ratio of staff to students in the Youthreach CTC setting allows for young people to learn in groups that are much smaller than those in other settings. This allows more individual attention to be given to students by teaching staff while also maintaining group teaching. (Senior manager, survey response)*

Course content could also be adapted for learner interests and styles of learning.

> *In our centres, it is a mixture of Leaving Cert Applied and QQI modules; these approaches are better aligned to the needs of these particular children. (Senior manager, survey response)*

Secondly, respondents emphasised the range of supports offered to participants, including learning and counselling supports (see also Chapter 7).

> *There are additional supports available such as counselling, advocacy, one-to-one tuition if necessary and referrals to other services. (Senior manager, survey response)*

Several senior managers referred to the integration of centre supports with those offered by other service providers locally, providing a more wrap-around approach (see also Chapter 7). Thirdly, an emphasis on life skills and personal development was seen as a fundamental dimension of the programme, with the adoption of a holistic approach to learner need.

> *The fact that Youthreach offers a person centred approach to the provision for young people, focusing on personal development as well as the development of career or job related skills, differs significantly from other programmes where the focus is generally predominated by a focus on job preparation. (Senior manager, survey response)*

> *The CTC offers a combination of vocational training or skills development combined with an emphasis on personal development or transferable skills that is not common and offers a valuable currency to learners. (Senior manager, survey response)*

> *Youthreach is strong on building transversal skills – confidence, decision-making and personal and interpersonal skills. (Senior manager, survey response)*

One respondent suggested that the length of the programme itself helped to scaffold learner development:

> *The two-year programme with forty-one weeks attendance by students is significant as it allows the young people to develop in a very structured supported way initially with a move towards independence in the second year. (Senior manager, survey response)*

In further discussing the advantages of the programme, senior managers emphasised both the fact that it was a national programme and the flexibility at local level to adapt to learner needs:

> *One of the main advantages to the national structure of Youthreach is that it is national in concept and general structure, requirements etc., yet local in specifics, including staffing structures, curricular arrangement etc. This provides the flexibility and adaptability to allow the needs of different cohorts in different communities to be met*

> *through modification and adaptation within the overall structures and requirements of the programme. (Senior manager, survey response)*

> *The current configuration of Youthreach allows for flexibility in terms of design and delivery within a framework of accountability, quality assurance and operational requirements. Local needs can influence programme design. (Senior manager, survey response)*

> *The ability to adapt the programme to changing needs ensures the programme stays relevant. (Senior manager, survey response)*

In addition, senior managers emphasised the role of Youthreach in facilitating the acquisition of qualifications and progression to education, training or employment.

> *[It] [a]llows young people to gain life skills, work experience and qualifications. It offers hope and a future. (Senior manager, survey response)*

Senior managers were asked about the extent to which they were satisfied with different aspects of the governance of the programme. Around six-in-ten of the senior managers were satisfied to a great extent with different aspects of the programme, including budget management, use of resources, control and accountability, hiring personnel, governance and direction of the programme, and monitoring of work. Most of the remainder were satisfied to some extent, with very small numbers expressing dissatisfaction. The greatest level of dissatisfaction (16 per cent) was in relation to hiring personnel. Reasons for dissatisfaction centred on the lack of input into hiring staff (other than the co-ordinator/manager) and on the difficulty in attracting staff because of existing contracts.

> *The current starting pay of resource workers is inhibiting recruitment significantly. Teaching is at the same level as VTOS/BTEI (QQI Level 3 and 4) with more challenging students but pay is not comparable. (Senior manager, survey response)*

> *Recognition needs to be given to the staff in Youthreach who work under difficult conditions with less entitlement than staff in the mainstream. (Senior manager, survey response)*

More detailed questions were asked on other aspects of governance. Almost all senior managers reported that they were satisfied with current governance structures and the way reporting works. In addition, almost all felt that programme

implementation was regularly monitored and that there was transparency in the allocation of resources. Four-fifths considered the programme guidelines to be clear, that the governance model was effective and that there were opportunities to exchange good practice.

Centre co-ordinators and managers tended to emphasise similar advantages to the programme as senior managers. Just under half emphasised the ability to provide a flexible and learner-centred approach:

> *Having flexibility and autonomy within our individual centres is a real benefit, as it allows us offer a truly needs based, student-centred programme which is specific to our own community and the young people who live in it. It also allows us engage in a very genuine way with community stakeholders and other educational programmes and provision with a view to supporting our students to achieve their goals both in academic and personal terms. There is also huge scope for the whole staff team of the centre to be involved in the planning of our provision at centre level and a sense of ownership over what we can then offer to our students. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

Almost a quarter stressed the consistency arising from a national approach while 16 per cent mentioned the provision of support for young people in need. In terms of governance structures, co-ordinators/managers emphasised the accountability resulting from adherence to policies and structures (35 per cent), the flexibility of the programme to meet learner needs (18 per cent), the supportive structure provided (18 per cent), and quality assurance (14 per cent).

> *Financial oversight and spending of budget is well recorded. Regular board of management meetings take place and are well attended. A certain amount of autonomy and discretion is allowed to co-ordinators to make local decisions about appropriate issues. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *The benefits of the current governance provides substantial oversight for the programme. This oversight includes finance, policy and policy development, allowances for learners and a clear reporting system to feed into the Youthreach board of management. (Co-ordinator/ manager, survey response)*

Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers had broadly similar views in relation to the advantages of the current approach but had divergent views on the changes they would like to see to governance structures. CTC managers emphasised the need for more autonomy (36 per cent compared with 3 per cent in Youthreach

settings):

> *The board of management does not have much say in the business planning process. [The ETB] provide CTCs with business planning objectives and the board has no say in what these objectives are. Each CTC should be able to decide what the goals and objectives are – more flexibility might generate more creative programmes that better meet local needs. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *Whilst the CTC is a limited company publicly funded via the ETB, it no longer has the power to make decisions without the prior approval of the ETB. This slows up making changes and in fact makes making changes very difficult indeed. The board of management should be given more autonomy provided it fulfils procurement and budget restraints and programme targets. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

They were also more likely to emphasise the need for consistent policies (21 per cent compared with 10 per cent).

> *While they strive for standardisation and transparency across the board, there are still some differences as Youthreach are aligned with ETB structures but CTCs are still working to the old FÁS structures. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *CTCs are at the end of a very long communication process in relation to policy and innovation. Communications are open to interpretation resulting in governance differing across the country. Regular briefings from senior office holders could build consistency. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

In contrast, moving provision out of further education (22 per cent) was more strongly emphasised by Youthreach co-ordinators:

> *Nationally while Youthreach programmes are designated as Centres of Education under the Education Act, 1998, the inclusion of the programmes under the FET structure can mean that the programmes fall between two worlds of formal education and adult education. This is relevant in the context of investment where Youthreach has not had the benefit of ICT investment/access to special education resources that schools have benefited from. Arguably many of the young people attending Youthreach would have benefitted from these supports in the formal education system and should have the same opportunity of access whilst attending Youthreach. The competition for funding as*

part of the global FET budget is challenging for the resourcing of Youthreach. (Co-ordinator/ manager, survey response)

I think we are caught very much between two stools. We don't really belong in Further Education as the rest of that sector are dealing mainly with adults and we find ourselves working in isolation with little understanding or support for what we actually do as we are dealing with vulnerable children and differ greatly in many ways to the other programmes in FET. While we are subject to second level Department inspections etc. we lack the status of mainstream schools and again we are left somewhat in isolation. I strongly believe we should be a real part of secondary school provision and that we should develop a programme that works hand in hand with second level mainstream schools in a manner that would enhance educational provision for all our young children of school-going age. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)

The need for more clarity around the role and support for the co-ordinator and other staff (12 per cent) was also highlighted to a greater extent by Youthreach co-ordinators:

A board of management would also be beneficial to the Centre as a support. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)

Just under a fifth of both co-ordinators and managers indicated they felt no changes were needed to governance structures.

In discussing governance structures, many co-ordinators and managers referred to significant variation in the operation of the programme across ETBs, which was seen as posing challenges in providing a truly national provision.

One of the biggest governance challenges we face as a national programme is the fact that we are not really governed nationally. There are 16 ETBs and it often feels like there are 16 different ways of doing things when it comes to governance of the Youthreach programme. This leads to disparity in how centres are expected to operate on a day-to-day basis. Given that Youthreach co-ordinators engage with each other regularly at a national level, these differences in governance are well recognised and easily identified. There are guidelines of course, which, though far from perfect, should at least provide a level base from which Youthreach operates nationally, yet different ETBs interpret and operate them differently. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)

> *Youthreach is governed differently across the 16 ETBs. In some ETBs the Youthreach programme is managed by the Education Officer and comes under the Education/Schools section of the ETB. In other ETBs it comes under the Adult Education Officer and is aligned with the Further Education and Training section. … There are pros and cons to being under either section but the lack of consistency across the ETB sector leads to differences for staff and students depending on their ETB. SOLAS and the DES should decide which sector Youthreach lies and instruct all ETBs to follow same. … The differences in how programmes are operated and funded across ETBs leads to an uneven and unfair 'playing field'. All centres are compared by SOLAS on the PLSS and FARR system but they don't have the same opportunities or resources. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

At the same time, a number of co-ordinators/managers felt that structures worked well in their own ETB:

> *We have a very active board of management within our ETB which offers help and support in regards to financial management/policy development and implementation and any grievances that may arise. There is also a supportive QA team that help and assist in the provision of our programme. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *In this region, the programme is well structured and organised, with very good communication, where information is well communicated. There are clearly defined roles and consistency in Youthreach rules, policies and procedures across the ETB. There is a good spirit of cooperation in action. There is a statement of corporate responsibility and it is subject to regular review, and there is full transparency and accountability at all levels. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

The potential ambiguity in reporting to SOLAS but at the same time being subject to DES inspections was raised by some co-ordinators:

> *Youthreach programmes must follow SOLAS guidelines and are evaluated on their outcomes by the PLSS system like all other FET programmes. However, we are also open to DES inspections where staff and centres are evaluated similar to schools. No other FET programme is open to DES inspections. In essence, we are trying to satisfy two very different sets of guidelines and governance structures. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

Co-ordinators and managers were also asked about the challenges for the future provision of Youthreach. As with desired changes, responses were significantly different across the two settings. Over a quarter of Youthreach co-ordinators saw the issue of staff recruitment and retention as a challenge for the future, a pattern that is related to differences in staff contracts and the perceived low level of salary relative to mainstream teaching. The issue of staff contracts was mentioned frequently in the case-study interviews and in the open-ended responses to the survey questions.

> *There's something amiss somewhere on the value that you put on the people that are working with the most marginalised and the most disadvantaged young people. (Barrow, Staff)*

> *The two-tiered discriminatory approach to teaching staff (and we all teach no matter what title is given) is resulting in resource workers leaving every year once they have a year's experience. The knock-on effect is that new staff have to be recruited every year, at a cost to the ETB, new staff have to be trained into the ethos and approach to use with early school leavers; and the students have to adapt to new personalities annually. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *I think the big elephant in the room that needs to be addressed nationally is this resource status of the staff who work in Youthreach and teachers and the disparities between that. I think it's … had a huge impact on people deciding to leave because they won't get recognised for service even though they're qualified teachers and often are more qualified than a lot of people in mainstream schools. And they're not properly recognised. (Boyne, Staff)*

Perhaps even more importantly, this disparity was seen as constraining provision for learners during the holiday period when those on teaching contracts were not required to work:

> *I'm a little bit angry or upset that my teaching is not being recognised. … Resource people generally teach the core subjects and I develop, we develop all our own resources here. So you do all of that and we're doing exactly the same role … but I'm not being recognised as such… I suppose goodwill sometimes can be used against you. We will do it and we will continue to do it. Because this is … not a career but a vocation … But for the learners it's really not fair because we're limited in what we can do with them. And especially in the summer programme as well, because we don't have the staff. (Moy, Staff)*

> *The first week in Easter up to, say, Good Friday, I've no staff. There's only myself and the resource person. (Erne, Staff)*

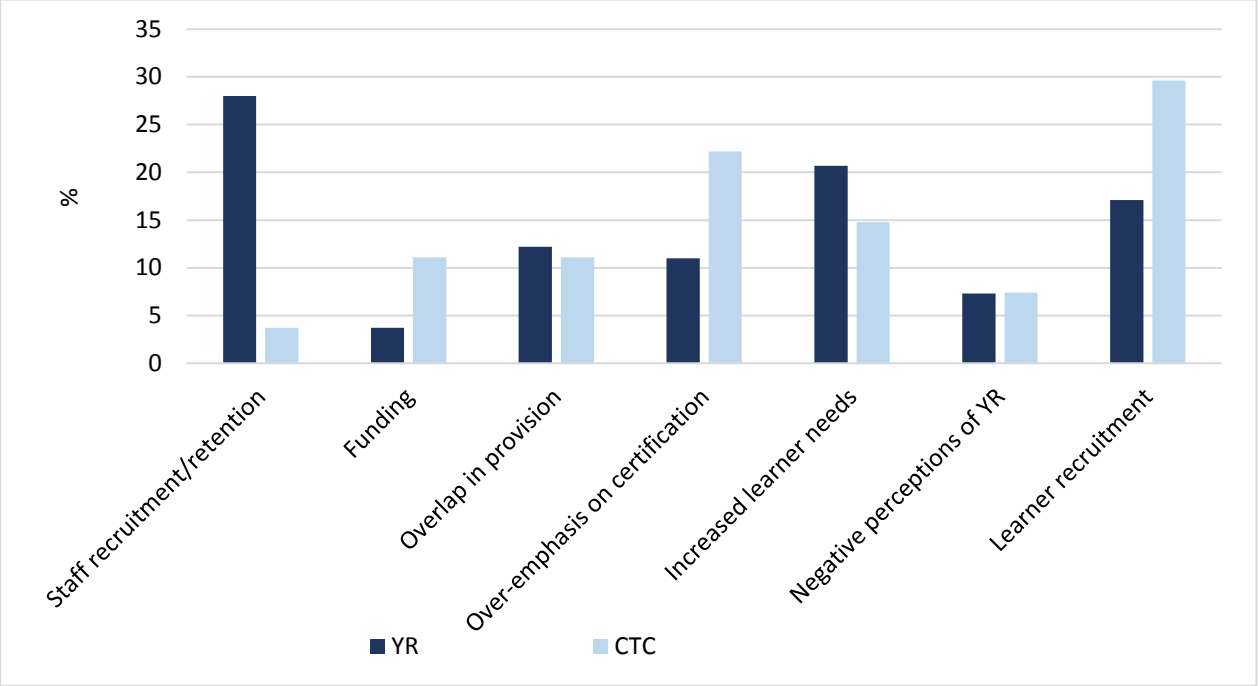
> *What gets more stressful is the contracts, the terms and working conditions and the fact that there are people in here, and I love them to bits, but they're on a different scale than we are. They close that door on 8 June, they say, 'Goodbye.' and they don't see us again until September. Resource people have to turn around and do the work placements, do the summer activities, the whole lot, do a longer year. That's what stresses me out. (Barrow, Staff)*

Difficulties in staffing coupled with greater levels of non-attendance among learners during the holiday period led some co-ordinators/managers to question the value of the summer programme:

> *That it is necessary to engage learners into June and July should be reviewed. Centres have to spend large amounts of money on summer programmes and keep[ing] learners engaged during a period of time when they do not want to be in Centres is challenging and can bring unnecessary stress to all parties involved. … Having to buy back in your own staff again at [Christmas and Easter holidays] is ridiculous. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *The 'summer programme' is ineffective and counter-productive and only serves to make marginalised children feel more marginalised as they have to attend when all their peers in mainstream are on holidays. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

FIGURE 5.15 CHALLENGES FOR THE FUTURE OF YOUTHREACH PROVISION



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

A fifth of Youthreach centres also referred to the increased needs evident among learners, reflecting the increase in the prevalence of learning and mental difficulties among young people discussed in Chapter 4. Learner recruitment was reported as a challenge in one-in-six Youthreach centres but was highlighted in almost 30 per cent of Community Training Centres. This may reflect the more protracted process involved in enrolling in CTCs (see Chapter 3). CTC managers were also more likely to report an over-emphasis on certification as a challenge, with over a fifth doing so compared with a tenth of Youthreach centres.

> *A lack of understanding by the local ETB of the issues and needs of CTC participants and too much focus on statistical results regarding certification and progression rather than a holistic understanding of the socio-economic issues and soft skill development that is far more important in my opinion. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *The current system for measuring outcomes by SOLAS is FARR and this only captures the quantitative outcomes. There is no mechanism to capture the qualitative data – the soft skills. A lot of time and energy is given during the course of the programme to develop the soft skills of students. For some students this is more of an achievement than their QQI award. These skills equip the students so that they can become active citizens and yet there's no emphasis put on these skills as a valid outcome. It's worrying that SOLAS will implement 'Outcomes based funding' in the near future and will only measure outcomes*

> *based on progression to further education, training or employment. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

Other issues highlighted included potential duplication or overlap in education/ training provision, negative perceptions of the programme and funding levels.

5.6 KEY THEMES FROM THE CONSULTATIVE WORKSHOPS

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the discussions held during the consultative workshops provide rich insights into the views of stakeholders involved in the Youthreach programme and in the broader domains of education and social inclusion. While much of the discussion mirrored the findings in the co-ordinators'/managers' survey, the senior managers' survey and the case-study research, a number of other issues were raised which warrant further attention. This section outlines some of the key issues raised by stakeholders which were not as evident in the other forms of data collection.

Retention versus real engagement

In line with the case-study findings, Youthreach learners' prior educational experiences featured in discussions at the consultative workshops. Some questioned the increased retention figures in recent years as they had experienced learners who:

> *Fall out of the system and are sitting at home and while they're on the books of the secondary schools, they're not actually in the classroom, and therefore they'll be deprived of that education, simply because they've not even thought about Youthreach. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

Other speakers also question the quality of retention sometimes taking place in schools:

> *We've all had examples where learners come to us; maybe they begin school for about six months, a year, but they haven't actually really been in school. They've had a reduced timetable; behavioural issues; maybe they are spending 20 minutes in the classroom and then they're out of the classroom. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

Referral /transition from school into Youthreach

A number of stakeholders spoke about the transition from mainstream school into Youthreach, highlighting a number of issues around the referral process and the transfer of information:

> *There's a challenge around that part when they transition, even though it's different between CTCs and Youthreachs, but the transition from school and how that handover is managed and the experience they're coming from in school. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

Loss of supports between mainstream school and Youthreach

A number of those at the consultative workshops raised the issue of the loss of supports which were available to students with special educational needs in mainstream school when they move into the Youthreach programme:

> *The situation where a young person in school who may be diagnosed with a learning disability, for example… none of their supports will travel with them when they come to a Youthreach centre… [they] could potentially be disadvantaged by coming to a Youthreach centre. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

Others spoke more specifically about the loss of SNA support for learners coming to Youthreach:

> *We don't budget for an SNA, it's not in our budget. Yet, it's funny we ask the question on the application form: did you receive any special resources; did you have an SNA, that facility doesn't follow into Youthreach, and that child is straightaway at a loss. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

Another stakeholder spoke about the loss of specific supports such as transport which could then act as a barrier to attendance:

> *Lack of access to travel routes and then a lack of ability to actually pay bus or train charges as well and that potentially being a barrier to attendance, to being punctual, to being on time. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

Staff quality and retention

Another concern was raised related to staffing, in particular the quality of staff working in Youthreach:

> *There is some experience of unqualified staff coming into Youthreach, maybe through re-deployment, and obviously we all know just how important the people, the individuals, are in Youthreach and having the confidence and the skills to work with young people. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

Other felt that, given the issues around staff contracts, the retention of staff was becoming a serious problem:

> *By the time you actually engage with new staff, they move on to a new secondary school system for the better terms and conditions and holidays and pay…you lose the knowledge that's gone into them over them years and that wears on the staff that are staying. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

Location of Youthreach within the Department of Education and Skills or SOLAS

Some of those who spoke at the workshops queried the location of Youthreach within the Further Education and Training sector and argued that it was more appropriately placed in the second-level education system:

> *We're dealing with kids, we're dealing with young, young people from 15 years of age. Even the 16/17/18/19-year-olds we deal with [are] emotionally immature… so where we are structured with further education, we should be with the secondary schools. We should be complementary to secondary schools. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

> *Youthreach needs to be seen as an alternative to second-level education; not something different but actually the same thing, just a different way of doing it. And for that reason, those challenges, it needs to be aligned with second-level education. Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

They went on to describe how the different structure of the Youthreach programme meant that learners were made to feel different to their peers in mainstream education:

> *They're looking at a longer year, their peers are off in June and the learners at Youthreach are still in school… we need to show that they're not different, they're just receiving education in a different way. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

5.7 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has drawn on survey data and case-study interviews to explore perceptions of Youthreach governance among senior managers and centre co-ordinators/managers. The Youthreach programme is seen as occupying a distinctive place in the education and training landscape, providing supports for marginalised young people and having the flexibility to respond to learner need while operating within national guidelines and standards. On the whole, senior

managers are broadly satisfied with existing governance structures but the views of co-ordinators and managers are more mixed. The two types of setting, Youthreach and Community Training Centres, have different governance structures, with resulting differences in reporting lines, funding arrangements, staffing levels, and staff terms and conditions. While set up by local community organisations with their own board of management, CTC managers report an ambiguity in the governance model, whereby the ETB as the funder in fact has the main say. For both types of settings, although operating within common guidelines, variation in practice at the ETB level results in a tension between consistency and local control. This results in different levels of resources (especially premises) and curriculum (see Chapter 6) across ETB areas.

Senior managers adopt an oversight role with the centre co-ordinator/manager acting as the linchpin in engaging with management and reporting structures as well as motivating staff and dealing with the needs of young people. The co-ordinator/manager also acts as the key point of contact for liaison with local agencies and organisations (see Chapter 7). Senior managers see co-ordinators/ managers as having a good deal of autonomy regarding programmes and activities offered at centre level, but in practice there appear to be constraints resulting from ETB policy regarding funding and qualifications as well as from the skillset of existing staff. Centres typically have a small group of staff, meaning that many staff teach and facilitate a broad range of modules and courses, making access to continuous professional development particularly important. The increased prevalence of mental health and learning difficulties among learners is seen as posing particular challenges for staff, and both senior managers and co-ordinators/managers highlight the need for continuous professional development and support for staff in the areas of mental health and dealing with challenging behaviour. There are different staff contracts between CTC and Youthreach centres, and within Youthreach centres, that result in variation in the length of the working year and in pay levels. From the perspective of co-ordinators/managers and the broader stakeholder group, this issue is seen as posing challenges for the running of the centres during holiday periods and as creating difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff in many settings.

Co-ordinators and managers are broadly satisfied with overall funding levels. However, the majority highlight gaps in provision around facilities for young people with disabilities, learning support provision and sports/recreational facilities. Significant variation is found in the quality of premises and senior managers highlight the lack of a capital budget for new buildings and/or renovations. The lack of a capital budget is also likely to act as a constraint in setting up new centres in areas of population growth.

CHAPTER 6

Teaching, learning and assessment

6.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter draws on the survey of co-ordinators/managers and in-depth interviews with co-ordinators/managers, staff and learners to examine the nature of teaching, learning and assessment in Youthreach and Community Training Centres. Section 6.2 looks at the nature of curriculum provision, exploring variation across centres in the qualifications offered and the rationale underpinning this difference. This section also examines the other activities and courses provided within centres. Section 6.3 looks at the kinds of teaching methods used while the approach to learning support provision is outlined in Section 6.4. Section 6.5 looks at the kinds of formative and summative assessment used in the centres and the feedback given to learners and their parents.

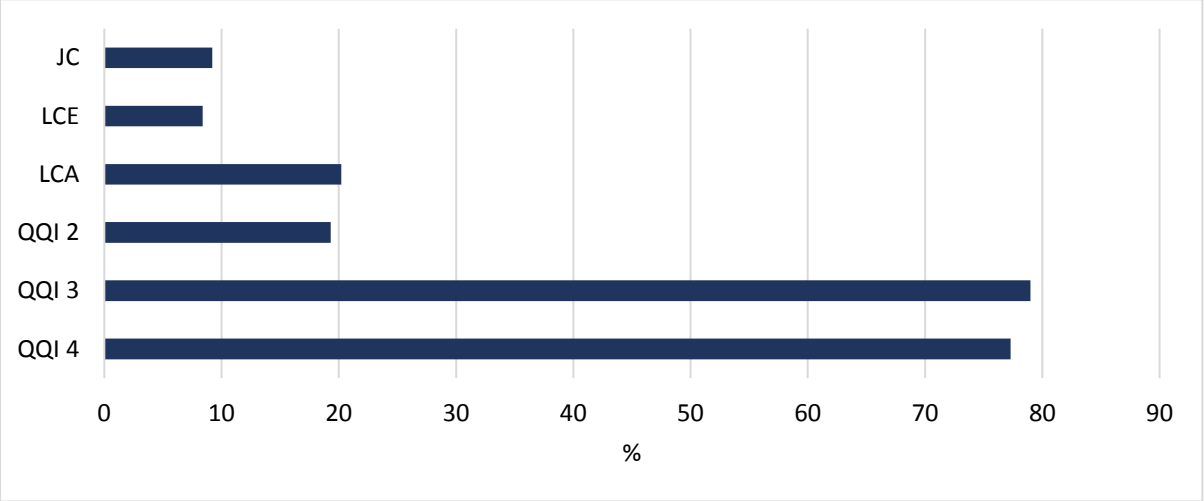
6.2 CURRICULUM

Co-ordinators and managers were asked about the type of qualifications offered in their centres. Because provision may vary from year to year, the information presented here was based on the number of awards in the relevant categories in the centre in the past year (as reported in the survey by co-ordinators/managers), with at least one (even partial) award taken to indicate provision. Figure 6.1 indicates that a small group (8-9 per cent) of centres offer the Junior Certificate (JC) and Leaving Certificate Established (LCE) programmes. A larger group, a fifth, provide the Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme. A similar proportion of centres offer QQI Level 2 qualifications. The most common form of provision, applying to over three-quarters of centres, relates to QQI Levels 3 and 4 qualifications.

The provision of 'traditional' qualifications such as JC, LCE and LCA was almost completely confined to Youthreach centres. None of the small centres provide JC compared with 14-15 per cent of medium and large centres. Larger centres are also more likely to offer LCE (23 per cent compared with none of the small and 10 per cent of the medium-sized centres). A gradient by size is also apparent for LCA, with almost half (46 per cent) of large centres offering the programme compared with 8 per cent of small centres and 28 per cent of medium-sized centres. SENI centres are significantly more likely to provide JC than non-SENI centres (21 compared with 9 per cent) and somewhat more likely to offer LCA (32 per cent compared with 24 per cent), but do not differ in relation to LCE provision. Provision of JC varies by ETB area. Only five ETB areas have any centres providing LCE. Provision of LCA also varies notably by ETB area. The provision of JC and LCA appears to reflect the

profile of learners, as it is more prevalent in centres with a greater concentration of need. Thus, 21 per cent of the high need group provide JC compared with none of the low need and 10 per cent of the medium need. LCA provision is at 42 per cent among the high need group compared with 13 per cent for low need and 22 per cent for medium need centres.

FIGURE 6.1 TYPE OF QUALIFICATIONS OFFERED BY YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

The rationale for offering SEC qualifications was framed in terms of providing young people with the 'same' qualifications as their peers in mainstream schools.

> *I think there was kind of a uniform decision made across the [area] that like the young people that come here they want the same as everyone else. They don't want to be different. And was felt that to offer them the Junior Cert and Leaving Cert was a basic requirement so they'd be the ones that are being prioritised. … The LCA is a good programme. There's whole lots of kind of experiences that you know work experience, Art, Task. You know all the kind of the skills kind of you know that will certainly serve them later on in life (Boyne, Co-ordinator/manager)*

A senior manager also saw the provision of LCA in Youthreach as facilitating greater continuity of learning experience across the transition:

> *Youthreach provides Leaving Certificate Applied which the students are able for academically, can slot into if they drop out of school and can take up where they left off in school. They can also carry forward their LCA credits from school to Youthreach. (Senior manager, survey response)*

Youthreach centres are more likely to provide QQI Level 2 qualifications than Community Training Centres (23 per cent compared with 7 per cent). Provision does not vary systematically by centre size but does differ across ETB areas. As with other qualifications, provision appears to reflect the perceived profile of learners, being lowest in centres with a lower concentration of need (8 per cent compared with 20-22 per cent). Provision does not vary by the proportion of young people with learning difficulties but does reflect the prevalence of EPMH difficulties (being provided in 28 per cent of centres with a high concentration compared to 11 per cent with a low concentration). This pattern may reflect centres using QQI Level 2 to ease the transition back to learning for young people with anxiety difficulties or for those who join the centre late in the academic year.

> *Because you could have kids who come in late in the year and you haven't a clue and there's no point certifying someone, do you know. And it just gives a chance to sit them down. Number one, give them a routine. Number one, get a look at what they're about. Number two or number three, then they can be working on modules like on a level two that are achievable. They'd just give them a good feeling of education because they don't have it. (Suir, Staff)*

Provision of Level 2 is also more common in centres with a younger learner profile (25 per cent with the highest representation of those aged 17 or under compared to 15-18 per cent in other centres). The extent to which this pattern may reflect the educational profile of learners on entry to the programme is examined below.

QQI Level 3 qualifications are more frequently provided in Community Training Centres than in Youthreach centres (93 per cent compared with 75 per cent). Otherwise, QQI qualifications are commonly provided across centres of different sizes and learner profiles and located in different areas. CTCs are also more likely to provide Level 4 qualifications (89 per cent compared with 74 per cent). These qualifications are more commonly provided in smaller centres, whether in the Youthreach or CTC setting. Provision is prevalent across ETBs, but with lower levels of provision in three areas. Centres with a younger learner profile are less likely to provide Level 4 qualifications but otherwise there is little systematic variation in provision by learner characteristics. SENI centres are somewhat less likely to offer QQI Level 3 or 4 qualifications than other centres.

QQI qualifications were seen as providing clear progression routes into further education and training:

> *The whole step by step approach with the QQI is very good. Young people now know where they can progress onto. (Bann, Staff)*

The modular approach was seen as flexible enough to be adapted to learner interests:

> *With QQI, you've still your deadline and your assignments or whatever. But you can suit the needs of the programme, so if a group of young people come in and … the boys are interested in cars at the moment. I can slot that in. I can manoeuvre it to keep their interest and then we'll link with whatever's going on. (Bann, Staff)*

Staff can select particular modules in order to enhance the life skills of learners:

> *There would be a large bank of modules say that would make up the Level 4 QQI Catering major award, so within that you have nine other minor awards, and we would have looked at them as staff and said what one suits one instructor … so I picked Personal Development. And then within the Personal Development, the learner have to construct a project based on a social issue and we sit around and we say well what sort of issues do we want to talk about, unemployment, do you want to talk about mental health, and I usually guide them towards mental health. So what I do, I suppose, well could we say this, yes, those modules are finished to meet the criteria that they need. But I primarily do those modules and have picked those modules because I can see the learning that they will achieve with those stand-alone modules. (Shannon, Staff)*

However, staff in another centre felt that greater learning took place in the Junior Certificate than in QQI courses:

> *There is less learning in QQI Level 3 … what is important at the end of the day are the sheets and there isn't as much learning in it as when you're preparing for a Junior Cert exam you're equipping learners with skills and you're doing any number of skills, only a few of them will be tested on the day but they need to have all of those skills and then they move forward whereas QQI I don't think - it doesn't differentiate as much. (Boyne, Staff)*

In addition, some of the modules are seen as requiring too much written work on the part of learners:

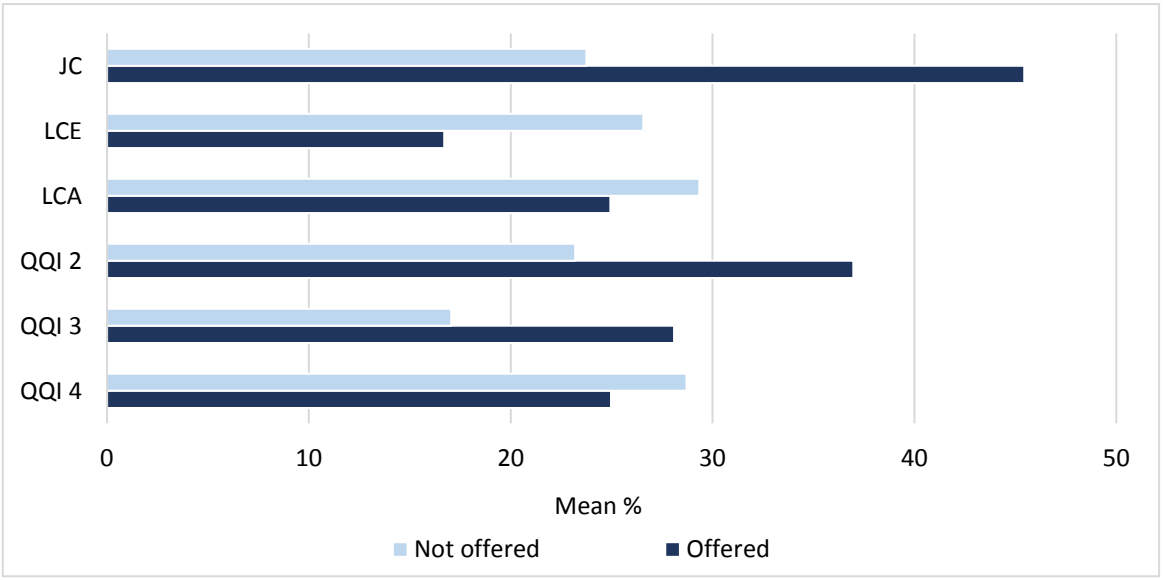
> *Career Preparation, it's actually a mandatory module. To go to mock interviews and stuff like that but it's quite demanding on them because there's an awful lot of written work. And they've left school because of that reason, and other reasons, not just they are not able*

for the written work and it is a lot, it is a lot for them to take on. (Shannon, Staff)

Given the patterns discussed so far, it is not surprising that centres vary in the number of different qualification types offered. The most common pattern is providing two qualifications (61 per cent of centres), with 16 per cent providing only one and 24 per cent offering three or more. CTCs are more likely to provide two qualifications than Youthreach centres (74 per cent compared with 57 per cent), with a sizeable group of Youthreach centres offering three or more qualification types (27 per cent compared with 11 per cent). Larger centres are less likely to offer only one type of qualification, with 11 per cent doing so compared with 21 per cent of small centres and 17 per cent of medium-sized centres. Centres catering for a greater concentration of need tend to offer more qualification types.

The nature of provision is found to be tailored to the educational profile of young people upon entry. Figure 6.2 shows the average percentage of learners in a centre with only primary education by the type of qualifications offered in the centre. It is evident that centres offering Junior Certificate, QQI Level 2 and Level 3 qualifications have significantly higher proportions of learners who enter without completing junior cycle education. Centres offering LCE, LCA and QQI Level 4 have somewhat fewer learners with only primary education, but the differences are not marked. Centres with a higher proportion of learners entering with primary education only also tend to offer a wider range of qualification types on average.

FIGURE 6.2 AVERAGE PROPORTION OF LEARNERS WITH PRIMARY EDUCATION ONLY BY WHETHER THE QUALIFICATION IS OFFERED



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

In the case-study interviews, co-ordinators and managers reported that all learners were assessed on entry to the programme. This assessment was used to determine whether learners required additional supports and influenced the level of course they took:

> *It depends on their assessment when they come and if they haven't done a Junior Cert they would automatically start at Level Three. And if they've a Junior Cert and it's a good Junior Cert they would be in Level Four. (Moy, Staff)*

> *If we get a young person coming in who's 18, 19 and they've … already got some level of qualification and they're just looking to find another way into, into college or an IT or something like that, the success, then, will be getting them … the points they need to get into their course that they're after. If we're getting 15, 16-year-olds who have no literacy, obviously the main thing is getting them socialised. Some of them come in very dark when they come in the door, getting them some level of reading, some level of numeracy, trying to get them up to that sort of speed first. We had a couple of students in here who, who came in just like that and now they're getting their Level 3s, which is a big, big deal for them 'cos they've all come in with, usually, pretty … bad experience of education.(Foyle, Staff)*

As discussed in Chapter 5, learner need was the primary basis for deciding on course provision, with many centres revising course offerings as the profile of learners changed:

> *Each year our timetable changes as we meet these needs. A number of years ago we provided Levels 1, 2 and mainly 3 QQI awards. About five years ago we identified a need for Level 4 QQI certification so we devised a full programme for Level 4 to run alongside the other levels. It has taken a number of years to integrate it fully into the overall programme but it has been a massive success. It has succeeded because of the commitment, flexibility and professionalism of the staff. As the nature of early school leaving has changed in the local area, the Level 4 group is now the numerically dominant group and we are identifying an increased level of progression routes for them. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

However, co-ordinators and managers were partially constrained by the skill sets of existing staff.

> *The needs of young people aren't static and I think that's one of the challenges for staff teams because particular skills are maybe present within the teams that do need to be … updated. (Bann, Staff)*

> *All my staff have CIDs [Contracts of indefinite duration] so … I can't get anybody in. So I have to look at the skill set of those staff and see what we can do with that. (Moy, Co-ordinator)*

Facilities and resources were also viewed as constraints on the kinds of courses and activities offered:

> *A person who is very practical, we've no metalwork, you know, those practical subjects, we don't have our own kitchen, they would be brilliant, you know, that facility because the practical subjects are for life anyway and we're trying to teach them all those, that's what we miss definitely. (Bann, Staff)*

In addition, ETBs were seen to have different views as to what qualifications should be offered in local centres and to the length of time learners could remain within the system:

> *I feel it is important that Youthreach centres can continue to select the type of accreditation that suits their particular needs. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *Youthreach centres should be allowed to deliver more than just QQI courses. In this ETB, centres can only deliver QQI courses as it's believed that schools should only deliver the Junior Cert, Leaving Cert and LCA. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

> *Currently our ETB dictates that students only stay in Youthreach for two years except in very exceptional circumstances. However, given that we are now seeing students come to us younger (i.e. 15 / pre-Junior Cert) there is a need to allow for greater flexibility around the length of the programme to ensure they are better prepared for a positive progression when they leave us. The first year is often spent working on purely practical things like improved attendance, engagement, social skills, etc. all with a view to ensuring better outcomes. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

A number of co-ordinators/managers felt it would be useful to be able to provide some Level 5 courses to facilitate the progression to further education, with some providing 'tasters' to familiarise learners with what is involved:

> *I'd love that we could have Level 3, 4 and 5 available within the Youthreach system, particularly the practical modules. They're not always ready for PLC when they finish with us. I'm not saying I want this course to be longer because I don't want to make them dependent either, so it's sticky how you do it. (Blackwater, Co-ordinator/manager)*

> *I've devised a few Level 5 modules. We can't deliver them. Say we had someone who is going to go on after they leave here so that you're giving them a bit of work in that area to get them ready for it, we call it preparation for further ed. There's one in psychology there because actually he's interested in psychology. There's one in childcare and there's one in tourism, that sort of thing. (Liffey, Co-ordinator/manager)*

> *We also offer some component modules at Level 5 but we do not offer the full awards at Level 5 since that is the remit for the PLCs. Offering Level 5 Components is somewhat of a contentious issue. However, our rationale for this is, I believe, a sound one. We have a good recent track record of success when it comes to students who successfully complete our programme but I had begun to notice that they often successfully applied to the PLCs after graduation but were not actually ready for the jump and soon fell out of their course. Since we introduced the option to complete one or two modules at Level 5, I get a sense that more of the students seem to stay on in their college because they have already had the chance to taste what a 'Level 5' is all about – they get used to reading and interpreting the Assessment Briefs, they understand that it's even more 'self-directed' than Level 4 and above all they know they can get through the work if they stick with it. Plus, the colleges can know that they young person has already grappled with a Level 5 and hopefully managed it. Plus, every module achieved is an advantage even for students who leave here and then change their mind about college – something like word processing or spreadsheets at Level 5 will stand to them. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

In addition to the SEC- and QQI-accredited courses, the vast majority (89 per cent) of centres provided a range of non-accredited courses and activities or courses accredited by other bodies. These comprised of a range of activities tailored to learner need, including sports and fitness, courses and talks to promote emotional wellbeing, and practical skills such as driver theory and SafePass. These activities were seen as contributing to the broader development of learners and such classes could be used to enhance the emotional and psychological health and coping skills

of learners (see Chapter 7). However, staff in one centre reported difficulty in providing non-accredited in addition to accredited courses:

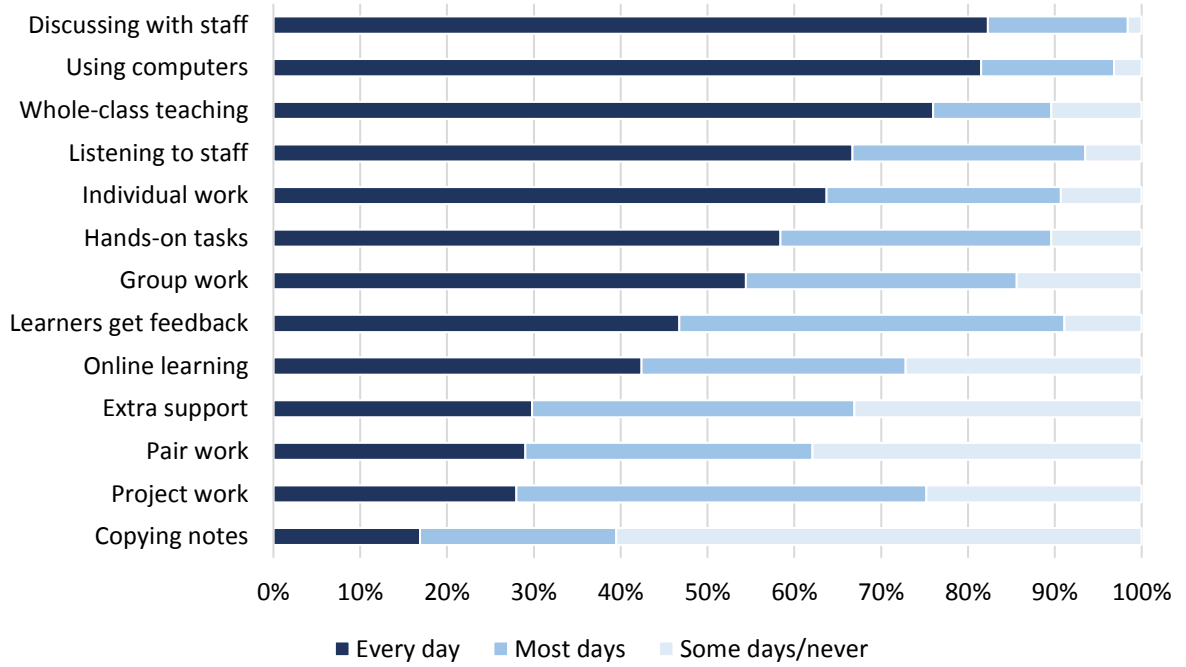
> *What we offer is the core modules to get a QQI Level 4 and Level 3. We had extra modules before, it was just putting a bit of stress on staff to get the young people over the line when one of the modules wasn't a necessity. (Bann, Co-ordinator/manager)*

The vast majority of centres offered at least one such course or activity but the actual number of courses varied significantly. Youthreach centres offered significantly more courses and activities than Community Training Centres, an average of 6.4 compared with 2.3. Among Youthreach centres, SENI funding facilitated the provision of a much larger range of courses and activities (an average of 9.1 compared with 5.7). Variation was also evident across ETB areas. Provision also tended to vary by the type of accredited courses offered, with fewer such courses and activities in centres providing LCA (3.8 compared with 6). It may be that the courses which must be offered as part of the programme constrain the time available for non-LCA courses. In contrast, centres offering QQI Level 2 courses tend to provide significantly more of such courses and activities (7.7 compared with 5.1), most likely in an effort to engage a more vulnerable group of learners.

6.3 APPROACHES TO TEACHING AND LEARNING

Figure 6.3 shows the co-ordinator/manager reports on the kinds of approaches to teaching and learning most frequently used in the centre. It should be noted that this provides a general overview; given the range of qualifications offered in some centres (see Section 6.2), approaches are likely to be tailored to particular groups of learners. The most commonly used approaches involve learners discussing with staff, learners using computers, and whole-class teaching, which are all used every day in at least three-quarters of centres. Listening to staff explaining or demonstrating individual work, hands-on or practical activities and group work are used every day in at least half of centres. Other approaches such as learners receiving feedback, online learning/using the internet, providing additional support, pair work and project work are used at least on some days in the majority of centres. In contrast to mainstream second-level education, more didactic approaches, such as copying notes from the board, are seldom used.

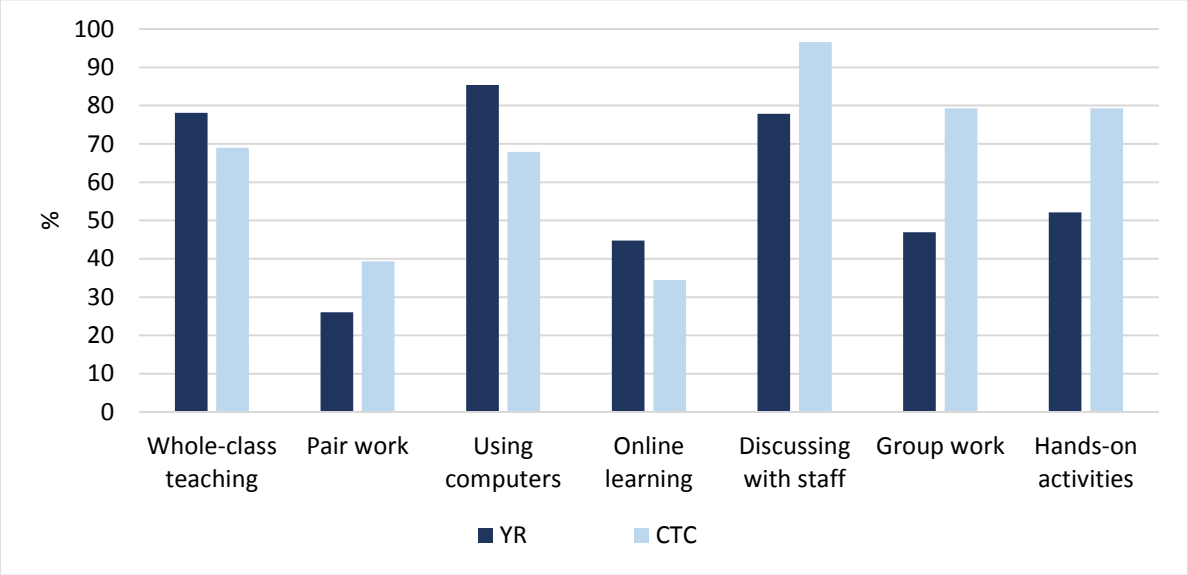
FIGURE 6.3 FREQUENCY OF USE OF DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO TEACHING AND LEARNING ACROSS YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

While many of the approaches were used frequently in both Youthreach and Community Training Centres, some differences in approach are evident (Figure 6.4). Youthreach centres are more likely than CTCs to use ICT-based approaches and are slightly more likely to use whole-class teaching. In contrast, CTCs are more likely to employ interactive approaches, including group and pair work, discussion and hands-on activities.

FIGURE 6.4 USE OF SELECTED APPROACHES TO TEACHING AND LEARNING 'EVERY DAY' BY YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

The findings point to other sources of variation in the use of different teaching practices. Not surprisingly, the kinds of qualifications offered by each centre shape the methods used. Centres providing LCA or LCE were somewhat more likely to use whole-class teaching, while those offering QQI Level 4 were somewhat less likely to do so. Centres providing LCA or LCE were also less likely to report frequent discussion between learners and staff and frequent use of group work; discussion was more common in centres offering QQI Levels 3 or 4 while centres providing QQI Level 4 were more likely to report frequent use of group work. The use of hands-on activities was much less common in the small group of centres offering LCE and more frequent in settings offering QQI Level 4. Computer use was much less frequent in centres offering Junior Certificate, LCA and/or LCE; for example, only half of the small number of centres providing LCE reported using computers every day compared with 84 per cent of other centres. In contrast, very frequent computer use was reported in centres offering QQI Level 4, with 87 per cent using ICT every day compared with 63 per cent of other centres. These centres were also more likely to report frequent use of the internet/online learning (49 per cent compared with 30 per cent) and of project work (79 per cent compared with 52 per cent). Individual work was slightly more commonly used in centres providing QQI Levels 3 or 4.

Teaching approaches are also found to reflect the size and composition of the centre's learners. Smaller centres are more likely to use computers every day (94 per cent compared with 76-79 per cent) but no other marked differences by centre size are apparent. On closer investigation, there is less variation in ICT use by centre size for Youthreach but smaller CTCs are more likely to use computers on a

frequent basis. Pair work is more commonly used in centres with a high concentration of need; 44 per cent of high need centres use pair work every day compared with 20 per cent of low need and 26 per cent of medium need centres. A similar pattern is evident in relation to computer use, with 93 per cent of high need centres using this approach every day compared with 71 per cent of low need and 81 per cent of medium need centres. High need centres are slightly more likely to use project work on a frequent basis, 32 per cent doing so every day compared with 21 per cent of low need centres. At the same time, high need centres are somewhat more likely to report use of more didactic methods (32 per cent reporting 'copying notes from the board' every day compared with 9-14 per cent of other centres). The use of group work also varied by the concentration of young people with learning difficulties, being less frequently used in centres with a high representation of this group (43 per cent using group work every day compared with 56 per cent of the medium group and 64 per cent of the low group). However, perhaps surprisingly, centres with a high concentration of those with learner difficulties were less likely to use hands-on activities (43 per cent compared with 61-69 per cent of other centres). This pattern applied within both Youthreach and CT centres.

The value of using more hands-on activities as a way of engaging learners was emphasised by co-ordinators, managers and staff in the case-study interviews:

> *I suppose the practical ones are the best. You know, team teaching and anything that has them moving about is the best…trial and error, you know, stand up with a map or on the board and telling them all and it doesn't work, and in Youthreach it's nearly a one-to-one…you might have two people on this section and two other people on something else and it's just a matter of kind of managing that. They do work well in pairs, they do work well in teams and they love projects. (Moy, Co-ordinator/manager)*

> *I also find with students with no level of literacy or with aggression, the horticulture is a great problem [solver] because they're outside, they're very often doing physical work. For kids who have a lot of aggression in them that can sometimes just take the edge off. (Foyle, Co-ordinator/manager)*

Staff indicated the need to use a variety of methods to identify what works best for particular individuals or groups of learners:

> *At the start it's kind of like trial and error as such. You'd be kind of starting off doing a lesson and seeing how that went and then, 'Oh, we need to, we need to redo that', and maybe take that, you know. Like let's say we went through a lesson and it might be, 'I don't think*

anyone got that'… So you might go and I might bring in a video. So now we're doing scientific notation, I've brought you in something to watch, a video. (Erne, Staff)

To scaffold learning, staff tended to break work down into small manageable components, while also developing trust between staff and learners:

I have every example laid out for them, … you don't say, 'Oh, you have to do all this,' it's bite size and it's about achieving small goals and … try and achieve the small goals at the start really, really fast, which could be something of, you know, 'Fill in this worksheet,' 'Do this small little painting,' and it's just about breaking the ice and about getting to know them instead of laying out, 'Oh, this is what we're doing for the year'. Because you may never get to that it may never happen like that so it's about establish the rapport as quick as you can. (Foyle, Staff)

The need for clear learning goals was also emphasised:

We all teach the same, we have a method, we'll do the date up, it's a simple thing. Put up our learning intention, our key words, and a recap at the end. And that's the start and the end, and they do a learning drill at the end. So, all those simple things when it's consistent definitely do work. (Bann, Staff)

Particular courses were seen as not only developing learner skills but as giving them a sense of achievement, often for the first time, and a way of engaging with staff and peers in a safe environment:

[Art] kind of builds up self-esteem. A lot of these kids, I won't generalise, but an awful lot of them would have been told in no uncertain terms that they can't do this, they're not capable, 'you're not able,' a lot of negative re-enforces there. What I have is a positive re-enforcer, and that is what, so it's kind of like the shoulder to shoulder counselling you would say, or something that you might see in Men Sheds or something, where the kids are sitting down, there is quietness, the radio is on, then somebody starts a conversation, just off the top of their head, it could be anything, it could be a suicide or it could be somebody who got a job, not necessarily negative, but it's a much calmer atmosphere, it's much more conducive to having a discussion or a conversation as opposed to what you might get, could be shouting matches and stuff like that, you know. So, definitely, that is the art aspect, that is, I think it is a great benefit. (Shannon, Staff)

Some staff reported difficulties in differentiating classes for learners, given the broad spectrum of abilities in the group:

> *I'm running two modules at the moment in here at the same time, with different learners all at different paces - all at different stages of the module … I have people in my class who are really computer quick and savvy and fast learners and bored almost with the level of the work and I have to give them more interesting stuff to do. And in the same class at the same time I might have somebody who can't switch on the computer. (Liffey, Staff)*

In contrast, other staff had adapted to using differentiated approaches and felt they worked well:

> *So I could have Level 3s, 4s and you could have someone with literacy issues, so you could have three different levels in a room … in the beginning, again, that was new for me, so I had to learn my strategy to work around that, and I must say now I'd have no problem. Yeah. I'd be fine with it. I just worked myself around it. (Blackwater, Staff)*

The young people interviewed were positive about their experiences of learning in the Youthreach programme, contrasting the situation with their negative experience in mainstream education. Some of the learners were exposed to new subjects in Youthreach that they had not done in secondary school:

> *I love just painting and stuff, because we would actually get lost in time and everything. You just go in your own world so I love that. (Suir, Learner)*

Learners were positive about the way that smaller class sizes meant more individualised support:

> *They take more notice of you and if like you're stuck and you just don't say nothing they notice like because there's not that many in the class like, and they come over and help. But then for in school like there's just too many in the class. They just don't give a shit, like they just sit there and look at you. So it's way easier in here. (Suir, Learner)*

> *It's the way they talk to you like, I don't know. You've more kind of a one-to-one here than you do in school because in school there's what, 30 people in your class. You're not going to get a one-to-one ever. Ever. I did the whole four years in school and I never had a one-to-one I'd say once. (Moy, Learner)*

It's easier to learn, you know because there's not as many people in a class and all, so the teachers have more time with each student, like. (Blackwater, Learner)

In here there's less people in the classes so you get more help like. But in my old school there was too much people in the class so I just fell behind. (Barrow, Learner)

Clear explanation and staff taking the time to ensure learner understanding were seen as transformative for many young people:

I was so surprised that like first of all like the way the classes were so much smaller. It meant like the teachers had so much more time to like make sure everyone understood it. I was so surprised that like the difference so how much easier it was to learn. (Barrow, Learner)

You get more help as well I think. In school there was maybe a brief explanation of how it's done and what to do and then they expected you to figure the rest out. A lot more help here. (Bann, Learner)

The programme was seen as allowing learners to work at their own pace, rather than being left behind, as had been the case at school:

In here, you can just do whatever you feel like you can and you can go at your own pace, set our own time and go on how you want. (Moy, Learner)

Because not everyone gets to do the same thing. If I'm on my own page and someone's doing their own page, then it's two different things, but everyone catches up. Like we don't have to like do you know page by page. (Moy, Learner)

I get more attention during my work … That like it's easier because the teachers if I miss something they'll help me catch up whereas in secondary they wouldn't. (Barrow, Learner)

I'm finding it a lot easier now, like if you're stuck, they come down. They're, like, they get whoever is in the class to do the work and if they know what they're doing, then they come down to whoever is stuck and they just help you a lot with it, like, talk you through the whole thing. Whereas in school, if you don't know how to do it, you're just,

kind of, stuck there, like, while the teacher does their own thing. (Bann, Learner)

The greater emphasis on hands-on and practical activities was seen as enhancing learner engagement:

I absolutely love learning, like, I love learning new things and that. So, like, I'd rather someone just be talking to me and then demonstrate things and do that. But in school it's more often, like, walk in class, sit down, get your copies out, get your books out, and, like, take down what's on the board. I didn't like that because - I don't know, like, I just - I'd rather, like, talk about it. (Foyle, Learner)

Many learners contrasted this approach with what they saw as the less relevant nature of second-level school subjects:

Useless. Pointless. Because they don't teach you anything that you need, do you know, for life, like. So nowadays, like, we have to think about life and houses and cars and that. They don't teach you nothing about money or saving money or your taxes or how to do anything that you need in life instead of doing algebra because you're never going to use that, do you know. (Liffey, Learner)

Continuous assessment rather than a focus on exams was also seen as an advantage by learners (see also Section 6.5):

It helps you as well because you do assignments as well like you do a bit of work and then you do an assignment at the end of it, and it just makes it way easier. (Suir, Learner)

It's easier for us as well because everything is documented, so if we have a talk then we go in, we document everything on computers, save it and then we go back in and we edit everything and they become the key assignments. (Boyne, Learner)

This approach was underpinned by regular feedback from staff on learner progress:

They will call you into the office about once a month and it's, like, a meeting for every student here to tell you how you're getting on. Then you fill out your own evaluation sheet to think how you're getting on, and then they'll correct you if they don't like your attendance and your behaviour and all that. (Bann, Learner)

> *They would tell you and if you've missed anything, they'll put [a] sticker on it so you can go back to it and then they'll help you with it if you need help. So, like at the end of the year, the only reason you would have missed anything is really if you didn't do it yourself really. (Bann, Learner)*

> *They read them [assignments] and say, 'Look, you have to change this or that', or they say, 'It's perfect, you know, and we'll send it off', and they give us tips of what to do…they always come down and help you out. (Boyne, Learner)*

Some learners emphasised the fact that they received a better preparation for college than they would in mainstream school:

> *In college you do QQI Level Five and here you do QQI Level Three and Level Four … so people that goes from here to college has more of an advantage to people that went to secondary school. (Moy, Learner)*

Positive relationships with staff and the support offered by staff to learners were seen as key features of a positive learning experience (see also Chapter 7):

> *Teachers pay attention to you mostly like. Like if you were in secondary school they wouldn't really put your attention on person either. It was just do what you can do. But here like they're really focussed on the work and stuff like. (Suir, Learner)*

> *If I was stuck on anything, the person, the tutor or the teacher that's doing it, really good. They give you a hand. They won't leave you stuck like. (Blackwater, Learner)*

> *Like they'd ask you like in the mornings how was your day like and over there [school] they wouldn't like. There you just go into the class and they teach you what they have to teach you. But it's completely different. They are way nicer in here like and they'd ask you like yeah how was your day and stuff like. They wouldn't over in secondary school at all. They wouldn't put that much care as they would in here like. But they're very good in here like. (Suir, Learner)*

> *I usually get along with teachers better and they do help you out, they take you out for one on ones and they help you and where you need help with anything they show you how to do it and things like that. (Boyne, Learner)*

For many young people, taking part in the Youthreach programme was their first experience of achievement:

> *Maths in school, like algebra and all that, I couldn't do it. I was crying. I couldn't do it. But here, I can just do it. I know I'm really good at it like and I enjoy it as well. It's so weird. It's good … The Maths teacher here, He's more calm. You struggle and they won't give up on you. (Erne, Learner)*

> *I get so much more work done here because like once I understand it, I can do it. (Barrow, Learner)*

> *I learned a lot compared to school like. I think I learned more here in the two years than I did in my whole life in school. (Suir, Learner)*

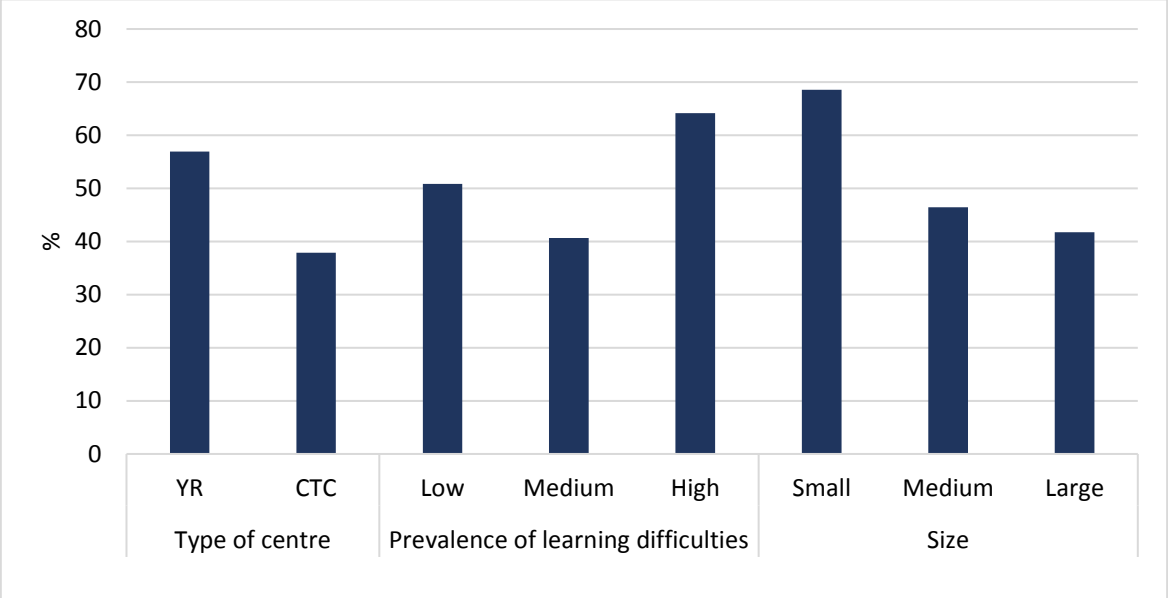
> *I thought it was going to be like school but smaller but you get paid for it. But it's not. It's like so much better. Like you properly learn. (Erne, Learner)*

While the learners clearly expressed the value of the Youthreach approach in facilitating their learning, the young people interviewed were not always very specific about the kinds of teaching and learning they found most beneficial, focusing instead on the entirety of the Youthreach experience.

6.4 LEARNING SUPPORT PROVISION

In the survey, co-ordinators and managers were asked about whether they offered learning support provision, the number of learners receiving such support, and the kinds of approaches taken to working with young people with literacy and numeracy difficulties. A significant difference in the provision of learning support was evident between Youthreach centres and CTCs, with 92 per cent of Youthreach centres offering learning support compared with 79 per cent of CTCs. Otherwise no variation was evident in learning support provision by centre characteristics and profile or by ETB. The picture changes somewhat when we consider the proportion of learners in receipt of such support across centres, with significantly higher prevalence of support in smaller centres, Youthreach centres and those with a larger proportion of young people with learning difficulties (see Figure 6.5). Almost three-quarters (74 per cent) of learners in SENI centres receive learning support compared with 53 per cent of those in other Youthreach centres.

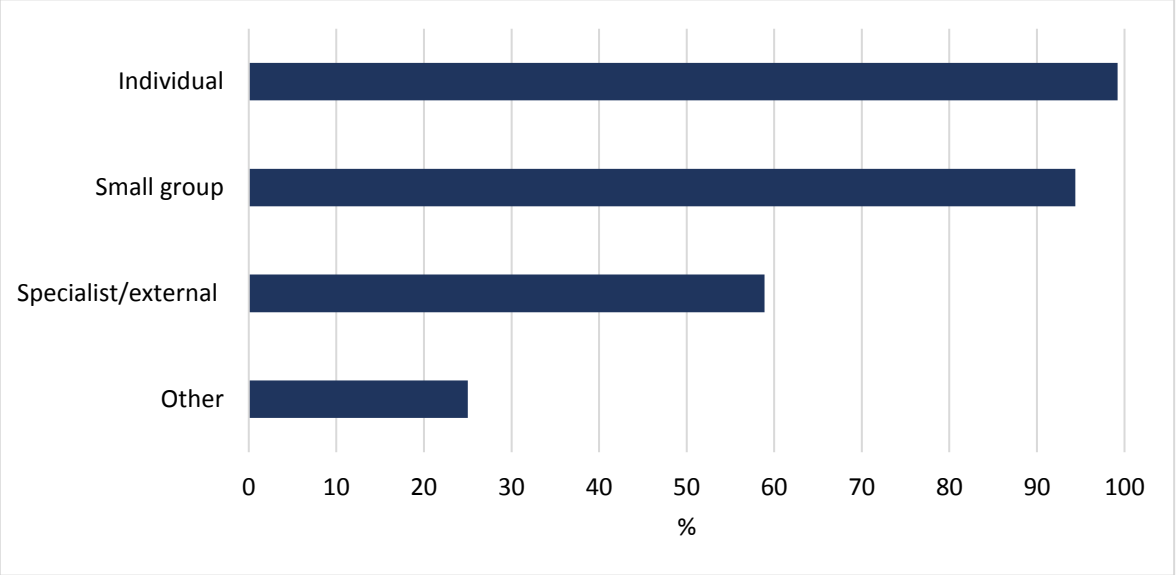
FIGURE 6.5 PROPORTION OF LEARNERS IN RECEIPT OF LEARNING SUPPORT BY CENTRE CHARACTERISTICS



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

In terms of the specific approach used, almost all co-ordinators/managers reported using a combination of individual (one-to-one) and small group support from centre staff for young people with literacy and/or numeracy difficulties. In almost six-in-ten cases, centres drew on specialist support in the form of ETB literacy tutors or cooperation hours while a quarter of centres indicated that they used other forms of support. These other forms incorporated a variety of supports including designated staff or class periods, online learning and broader supports from the advocate or counsellor. CTCs were significantly more likely to draw on external support, with 90 per cent doing so compared with 49 per cent of Youthreach centres. This pattern was evident even taking into account size of centre. SENI centres do not differ from non-SENI centres in the type of supports offered. Some variation in the use of external support is evident across ETBs.

FIGURE 6.6 NATURE OF ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS FOR YOUNG PEOPLE WITH LITERACY AND/OR NUMERACY DIFFICULTIES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

In one centre, learning support was provided to all learners, not just those with serious literacy or numeracy difficulties, to remove the stigma attached to receiving support and to enhance the learning of all young people:

> *All students meet with the Literacy and Numeracy Teachers either 1:1 or small group- even the stronger students because that way there is little stigma as everyone knows everyone goes out to these sessions. For the stronger students it's their chance to be brought ahead so that they can work away and can be paired up with other students when they come to the bigger group. For weaker students it's the chance to reinforce what's being taught to them and also introduce them to new materials in the smaller setting so that they are less intimidated when the Maths teacher for example brings a new formula to the table in the bigger setting. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

In the interviews, staff also reported using a range of online supports for literacy and numeracy, including the Level 2 NALA Write-on for those leavers with particular difficulties:

> *At the moment there's two doing that. … So, they're working on that and they will progress to Level Three but it's just to start them off and I think it builds their confidence then because they know they're going to achieve that so then they know they can do the next step. (Moy, Staff)*

Some centres had also developed links with local literacy services to provide

additional supports for their learners:

> *Every Tuesday and Wednesday they will take the weaker, the much weaker ones for an hour on a Tuesday and Wednesday morning to work on those. (Suir, Staff)*

Others used volunteers to run paired reading programmes:

> *We did the paired reading programme, a volunteer-led programme where people come in and read. There's all - it's amazing it worked, it was all in the one room. So, paired reading went well. We've been blessed with students on placement, in volunteers, so we would have people in working one-to-one. You met one or two learners today; did need a bit of support in the classroom. But the classrooms are small enough, you could - you can work with them. And in fairness, there's people meeting us lunchtime now, catching up with stuff that they're very weak in. (Bann, Co-ordinator/manager)*

In the survey, almost half of the Youthreach co-ordinators and over a third of CTC managers expressed dissatisfaction with the learning support they could offer, with SENI centres, not surprisingly, being more satisfied (see Chapter 7). Some of the centres visited as part of the case studies highlighted the lack of learning support available to them, particularly when compared with the levels of provision in second-level schools. One co-ordinator described how they were able to provide some 'one-to-one learning support but would like to see more'. In another centre, a staff member with responsibility for learning support felt that there is a disparity between learning support provision in Youthreach and that in mainstream school, with similar arguments being proffered in the survey responses and consultative workshops:

> *I really feel strongly, we don't get any learning support, so no special assistance, nothing. So, if they have an assistant at school, that's dropped when they come here. And I don't see why that's the case, you know … their needs haven't changed. (Bann, Staff)*

> *A very high proportion of our students come to us with special education needs. Some come with an existing diagnosis for a learning difficulty and these students would have had access to supports and resource hours in school – these do not travel with them. Some will come to us with no diagnosis, but through assessment and relationship building we will begin to see learning difficulties and will sometimes fund educational assessments (out of our own budget) to provide the young person and their parent/guardian with accurate information on their learning difficulty. Some will come to us with very*

> *poor language, literacy and numeracy skills, purely because they have missed huge chunks of their education and never really received any meaningful supports. Regardless of the reasons, there is a glaring need to provide a Youthreach version of the excellent and resourced supports provided in mainstream schools. The SEN Initiative is ideally placed as the obvious solution to this and would provide a proven and viable route to providing SEN supports within Youthreach. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

Existing staffing levels were not seen as sufficient to provide the amount of support needed by the current population of learners:

> *Technically, all students could avail of this but there's only one staff member trained to provide learning support and this isn't her only duty in the centre. Therefore, she can only work with the students who have the greatest need. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

Adequate literacy and numeracy support was seen as the bedrock for achieving positive outcomes in terms of qualifications and personal development among learners:

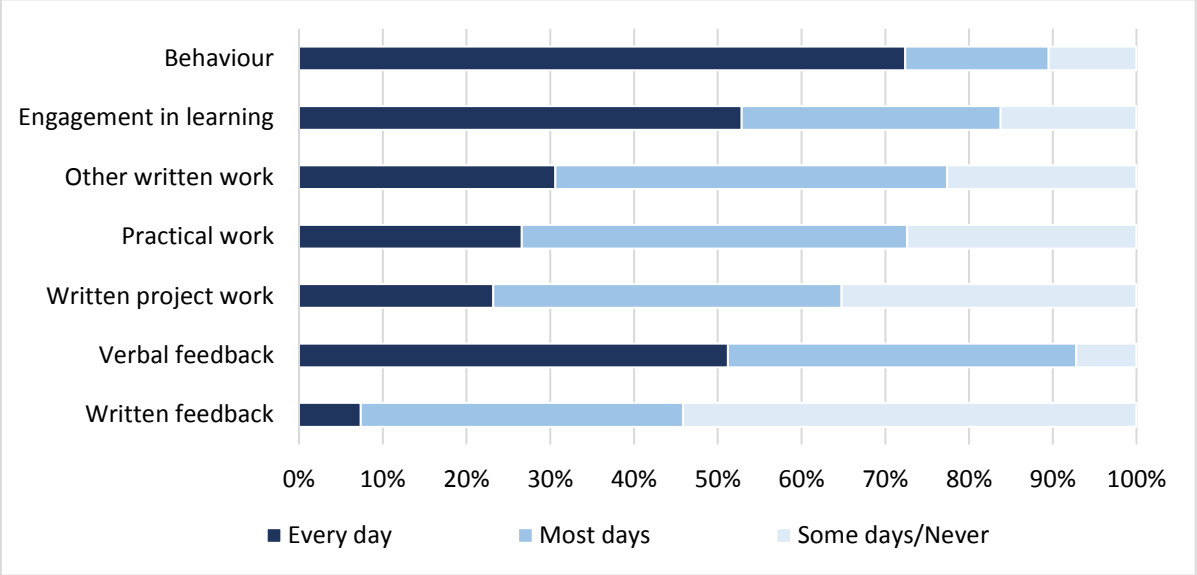
> *In my opinion I feel that dedicated resource hours from fully trained learning support teachers would help improve literacy and numeracy skills. Access to these types of support would lead to students attaining more self-confidence, thus ensuring that the student would remain on the programme leading to acquiring accredited qualifications. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

6.5 APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT

Co-ordinators/managers were asked about the different forms of assessment used in the centre and the kinds of feedback provided to learners on their progress. Almost three-quarters of centres reported assessment of participant behaviour on a frequent basis with over half also placing a strong emphasis on assessing young people's engagement in learning (Figure 6.7). Centres tended to assess practical work, written project work and other written work on most days. The vast majority of centres (89 per cent) used tests or exams at least occasionally.

In contrast to the patterns for teaching and learning, there was little marked variation in approaches by centre characteristics. However, centres with a greater concentration of learner need were more likely to place a strong emphasis on assessing participant behaviour than other centres (89 per cent assessing it 'every day' compared with 61 per cent of low need and 72 of medium need centres).

FIGURE 6.7 FREQUENCY OF USE OF DIFFERENT APPROACHES TO ASSESSMENT AND FEEDBACK ACROSS YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

In most cases, feedback was provided to learners verbally with written feedback being less prevalent (though happening in almost half of centres on a frequent basis). The vast majority (91 per cent) of centres provided feedback to parents on the progress of learners, although 9 per cent of centres reported never or almost never doing so. Average-sized and large centres were more likely to rely on the use of verbal feedback (53-58 per cent doing so daily compared with 36 per cent of small centres) while smaller centres more frequently used written feedback. Verbal feedback was also more frequent in centres with a medium to high concentration of learner need. CTCs were somewhat less likely to provide frequent written feedback than Youthreach centres, though this was wholly due to the larger average size.

Centres tended to use individual learning plans with each of the learners to monitor their progress throughout the year. Staff members felt these sessions allowed them to individually explain to learners where they were and where they needed to go rather than doing it in front of the whole group:

> *We do individual learning plans. … Sit down individually … with the student and we'd sort of say, 'Okay, this is where you are now' … So I'd sort of say, 'Listen, we have two done now and we started the third one like, what we need to do is…', it's just a great way for the ones who want it explained to them exactly where they are on the course. 'Cause I mean I think if you're saying it in the class in front of everyone, like I was saying before some people will sort of think, 'Oh, Jesus, I haven't got that bit done yet'… If you're sitting them on their own you can say, 'Well, listen, you are doing well and don't be, don't be getting*

too bogged down, you're a little bit behind. We can catch you up', and it's just to let them know individually where you are. (Erne, Staff)

And if the assignments aren't done, and you explain that to them, you know, you're saying like this is it. As you progress and as you've done that. They also have a sheet that when they progress I tick it off and say, 'Right, now, you know, that assignment's done'. So they can see that they're working their way through their assignments as the time progresses. (Erne, Staff)

Individual learning plans were seen as giving young people a sense of ownership over their progress:

They have individual learning plans that they would … develop with - in conjunction with the young person at the start of the year. And - and rewritten and done up during the year in conjunction with the young person, and they would meet termly about their individual learning plan. I think … if you don't meet young people very often about it, it becomes something in the sky and they don't connect to it at all. But I think as we have introduced it more often throughout the year, they now see it as theirs and have a little bit of ownership around it. And understand it. Whereas before initially when that came in years ago, it was, kind of, more - it started off nationally almost as start and end-of-year thing. But we learned quickly from that, very, very quickly that that - that doesn't work at all. They had forgotten about it … and saw it as a piece of paper. Whereas now they're engaged and would mention to us when they want to add something to it, et cetera. (Bann, Staff)

Some centres used visual displays or checklists to help learners monitor their progress:

They have this checklist. It's actually brilliant. I should show it to you. It's just a visual thing for each young person, so they'd have their name and say it's career preparation, right. … The SLOs that go down the side, each time the young person goes into them they go, they walk up and tick. So they can see how far they're going with that module. But then we'll have, if say if a young person's missing for a week and they come back in and they see the rest of the class have more ticks they're kind of, 'Oh my god, I have to catch up' and it's just, it's something so basic but it just, it really, really works in this centre. (Shannon, Staff)

6.6 CONCLUSIONS

This chapter has looked at experiences of teaching, learning and assessment in Youthreach and Community Training Centres. The kinds of qualifications offered are found to vary significantly across centres, with a small minority offering the Junior Certificate and Leaving Certificate Established programmes, and the majority providing QQI Level 3 and Level 4 qualifications. Learner need is seen by co-ordinators and managers as the main factor in deciding on course provision. The study findings do indeed show that provision is tailored to need, with centres more likely to offer Junior Certificate and QQI Levels 2 and 3 qualifications where a greater proportion of learners have not completed junior cycle. However, constraints on provision are also apparent, with significant variation across ETBs, particularly in the provision of SEC-accredited qualifications. The skill set of existing staff and the quality of facilities also influence the potential flexibility in adapting provision to meet need.

The vast majority of centres offer courses and activities other than those accredited by the QQI or SEC. For the most part, these are geared at enhancing the physical and emotional wellbeing of learners. Learner access to a variety of such activities depends on the centre they attend, being more prevalent in Youthreach centres, especially those involved in SENI. Provision also varies by the other courses offered, with fewer such activities in centres offering the LCA programme and a greater variety in centres offering QQI Level 2, which serve a learner intake with more complex needs.

Centre staff use a variety of teaching methods in order to engage learners, placing a greater emphasis on hands-on and practical activities, and less emphasis on the kinds of didactic methods which characterise mainstream second-level classes. The study findings indicate that methods are adapted to reflect learner needs, with a greater use of pair work and computers in those centres with a greater concentration of need among learners. Methods are also influenced by the qualifications offered, with a greater use of whole-class teaching and less use of group work and discussion in centres providing LCA or LCE. Staff assess learners on a range of criteria, including behaviour and engagement, and there is a strong emphasis across most centres on regular verbal feedback to learners on their progress.

The learners interviewed were very positive about their learning experiences in Youthreach. They valued the small class sizes which facilitated more individualised attention, the ability to work at their own pace, the support they received from staff and the emphasis on continuous or modular assessment. For many young people, Youthreach was their first experience of achievement. The quality of relationships with staff was a crucial element in young people's

re-engagement with learning and they spoke with warmth of the care and support they received from staff.

CHAPTER 7

Supports for learners

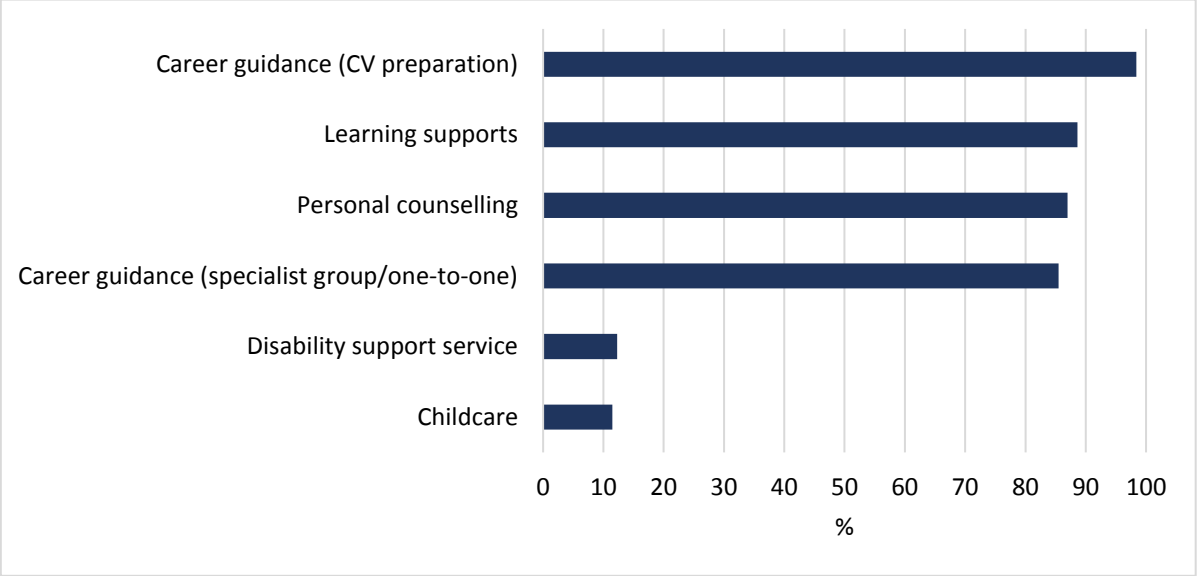
7.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter looks at the types of supports available in Youthreach centres and CTCs. Using survey data and case-study qualitative interviews, it examines the provision of counselling in Youthreach centres and CTCs and the extent to which these supports vary across different settings. It then focuses on the use of learning supports in these centres followed by a section on how career guidance counselling operates in Youthreach centres and CTCs. The integration of the centres with outside services is also examined. Case-study interviews are then used to explore the relationship between staff and learners in Youthreach centres and CTCs and how this compares to their relations with teachers in mainstream second-level education. The final section of this chapter focuses on SENI and how it is operating in Youthreach centres.

In the survey, co-ordinators/managers were asked about whether they provided a range of services to learners in their centre (Figure 7.1). Almost all reported offering career guidance activities (such as CV preparation and mock interviews) while the vast majority (86 per cent) also offered specialist career guidance[12] in group or one-to-one settings. The vast majority of centres also offered learning support (see Chapter 6) and personal counselling (89 and 87 per cent respectively). In contrast, only a small minority of centres offered a disability support service or childcare provision (12 per cent). Because of the high levels of provision of both kinds of career guidance, there was little variation between Youthreach centres and CTCs, or by centre size and profile. However, there was some variation in levels of specialist guidance support by the ETB within which centres were located. In addition, specialist support is somewhat less common for centres with a concentration of young learners (17 years of age or under); 76 per cent offer such support compared with 93 per cent of those with fewest young people and 88 per cent of those with a medium level. Similarly, there was little variation in the proportion of centres offering personal counselling, though levels of provision were somewhat lower in some ETBs.

[12] The term 'specialist career guidance' was used to refer to specific information and advice; this could be provided by specialist personnel (such as advocates) or by a designated staff member.

FIGURE 7.1 SERVICES PROVIDED BY YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES

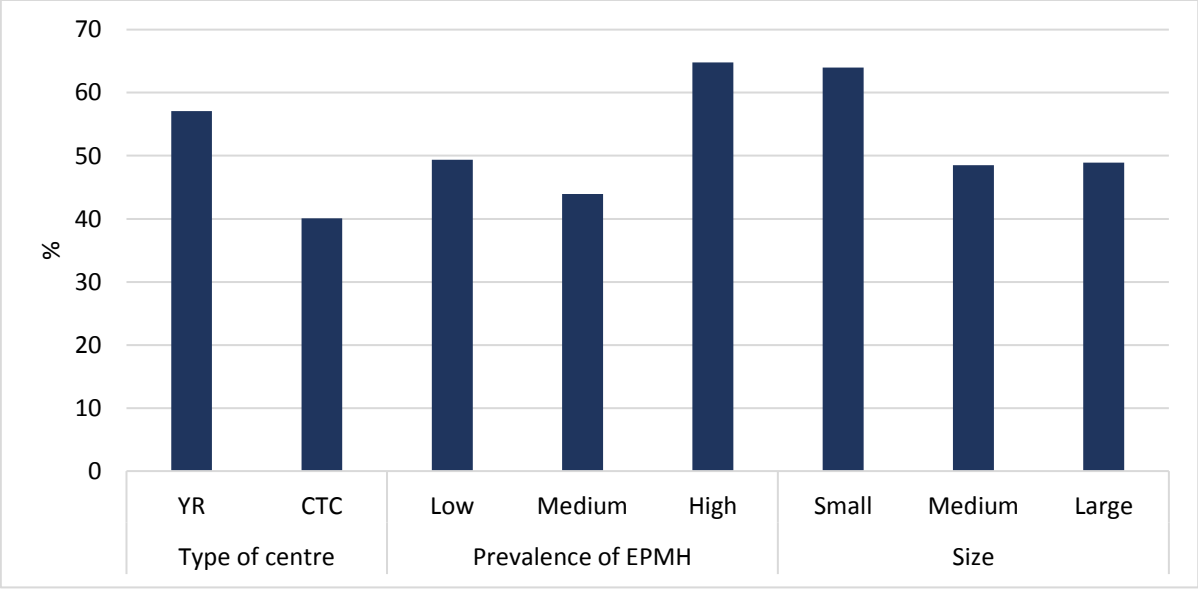


Source: Survey of co-ordinators/managers.

7.2 COUNSELLING

When we consider the intensity of provision, however, that is, the number of learners receiving counselling, the survey shows that variation is evident by a number of centre characteristics (see Figure 7.2). Receipt of counselling is significantly more prevalent in Youthreach centres and, not surprisingly, where there is a greater concentration of learners with EPMH difficulties; prevalence is also somewhat higher in smaller settings.

FIGURE 7.2 PROPORTION OF LEARNERS IN RECEIPT OF PERSONAL COUNSELLING BY CENTRE CHARACTERISTICS



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

The use of counselling services was also found to vary between Youthreach centres and CTCs in the case-study interviews. In some centres, the counsellor is an employed member of staff based on site. In others, the centre employs a counsellor for a number of days or learners can attend a counselling service close by. In other centres, the learners have no direct access to counselling services but the staff respond to issues as they arise by sourcing psychological supports when needed. In one Youthreach centre, learners had access to a counsellor for three days each week. Young people were open to attending the counsellor while in the centre but seemed to be reluctant to attend outside services often due to negative past experiences:

> *It was anything that's part of the centre they will access. And if we suggest linking in, which we have done with counsellors outside of the centre, it's different. And they don't. And some of them have had maybe negative experience of that in the past. So, they want to know you first. They want to get used to [you]. They want to see your face. They want to see other people going in. (Moy, staff)*

Another Youthreach centre has an allocation of four hours per week with a local counselling service (based in a building on the same campus). Staff encourage each of the learners to use this time and found that over time they are more and more willing to attend. One co-ordinator described how having a counsellor who was a familiar face was really helpful where learners were experiencing difficulties:

> *What we say is that, 'You never know, there could be a tragedy or something that you need to see, at least you're not going off to see a stranger.'… And the numbers of times I've sat in this office and said to people, 'Do you think you want to go to counselling?' 'No, no, I'm fine.' Like, you know, when they've had a bereavement or something tragic, but, 'No, no, I'm fine.' And yet, at the same time that has changed over the years, people are much more willing to do the counselling now. (Bann, Co-ordinator/manager)*

To overcome the reluctance to going to see a counsellor among learners, some centres have adopted a rule that everybody goes each week regardless of how big or small an issue they have. During the interviews, the learners described how they found this approach really useful:

> *But in here they kind of - it's not that they force you. They push you to it and its better like. The boys and everybody comes and that's good like for boys. The boys don't really talk. The boys would be in here for chatting for hours. They do like. They're worse than us. (Suir, learner)*

Some weeks, the learners do not really need counselling but are encouraged to go

to simply check in and have a chat:

> *If you don't want to talk you can just tell her like you don't want to talk today… and she makes you tea and biscuits and stuff… Which is nice. (Suir, learner)*

Many of these formal supports appeared to complement a range of informal supports offered by staff in many of the Youthreach case-study centres (see Section 7.4). Where the provision of counselling was insufficient, subtle supportive interactions with staff could help such as checking to see how their day was going (on arrival, during lunch or during class) to give the learner an opportunity to raise an issue if needed. One co-ordinator/manager felt that, given the level of need among the learners, one day a week for the counsellor was not enough:

> *I really think the centre could do with another day of counselling because … some are coming with such a level of need and experience of difficulties. (Boyne, co-ordinator/manager)*

In one CTC, however, there was no access to counselling for the learners despite high levels of need. The centre manager and one staff member described the learners as having a negative view of counselling:

> *Most of the kids who come in would have maybe something like that through social work if they want to avail of it. But a lot of them don't want to avail of it because, as I say, they see this as head-wrecking… they've been through enough of it to say, just, 'Man, you're wrecking my head, go away'. (Liffey, co-ordinator/manager)*

Where critical incidents have happened in the centre, the co-ordinator/manager intervened to bring in outside services. Describing the attempted suicide of one of the learners, the co-ordinator/manager spoke about how his day was spent in the GP:

> *That day was taken up with getting him – getting his GP – getting him down to his GP sitting there with, in the, the surgery waiting to make sure that he went in. (Liffey, staff)*

The availability of counselling supports not only benefitted the learners but was often viewed by staff working in Youthreach centres and CTCs as a 'total bonus' as they could refer learners to use this service as situations arose each day:

> *If you're in a class and something pops up, you're not going to, 'Actually, I really don't know what to do here'. I'd say, 'Can I suggest you might meet with [name of counsellor]?' Or I might just run it by*

[name of counsellor]. And, you know, so that's, I found when I first came here, that was a big help. (Blackwater, staff)

Learners were reflective about the impact of attending counselling on their mental health which some described as having enabled them to continue their education:

It's very good… it made me at times kind of get my head together and stuff… So you get on better and it's less kind of stressful and stuff. But you still get all your work done. (Suir, learner)

For many learners, it was the assurance of having someone there if they ever needed them:

You can ask him for - just to meet you sometimes… Yeah, it's if you know you have him there, that sort of thing. (Blackwater, learner)

The relaxed nature of the counselling sessions helped some of the learners:

It helped me out an awful lot. Yeah, made me feel better in myself… He'd be all friendly, like, you can have the craic with him and talk. (Blackwater, learner)

Some of the learners appreciate that the counselling services are there but do not always use them:

There is also a counsellor we can go to on Tuesdays. I used it a lot last year. Not so much anymore. I still go maybe once a month. (Bann, learner)

For centres with high levels of need and no full-time counsellor, co-ordinators/ managers were frustrated at the length of time it took to access external psychological services for learners compared to mainstream education:

I have to fill out a form. I have to send it in to the psychological support services. They have to process it. It could be a week or two then they'll come out. If the child, the kid is under 18 they have to meet with their parents, so an appointment has to be set. So it can be two or three weeks before the psychological support service actually get down and sit with the student on their issue or their problem. You take like the schools, they have built-in supports that can be - they can bring them in straight away. That's what our students need. (Erne, co-ordinator/manager)

Some of the case-study centres operated a key worker system where all staff would meet and go through the progress of each of the learners at the centre. Similar to the mentor system in SENI centres (see Section 7.6 below), resource staff were assigned a number of learners to work with:

> *They will key work with them and any issues they'll deal with them. You know before they escalate into anything kind of more serious. (Boyne, Co-ordinator/manager)*

Once a month, they meet with the aim of developing the soft skills of the learners:

> *They kind of look at their soft skill development and they would meet with them…to look at their attendance, their participation, you know, that kind of stuff. (Boyne, co-ordinator/manager)*

The key worker system was also operating in one of the CTCs where staff and learners held monthly meetings to go over their progression and set new objectives:

> *We would go through what their aims and objectives were for the past four weeks, have they met them, great, were they too easy, were they too hard, why didn't they meet objectives and then we write out another set of objectives for the coming four weeks. So it's very, very useful and you can always refer back to it if they are a bit slow and they're not willing to engage as much, say look, we wrote this, we signed it, you know, this is what we said what we would do and we're not really meeting those targets. (Shannon, staff)*

7.3 CAREER GUIDANCE COUNSELLING

7.3.1 Career guidance

Figure 7.1 highlights the level of career guidance available in Youthreach centres and CTCs, with almost all centres providing guidance in the form of CV preparation and 85 per cent providing specialist group or one-to-one career guidance. During the case-study visits, some centres appeared to offer a programme of career guidance involving one-to-one meetings and outside speakers where each learner has an individual progression plan:

> *So [we] meet them individually and we go through their progression and where they want to go to. So, they - for example, we have - we do the college visits; we have colleges in to speak to us… And we talk to INTREO about work opportunities locally et cetera. Then, each young person will come up with a progression plan and where they want to go. (Bann, staff)*

In another centre, the staff appreciated the role of the guidance advocate who, they felt, positively influenced the learners. They felt that she gave the young people advice on work experience but also offered another positive adult in their lives that they can talk to:

> *There's someone who comes in and it's brilliant, and I can even see with the students that they think it's brilliant. They look forward to Mondays … when they're going to see her… Well, you, you hear them, 'Well, I'm going to do this' and 'We can talk to [name of guidance person] on Monday', it's like… It's someone else who they have - they can go to see. (Erne, staff)*

Across centres, the approach to guidance appears to vary depending on whether learners are taking Level 3 or Level 4 qualifications:

> *The career preparation is usually for the slightly younger, so it's like what is work, what is a job, all this kind of stuff. Their ideal boss, their ideal employee. Some of the basic rights… We do kind of mock interviews. (Suir, staff)*

Employed by the advocacy service, some advocates work directly with the young people around career progression and guidance. One guidance advocate worked in a CTC for three days a week and in a Youthreach centre the rest of her time. She described how the advocacy service operated within the 'MAGIC formula' which is based on the idea that some early school leavers will require a mixture of Mentoring, Advocacy, Guidance, Information and Counselling:

> *It was all around career path planning and it was based on the MAGIC formula of mentoring, advocacy, guidance, information and counselling, but not counselling per se from a therapeutic medical perspective. (Blackwater, staff)*

The advocate felt that she had a different relationship with the learners compared to the staff:

> *And our goal is to… assess their needs, see what they need and then link in with them, whether it is around work experience or the very basic stuff cos they've to go back to personal hygiene…Whatever their needs, you know, counselling, interventions, whatever it is. (Blackwater, staff)*

During the interviews, the learners acknowledged the role of guidance counsellors and advocates in helping them access work experience placements and preparing

them for further education or employment when they leave. One learner reported that his advocate helped him to apply for jobs after Youthreach:

> *She gives you a hand with everything. She was like, 'Well if you're not happy with that, we can always try this'. Like she would, like, direct you and like if you didn't know where to get a job - or help to find a job, she'd tell you, 'Right, there's a job on this site; a job on that site. Apply for this'. (Blackwater, learner)*

One learner spoke about how their advocate used group activities to explore what the learners wanted and follow-up with a 'one-to-one with them' (Shannon, staff). Another advocate, with a counselling background, felt he provided the learners with a bridge from the centre to further education or employment:

> *It involves one-to-one supports, mentoring, guidance. Counselling is my background, so I look at my role as like a parent, the support that they don't get at home. So I am the bridge for them leaving here and going on somewhere else. (Suir, staff)*

In one centre, one staff member described how learners have very low expectations regarding their future occupations:

> *I do career investigation… and it's, like, 'Oh, but sure I couldn't be that, I couldn't be that.' And then you're trying to tell them there are different routes and if it's not route 1, you know, and that sometimes people – it takes them years to get where they want to be. (Boyne, staff)*

Similarly, weekly access to a guidance counsellor in one centre has meant that learners who are due to leave Youthreach have made concrete plans for further education and employment:

> *[Name] that comes in on a Wednesday, she helped me get into FÁS so I'm going to be started FÁS straightaway after I leave here. (Suir, learner)*

Some of the learners in another centre spoke about the type of career guidance available:

> *You're doing the career prep so that will, kind of, tell you about different options you might have and I didn't have career prep in school. (Bann, learner)*

Another learner spoke about having access to guidance in the centre which has

helped her figure out what she would like to do when she leaves:

> *She comes in and she was telling me about all the acting courses in there… She was saying it's great and all like… But when I went down there for like, they had this open day they did. And they were doing this drama thing and I was like, I'd probably be able to do it. (Shannon, learner)*

Some of the centres sought to remove the fears of learners around progression by organising course shadowing and work experience placements in local colleges:

> *We organise course shadowing so they can go in and spend one day or two days in the course of their choice. It just takes the fear out of going into the school or the college and when they get on they say, 'Sure that's Mary from across the road.' And you say, 'Yeah, they're all the same as you. They're the exact same as you.' And then with the boys, we try to get them work experience in the colleges in the summer time, working with the caretakers so they know the college and all the fear is taken out of the next step. (Suir, staff)*

7.3.2 Work experience placements

Work experience placements form a part of the Level 4 QQI qualification. Level 3 learners also do 'work placements' (presumably work shadowing). The survey data show that six-in-ten centres reported that all learners took part in work experience, a third mentioned that most learners took part while 6 per cent indicated that only a few participated. There were few marked differences in responses across different types of centre. However, SENI centres were more likely to indicate that most rather than all learners took part in work experience (42 per cent compared with 32 per cent of non-SENI centres). Not surprisingly, the pattern varies markedly by the type of qualification(s) offered in the centre. In the small number of centres offering the Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate Established, fewer learners take part in work experience placements. Similarly, rates of involvement are lower in centres offering QQI Levels 2 and 3 qualifications compared with those offering Level 4.

The length of work experience placement is found to vary across centres; in 41 per of cases, learners have a placement of ten days or less, in a third of centres the duration is 11 to 20 days while over a quarter (26 per cent) of centres have placements of longer than 20 days' duration. Somewhat surprisingly, given earlier analyses of the difference between CTCs and Youthreach centres in orientation to the labour market (see Chapter 3), placement duration tends to be shorter on average in CTCs. Thus, 57 per cent of placements in CTCs are ten days or less compared with 35 per cent in Youthreach centres. Duration does not vary by centre size (once type of centre is taken into account). In contrast, duration tends to be

longer in centres catering for a greater complexity of need. Only 21 per cent of the latter centres have short (less than 10 days) placements compared with 41-50 per cent of the low and medium need centres. Duration is somewhat longer in centres offering LCA and shorter in the small number of centres offering LCE.

The survey data also show that work placements were more likely to be organised on a block rather than a day release basis; over the past year, an average of 59 per cent of learners had taken part in a block placement compared with 14 per cent doing day release. The relative reliance on block placements as opposed to day release was much greater in Youthreach centres than in CTCs. Centres with a greater concentration of need are slightly more likely than other centres to use day release, at least for some learners, but do not differ in the proportion using block placements. Longer duration placements tend to involve at least some day release components.

Some of the case-study centres reported that sending learners out on long blocks of work experience can be difficult:

> *We had been putting some of them out in like the two week blocks and you know it doesn't work for some for them. It's too much. So, we're probably going to go back and look at maybe one day a week or two days a week. (Moy, staff)*

> *Some learners are not suited to the block, so they would prefer once a week. You know, so there'd be more support there for them if they do it once a week, so they're only out once and they'll be back in the centre then. (Moy, Co-ordinator/manager)*

In another centre, QQI Level 4 learners took part in a work experience placement of ten days' duration (five individual days and then a block of five days). At the time of interview, the staff were reviewing whether this is the best approach as there is a trade-off between learners getting immersed in the placement and the long duration for those with anxiety issues.

In one CTC, the staff placed a strong emphasis on work placements and employment for learners. One staff member carefully selected work placements for the young people depending on their personality, attitude to work and overall work ethic. He felt that leaving the work experience until later in their time at the centre was better for the learner as they had built up confidence and gained more skills:

> *I mean, sometimes you'd imagine putting them in early would be a good thing because they might learn what it's like to work …But I think that has always been a disadvantage for our learners because they usually - can shy away very quickly from that, 'I'm not going back there ever again', do you know what I mean? … So, towards the end, the idea is that they have the skills and the confidence. (Liffey, staff)*

The staff member argued that there were huge gains for an employer in taking someone from the centre as they got free labour for the six weeks of work experience and had plenty of time to decide if they would like to take them on after that:

> *So, the employer has six weeks to see if this person is actually suitable for the job or not. Now, you - he could have a stack of CVs from people with Leaving Certs coming in, right. And each one of those CVs is going to cost him three weeks wages in some shape or form to decide whether that person is going to be of any value to him or not. But if I go in and say, 'Here's this young lad. I'm telling you, you know, quite honestly -' I'm not going to, you know, try and oversell somebody, that, 'This is what they can do but the fact is you can have them for six weeks and it will cost you nothing'. So, usually, our guy goes straight in. Whereas he will decide, you know, 'These - all these people - all these CVs are going to cost me money, this guy isn't. It's worth a try'. (Liffey, staff)*

The survey asked who was involved in organising the work experience placement. In the majority (65 per cent) of centres, staff other than the co-ordinator/ manager were involved; where specified, these included a range of different roles such as the advocate, a designated resource staff member and a work experience team. The co-ordinator/manager was involved in 21 per cent of centres while the learner was (mainly) involved in 42 per cent of cases. Respondents could indicate that a number of different people were involved so the answers total to more than 100 per cent. In small centres, the co-ordinator played a more prominent role, and the learner a less active one, in organising placements. Somewhat surprisingly, learners played a more active role in centres with a greater concentration of need. This may reflect a conscious strategy on the part of staff to use sourcing a placement as skill development in these settings. Contrary to this pattern, non-co-ordinator staff in SENI centres tended to be most actively involved in organising work experience with learners less involved. Learners played a more active role in organising longer placements (11 days or more) compared to short duration placements.

The case-study interviews also highlighted some variation in who was responsible

for work placements for learners. In one centre, the advocate worked closely with other staff to ensure learners in QQI Level 3 and 4 gain access to a suitable work placement or progress to employment or further education:

> *I would start working with [name of staff] here, because he does work experience, and I kick in then and then the two of us will work together and we try and help them. We would do an awful lot of work getting them help and getting them work experience… And then the second year I organise course shadowing for them. You know, if there is a course that they might be interested in I have the books made, go on the computer and we do career inventories and stuff like that (Suir, staff)*

Some staff felt it was important to hold off on work experience placements until the learners have developed a work ethic:

> *I mean they have to show that they can come in and they can come in on time and stay a full day in here because that's hard to put them on a work experience if they haven't showed that. (Blackwater, staff)*

The connections built up with local employers are seen as crucial in facilitating work experience placements:

> *Having the support of an advocate is good because they have connections, the foot in the door… They know that when they come with us they're fully supported, they're fully insured. They'll be of a good standard and we're not going to put somebody in something that they wouldn't, do you know that they were going to crash and burn. (Suir, staff)*

Staff in one centre were very active in following up with work experience employers:

> *I ring them every day. Did they turn up? How was everything? Is everything okay? Because it's like you're only as good as your last. If they're going to take them you want to keep a good and I also get a little report. I put in a questionnaire with their packs. (Suir, staff)*

In other centres, learners are encouraged to obtain their own placements as this is seen as enhancing their skills but the staff member in charge of work experience has contacts with local employers which can be used if necessary:

> *What happens usually is we prepare in class and talk about work and work skills and work - requirements for work. Then they get the opportunity to, kind of, think about what kind of work experience they*

want to do. The - I then encourage them to look for their own work experience, with support. (Bann, staff)

I don't get work experience for them because I think it works better when they get it themselves. (Suir, staff)

In a third of cases, co-ordinators/managers reported that it was 'very easy' or 'easy' to obtain placements while in 59 per cent of cases it was 'quite difficult', being 'very difficult' in 6 per cent of centres. Perceived difficulty did not vary by centre characteristics or the profile of learners. It might be expected that learners living in jobless households might have greater difficulty because of lack of employment opportunities in the local area and/or fewer social networks to access employment. However, this pattern was not evident from the survey data. Surprisingly too, it was not seen as more difficult to organise longer duration placements. In almost all cases, employers were asked for feedback on the learner and learners were assessed on the basis of all placements in the vast majority (85 per cent) of cases.

The issue of work experience is, however, seen as challenging for young people with mental health difficulties. Some centres had sought to overcome these issues by offering more sheltered work placements. One advocate reported that they try to support learners to move out of their comfort zones in doing work experience:

We always try to get them very nice safe near work experiences the first time and then we try to push them out and push them out. (Suir, staff)

Another staff member described how those who they expect to have difficulties (e.g. anxiety) are often given a more sheltered placement:

I did find that even setting up the work experience this year, they - you know, young people want to do the work experience and yet you're so worried about their mental health when they're on work experience because they present so vulnerably here. Having panic attacks, et cetera, et cetera. (Bann, staff)

7.4 RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN STAFF AND LEARNERS

7.4.1 Give respect, get respect

For some learners, entering the Youthreach programme offered them an opportunity to be treated as an equal by respected and trusted adults. Many had negative relations with teachers in second-level school and appreciated the level

of understanding of Youthreach staff in comparison. One learner felt that the staff in the centre treat learners like adults and this encourages mutual respect:

> *I find that - like even just referring to them as their first name I did that in primary school as well. I find it better. I can trust them more…I get to know them a bit more and then they're like… you know we kind of like you know create relationships with them, so that we respect them and they respect us. They treat us like adults. (Barrow, learner)*

One learner felt that staff in the centre treat her differently:

> *You're not seen as just another like, like just a robot or whatever. You're actually talked at like a person. Everyone in here is like, I don't know, like they're just - they don't judge you or anything. I get along with everyone here especially like the staff. (Erne, learner)*

Another felt that *'the teachers are all nice. The atmosphere's really good. It's not - it's different from school, better. (Erne, learner)*

Learners appreciate the time given to them, especially when they experiencing difficulties with their work:

> *I feel like they genuinely care and like they'll genuinely take the time out of the day to explain something to you. (Barrow, learner)*

One learner described the co-ordinator in his centre as being strict but fair:

> *He has rules like but he'll stick to them do you know? He'll be as fair as he can. (Barrow, learner)*

Learners feel the staff are approachable and are therefore more likely to talk to them about any problems that might arise:

> *She's the funniest, nicest person ever. You can go and talk to her about anything. (Erne, learner)*

Learners described the importance of respect between them and the staff:

> *It's so good like a connection. They always listen like and they treat us everyone like with respect, like they don't have favourites or anything. They treat everyone fairly. They're really good… We're able to talk like so no they wouldn't say anything bad like. They're good people. (Suir, learner)*

For some, they felt they could talk to the staff in Youthreach about any issues they might be having:

> *Like you can talk to them do you know if there's something going on they know, they can tell. (Moy, learner)*

The level of care from staff meant that trust is built up between learners and staff:

> *They're all bang on. They just help you and like- it's like they proper care about you. (Erne, learner)*

> *They'll call you out. They're like, 'Are you okay?' They'll bring you into the office and have a chat. (Moy, learner)*

These positive relations between students and staff mean that the incidence of fighting and bullying among learners is reduced:

> *We never see fighting really, do you know that you would in a school, like you'd see bullying and stuff like…But you'd see none of that. We all talk to each other. We all get along. (Suir, learner)*

One learner spoke about how, for the first time, his mother was receiving positive reports of his performance:

> *Because even the teachers like they're always complimenting me, like they're always filling my mam in like how good I am and how good I'm getting on with it. Because she's at all the parent teaching meetings, everything. (Suir, learner)*

This approach of trust and respect between the learners and Youthreach staff was also raised by a number of stakeholders at the consultative workshops:

> *It's a fresh start. They are treated equally. It's not like, 'Oh Mary is a sister of Jimmy who gave us a lot of hassle in school'. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

> *It's a protective inclusive environment and it's non-judgemental. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

7.4.2 Keeping an eye

The case-study visits highlighted the extent to which structured supports were often provided alongside informal supports by the staff in the centres. Many of those interviewed described the importance of the first greeting with the learner

in the morning which often flagged to them that something is not right. Others spoke about the importance of eating with the learners, passing them on corridors and subtly watching their body language and interactions with others. Where centres held daily debriefings, any observations or concerns about a learner could then be shared with other staff who could then 'keep an eye'. Often this method allowed staff to prevent students having issue while in the centre:

> *Straight away you could see there was something up. So I was like, 'Right, okay', so like for - it's like 'Do you mind if I take him for a minute'. So brought him in and was like, 'What's going on? Is everything okay?'. Do you know, because you could really see he was about to blow. (Shannon, staff)*

These informal supports are seen as very important in dealing with anxiety and other mental health difficulties:

> *If someone comes in under high anxiety, rather than waiting for the panic attack and the big shouting in the hallway, we might pull them aside and just check in with them. Go down, play pool, give them a glass of water. I think that's where we've improved over the years too in terms of de-escalating. (Bann, co-ordinator/manager)*

Other centres had a designated room where they could call a learner aside and ask them if everything is okay:

> *We do give them that opportunity to talk to staff on a one-to-one basis, you know, like, while the tea break is going on. We have a quiet room. We chat to them. (Bann, staff)*

One of the staff felt that it was the responsibility of the staff, who know the learners so well, to be strong and there for them rather than 'pawn people off' to other services:

> *So we supervise their lunchbreaks so that means any young people that - that feel too vulnerable to go out to the shop or downtown, their lunch is provided downstairs. They can chat to staff all the time and young people do use that one-to-two times, sit beside you, have a cup of tea, chat about their issues, chat about their problems. (Bann, staff)*

One centre appeared to adopt a youth work approach to their work by firstly developing trust with the learners when they start. Over time, this trust is built upon and staff are aware of how learners are modelling their behaviour. This appears to be done with an awareness of the need for firm boundaries between the learner and the staff:

> *I suppose the relationship is key because it's all based in trust if they buy into…it's down a simple thing of saying you can but not just saying it but doing, showing it, constantly showing it, and replicating…a lot of them would come from backgrounds where they don't have that, there's no sensitivity in the kind of relationships they might have with their mum or their dad, dad mightn't be on the scene, they mightn't have a strong feeling role model or a male role model, they may have different - a distorted view of what that should be, their view, so I think it's about establishing that. And then as well that we are establishing boundaries, like what we do accept or don't accept, how we want it to improve over time. I think as well that became the behaviour you want back, you know. It's not about saying and telling them what you want it's about you hopefully rising to that and them following, you know, it's a two way partnership. (Foyle, staff)*

The approach used in this centre is learner centred which tries to place the responsibility for learning on the young people themselves. The same approach is applied to misbehaviour:

> *But you're on kind of their level. Like, 'What would yous like?' or it's more, 'What do you think you've done wrong?' Or if they're in trouble, 'What do you think I should do with you?'. Give them a little bit more power and responsibility and suddenly you get them to turn around and to trust you, and trust is a huge important thing. (Erne, staff)*

Sharing a canteen and preparing food together is an important feature of this centre and where a lot of subtle staff-learner interactions take place:

> *It's normal time and regular tea breaks that they expect. And they know when lunch is happening and they know what they're allowed to do and what they're not allowed to do. And there is - there's a - I love the fact that we sit in there and eat with them in there and that kind of stuff. There's - it's like - it's much more respectful than any school situation they've experienced. (Liffey, staff)*

Other co-ordinators described how the food can be a source of nourishment for the learners but also provides a means through which to celebrate occasions like Christmas for some learners:

> *Food has always been and will always continue to be a top priority for us here in our centre. We know that on many of our students rely on the food here as probably the only source of good quality nourishment that they have access to. We have always known that there are students who don't get a proper meal even at Christmas. Just the other*

day one of my colleagues told me that one of the current students who is 18 years old has said that he can't wait for our Christmas dinner this year as he has heard it's good and on 25th December last year he had had a pizza for dinner. (Moy, co-ordinator/manager)

7.4.3 A family unit?

Many of the centres had a positive and family-like atmosphere with staff and learners eating together in canteens or kitchen. The use of the term family was raised by both staff and learners as a way of describing the bond between them. One co-ordinator/manager emphasised the importance of developing relations between staff and learners:

They [staff] just get to know the students. They're a little family in themselves. (Erne, co-ordinator/manager)

One staff member described how the relationship between staff and learners is different in Youthreach centres due to the small numbers:

We have a different relationship I suppose with the young people because we have smaller numbers. So, we can kind of - we can notice those changes in the person from day-to-day. … They do become like an extended family really. (Moy, staff)

One co-ordinator/manager viewed the kitchen as central to the success of the centre as it was a place where staff and learners can interact, learners can learn about cooking and cleaning and also the importance of working as part of a team:

In any home the kitchen's kind of the centre of the family and in here the kitchen's kind of the centre of the family in here as well, and they get, they get a good hot meal. But they learn how to prepare it, so they're getting life skills and that, and they're working as a little team. (Erne, co-ordinator/manager)

Even like we've students come in and the food is a big thing with them. They might come in, they mightn't eat any food for a while and then they start to make their own food and they're learning. (Erne, staff)

The level of trust and personal bonds built up between staff and learners often led to learners engaging with counselling and other services. One learner reported feeling comfortable talking to staff members about issues and felt supported to attend the counsellor within the centre:

> *After talking to her for maybe half an hour, missing a little bit of class, she convinced me to go to counselling, just because it's free, you might as well go once and see if you enjoy it. And it was a great benefit. And in fact because of her I want to go see the drugs counsellor to get help to quit smoking. (Bann, learner)*

Another learner described how truly inclusive Youthreach centres are*:*

> *There's no, like, trouble or fighting or anything. No matter who comes in, even if the person that starts doesn't know any of us, we all just include them and make sure everyone's good and safe. (Bann, learner)*

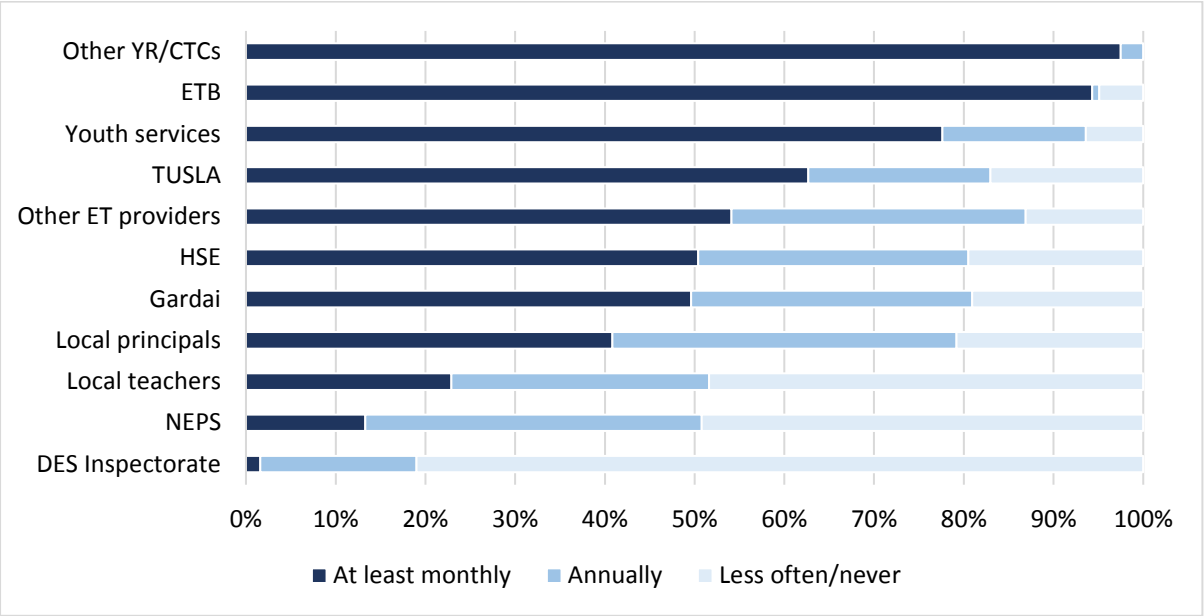
Stakeholders at the consultative workshops also raised the family-like atmosphere that exists in Youthreach to support young people and help them re-engage in education:

> *It's a safe space for these young people…and provides a warm, safe space and a quasi-family structure to support them, and possibly the first positive experience of education. (Stakeholder, consultative workshop)*

7.5 INTEGRATION WITH LOCAL SERVICES

In the survey, the co-ordinators/managers were asked about the frequency of contact with a range of local agencies and services. Almost all reported at least monthly contact with the ETB and with other Youthreach and Community Training Centres (Figure 7.3). A very high proportion (80 per cent) of co-ordinators/managers indicated at least weekly contact with the ETB. Over three-quarters of centres report frequent contact with local youth workers or youth services. Centres indicated fairly frequent contact with TUSLA, HSE, An Garda Síochána and other local education/training providers, though a significant minority (about one-in-five) reported little or no contact with these groups. Centres differed in the degree of contact with local school principals with around a fifth having infrequent contact. Contact with the NEPS and the DES Inspectorate tended to be infrequent.

FIGURE 7.3 FREQUENCY OF CONTACT WITH LOCAL AGENCIES AND SERVICES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

Responses on the frequency of contact with local agencies were combined to give an overall scale of integration with local services. Co-ordinators in Youthreach centres reported slightly more frequent contact than CTC managers; the difference was not marked but 30 per cent of Youthreach centres fell into the highest contact group compared with 17 per cent of CTCs. This difference largely reflects less contact with local principals, other Youthreach centres/CTCs and TUSLA in CTCs than in Youthreach centres. Larger centres also reported somewhat more contact, with 37 per cent of large centres falling into the highest contact group compared with 27 per cent of average and 19 per cent of small centres. The degree of contact did not differ by the ETB within which the centre was located. Somewhat surprisingly, the degree of contact did not appear to reflect a greater concentration of need among learners (that is, the relative proportion with learning or EPMH difficulties or from a Traveller background). However, there is some variation according to the proportion of learners from jobless households, with those with medium to high concentrations of this group being more likely to fall into the medium and high contact groups. This may reflect the greater integration of local services in more deprived communities. Co-ordinators/managers with a youth work background had somewhat greater contact with local agencies and services than those with other backgrounds; 38 per cent of these centres fell into the high contact group compared with 25 per cent of other centres.

The qualitative interviews and surveys highlight the importance of inter-agency support in some of the Youthreach centres and CTCs. One co-ordinator felt it was particularly important given the growing and often critical mental health issues in the centre in recent years and felt that they were coping as best they can by linking

in with outside agencies:

> *We manage it as best we can. We have psychological support services here through our ETB so we link young people with them. We also link them with outside counsellors… we manage it on a day-to-day basis as best as we can. (Foyle, co-ordinator/manager)*

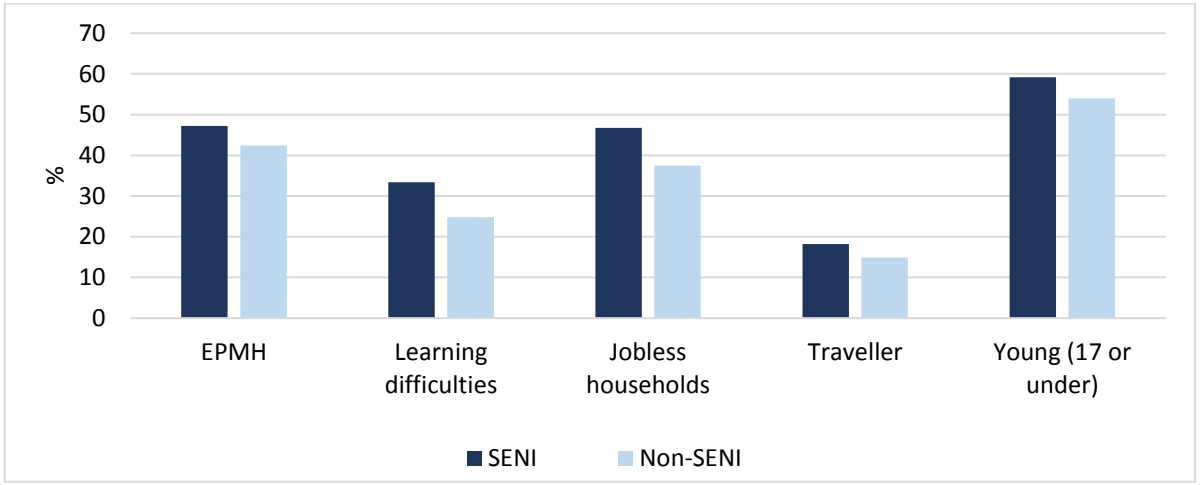
Other co-ordinators described the 'multi-agency approach' to learner support where they were

> *engaging with agencies such as [An] Garda Síochána, we build positive relationships and experiences which at times can be quite challenging (Moy, Co-ordinator/manager)*

7.6 THE SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS INITIATIVE

As described in Chapter 3, twenty Youthreach centres receive additional SENI funding in order to introduce specific forms of support provision and build staff capacity. This section examines the SENI centres in comparison to non-SENI centres and provides an in-depth insight into the impact of SENI on staff and learners in Youthreach centres. Among the sample of centres surveyed, 21 per cent of Youthreach centres were receiving additional support under SENI while none of the Community Training Centres had access to such support. SENI centres did not differ significantly from non-SENI centres in their size or location. Information on the profile of learners derived from the co-ordinator/manager survey can be used to indicate whether centres with a greater complexity of need among learners are more likely to receive SENI funding. Twenty-nine per cent of centres with a high concentration of need are taking part in the initiative compared with 16 per cent and 19 per cent of those with low and medium levels of need respectively. Thus, there appears to be some degree of targeting. At the same time, the majority of Youthreach centres with significant learner needs are not in receipt of additional funding to reflect that profile. The representation of particular groups of learners across SENI and non-SENI Youthreach centres is presented in Figure 7.4. SENI centres tend to have a higher average proportion of young people with learning difficulties and emotional and psychological difficulties. They are also more likely to come from a Traveller background or live in a jobless household. The profile of SENI learners is a little younger than those in non-SENI centres. Nonetheless, the differences found are relatively modest and suggest high levels of need in many non-SENI centres.

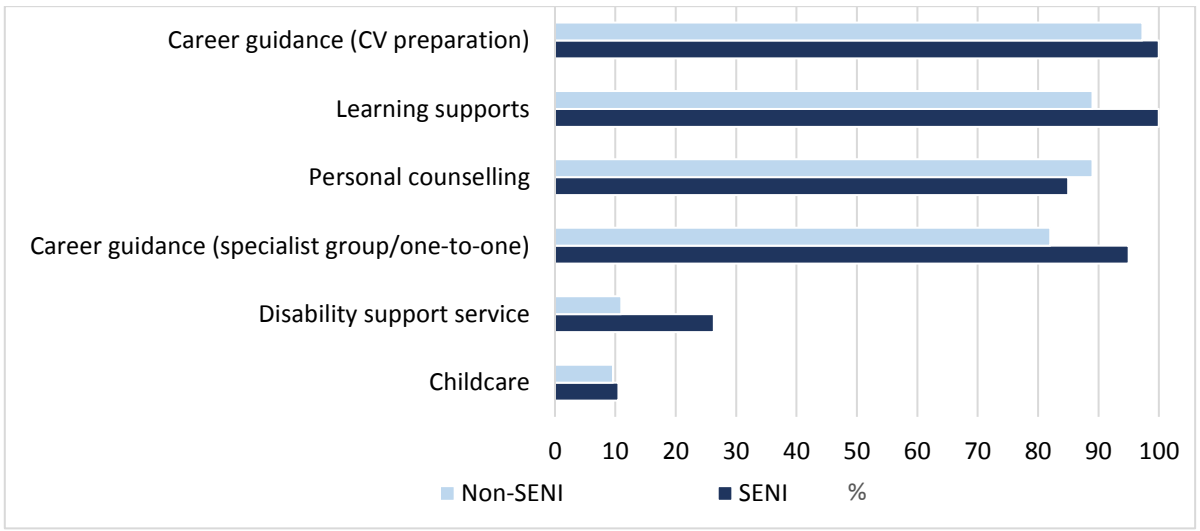
FIGURE 7.4 AVERAGE PROFILE OF LEARNERS IN SENI AND NON-SENI YOUTHREACH CENTRES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

Figure 7.5 shows the provision of different kinds of services to learners across SENI and non-SENI centres. SENI centres are more likely to provide a disability support service, learning support and specialist career guidance. However, they are no more likely to provide personal counselling. The difference in learning support provision is even stronger when the intensity of provision is considered, that is, the proportion of learners in the centre receiving such support. Almost three-quarters (74 per cent) of learners in SENI centres receive learning support compared with 53 per cent of those in other Youthreach centres.

FIGURE 7.5 PROVISION OF SERVICES IN SENI AND NON-SENI YOUTHREACH CENTRES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

Centres taking part in SENI reported significantly more contact with local agencies and services; 45 per cent of SENI centres fell into the highest contact group compared with 24 per cent of those not taking part in the initiative.

7.6.1 Impact of SENI

During the case-study interviews, the additional staffing through SENI was raised and seen as providing extra capacity to respond to crisis situations that arise with learners:

> *I could bring them out, as in even just downstairs, sit down with them for ten or fifteen minutes, kind of get them to chill out a little bit, get them to talk about what's going on which they couldn't do in a bigger situation. And I think even in a Youthreach where there isn't SENI I think that's probably not as easy because there wouldn't be the additional staff to be able to do it. (Suir, staff)*

One co-ordinator felt that all Youthreach centres should have a SENI budget, particularly to fund the use of the mentor system in connecting with the learners:

> *I think if I had a magic wand I would flick it and I would make sure that all the Youthreachs had the SENI budget… Because I think it's imperative. You just cannot meet - you cannot meet the needs, the young people's needs… even having the mentoring is something where you can get into the nitty gritty of where they are at, and it's led by them. It's not led by the staff; it's led by them. And once you have the relationship there, a young person will tell you what they want. (Barrow co-ordinator/manager)*

7.6.2 SENI and counselling

In one SENI centre, learners have access to counselling services for one day a week. One co-ordinator/manager described how all of the learners are required to attend, even just to check in (see also Section 7.2):

> *It's a check in, it's not even for counselling, they're going in there. It's a student support is what we call it. So they'll go in there, so she can ask them, 'Well, how's everything? Anything you want to talk about?' But she's also got the, I suppose, tools there if something opens up outside of that, and it's totally confidential, it's nothing to do with us. (Suir, Co-ordinator/manager)*

These sessions are used to monitor how things are for the learners and, where necessary, are used to refer them for further therapy or supports:

> *They're just checking in how's your week going, how's your day going and you probably would see a psychotherapist once every three or four weeks just for checking…the fact that they're just checking in with somebody and it's just that it's normal that you talk, do you know,*

about maybe something that's worrying you. It's just normalising that stuff. (Suir, staff)

Through the SENI funding, there was a counsellor on site twice a week in one of the case-study centres. However, the staff also appeared to use subtle interactions with the learners to establish if everything was okay:

if I see some student and they have a little wrong - or a little sad face, you know, we pick that up really, really easily after we're here - you know, they don't have to talk, it's non-verbal, you'll see somebody and you say, 'Are you all right, today, or not so good? (Barrow, staff)

Some of the psychological supports are unstructured and made up of subtle interactions between staff and learners where staff are monitoring the learner's appearance or demeanour:

They come in. They usually – then you might have a little chat. You'll, you'll notice things about people. Some of them are coming in, great, all make up. Another person looks like they've slept in their clothes. These are little things that we would log, maybe check in with someone if – you know, if they're in good, bad form, whatever. They're having breakfast. (Barrow, staff)

Given the level of need of the young people, the co-ordinator/manager expressed some concern at their level of expertise and the issues they were coming up against:

We're educators at the end of the day and we're not psychologists; we're not counsellors, you know? But we are being left to deal with a lot of the difficulties that young people have and to try to remove the barriers that… you know the barriers to education for a start. The barriers to their personal lives. You know, the barriers in their families, you know? (Barrow, co-ordinator/manager)

One of the staff at the centre was very clear that her job was purely educational and anything more than that would be referred to the counsellor or the mentor that had been assigned to the learner:

I draw the line on any other thing because there's a care team there, I am not qualified to counsel. If there is an issue outside of Maths, I'd say, 'Lads, who is your mentor?'. So, there's a system there. (Barrow, staff)

As part of SENI funding, one of the Youthreach centres employed a youth worker

and was able to provide counselling for learners and CPD for staff:

> *One of the main things is we're able to employ a youth worker. So we're able to along with academic programmes we're able to run holistic programmes and alternative programmes. We also have a psychotherapist that comes every Thursday to our students. (Suir, staff)*

The part-time youth worker employed at the centre described how the additional funding available through SENI allows her role to be diverse in nature working directly with learners, linking with outside agencies and teaching modules:

> *I do SPHE, I do communication skills. I also teach team working and I do a lot of one-to-one because of the fact that we are SENI, there's additional hours for me to do a lot of other one-to-one work…I link in as well because again where we're located here I link in with Foróige there's three Foróige youth workers just across the way, so I link in with them and I do two different programmes…and we also link in with the neighbourhood youth project… so it's fantastic, but all of that I think is because it's a SENI centre, and there's the extra funding to do it. (Suir, staff)*

In another SENI centre, however, although the additional funding was welcome, the co-ordinator/manager and staff still felt over-stretched as it only allowed for the full-time employment of a student support officer and a part-time counsellor. He felt that these were the only real gains of being a SENI centre:

> *As a SENI centre… student support is employed through SENI. And [name of staff member], part of her wage comes through the SENI as well. So, by the time you get those two wages out, there's not an awful lot left. (Barrow, co-ordinator/manager)*

7.6.3 SENI and a student support officer

In one centre, the student support officer employed through SENI appeared to play an instrumental role in the overall running of the centre. He was the longest serving staff member and provided support to the learners, staff and the co-ordinator/manager:

> *The student support officer's employed through that SENI budget because it takes an awful lot of pressure off a lot of other staff. (Barrow, co-ordinator/manager)*

SENI also allowed for the staff to hold a 'care group' each week where the student support officer, the co-ordinator/manager and a staff member would meet and

highlight any issues with students that needed to be addressed. The focus of this meeting appeared to be on social and emotional supports rather than the academic progress of the learners:

> *We identify our most vulnerable students, and we have a timetable of things that we do with those particular young people during that particular week. So, it might be making an appointment with them for CAMHS or just to ring the parent to see where they're up to. Or I'd ring family services or to speak to somebody in Foróige about it or to try to link them into… into [name of local support service]. (Barrow co-ordinator/manager)*

The SENI funding also means there is a literacy and numeracy team working in this centre:

> *There's a literacy and numeracy team… people will be withdrawn from class on a one-to-one basis to work on their literacy and numeracy skills, to bring them up to … speed, or, as is the case at this time of the year. (Barrow, staff)*

7.6.4 Mentoring (SENI and non-SENI centres)

As described in Chapter 3, one of the key features of SENI is the use of a mentor programme (some non-SENI centres also have mentoring, though Gordon (2013) suggests that these supports are not as intensive as in SENI centres). Every learner in the centre has a mentor and attends counselling which means that no one is being singled out:

> *It used to be that people, 'I don't need a, you know, mentoring, I don't need a counsellor.' But everybody does it, then there's no question that they don't want it, you know. Keeping everyone the same. (Barrow, staff)*

The co-ordinator/manager acknowledged the importance of SENI in allowing for the mentor system. This is done however on a voluntary basis by staff but appeared to be successful:

> *We do the mentoring here as well. [name of staff member] mentors an awful lot of the young people here. We've three other staff involved…they have volunteered. They want to come into it now. (Barrow, co-ordinator/manager)*

The other case-study SENI centre also employed the mentoring system. One staff member described how it is 'where you link in with the students every week or every second week depending on what's gone on for them' (Moy, staff). The

mentoring role is seen as encompassing a very broad range of activities and supports, including very practical tasks:

> *Mentoring covers such a wide range of things. So, it goes from like… maybe organising them to have dental checks and to get registered for their public service card. Really what maybe the parents aren't able to do or organise for them. Doctor's appointments. To them, it may be dealing with a particular issue that might be happening for them outside of the centre. To inside the centre, maybe they're struggling with some of their work and they need extra help there or, you know? So … there's quite a lot of stuff. (Moy, staff)*

The centre also appeared to use the mentor system to monitor behaviour in the centre over time and engage the learners to commit to improving any negative behavioural patterns:

> *They meet the mentor, it's different for every learner, so they could meet them once a week and if they have any behaviour issues or if anything's flagged up on the system, it will be discussed there and then and they have a month to kind of redeem themselves before they you know. So, if they have the yellow card, that only lasts a month and it's gone then. So, it's to give them a chance and to try and get them just to behave better. (Moy, co-ordinator/manager)*

The learners interviewed also spoke about the importance of their mentors in discussing any issue or problems they might have:

> *I have my own mentor who, she advises me if I have some questions or I want her to find out something for me. (Moy, learner)*

> *My mentor [name]…I can talk to her about anything. (Moy, learner)*

At the end of a mentoring session, the staff member often sets a task to be completed by the time the next session comes around. This is done to engage the learner and allow them to witness their own progress over time:

> *It is a very important role and, you know, you make – at the end of every session, kind of, set a little plan or goal… So, you're going to get that textiles piece finished or you're going to make a phone call about work experience or, you know, you're going to start saving or join the gym or whatever these things are and then you can come back to them and say, 'How did you get on with that?' Maybe some of it's not important now because something else has come up. Or maybe they*

can see, 'Oh, yeah, I've actually made some progress here. (Barrow, staff)

7.6.5 The WebWheel model

As described in Chapter 3, the WebWheel model is an important feature of SENI. One staff member in a SENI centre described how the WebWheel works for the learners:

We've a WebWheel system that looks at every kind of part of their life, and they can rate themselves and if they rate themselves low we try and help them to bring it up to, you know. To work on the areas that they'd identified themselves. And then obviously we identify areas as well from working with them. You know, that we try to progress and we help them out with. (Moy staff, SENI)

The relationship between learners and mentors is seen as close and contributes to the identification of any difficulties faced by the young people:

They [learners] feel really comfortable. So, it's great because you know in the morning if they come in and there's something happening for them they'll just give you a nod or shout. … They respond well to it and even with their behaviour it really helps with their behaviour as well. (Moy, staff)

In SENI centres, many of the young people interviewed were open about their experiences of mental health problems in the past. Having a mentor on the staff of Youthreach and weekly access to a counsellor made a difference to them:

We do WebWheel. It's a one on one with each teacher in here but some of us has a girl from across the way that like… So it's not too bad. But yeah you always have someone to turn to like if there's a problem. (Suir, learner)

7.7 SUMMARY

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the different types of supports available in Youthreach centres and CTCs by focussing on the provision of counselling and career guidance. The chapter also examines the nature of the relationship between staff and learners in Youthreach and the integration of existing supports with local services. The final section of the chapter examined centres participating in SENI.

Section 7.2 in this chapter highlights the extent to which the provision of counselling services varies by a range of centre characteristics. Compared to CTCs,

Youthreach centres are more likely to have counselling services. Centres vary in levels of access to counselling with some centres having a counsellor on their staff whereas others would have a counsellor visit the centre a number of times a week. Some centres had no access to direct counselling but sourced outside supports when needed. Overcoming learners' reluctance to attend counselling is a common issue in Youthreach centres and CTCs, with some centres requiring that all learners attend counselling every week in order to reduce the stigma. The findings show the positive impact that access to counselling has on the learners in helping them through issues around trauma, depression and anxiety and often allowing them to re-engage with and take ownership of their education.

Access to career guidance counselling featured in both the survey data and the qualitative data from the case-study visits. Almost all centres provide guidance activities for learners in the form of CV preparation and 85 per cent provide specialist group or one-to-one career guidance. Some centres use a guidance advocate who works with the learners on a progression plan for the future. Guidance varies by QQI qualification, with Level 3 introducing the idea of employment or further education and Level 4 helping learners with course options and applications. In some centres, advocates sought to increase the expectations of the learner by providing concrete options for education or employment.

Work placements featured heavily in the discussions with staff and learners, particularly those undertaking Level 4 accreditation. The findings show that six-in-ten centres reported that all learners take part in work experience and that this varies by centre type. The length of work placements also varies by centre type with placements reported to be shorter (10 days or less) in CTCs compared to Youthreach centres. Across centres, work placements tend to be in a block rather than individual days per week, although this was more prevalent in Youthreach centres compared to CTCs. Centres with greater levels of need were more likely to use day release placements, something which was also raised in the interviews with staff who had some concerns about the mental health of learners doing long block work placements with a loss of day-to-day emotional support from centre staff. Other staff argued that it is best to leave the work placements until the end of the programme so that learners build up enough confidence to enter and succeed in employment. In the majority of centres, staff other than the co-ordinator/manager organise or help organise work placements, although the co-ordinator/manager played a bigger role in smaller centres. Where centres had advocates, they appeared to play a role in linking in with staff to gain information about individual learners and sourcing relevant work placements. In other centres, individual staff members built up linkages with local employers which facilitated work placements. Learners appear to play a more active role in centres where there are high levels of need. In some centres, staff viewed this process as important in enhancing their skills.

The quality of staff-learner relations in Youthreach centres and CTCs formed a dominant theme emerging from the case-study phase of the research. For many learners, it represented their first positive experience in education with adults that they trusted. A mutual respect appears to exist where clear boundaries are set but learners are supported both educationally and psychologically. During the case-study visits, staff described an informal set of supports that operate in Youthreach centres and CTCs where they would 'keep an eye' on the behaviour of learners and, in some cases, share any relevant information with colleagues if action was needed. In many of the centres visited, the term 'family' was often used to describe the relationship between staff and learners, highlighting the extent to which Youthreach centres and CTCs offer an inclusive, safe space for young people with varying levels of need.

Centres surveyed reported having frequent contact with local services, including the ETB and other Youthreach centres and CTCs. Over 80 per cent of co-ordinators/managers reported at least weekly contact with the ETB. Other services worked with included youth workers and youth services, TUSLA, the HSE, An Garda Síochána and other education or training providers. The degree of contact with local services did not differ by centre size or ETB nor did it reflect the level of need in a centre (such as EPMH, or learners from a Traveller background). Co-ordinators/managers with a youth work background had more contact with local agencies compared to those with other backgrounds.

The final section of this chapter examines the impact of SENI in Youthreach centres. The findings show that SENI centres tend to have higher levels of young people with learning difficulties and EPMH, and they are more likely to have learners with a Traveller background and from jobless households compared to non-SENI centres. Focussing on the types of supports available in SENI centres compared to non-SENI, findings highlight how the proportion of learners in receipt of learning support in SENI centres is significantly higher than in non-SENI settings. SENI centres are also more likely to have greater contact with local agencies compared to non-SENI centres. The additional funding and supports in SENI centres appear to offer staff more scope and capacity to meet the needs of learners. Access to counselling is a key feature of SENI, although the level of access varies across different SENI centre settings. In addition to the full- or part-time employment of a counsellor, SENI can be used to fund a student support officer or youth worker. The mentor system allows for individual staff members to link in with a number of young people, provide information, and set tasks or goals for the next meeting. The relationship between learners and mentors is close and based on a high level of trust.

CHAPTER 8

Learner outcomes

8.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter focuses on the outcomes of learners in the Youthreach programme. As discussed in Chapter 1, the methodology used in the study focused on obtaining objective data from co-ordinators and managers on learner outcomes and subjective information from the learners themselves on their experiences of provision. Taken together, such an approach reflects the broad aims of the programme in terms of progression to education, training and employment, soft skills development and social exclusion (see Chapter 3). Because of the absence of a group of young people with equal challenges in the general population, it is not possible to conduct counterfactual analysis to look at the net gain of Youthreach participation. However, where possible, we make comparisons to outcomes among other groups of young people.

We firstly examine quantitative outcomes such as attendance and explore possible reasons for non-attendance in Youthreach centres. The findings highlight the measures used by centres to address the issue of non-attendance. The chapter then focuses on completion rates in Youthreach and the factors influencing non-completion, including a lack of supports for the learners. The chapter also focuses on progression rates using rates of certification and the outcomes for learners after they leave the programme. Using data from the case studies, we then examine the perceived impact of the programme on learner outcomes, drawing on interviews with Youthreach staff and learners. The final section examines the use of metrics in Youthreach and the difficulties in measuring soft skill development among Youthreach learners.

8.2 ATTENDANCE

Co-ordinators/managers were asked about the proportion of learners that had missed a day or two here or there within the last month. The average rate of non-attendance across centres was 54 per cent. However, there was considerable variation around this average. A quarter of centres reported non-attendance of a third or less while 23 per cent indicated non-attendance among more than three-quarters of the learner group. The patterns of non-attendance did not vary markedly between Youthreach and Community Training Centres or across centres of different sizes. Contrary to expectations, non-attendance rates were not higher in centres with a greater concentration of need. Rates of non-attendance were somewhat lower in SENI centres than in other settings (47 per cent compared with 56 per cent). It is difficult to provide an accurate comparator for these rates of non-

attendance. Information on post-primary schools indicates that students in DEIS schools miss an average of 10.4 days per school year compared to 7.4 in non-DEIS schools (Millar, 2017). Furthermore, almost a quarter of students in DEIS schools missed 20 or more days per year. Given the profile of Youthreach participants in terms of non-attendance while at school (see Chapter 4), the rates for the majority of centres would appear to compare favourably with mainstream provision.

8.2.1 Reasons for poor attendance

There was a general acceptance in centres that attendance was going to be an issue for such a disadvantaged group of young people with such complex needs and home lives:

> *You never get full attendance… I don't think I can ever remember the day in any centre where every single person who was supposed to be in was in… they'll keep telling you that and - but sometimes I think dysfunctional backgrounds are, and the parents not getting up so, you know what I mean, there's always a reason, you find it. (Erne, staff)*

One co-ordinator/manager felt that on average the learners attended four days a week:

> *You could, on average, get about maybe four days a week over here with most kids, you know. Other kids then you could see them once or twice a week then you mightn't see them for, you know, another two weeks. (Liffey, co-ordinator/manager)*

Many of the staff interviewed believed that it was often not the fault of the young person but a lack of support from home:

> *The problem stems from lack of support in the home usually. I mean, it's very hard to get out in the morning if you don't have somebody there to support you and if you have built up a, kind of, lifelong habit of not going to school (Bann, Staff)*

Staff often had sympathy for some of the young people who were not attending when they were aware that other factors, such as parents, were the reason behind it:

> *Sometimes the parents are the biggest problem they're holding them back so much. I have some country young lads and I could - the list of excuses that the mother would have. And the father doesn't want him coming to any shape or form of training, that he wants him home working and that's it, like, you know what I mean. But, do you know,*

lovely young lad, nice and quiet but, man, do you know … And it's - and I know it's not him, do you know. (Liffey, staff)

In other centres, some learners with Traveller backgrounds could be absent for long periods due to family reasons:

You sometimes get students like that, especially more among the Travelling community, I suppose. We've got a couple of guys who – it's the first time I've seen them in a couple of months but they've turned up now and that happens a lot, I think, for their family reasons. (Foyle, staff)

Some staff felt they did not always have the information about a learner's lack of attendance describing it as 'drip-fed' over time:

They'd have bereavements, they'd have family stuff going on, they're just depressed. They'd have a load of stuff going on. And it's drip-fed; you won't hear about this stuff when they come in. (Liffey, co-ordinator/manager)

Gaming and the impact of gaming on attendance for young men was raised by a number of staff in the case-study centres:

[They're] not able to sleep during the night, for whatever reason, they're not getting their sleep. They're online or whatever, with the games. This is what I hear them saying, I don't know. (Blackwater, staff)

8.2.2 Managing attendance

The case-study visits highlighted different approaches to managing attendance across different settings. In most centres, the staff take a flexible approach to encourage learners to attend:

Maybe they should come in on a part time, maybe just come in in the mornings, maybe they're not getting on with people in their class so just come in – you know, don't come in Wednesdays when they're all mixed up or something. So, we try to do individual programmes to get people back in gradually and sometimes a part-time timetable can work for people. (Barrow, co-ordinator/manager)

Other centres also used this approach in order to build up the attendance of the learner over time:

> *Once they're in and relaxed and you've got them regularly and they get to know everybody and they understand how it all works, then you might get, 'Oh, just maybe try and come in Wednesday as well. Do you think you can do that?' And the idea is just to try and hold them - pull them in, you know. (Liffey, staff)*

In other centres, co-ordinators and staff appear to be strict on attendance but at the same time try to understand the reasons behind it:

> *We would be quite strict on attendance, but having that said, I think when the numbers were kind of falling there before Easter, I think we were almost trying to just work with the students that were here and figuring out why. (Suir, staff)*

Some centres balanced applying rules around attendance with following up with learners to make sure everything was okay at home:

> *There's a lot of chasing up… if they [staff] have a free minute, they would pop down to the young person's house. Or we have like the Facebook Messenger. So, like, yeah. So it'd be like then that person, 'I haven't seen you in a couple of days. Is everything okay?'. And like it could be like then - or generally what happens is like, 'Oh, I'll be in tomorrow', so it's just that kind of link. (Shannon, staff)*

Other centres applied stricter rules with parents contacted if learners do not attend. One centre sent reports to parents regarding attendance a number of times a year. The co-ordinator described how relations were positive between staff and parents who were 'working together' to facilitate learner attendance:

> *Depending on the learner, we would have regular contact. We have parent/teacher meetings once a year. … We send out reports every term. Obviously any events that we have, we would invite parents to. If the learners are missing - you know, they're not in, we ring them. (Moy, co-ordinator/manager)*

In some cases of persistent non-attendance, staff contact the family and in one centre a contract was put in place with the young person:

> *What we do is we meet the young people if they're - if they're absent; talk about the issues: what's causing it; come up with tactics to address the issue; and we do call in parents if it's not working…if the verbal chat doesn't work, then we put a contract in place. So, you know, 'You need to turn up four days out of five next week starting', or, 'Three days next week, four days following week'. And I think the*

contracts are the only things that really do work, like, young people have asked us to see if a contract's around their attendance. (Bann, staff)

Other centres use a text system so that parents are informed if learners are not attending. This applies for afternoon as well as morning attendance. If a learner is late, they are not allowed to attend for the rest of the day:

If they are not in here before 9.15 am without you know sending a message in, they're not let in for the day. So, you know they can't just kind of stroll in whenever they feel like it, so I think there is the structure here but sometimes it's a balance. (Suir, staff)

Other centres only appear to contact the parents when attendance has become a real issue:

We do take the more formal…like there would be a letter going out to you know an attendance warning. And invite the parents to come in and have a chat and say look… This needs to improve. And then you know and then if it needs to go then there's a second letter and if it needs then a termination notice. (Boyne co-ordinator/manager)

The allowance was also seen as an incentive to maintain attendance:

I suppose one of the measures is that some of the students get an allowance for being here and when they don't attend, so those that are looking, that are choosing to not bother then they'll lose payment for that and I suppose that acts as a little incentive in a way. (Boyne, co-ordinator/manager)

A number of the centres raised the issue of higher rates of non-attendance during the summer, particularly when the teaching staff are off and only the co-ordinator and resource staff remain. Some mentioned that the students want to be off like their peers in second-level school:

The students that are here don't want to be here or their contemporaries. All their school mates and that are all off. They have to come in to do Youthreach and it is a struggle. They are fighting against everything every day. (Suir, staff)

The low attendance also applies to other holidays during Easter and Christmas:

Running up to the holidays, around Easter times we have now, Christmas periods, mid-term breaks, that's when you do see a notable

decrease, and it can be quite disheartening, you know. (Shannon, staff)

There was no clear pattern regarding centre policies around non-attendance, particularly in relation to the impact this would have on the allowances that the learners received. In some centres, learners had a clock-in clock-out system and when they missed a day their allowance was impacted relative to the amount of time absent. In other centres, it was not clear how strict the application of rules around allowance withdrawal was.

8.3 PROGRESSION AND OUTCOMES FOR YOUTHREACH LEARNERS

TABLE 8.1 SUMMARY OF COMPLETION AND PROGRESSION OUTCOMES AMONG LEARNERS (YOUTHREACH AND CTC CENTRES COMBINED)

	Completed the programme (%)	All who took part in the programme (%)
Completion		31.0
Accreditation:		
% receiving full award	60-61	34-40
Progression:		
Employment	27.5	27.0
PLC programme	21.9	38.0
Other FET	23.3	
Unemployment	15.8	35.0
Other	7.5	
Not known	4.0	

Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

8.3.1 Non-completion

Co-ordinators/managers were asked to indicate the number of learners who had left the centre before completion of the programme in the last year. These figures were used to calculate rates of non-completion relative to the total learner population at the time of the survey. Using this benchmark, an average of 31 per cent of learners left before programme completion (Table 8.1). The SOLAS FARR administrative database records numbers of 'completers' and 'early leavers' which can be used to assess the total leaving the programme in a single year. For 2017, FARR administrative data give estimates of 14 per cent non-completion, with rates of 13 per cent in Youthreach centres and 17 per cent in Community Training Centres. The difference between the administrative and survey estimates is likely to reflect co-ordinator/manager perceptions of 'completing' the programme. While the programme guidelines no longer refer to a two-year programme, most centres structure learning so that young people take QQI Level 3 qualifications in year one and progress to QQI Level 4 qualifications in year two. Some co-

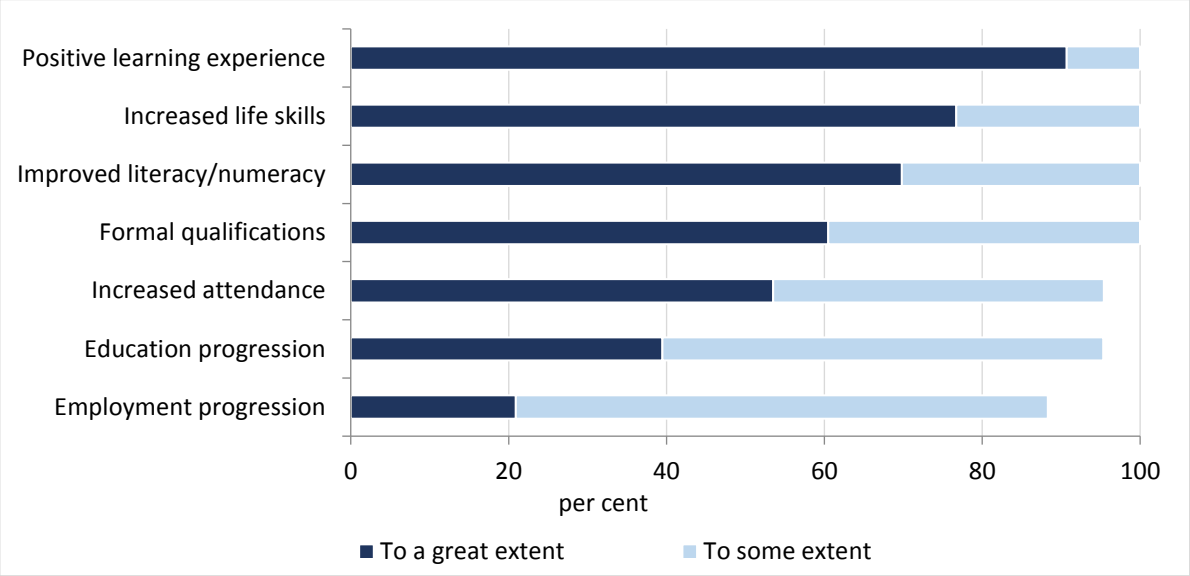
ordinators/managers may therefore view learners leaving after one year as 'non-completers'.

Survey-based rates of non-completion varied across centres, representing fewer than one-in-six learners in a quarter of centres, with half or more leaving in 18 per cent of centres. Not all non-completion can be interpreted as negative in nature; 20 per cent left because they obtained employment and 19 per cent got a place on another course. However, 23 per cent left for other reasons while 38 per cent left because they disengaged from the course. Non-completion rates did not differ between Youthreach centres and CTCs but larger centres in both settings tended to have somewhat lower non-completion rates. Rates of non-completion varied across ETB areas. Somewhat surprisingly, rates of non-completion are lower in centres with a high concentration of need (24 per cent compared with 34 per cent in low and medium need centres). This may reflect the lack of other options, such as employment, operating as a 'pull' out of education/training for young people with greater challenges. Rates of non-completion, especially for reasons of disengagement, are significantly higher in centres with higher rates of non-attendance so there does appear to be a group of young people who find re-engagement in learning difficult.

8.3.2 Progression pathways

Senior managers were asked about the extent to which participation in the Youthreach programme had an impact on different kinds of learner outcomes (Figure 8.1). Senior managers saw the programme as having the greatest impact on experiential and social aspects, giving learners a positive learning experience and increasing their social/life skills, as well as providing them with improved foundational skills in literacy and numeracy. Over half saw the programme as contributing 'to a great extent' to increased numbers acquiring formal qualifications and increased attendance/retention. Training centre managers were more critical than other groups of the extent to which the Youthreach programme had led to the acquisition of formal qualifications. Senior managers were less positive about the impact of the programme in terms of progression to education and to employment, although the vast majority saw the programme as having an impact at least to some extent.

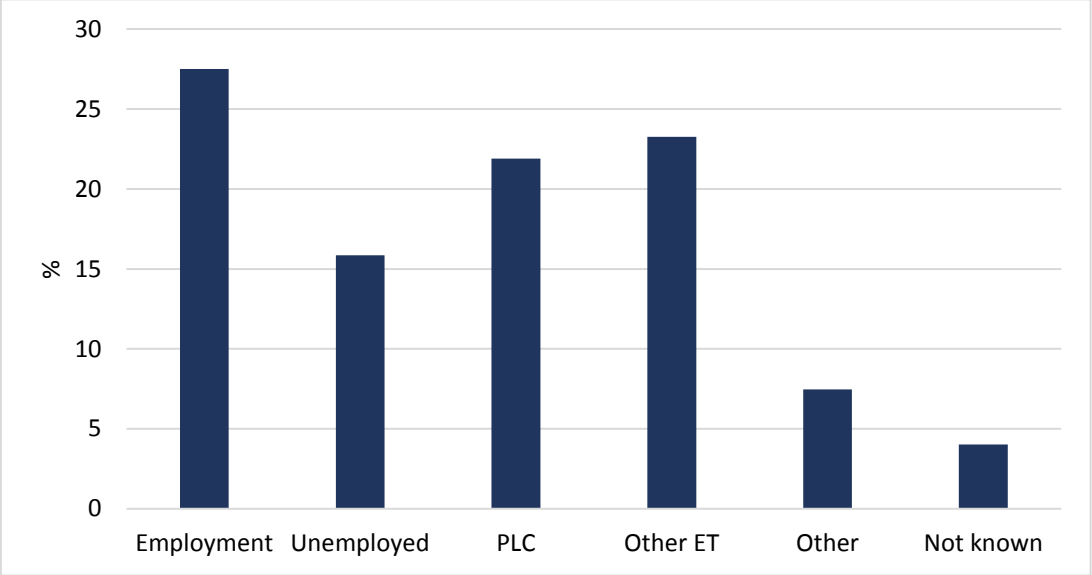
FIGURE 8.1 PERCEIVED IMPACT OF THE YOUTHREACH PROGRAMME ON LEARNER OUTCOMES



Source: ESRI survey of senior managers.

Co-ordinators and managers report regularly on the progression pathways taken by learners upon leaving the programme. Figure 8.2 shows the outcomes for *completers* in 2017. Forty-five per cent of completers progress on to another education or training course, being evenly split between PLC courses and other courses (including apprenticeships). A roughly similar proportion (43 per cent) went straight into the labour market, with obtaining employment being more prevalent than unemployment. Overall, one-in-six of completers are unemployed after leaving the programme, a rate that compared favourably with unemployment levels for the early school leaver population as a whole (see Chapter 2). Co-ordinators/managers were aware of the pathways taken by all but a few young people.

FIGURE 8.2 POST-PROGRAMME OUTCOMES AMONG LEARNERS WHO COMPLETED THE PROGRAMME

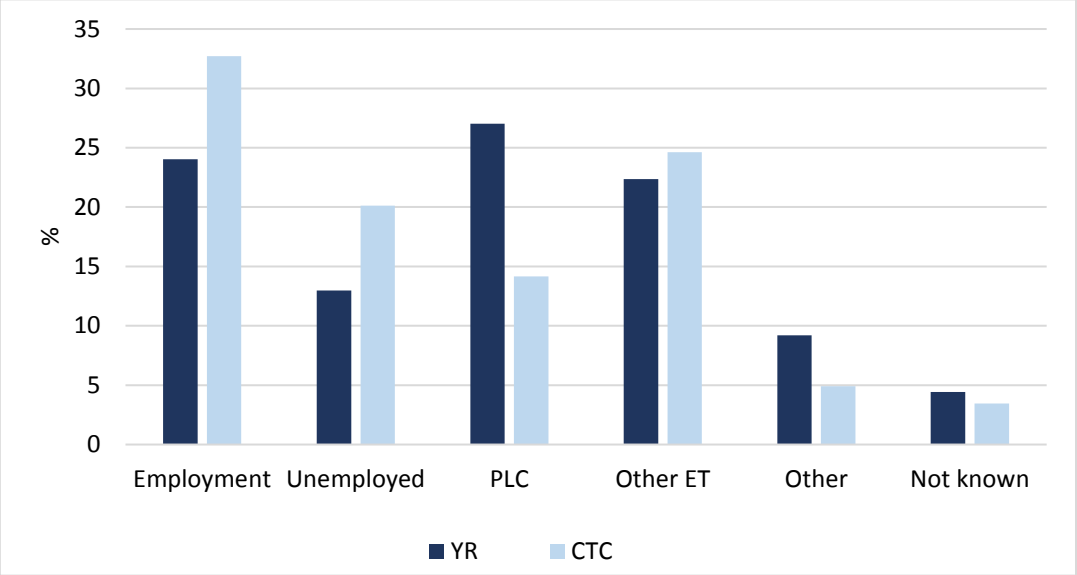


Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

Findings from the survey of Youthreach co-ordinators and CTC managers show, however, that progression pathways varied significantly across centres. There are significant differences between Youthreach centres and CTCs, with those completing in CTCs much more likely to enter the labour market and less likely to go on to a PLC course than those leaving Youthreach settings (Figure 8.3). Among Youthreach centres, there are differences by size in learner outcomes, with larger centres having lower rates of progression to education/training (45 per cent compared with 57 per cent in small centres and 50 per cent in medium centres) and higher rates of unemployment (22 per cent compared with 8 per cent in small centres and 12 per cent in medium centres). There is some variation across ETB areas in rates of education/training progression and unemployment. Centres with a higher representation of Traveller youth tend to have higher rates of unemployment among leavers, which is likely to reflect the low employment rates among the Traveller population as a whole (Watson, 2017).

Centres with a higher rate of full awards (overall or among completers) have a significantly higher rate of progression to education/training (with a correlation of 0.2-0.3). Unemployment rates are also lower in centres where a greater proportion of completers obtain full awards. Progression to education/training was significantly higher in the centres that provided personal counselling for learners.

FIGURE 8.3 POST-PROGRAMME OUTCOMES AMONG LEARNERS COMPLETING THE PROGRAMME BY TYPE OF CENTRE



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

Information on non-completers from the survey of co-ordinators/managers can be used to look at outcomes for all young people leaving the programme.[13] This information is at a lower level of detail, allowing us to distinguish between progression into education/training, employment and other outcomes. On this basis, 38 per cent of all those leaving the programme progress to other education/training, 27 per cent obtain employment while 35 per cent have 'other' outcomes (including unemployment, inactivity and unknown status). These figures, in comparison with those in Figure 8.2, reflect poorer outcomes among those who do not complete the programme. Nonetheless, a significant minority – a quarter – of non-completers leave to take another education/ training course.

The Youthreach and CTC case studies highlighted poor progression to further education, training or employment for some groups of learners, particularly those with a Traveller background. One co-ordinator appeared to report relatively poor levels of progression to other education/training (except apprenticeship) with more going into the labour market or, in the case of Travellers, unemployment:

> *We have a huge Traveller contingent and they don't go to college and they don't seek employment. There's a couple of our learners here who want to work, who are mad to work, some of the Traveller lads. The girls are still in that mode of, 'I want to get married, I want to have*

[13] The FARR database also collects information on learner outcomes, but it is not possible to distinguish progression within the same Youthreach or Community Training Centre from progression to other education/training providers so this section relies on survey data.

kids. And that's it, I don't want to go to [go to] college. (Moy, co-ordinator/manager)

Some Youthreach staff raised concerns about the lack of continuity in supports for the learners when they enter a new educational setting. This often led to learners dropping out. In some centres, staff tried to maintain support over the transition:

We give them huge support here and then they might go to like a PLC and you're like yeah you're on your own and you have to do this. We don't just cut them [off]. In fact we kind of wean them off and we're a very open house for coming back and it's great because they're coming back with college projects, they're coming back with other projects, they're coming back with CVs for photocopying. Keep coming back to us, that's what we're there for. We've never cut them loose. (Suir, staff)

In most centres, learners kept contact with centre staff to either say hello or ask for help with CVs or college coursework:

Good, bad or indifferent they come back and they check in and they tell you look what I'm doing now or I'm doing a course now. (Suir, staff)

They always come back. They come back in, like, they come in and chat with us or if they need help with a CV or they might be gone three years. (Suir, staff)

One of the co-ordinators interviewed was conscious of the need for learners to progress and move on, although he acknowledged that some of the learners are nervous about leaving the 'safe' Youthreach setting:

People [are] almost self-sabotaging the end of year because they want to come back for another year…I think they feel safe here, they feel listened to, and yet, we - they need to progress, they need to progress, like, we don't want to be a holding centre. (Bann, co-ordinator)

8.3.3 Transition supports

Another staff member raised the issue of supports for learners when they move into further education. Instead of approaching the learners, the learners need to seek them out which can be a barrier:

We have had a few young people in the past who have dropped out of further education because of the lack of support or the perceived lack

> *of support. Because even though we have gone through it with them, what the supports are in the college for them beforehand, I think because the supports don't approach you as much in further education as we do here - we approach them a lot of the time, starting off – that they see them at a distance and don't access them properly. (Bann, staff)*

The co-ordinator saw the transition to VTOS courses as easier, as a lot of the same supports followed young people (they could continue to access the same counsellor), but doing a PLC in this particular locality generally involved moving out of the local area.

One advocate interviewed felt that for the learners in the centre, there is a 'big jump' to be able to engage with Level 5 qualifications elsewhere:

> *I would probably get about between 14 and 16 people apply for college every year. Probably about three to four go. (Shannon, staff)*

This centre also kept regular contact with learners when they left, for two to three years in some cases:

> *We kind of like to keep in contact with them because it's not just as simple as when they finish they're just going to get a job. There's a lot of minding in the process, do you know, for the first year and a half afterwards, so there's a lot of contact. (Shannon, staff)*

However, there are clear challenges around the transition given the supports received by the learners while in Youthreach:

> *It can cause difficulties as well when they move out of this environment and they go on to the likes of [name of college of FE] where they don't get that kind of one-to-one assistance that they need. Sometimes it can be a bit of hindrance. (Shannon, Staff)*

One centre used their guidance advocate as a way to bridge the gap between Youthreach, employment and further education. The co-ordinator described the guidance advocate's links as having a positive impact on the expectations of the learners:

> *She [guidance advocate] has good links with the colleges around [local area names]. She's good links and contacts there. So we can get the students into college or into the training centres. And when the students hear that there's a progression, you will go to college, you will do this if you want to do that or into employment, suddenly then*

there's a whole huge emphasis, 'Jeez, I can do this'. (Erne, co-ordinator/manager)

For those centres with supports like a guidance advocate, the staff were concerned about the progression of the learners when they left Youthreach:

There isn't a direct follow-on from here, that maybe we - there is an over support I suppose or maybe that we maybe were not good at kind of preparing them for going out into the world. (Moy, staff)

This issue of drop-out from further education was also mentioned by the co-ordinator:

We're trying to actually set up some sort of more support, I suppose, for our learners because they tend to go and maybe do six months and then they're gone. (Moy, co-ordinator/manager)

Financial issues are also seen as a barrier to progression for some learners:

When they are used to the money here and then you are asking them to go to college and pay admission fees and pay for books and pay for everything that they have never had to put their - that is a huge stumbling block for us. (Suir, staff)

In another centre, the staff reported some progression to third-level education among the LCE cohort but described how young people find the transition quite difficult as they lack support from home:

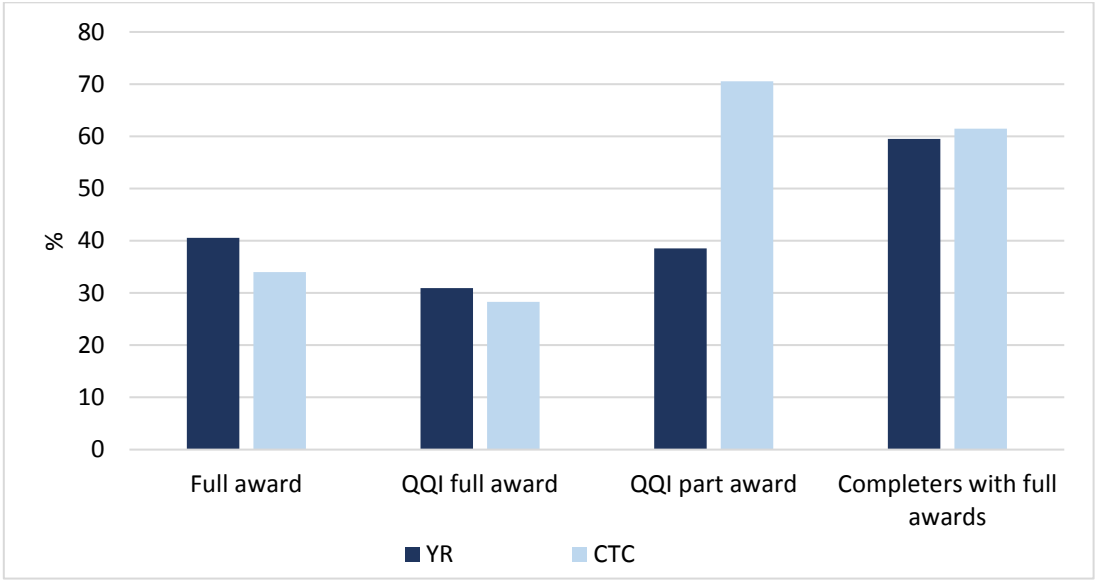
There is a certain level of progression but sometimes you're kind of limited because when they go from here they're back into their, sort of, home background again. (Boyne, staff)

8.4 CERTIFICATION

The SOLAS FARR administrative database records certification among those leaving the Youthreach programme. In 2017, these data indicate certification rates of 42 per cent for all leaving the programme, with rates of 48 per cent among those completing the programme. In the survey, co-ordinators/managers were asked for a more detailed breakdown of the number and type of certified awards among learners in their centre in 2017. Because information is not available from the survey on individual learners and when they started and finished in the centre, the number of awards are compared to the number of learners at the time of the survey. An estimated 34-40 per cent of learners received a full award of any type, while 60-61 per cent of those completing the programme received a full award. A

third of learners (31-34 per cent) received a QQI full award. Certification rates were broadly similar between Youthreach and Community Training Centres, except in the case of QQI part awards where CTC learners were more likely to receive such awards (71 per cent compared with 39 per cent).

FIGURE 8.4 RATES OF CERTIFICATION ACROSS YOUTHREACH AND COMMUNITY TRAINING CENTRES



Source: ESRI survey of Youthreach Co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers.

There were marked differences in certification rates by size for Youthreach centres, with larger centres having lower rates across all categories. Among completers, 74 per cent of those in small centres received full awards compared with 59 per cent in medium centres and 29 per cent in large centres. There was little systematic variation in certification rates by learner profile, although centres with a higher proportion of learners with EPMH difficulties tend to have a higher rate of full awards. However, there were marked differences by ETB area in the proportion receiving full awards.

8.5 BALANCING QUANTITATIVE AND QUALITATIVE OUTCOMES

Some centres appeared to emphasise the development of soft skills as the primary goal of Youthreach, with many stressing that this was essential if engagement in learning was to ever take place:

> *I think it 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. (Moy, co-ordinator/ manager)*

The programme was seen as providing young people with the necessary supports, especially around soft skills development:

> *When you wonder sometimes during the year: is it worth it? Well, at the end of it when you see how they value it…It's the soft skills. It's building on those which are really hard to measure. But sometimes for learners… it mightn't be the academics; it might simply be that they are able to be with other people and communicate and you know kind of socialise with their peer group, you know? Which is something they may not have been able to do before. (Moy, staff)*

Some staff argued that Youthreach was not just about training and accreditation but that it offered a safe space for vulnerable young people:

> *It's not just all about the training, do you know what I mean? It's - sometimes it's just a place for these guys to go, you know. We've had situations where a young lad's been kicked out, we've had to get them emergency accommodation. I've had - it's all about the, you know, the human touch really. (Liffey, staff)*

Some of the outcomes may appear small and subtle whereas others are more tangible such as progression to further education or employment:

> *It's really different and it depends very much on where they are when they present. For one of our students who has really low literacy to see her being able to write in her folder, to be able to read something that you've handed her is amazing. That is such a sense of achievement. That doesn't appear on your database in outputs, you know. For other students who come in and they're quite motivated and they're quite – well, complete the Level 4. That's what I'd expect and to move on to either education or training or into employment, that's a successful outcome. (Foyle, staff)*

Many of those interviewed felt that a balance has to be struck between quantitative and qualitative outcomes in the Youthreach programme:

> *Certification is important and it is something that we have to – obviously you know we have to do and should be doing. But I wouldn't let it stand in the way of the trainees' kind of enjoying their course here it has to be kind of a balance on that sort of thing. … I would like to be able to I suppose more of these – do more of the kind of life and social skills, more of the softer stuff with the trainees. (Shannon, staff)*

Some co-ordinators/managers, however, were critical of what they saw as an over-emphasis on soft skills in some of the centres. One co-ordinator/manager argued for the need to hold high expectations for the learners:

> *There seems to be an over emphasis on soft skills and resistance towards encouraging young people to achieve certification and progress. … My experience of working with young people is they don't want to be defined by issues which bring them to Youthreach in the first instance. As professionals we need to raise our expectations of these students and let them know that we hold high expectations of them and we believe that they are capable of progression on to further education, training and/or employment.*

8.6 PERCEIVED IMPACT OF THE PROGRAMME

8.6.1 Life-changing impact

Many of the staff interviewed were reflective on the overall impact of Youthreach on learners during their time in the programme and after they leave. For some, they felt that Youthreach offered young people, who were in a spiral of negativity in second-level school, 'something different':

> *They're on a journey here and they've now got more choices at the end of ours, whereas they came in with a negative: 'Everything has gone so bad at school and all I've been told is I'm no good. When I'm at home I'm being beaten up or whatever and my brothers are in prison and I'm going to be a drug addict,' …We've shown them, cos we're good friends with them, they call us first names. We can have a laugh with them. And they've suddenly seen, you know, people aren't all bad. (Barrow, staff)*

Others stressed the impact of Youthreach on preventing young people with complex needs from taking other more risky paths in their young lives. Their engagement in education through Youthreach can break a cycle of disadvantage:

> *I think that's a real positive that they are being thought about and that there is something provided for them. Because, otherwise I don't know what type of stuff, where they would be or where they will end up, you know. And so it's just given them that opportunity to make something of themselves and not only for them, for their kids, for the next generation it could have a big impact. (Barrow, staff)*

Many of the learners interviewed also described the life-changing impact of coming to Youthreach. With such difficult experiences at school, many felt that they did not know what path they could have taken if it was not for the

programme:

> *It's definitely changed my life. I was going down a bad path in my first school I was in, my mainstream school. Just was - wasn't good. I was getting in trouble, do you know? I was arguing with people, but this changed my life completely, do you know? Without this, this is my second chance, do you know to go somewhere in life. (Barrow, learner)*

By attending Youthreach, some of the learners were able to realise that they could achieve something in the future:

> *When I came here, I think I do have a future. I can get this and achieve what I can be like. It made me more confident, I can do this like. So yeah, it did change me a lot. It changed my life. It really did. (Erne, learner)*

One staff member described one learner whose life changed completely as a result of coming to the centre:

> *You're going to speak to another guy in the day that when he came here first, he was such an agitated young lad. He came most of his life through care, you know what I mean…So, angry, agitated. You couldn't look sideways at him…But everybody deserves the chance. He just turned around, anything I ask him to do he'll do it for me, do you know what I mean. (Liffey, staff)*

Other staff described the transformation of some learners when they begin to achieve academically in Youthreach. Instead of rejecting education, they see signs of progress and begin to engage, often for the very first time:

> *They come in here aggressive and, like, pissed off with the system and then by the time they come out of here they want to help the system… (Foyle, staff)*

They described how getting QQI qualifications was the learner's opportunity to show others that they have succeeded:

> *For the first time in my life I'm 18, I have to say nobody can turn around and go, 'You're a drop-out and you didn't get your Leaving Cert.' You can actually turn around and say, 'No, I left school, I came here and I chose to succeed' 'and I've succeeded,' so it's something to show instead of being this negative thing of, you know, you're a drop-out. (Foyle, staff)*

One co-ordinator/manager described how a particular learner was the first to learn to write in her family but was doing so well now that she was completing a Level 4 module:

> *One of the students who you'll speak to later today there's no literacy within the family. She is probably the first who can read and write she couldn't when she came here … so the fact that she's now going home and helping her grandparents read letters to come to the house and stuff like that, you know, it's amazing. But how do you measure that, you know. (Foyle, staff)*

Another co-ordinator described the impact of the programme on the learners and their families. He acknowledged that this might be a new positive experience for them:

> *We have a graduation in May and they see … these kids getting the results and getting the awards and … just the sense of achievement, the smiles. Their parents are coming with them to receive the awards and kind of it might be the first time anyone in their family got an award like this. (Erne, staff)*

8.6.2 Gaining skills and qualifications

Learners spoke about how joining the centre opened up their opportunities to gain qualifications. One learner credited Youthreach with encouraging her to get qualifications after leaving school:

> *I wouldn't have got my Level Threes be done or to pass all the –what do you call it? QQI Level Three. And yeah, passed that the other day so. (Moy, learner)*

Youthreach was the reason for another learner (past participant) getting their qualifications and eventually getting employment:

> *Yeah, I got my Level 3 and Level 4, I got the Level 4 component certificate because I had to go out and find a job. So - but, other than that, I would have got the Level 4, but like I - I got all my exams and everything done, which I wouldn't have had the chance to do if I didn't get in here. (Moy, past participant)*

Other learners described the practical skills they had learned in Youthreach:

> *Like I learnt more and like I builded stuff you know in Woodwork and I'm coming on good my Maths and do you know just stuff like that. (Moy, learner)*

> *I didn't know nothing about cars before coming in here. And I can tell you what everything - basically everything is in the car room, where it goes and so that's good (Liffey, learner)*

For others, attending Youthreach had given them the opportunity to learn to read and write. One learner described her numeracy and literacy difficulties prior to attending Youthreach:

> *I always used to get in trouble and that. And, like, before I came here to be honest I didn't know to read or spell, then when I came here I just, my life changed. I learnt how to read properly, learnt how to do spellings and … I learnt how to do ABC, you know. (Foyle, learner)*

With many of the learners having had negative experiences of school and difficulties with their schoolwork, one co-ordinator/manager described how 'patience and encouragement' are required to boost the learners' confidence and allow them to see how much they can do:

> *Many who come through the doors are disheartened when it comes to education and feel despondent in a 'I can't do this' kind of way. However, with patience and encouragement and sometimes a few hard conversations they realise that they can do, and do. They learn to be proud of themselves – showing work off that they have completed, drawings, writing, talking about stuff like 'I could never understand algebra before but now I really get it and love Maths'. So much of this kind of thing makes us know that YR works for our students. (Co-ordinator/manager, survey response)*

Receiving a payment in Youthreach had helped some of the learners manage money for the first time. One learner spoke about this as a learning curve:

> *It also taught me how to handle money very early…Like at least now I can say, 'I know what it's… what I'm like with money,' I actually have to go and be reasonable with it. (Barrow, learner)*

8.6.3 Developing drive and ambition

The interviews with learners highlighted how the level of support and guidance received allowed them to think about their futures for the first time. In many cases, this support involved practical advice about what they could do after they left the programme. One learner felt that Youthreach was influential in her decision to go to college:

> *Youthreach, like, made me want to go to college, you know, like, cos I went to an open day and I seen the, you know, principal of the college and she was saying that it was just like Youthreach, you know, their modules are, like, the same modules in here. (Foyle, learner)*

Another learner spoke about Youthreach as helping him to think about future options:

> *Here they'd really just open up my eyes I guess and like within like the first few months I could easily tell what courses I kind of was aiming for. So, like it was nice… yeah, it was nice to kind of finally understand what my options were I guess. (Barrow, learner)*

Some credited Youthreach with allowing them to become aware of available options:

> *Before I went to the Youthreach, like, I had no ambition to go to college, like, or do anything like that, or education, like, do you know I had a lot of trouble doing that. Then when I came back in here, it was more like: 'You can do all these', like, do you know, 'You have these options for you'. And then this, kind of, makes you more interested in it, do you know? (Bann, learner)*

> *Like thinking of what I want to do in the future that helped me as well because when I was… before I went here I didn't know what I wanted to do, what I wanted to be, where I wanted to go. So, [name of centre] Youthreach has helped me a lot with that. I'm delighted I came here instead of staying in school. (Moy, learner)*

Advocates and guidance counsellors were seen as instrumental in encouraging learners to apply for courses:

> *If I didn't come here I don't think, I would be too lazy and I wouldn't have applied for college, but like [name of advocate] like, she pushed you like, if you say you want to do something she would help you and actually deal with it. (Shannon, learner)*

8.6.4 Building confidence

For other learners, Youthreach had dramatically changed their confidence and overall attitude to education. Many of those interviewed described themselves as 'shy', 'quiet' and not very 'outgoing or social' prior to joining the programme. For them the programme had brought them out of their shell:

I was really shy at first but not anymore. I think they're sick of me now I think. (Moy, learner)

Like when I started I was very shy but compared to now I like broke out as well, like you know have a bit of craic and I like to speak in front of people. (Moy, learner)

I used to be very like insecure and like to myself, you know? But since I've come here I've opened up a lot. (Barrow, learner)

When I came here, it brought me more out of my shell. Like, I started doing a lot more; I started talking to other people. Like, I was so shy in school; I wouldn't even talk to someone, like, if this was me in school coming to talk to you, I'd be like, 'Oh, okay'. But now, like, they've brought up my confidence so much. (Bann, learner)

For many learners, even attending an interview like the one conducted for the study would have caused them anxiety in the past, but now they were comfortable and more confident:

I was just saying like I was… normally like I'd be nervous or everything but now like it changed me. It gave me more confidence to talk to people or whatever. Make new friends and everything like that. (Moy, learner)

One past participant felt that Youthreach had improved their confidence as a learner and in how they communicated with others:

Before I wouldn't talk to anyone at lunch time or anything but after about two or three months I slowly came out of my shell and now I'm talking to random strangers about random things on the bus, which was never me before. (Suir, past participant)

Some learners described the social and communication skills they had gained from attending the programme:

It's made me more confident in communicating with everybody else like. You know, looking people in the eye, going out talking to people, asking them how their day was, being interested in what they're doing. It just gave me the overall confidence to be in a better place. (Moy, past participant)

8.6.5 Maturing and improving behaviour

Many of the learners interviewed described how they 'matured', 'copped on' and become more 'responsible' since starting in Youthreach. Many of their reflections are compared with how they used to be or how they behaved while they were in second-level education:

> *I was actually really wild, you know. But when I came to Youthreach, like, the first year of Youthreach I was still wild and then I just changed, like, anyone can tell you, like, I just matured. I wouldn't go into college and I'm starting college on the 12th of September then. (Foyle, learner)*

> *It made me mature, like, a lot, like, I was real angry and all…Now I can just keep it cool and just, you know I'm an adult now. (Foyle, learner)*

> *Before I came in here …I had no respect, no manners, no nothing, but what these have done for me now is just brilliant. They've taught me what's right and what's wrong in a sense. (Foyle, learner)*

One learner explained that she has matured since being in Youthreach:

> *Youthreach has just kind of taught me like kind of matured a bit more and like you know, now I'm feeling more secure. (Barrow, learner)*

Learners recognised what was making them mature in this way and appreciated the level of supports they were receiving:

> *Basically everything we do has steps and all the mentors are helping us take those steps. And the more steps you take, well the further in life you're going to get at an earlier age. I mean, I feel like I've matured maybe ten years since I've been here, you know? It's amazing. (Bann, learner)*

One past participant felt that Youthreach had given him time and space to 'calm down' when he was younger. He thinks that all the opportunities are there for young people:

> *Yeah, I think like even the teachers for the first few months I was probably still a bit of a mess here. It just - eventually I did calm down. I'm sure if you talk to them, like, 'He was a bit giddy and stuff like.' But eventually I calmed down and just - I don't know I just transitioned into being a bit more calm and focused on what I wanted to do. (Barrow, past participant)*

For many learners, the biggest difference, and in many cases relief, was that they had stopped getting into trouble since they started in Youthreach. One learner suggested that Youthreach has matured him during his time in the programme:

> *I was kind of being messing and stuff like that, but then I was in the office a few times as well but then I copped on after that and ever since I haven't been in the office since. Like do you know what I mean? I wasn't in trouble since then. (Moy, learner)*

Others described the biggest difference to them in attending Youthreach was that they were:

> *Just not getting in as much trouble as you would in secondary and this was something they were relieved about. (Suir, learner)*

Having had difficulties in school regarding behaviour and attendance, one past participant reported that these problems did not arise during his time on the programme:

> *I've never been suspended here. I've never been sent home from here. I haven't, no. If anything this place actually helped me get on the road yeah. (Boyne, past participant)*

For other learners who had spent some time out of school, attending Youthreach meant they were less likely to get into trouble with the police or simply hanging around. Several young people felt that they would be doing 'nothing' if they had not taken part:

> *It's matured me more than what I was before I came here… I say I would've still been hanging around on the road and all, on the street. (Foyle, learner)*

> *Because I would have been sitting around doing nothing and probably getting into trouble, so coming up here was keeping me out of trouble as well like. Because before here I was getting in trouble with the police. Then up here was keeping me out of trouble for a while with the police, as well…Because I wasn't sitting around doing nothing all day. I had something to do. (Shannon, past participant)*

8.6.6 Improving learners' mental health

As described in Chapter 4, many of the learners attending Youthreach have experienced multiple disadvantages in their lives in addition to negative experiences in education. The increase in the prevalence of EPMH among this

group is also documented in Chapter 4 and highlights the need to facilitate Youthreach centres to actively respond to new and emerging issues among the profile of participants. One learner spoke about the support she received from staff in the centre during a difficult period:

> *Around August time like, my Auntie passed away. I didn't really understand what to do, sort of thing, and they showed me how to like go through grief, and how to cope with it, sort of thing. I feel like if I wasn't going here I'd just be in bed sort of depressed. So, I'm glad I'm coming here and socialising. (Shannon, learner)*

One past participant reflected how the centre had helped him through an extremely difficult time in his life and appears to still be a source of support for him:

> *Because of what happened, me, I was actually to be honest I was suffering with depression so they all helped me through everything. And they just built me back up and now at the minute I am still suffering like but not as much because I know I can fall back and still ring them up but be like I need to talk to someone. (Moy, past participant)*

Other learners, particularly those who had been bullied in second-level school, spoke about the improvements to their mental health as a result of coming to Youthreach:

> *It's made me not be ashamed of who I am and I get to be who I want to be and … my mental health has gone way better since I came here. (Erne, learner)*

Another past participant reflected on the contrast between the time he joined Youthreach when he was in such a vulnerable state of mental health to one where he could participate and get an education:

> *This place offered me a bridge, a bridge between, I suppose, abnormality being when your mental health begins to affect how you function every day, i.e. I'm going sleeping during the day; I'm not eating properly; not going to school and not socialising. The bridge from that back to, kind of, integrating me socially but also educationally. (Bann, past participant)*

He attributes much of his personal and academic success to his time in Youthreach which helped him overcome his mental health issues:

> *The void for me was the interpersonal within – intrapersonal within myself - within others, but within myself. And this was the foundation*

for that. If I didn't come to this place, I don't know where I'd be because I might still be in bed, you know? Who knows what I might be doing? (Bann, past participant)

Another learner talked about staying in her room for months after she left school early but that changed as time went on:

I was, kind of, shy and wouldn't talk to no-one at first. But, like, then couple of months passed and, like, I started talking to more people and, coming out of my room more and in a better mood, like, and stuff like that. And do more exercise and stuff. (Bann, learner)

Another learner had just 'come out' when she started in Youthreach and found that the counselling supports helped her through this difficult time in her life:

God when I first came in here I was completely different like. I was only after literally coming out as well like so I was kind of all over the place. But they help you grow as a person and figure yourself out like as well, and they take time as well to listen to you. (Suir, learner)

In addition to the qualitative interviews, some of the co-ordinators/managers wrote additional material on their survey questionnaires to fully explain the breadth and depth of Youthreach and its impact on the learner. One co-ordinator/manager described what he and his staff do:

We develop coping skills; We build resilience and trust; We model good conflict management; We employ restoration practices; We provide boundaries and a safe environment; We give opportunities for young people to have fun and enjoy their adolescence; We promote positive energy and is a solution focused way of working; We encourage responsibility; We care for vulnerable people; We create a 'learner centred' culture; We develop empathy and a positive community viewpoint; We facilitate the transition of our learners from young people to adults; We empower young people to control their lives and seek help; We educate our learners for their future; We challenge our young people thus opening new pathways and opportunities; We engage with parents/guardians and support parents/guardians in dealing with their young person; We link young people to potential employers; We refer, mentor and advocate on behalf of young people; We create a sense of belonging; We facilitate and organise work experience opportunities; We educate the most vulnerable in our society in order that they may lead quality lives.

8.7 CURRENT AND POTENTIAL METRICS

8.7.1 Perceptions of SOLAS and the FARR system

In interviews with co-ordinators/managers, many expressed frustration at the current system of measurement which they feel only captures quantitative outcomes and does not take into account the distinct profile of Youthreach participants:

> *Everything's value for money. SOLAS are looking for inputs and outputs. All they're interested in is the who got what at the end of the year: who got the distinctions; who got the marks; who got the passes. And there's no thought put into the soft skills. There's no thought put into Mary spent two months in her bedroom before coming to Youthreach. But in the first year of Youthreach her attendance was 75 per cent. There's no measure – there's no measure for that. (Barrow, co-ordinator/manager)*

Although co-ordinators/managers appreciated the need to have a system of measurement, they argued that given the profile of Youthreach learners quantitative outcomes should not be the primary goal or outcome:

> *The whole, kind of, metrics is fine. I can understand that's important but in terms of defining that's the only sole outcome is, kind of, well, I suppose, mismatched between the ability of the young person coming in and their ability to actually function. (Liffey, co-ordinator/ manager)*

SOLAS metrics are not seen as capturing the complexity of need among individual young people:

> *Since SOLAS emerged, the emphasis is on progression retention certification. The reporting systems don't always capture the narrative or the situation behind the individuals… because there's a reason young people are in Youthreach. (Bann, staff)*

One centre manager felt there was a disconnect between SOLAS and the profile of learners in the centre, many of whom have a Junior Certificate but have low levels of numeracy and literacy. This, he argues, is not taken into account in any outcome measures required by SOLAS:

> *Most of our kids who take the test are in the bottom 20 per cent of test takers, right. They're really poor. But, no, there's no account given of that. (Liffey, co-ordinator/manager)*

One staff member described how they are currently judged on placement, throughput and certification in Youthreach. He felt, however, that other, more difficult to measure outcomes are being overlooked:

> *There's no criteria there from SOLAS saying, you know, well as an individual how did they develop, or as an individual are they more stable or are they still suicidal? There's nothing like that. (Shannon, staff)*

One co-ordinator/manager spoke about using the FARR system to measure the outcomes of the learners at the centre. She was frustrated that the soft skills could not be measured:

> *The FARR system works really well if you're in PLC when 25 students start a catering course in September and 24 finish in June with the qualification and one dropped out and moved away or whatever. It works perfectly. We have continuous intake*[14] *all year around. Some of our students are coming in to us with mental health issues, with really low literacy. To them - a success to me is very often the day they come into the office and can look you in the eye and ask you a question instead of shouting or screaming or walking out the door. That's your outcome. So FARR doesn't capture any of that. (Foyle, co-ordinator/manager)*

8.7.2 Difficulties in capturing soft skills

The staff acknowledged, however, that measuring soft skills is difficult, particularly when the idea of success can be different among learners. However such skills, including communication skills, organisational skills, pro-social behaviour and self-regulation, are crucial in progressing to employment. In the survey questions, some co-ordinators/managers described how success in Youthreach is measured on an individual basis:

> *Our measurement of success is on an individual basis. For some participants, it is the first positive experience of a learning situation they will have had. Many come to us feeling excluded from the education system and with no sense of where they might go in the future. If the participant leaves the programme with a better sense of him/herself and a better belief in their ability to cope with the many difficulties they face, although it is hard to measure and quantify, we consider this to be success. On the other hand some young people gain certification and go on to get jobs and have a more positive life experience as a result of being on the programme. Youthreach must*

[14] This makes the Youthreach programme quite different from other FET courses and is seen by co-ordinators/ managers as giving rise to challenges in planning teaching and learning.

be able to contain both sides of this spectrum. (Co-ordinator/ manager)

The effects of Youthreach are seen as subtle and not always detectable, even by the staff themselves:

We always hear it from the JLO's, the guards, they say, 'Jesus, whatever you're doing up there with Johnny is great. He's not getting in trouble.' We're like, 'We haven't done anything.' you know, and that's what we feel sometimes. But we don't see the ripple effect. We would see - again, parents saying to us, 'God, whatever -' you know, 'He's actually - he did the dishes last night.' You know, and all that. 'Oh, right. That's normal.' 'No, no, he never does the dishes. What did you say to him?' you know. So, those soft skills, they're very hard to capture…it's very hard to quantify it. (Bann, co-ordinator/ manager)

One of the staff described the difficulty in measuring some of the soft skills learned in Youthreach:

Life skills. That's never been measured, I don't think. I don't think it's, I don't know how measurable this is, because they don't know it. I mean nobody can go, 'Oh, I think I'm 40 per cent less angry', do you know. (Erne, staff)

Some of the successes are subtle and there the staff feel they cannot 'tick a box' to capture them:

You can't tick a box and say, 'Well look, John is coming in and his hood is down,' you know? He would have come in and his hood would be up and his head would be down and, like, you can't tick a box to say like John is coming in every day and his hood is down. But that is huge. (Suir, staff)

Learning the ability to interact was also raised by staff members in other centres:

One of the big things I would say, with them, is that they have advanced so much socially. Like, there is one guy, there is no way he would look at you when you're talking to him. Now, you can have a conversation with him, whereas you couldn't do that before. (Boyne, staff)

For others, progressing a learner to participate in work experience was often viewed as a signal of success:

That's a massive achievement, you know, for a young person to have completed his work experience, who would never work, wouldn't leave the room at home, you know, things like that. So, it's recording that, there's definitely a gap in that. (Bann, staff)

8.7.3 Ways of measuring soft skills

Difficulties in measuring soft skills prompted one co-ordinator/manager to develop a soft skills measurement tool, which measures six subjective areas including confidence, responsibility and power. Students are assessed and graded on a variety of soft skills measures three times a year so that the centre can monitor their progress:

It's, like, if I dropped a student off, say, would they be able to find their way home? Would they have the power to be able to ask for help? You know, those kind of things. So, it's where we think they are. (Suir, co-ordinator/manager)

Staff working in this centre appreciated the use of this tool in measuring the progress or 'distance travelled' by the learner:

It just gives us a format to talk about what they were like when they first came in here to where they are now. (Suir, staff)

As a SENI centre, the WebWheel mentor system is also used to gather this information and identify where supports were needed for the learners:

We have contact time … that's a great way of capturing their soft skills, some of their achievements and their goals. They review their own attendance, and their own behaviour, their own, you know, support needed. (Bann, co-ordinator)

Importantly, this information can be given to the learner to highlight progress other than certification:

It's based really on positives: what their positive qualities were that month; the skills that we saw them developing; areas academically that we feel they developed in…We have a soft skill chart that we tick off and we monitor their soft skills and show them how they - that has improved. (Bann, staff)

In other centres where soft skills measurement tools like WebWheel were not in use, the staff emphasised the need for a psychometric measure which could monitor soft skills development among learners over time:

> *So what I would say is, or suggest, is that there should be some sort of data collected when a learner starts in a centre, very child friendly, adult or young adult friendly questionnaires or psych measures, whatever you want, on the day of entry, and then on the day of leaving. You know, fill out the same things and it goes into a database. (Shannon, staff)*

Others felt that if these kinds of measurement tools had been used early on in the learners' school career that some of the issues could be identified and addressed at an earlier stage:

> *If you were to track this through school; like, say, maybe an engagement, a measure of learner engagement with learning, then these type of clients you'd see, like, whack, they'd be declining at that point. There would be… a flag raised. But there's no passport for that, it's not been done. (Liffey, co-ordinator/manager)*

8.7.4 Delayed impact of Youthreach?

In discussing the use of soft skills metrics, some of those interviewed described how the impact of Youthreach may not be 'felt' or 'experienced' for some years after the learner has left the centre. This, according to some co-ordinators/ managers, makes the outcomes of the Youthreach programme extremely hard to measure:

> *It could be five years down the line that they say, 'I remember that and I'm going to, you know, go after that,' or, you know, look after myself better or whatever it is. (Barrow, staff)*

Other staff also described the delayed benefits of going to Youthreach which may not be evident until years after learners have left:

> *Sometimes what they've learned here doesn't hit them until a few years later. It's not the - I mean, I suppose the idea is that they get work as soon as they finish here, it doesn't always happen. And it does for some of them. I think it's life skills rather than using their email if you know what I… It's little life skills that they – they don't even notice is happening but they're more able to get up and get in and relate to people. (Liffey, staff)*

8.8 SUMMARY

The chapter examined the issue of measuring outcomes in the Youthreach programme. It firstly examines rates of attendance in Youthreach and highlights the problems of attendance among Youthreach learners, with the average rate of

non-attendance at 54 per cent, although this varied by centre and was lower in SENI centres. Given the profile of Youthreach learners (see Chapter 4), the case studies highlight how poor attendance is somewhat expected, with many staff seeking to understand the reasons behind non-attendance. Many of those interviewed spoke about measures that they use to manage attendance in their centres. Some staff adopt a reduced week or timetable for learners which they gradually build up over time. Other centres have strict rules around attendance with learners required to text or phone and in some cases parents are contacted where a persistent issue exists. Staff also raised the issue of low attendance during the summer, Easter and Christmas holidays when schools were on holidays and Youthreach learners are required to attend.

SOLAS figures indicate non-completion rates of 14 per cent for 2017. The rate of non-completion reported by co-ordinators/managers is higher, most likely reflecting their view of the programme as encompassing two years with a progression across qualification levels. The survey data therefore indicated an average of 31 per cent of learners leaving before completion although, again, this varied across centres. The findings show, however, that almost 40 per cent of those who leave before completion have entered the labour market or another course. Larger centres have higher rates of non-completion. Poor progression to employment and further education and training was also raised during the case studies, with many of those interviewed dissatisfied with the level of supports available to Youthreach learners when they leave the programme. Some of the centres kept close contact with learners for years after they left the programme; such contact was mostly informal but in some cases learners sought assistance with CVs or career advice.

The survey findings show that 34-40 per cent of learners received a full award of any type while 60-61 per cent of those completing the programme received a full award. Certification rates varied by centre, with those in larger Youthreach centres less likely to receive full awards than those in small or average Youthreach centres. The findings did not show much variation by the profile of learners. However, those with higher levels of EPMH were more likely to have a higher rate of full awards.

Focussing on where Youthreach learners progress to, the findings highlight how 45 per cent of completers go on to further education and a similar number progress to the labour market. Taking the group of leavers as a whole (both completers and non-completers), 38 per cent progress to education/training and 27 per cent to employment. The rate of unemployment among Youthreach completers compares favourably with the unemployment levels of early school leavers more generally. There were some differences between Youthreach and CTCs in learner progression, with CTC learners more likely to enter the labour market and Youthreach learners more likely to progress to further education. Centre size also

appears to impact on learner outcomes, with learners in larger centres having lower levels of progression to further education and higher rates of unemployment compared to medium and small centres. There is evidence that accreditation acquired during the programme enhances learner outcomes. There is a higher rate of progression to further education and training in centres with high rates of full awards. Furthermore, unemployment rates are lower in these centres. Interestingly, progression to further education and training was higher where centres provided learners with counselling, indicating the importance of socio-emotional supports in securing positive outcomes for young people.

A key aspect of the qualitative interviews with Youthreach staff was to understand what they perceive to be the impact of the programme on young people. In many centres, co-ordinators/managers and staff described the life-changing impact of the programme on some learners. In particular, Youthreach was seen as showing learners 'another way' where they can engage and take responsibility for their education, and learn to communicate better with their peers and the adults working in the centre. For other learners, Youthreach has allowed them to learn how to read and write and staff felt this would have an impact on some families for generations. Many of those interviewed spoke about the need to balance the quantitative and qualitative outcomes and some emphasised the frequent need to address social and personal issues among the learners before any kind of learning can take place. Staff described the importance of flexibility in dealing with learners with such varied ability levels.

The learners themselves highlighted the value of the programme in providing them with a positive experience of learning, in developing their social and personal skills, and in enhancing their confidence to progress to education, training and employment. In contrast to the accounts of mainstream second-level students (see, for example, Smyth et al., 2007), there was much greater consistency in learner accounts and a more positive view of their experiences. Similarly positive views of alternative education provision have been reported in international studies (see, for example, McCluskey et al., 2015; Smyth et al., 2014). These positive views are seen as reflecting not only the quality of provision and relationships with staff but also the stark contrast with young people's negative experience of mainstream schooling (McCluskey et al., 2015).

The case studies highlighted ongoing issues among Youthreach staff about how outcomes are best measured to reflect the progress of the learners in Youthreach settings. While the outcome measures used by SOLAS reflected the aims of the programme in terms of progression to education, training and employment, many were frustrated at their lack of ability to capture soft skills development among the learners. In particular, they argued that the current system of measurement does not take the distinct profile of Youthreach learners into account. Some described

the non-tangible and often subtle successes among the learners, many of whom have overcome mental health difficulties and have begun to engage in learning and actively participate in the programme. This section described how one co-ordinator in a SENI Youthreach centre developed a soft skills measurement tool to use alongside WebWheel. This tool is used by staff and learners to monitor social and personal progress over time to more accurately reflect the 'distance travelled' by that young person since beginning the programme. Finally, a number of interviews during the case studies described how the impact of the programme may not be 'felt' or evident until many years after they have left the programme.

CHAPTER 9

Conclusions and policy implications

9.1 INTRODUCTION

The Youthreach programme was introduced in 1989 to provide second-chance education for young people who had left mainstream second-level school before Leaving Certificate level. Since its inception, there have been significant changes in the number and profile of learners, in governance arrangements and in the kinds of qualifications offered. In 2017, 11,104 young people took part in the programme in the two settings in which it is offered, Youthreach Centres and Community Training Centres, with a total cost of €98.7 million (SOLAS, 2018). The complexity of need among Youthreach learners poses challenges in comparing them with a similar group in the general population. For this reason, a mixed methods approach is adopted in the study to provide a comprehensive analysis of the nature of existing provision, involving a survey of senior managers at ETB level, a survey of Youthreach co-ordinators and Community Training Centre managers, detailed case-studies of ten centres, and two consultative workshops with key stakeholders in the areas of education and social inclusion. A key aspect of the report is the emphasis on the learner voice, with over 100 interviews conducted with those currently or recently on the programme to elicit new information on their pathways into the programme and experiences within it. This chapter outlines the main findings of the study and discusses the implications of these findings for future policy development.

9.2 THE PROFILE OF LEARNERS

Recent years have seen a remarkable decline in the prevalence of early school leaving, to the point where Ireland has one of the highest school retention rates in Europe (DES, 2017). As a result of these trends, the early leaver group and hence Youthreach entrants have become more marginalised in profile over time. The programme is well targeted in terms of the educational qualifications possessed by young people on entry, with the vast majority having Junior Certificate qualifications at best. A striking finding related to the increased prevalence of mental health and emotional problems as well as learning difficulties among young people taking part in the programme. Many learners have experienced a range of additional challenges, including trauma (adverse childhood experiences), substance abuse on their own part or on the part of a family member, and involvement in anti-social behaviour or crime. Compared with the general population, there is an over-representation of young people living in jobless households and from Traveller backgrounds. This concentration of complex needs has significant implications for the kinds of supports required for learners and for the skills needed by staff to deal with mental health difficulties and challenging

behaviour. The study findings also point to considerable variation across centres in the profile of learners, with some settings catering for more complex needs and challenges than others, though with the same level of resourcing.

The study findings highlight the importance of informal networks – including parents/guardians, family members and peers – in young people becoming aware of, and accessing, Youthreach provision. This pattern means that some groups of young people (and those living in certain areas) may not access the programme because they do not have the social networks to mobilise, and is likely to explain the relative under-representation of migrant groups among learners. In contrast, school-based referrals, or referrals through other agencies, were evident for only a minority, despite the young profile of many learners. Learner accounts highlighted negative experience of mainstream education, in particular negative relationships with teachers and peers, as well as the role of learning and mental health difficulties, as key drivers of their transition to the programme. Many learners reported that, in response to their challenging behaviour, it was suggested that it would be better if they left school voluntarily rather than being expelled. The absence of systematic tracking of leavers meant that this group of young people was then reliant on informal networks to access Youthreach rather than being facilitated in making a smooth transition to another form of education/training.

9.3 GOVERNANCE STRUCTURES

The Youthreach programme is offered through two sets of centres with different governance structures. Although the study findings suggest a good deal of commonality in experience and challenges across the two settings, governance and funding arrangements have significant implications for practice.

Community Training Centres were set up by local community organisations to cater for early school leavers aged between 16 and 21 years. They have their own board of management, staffed by volunteers from the local community, but also report to the ETB Training Centre Manager. Funding is based on an annual submission to the ETB, with its level largely driven by legacy patterns, and staff are employees of the centre rather than the ETB. Learners must register with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) to establish their entitlement before joining the programme, and only those learners who satisfy the relevant means test can receive the training allowance.

Youthreach centres were set up by the then Department of Education and are now under the remit of SOLAS, but still subject to DES inspection as centres of education. Centres previously had their own boards of management but now these boards are sub-committees of the ETB boards, and line managers for centres can

be FET Directors or Adult Education Officers. Funding is based on an annual allocation proportionate to the number of learners, although the 20 centres taking part in SENI receive additional funding. Staff are employees of the ETB but, even within the same centre, may be on different contracts. There is a fast-track process for learners registering in Youthreach centres and all learners receive an allowance, with the amount varying by age.

Senior managers and centre co-ordinators/managers point to a number of advantages of current governance structures. In particular, they highlight a consistent approach nationally, coupled with flexibility at local level to respond to learner needs. In addition, transparency in guidelines and accountability are seen as important features of current arrangements. However, co-ordinators/ managers also pointed to potential tensions in delivering the programme within current structures. While a national programme, ETBs appear to differ significantly in relation to key aspects of Youthreach delivery, including the provision of additional funding for specific activities, the quality of premises provided to centres, and the kinds of courses that centres are permitted to offer. As well as differing in approaches to delivery, the distribution of places is highly variable across ETB areas and does not reflect the current concentration of the early leaver population. The amount of contact between ETBs and centres also differs across ETBs and, within ETBs, across centres. CTC managers point to an additional ambiguity in governance for their centres, with several pointing to a marginalisation of the input of board members given ETB requirements and control over funding.

The co-ordinator/manager is the linchpin in terms of day-to-day management of the centre, the provision of support for young people and liaison with external agencies and organisations. The study findings point to some differences between centres in the extent of collaboration and exchange of practice among staff. The increased mental health difficulties among learners have implications for staff, with some centres availing of supervision and/or debriefing sessions but others having no such supports in place. Many senior managers and co-ordinators/managers point to the need for more CPD for staff in the area of psychological health and managing challenging behaviour.

A significant number of centres point to difficulties in recruiting and retaining staff. This issue is of particular concern given the relatively small staff numbers in centres and the need for continuity and highly skilled staff in providing supports for more vulnerable young people. Differential contracts in Youthreach centres mean that the summer programme is run by a reduced number of staff, making it difficult to offer classes and creating logistical constraints in terms of engaging in out-of-centre activities.

Youthreach co-ordinators report fairly frequent contact with other co-ordinators locally, though the level of contact varies across ETBs. The National Association of Youthreach Co-ordinators (NAYC) and the Irish Association of Community Training Organisations (IACOTO) enable interaction and exchange of practice for co-ordinators and managers respectively. However, there are few existing structures for exchange of practice between Youthreach centres and CTCs, though a network has been recently established in north inner city Dublin. Both co-ordinators and managers would like to see increased opportunity for the exchange of experience and practice.

9.4 PROGRAMME AIMS

Both senior managers and centre co-ordinators/managers see the Youthreach programme as having multiple aims, including re-engaging young people in learning, providing a positive learning experience, fostering the development of personal and social skills, the acquisition of qualifications, and progression to education, training and employment. Youthreach co-ordinators are more likely to emphasise the provision of a general education while CTC managers are more likely to stress the provision of more specific vocational skills and preparation for employment, though both adopt a holistic view of the programme aims. While current metrics capture the aims of the programme in terms of progression to education, training and employment, many co-ordinators and managers highlight the need to better capture soft skills (such as communication and organisational skills) and personal development on the part of learners, an issue that is discussed further below.

9.5 TEACHING, LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT

The majority of centres offer QQI Levels 3 and 4 qualifications, with a fifth offering QQI Level 2 courses or the Leaving Certificate Applied programme, and under a tenth providing the Junior Certificate or Leaving Certificate Established. Senior managers at ETB level indicate they have some input into what courses are provided but that the decision rests largely with the co-ordinator/manager. However, the type of qualifications offered, especially for the 'traditional' second-level courses, is found to vary across ETBs, with some co-ordinators/ managers reporting that they are not 'allowed' to offer LCA. Co-ordinators/ managers indicate that the main driver of course provision is learner need, with CTC managers indicating some role for labour market demand in their decision-making. At the same time, they report some constraints in course offerings, given the skill set of existing staff. Study findings indicate that centres do tailor provision to learner needs, with centres where a significant proportion of learners did not complete junior cycle more likely to offer Junior Certificate and QQI Levels 2 and 3 qualifications. Centres with a higher proportion of learners with mental health difficulties are also more likely to offer Level 2 qualifications, which co-ordinators/managers appear to use as a bridge to ease the transition back into

learning.

In addition to QQI- and SEC-accredited courses, the vast majority (89 per cent) of centres offer other courses and activities tailored to learner need, including sports and fitness, courses and talks to promote emotional wellbeing, courses and talks around drugs awareness, and practical skills such as driver theory and SafePass. Youthreach centres tend to offer more such courses and activities than Community Training Centres. Additional funding through SENI appears to facilitate much greater access to a variety of courses and activities for learners.

Centres use a variety of teaching methods in their day-to-day work, with little use of the more didactic approaches evident in mainstream second-level classrooms. The type of qualification offered does, in part, shape the nature of teaching and learning, with a greater use of whole-class teaching and less use of computers in centres offering 'traditional' second-level qualifications. Methods also reflect the concentration of need among learners, with centres with a high concentration of need using pair work, computers and project work more frequently.

The learners interviewed were very positive about their learning experiences in the programme, contrasting their experiences and progress in the centre with teaching and learning in mainstream second-level education. Learners emphasised the value of the small group settings in facilitating more individualised support, a pace of learning tailored to their own capacities and a focus on project or portfolio work rather than exams. Positive relationships with staff, that is the extent to which they were approachable, offered additional support and facilitated a caring and respectful climate, emerged as the cornerstone of a positive learning experience for young people.

Almost all centres used a combination of individual (one-to-one) and small group support from centre staff for young people with literacy and/or numeracy difficulties. In almost six-in-ten cases, centres drew on specialist support in the form of ETB literacy tutors or cooperation hours, with this approach much more common in CTC settings. Funding under SENI facilitated much greater provision of learning support, with almost three-quarters (74 per cent) of learners in SENI centres receiving support compared with 53 per cent of those in other Youthreach centres. This difference is only partly explained by the greater prevalence of learning difficulties in SENI centres. Almost half of Youthreach co-ordinators and over a third of CTC managers were not satisfied with the learning support they could offer, with, not surprisingly, SENI centres being much more satisfied with existing levels of provision.

9.6 OTHER SUPPORTS FOR LEARNERS

Centres provide a range of supports for learners, including work placement, career guidance, personal counselling as well as informal support from staff. The majority of centres offer personal counselling for young people, though the proportion receiving such supports is higher in Youthreach centres, in smaller centres, and, not surprisingly, in centres with a higher prevalence of EPMH. In many centres, some contact with the counsellor was scheduled for all learners, an approach which appeared to facilitate greater ongoing engagement with the service. However, co-ordinators/managers highlighted the scarcity of current provision, especially in the context of the very serious emotional and mental health problems manifest in the learner population, and the difficulty in securing referrals to specialist external services. Some centres are firmly embedded in local networks, with frequent contact with other organisations and agencies, facilitating access to a range of supports for their learners, including personal counselling, drugs awareness initiatives and additional literacy and numeracy supports. SENI funding appears to facilitate greater local engagement among centres.

Career guidance represents an important strand of centre provision, with guidance activities (such as CV preparation) offered in almost all centres and more specialist guidance supports available in 85 per cent of settings. Guidance is typically provided by the advocate, who works across a number of centres, though many centres also have a staff member designated to oversee work experience placements. A significant minority, one-in-six, of centres were dissatisfied with current guidance provision. Evidence from the case-study visits suggests that some centres appear to ensure that learners leave with a definite progression plan while this is not the case in other settings. Local contacts appear to play an important role in accessing work experience placements, which is found to be 'fairly difficult' in the majority of settings, and in facilitating progression to employment and education/training through, for example, a relationship with a local FE college. A lack of continuity of supports was seen as a potential barrier to progression, with some centres providing or wishing to provide 'taster' Level 5 courses to better facilitate the transition. Availability of other education/training provision locally also emerged as a potential barrier, with young people in some counties required to access a PLC course in a different town. Even in urban areas, more vulnerable young people were less likely to want to move out of their local comfort zone to access courses.

The most important support for learners was the quality of relationships with staff and other young people. Learners contrasted the support, care and respect they received from centre staff with the negative relations they had with their teachers in mainstream education. The small size of the group meant that staff could identify problems arising among the young people and intervene to discuss them at an early stage. Day-to-day contact and taking meals together provided an

opportunity to build up a relationship of trust between learners and staff. These relationships also served to enhance personal and social skills among learners. Staff often continued to provide support to learners who had completed the course.

9.7 LEARNER EXPERIENCES AND OUTCOMES

The study collected information on quantitative indicators of outcomes, including attendance, non-completion and progression, as well as qualitative assessments of learner development from the perspective of both staff and young people. Across centres, over half (54 per cent) of the learners had missed at least a day here and there over the past month, with considerable variation around this average across settings. SENI centres tended to report better attendance levels on average (with an average non-attendance of 47 per cent compared with 56 per cent in non-SENI Youthreach centres). Co-ordinators, managers and staff reported higher levels of absence during the school holiday periods. These levels of non-attendance are perhaps not surprising given that young people typically had irregular attendance patterns in mainstream education and compare favourably with non-attendance rates in mainstream schools serving disadvantaged populations. Staff were ready to place non-attendance in the context of the difficult circumstances and emotional challenges faced by learners, but at the same time, many centres were proactive in following up absentees and set clear boundaries and expectations for young people.

For 2017, the SOLAS FARR database indicates non-completion rates of 14 per cent across both settings. Survey data were also used to assess the rate of non-completion, that is, the number of young people leaving before completion relative to the number of learners in the centre at the time of the survey. It should be noted that young people could leave for 'positive' reasons, such as getting a job or going to another course, as well as because of disengagement or disaffection. Using this benchmark, an average of 31 per cent of learners left before programme completion, with rates varying significantly across settings. The fact that this rate is higher than the rate found using FARR data suggests that co-ordinators/managers view Youthreach as a two-year programme, encompassing progression from QQI Level 3 to QQI Level 4 qualifications within the same centre. Larger centres tended to have higher non-completion rates but the reasons for this pattern could not be identified using available information.

The accreditation rate reported by SOLAS includes both full and component awards, with rates of 42 per cent recorded for 2017. To disentangle the two, the number of awards in 2017 was compared to the number of learners at the time of the survey using survey data from co-ordinators and managers. Using this metric, an estimated 60-61 per cent of those completing the programme received a full award, with these rates being broadly similar in Youthreach and Community

Training Centres. Larger centres tended to have lower rates of receipt of full awards. If those who did not complete the programme are taken into account, an estimated 34-40 per cent of learners received a full award of any type.

According to the survey data, 45 per cent of completers progress on to another education or training course, being evenly split between PLC courses and other courses (including apprenticeships). A roughly similar proportion (43 per cent) goes straight into the labour market, with obtaining employment being more prevalent than unemployment. Overall, one-in-six of completers are unemployed after leaving the programme, a rate that compares favourably with unemployment levels for the early school leaver population as a whole.[15] There are significant differences between Youthreach centres and CTCs, with those completing in CTCs much more likely to enter the labour market and less likely to go on to a PLC course than those leaving Youthreach settings. Among Youthreach centres, larger centres tend to have lower rates of progression to education/ training and higher unemployment rates. Not surprisingly, centres with higher receipt of full awards tended to have higher rates of progression to education/ training. Looking at outcomes for both completers and non-completers together, 38 per cent went on to education/training and 27 per cent to employment.

As indicated above, the aims of the Youthreach programme are broad, including not only progression but also the development of personal and social skills and enhancement of emotional wellbeing. In the interviews, learners discussed the difference the programme made to their engagement with learning but also strongly emphasised the way in which participation had boosted their self-confidence and given them a purpose in life and hope for the future. Staff spoke about the slow process of re-engaging young people and providing them with the kinds of skills they needed for adult and working life. Co-ordinators, managers and staff were critical of the over-reliance on quantitative outcome measures, with the consequent neglect of the effort involved in enabling young people to engage in learning in the first place, especially those learners who had been out of education for some time or were facing significant challenges in their personal lives. Several centres used approaches such as WebWheel to capture the developmental progress of young people but felt that such measures were not taken into account at ETB or SOLAS level.

[15] At the same time, it should be recognised that the pool of early school leavers who are unemployed will include those who have taken part in the Youthreach programme.

9.8 IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY

9.8.1 Strengths and weaknesses of the programme

The Youthreach programme is seen as a distinctive programme in the Irish education and training landscape, in providing tailored and flexible supports to young people who have left mainstream second-level education. In terms of the FET sector as a whole, the programme has been characterised as mainly focussing on providing young people with the foundational skills to move on to other education/training provision and as serving a social inclusion role in involving marginalised young people in education/training (DPER, 2017; NESC, 2013). The study findings indicate that the programme works well in re-engaging 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.

The study findings point to significant geographical variability in the location of centres, so that whether a young person can access the programme can depend on the area in which they live. The findings also highlight variation across ETB areas in how the programme is resourced and in the type of courses offered, leading to some inconsistency in programme experience across areas. There is inconsistency too between Youthreach and Community Training Centres in their governance and funding structures and, among Youthreach Centres, between those with SENI funding and other centres. The findings point to the key role of relationships with staff in re-engaging young people with learning. However, contracts for some staff have led to recruitment and retention difficulties, and coping with the needs of young people – especially in terms of psychological and mental health – is seen to require CPD and additional supports for staff. Measures to address some of the weaknesses, while retaining the strengths of the programme, are outlined in Section 9.8.3.

9.8.2 Costs and value for money

The unit cost for Youthreach provision across both settings is relatively high in the context of the FET sector as a whole, only exceeded by that for specialist training programmes and somewhat, but not markedly, higher than for the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS). These costs largely reflect small group sizes in centres providing the Youthreach programme as well as the broader supports put in place for the young people. Taking another comparator which involves targeted support for young people with multiple challenges, Youth Encounter

Projects (YEPs), the unit cost of YEP provision is found to be three times higher than the costs for Youthreach provision.

The costs involved in the provision of the Youthreach programme must be balanced against the personal and societal costs of early school leaving. The findings indicate that those without Leaving Certificate or equivalent qualifications are more likely to be unemployed and to spend longer in unemployment over the life course. This has costs for the individual in terms of lower income and higher rates of poverty and deprivation. Unemployment has costs for the wider society in terms of welfare payments and income tax foregone; Smyth and McCoy (2009) estimate a lifetime cost of just under €30,000 per early leaver, which is likely to be higher currently given that the more marginalised group of early leavers can be seen as further away from being 'job-ready'. Even where early leavers access employment, it tends to be lower paid and more precarious, again impacting on financial wellbeing and resulting in lower tax returns for the State. Rates of lone parenthood are higher among early leavers, with resultant costs in terms of welfare payments. Poorer physical and mental health among early leavers has consequences for individuals' quality of life, and for the State, in terms of medical services and Medical Card costs. Crime rates are found to be consistently higher among early leavers, with the costs of a prison place much more expensive than second-chance or alternative education provision. OECD (2018) shows very high rates of reproduction of educational disadvantage in Ireland compared to other European countries. As a result, early leaving among the current generation has consequences for generations to come in terms of perpetuating socio-economic and educational disadvantage. A large body of work based on the *Growing Up in Ireland* study shows that children whose mothers have Junior Certificate or lower qualifications have poorer outcomes in terms of education, socio-emotional development, physical health and obesity (see for example Williams et al., 2016).

In sum, the relatively high unit costs of Youthreach programme provision must be set against the very high costs for individuals, and for society as a whole, of early school leaving. These costs are very significant in monetary terms but also have important consequences for social inclusion and wellbeing, indicating that investment in second-chance education for vulnerable young people represents value for money for the State. Early intervention is crucial given the scarring role of youth unemployment in terms of later unemployment and lower earnings (Eurofound, 2017).

9.8.3 Implications for policy development

The study findings point to the value of the programme in engaging a group of young people experiencing a range of challenges but highlight a number of areas where provision could be enhanced.

The number and location of Youthreach programme places

Recent years have seen a remarkable improvement in rates of retention in second-level education. The number of participants in Youthreach increased in the recession, in response to rising youth unemployment rates, but remained largely stable thereafter, with a reduction in take-up of 23 per cent in Youthreach centres since 2015. Over the same period, there has been an increase in CTC learner numbers, albeit from a lower base. There are good reasons for not expecting the fall in early leaving to be directly reflected in a fall in Youthreach programme places. The group of early leavers is now more marginalised than previously, in terms of socio-economic disadvantage and mental health difficulties, and so a larger proportion of the cohort is likely to require intensive supports to be able to progress to education, training and employment.[16] Given that overall participation in the Youthreach programme has been declining in recent years, while also noting that current Youthreach learners are often the most marginalised of their peers, SOLAS and the Department of Education and Skills should give further consideration to the most optimal use of available resources for the programme.

Like other forms of further education and training in Ireland, including the PLC programme (McGuinness et al., 2014; 2018), the location of Youthreach and Community Training centres is geographically variable and reflects legacy issues rather than current need. Furthermore, CTC places are highly concentrated in the Dublin area. This geographical variation coupled with a recent decline in participation levels points to the need for SOLAS and the Department of Education and Skills to engage in an ongoing review of the allocation of programme places across and within ETB areas to ensure the optimal use of resources, taking account of early school leaver numbers and of existing places. Consolidation may be feasible in some local areas with multiple centres but any such move should be carefully balanced against the reluctance of many vulnerable young people to access provision outside their local comfort zone and the poorer outcomes found for larger centres. Any economies of scale from amalgamating centres would appear to be offset by the lower rates of completion and certification found in larger centres.

Governance structures

Youthreach is a national programme which allows for flexibility to respond to local need. However, differences in governance structures, requirements around learner enrolment and funding levels between Youthreach and Community Training Centres, between SENI and non-SENI centres and across ETBs mean that young people have differential access to a place depending on where they live and varying access to courses and supports depending on the centre they attend. In

[16] This pattern is analogous to the implications of the decline in unemployment among the adult population whereby the group 'left behind' often require intensive supports to be able to access employment (see Darmody and Smyth, 2018).

addition, while there is a good deal of contact between Youthreach centres in many areas, there is relatively little contact between Youthreach and Community Training centres. The roll-out of the ETB reform was intended to provide more integrated education and training provision in local areas. The study findings suggest greater scope for ETBs to play a role in encouraging the sharing of good practice across the two settings. Examples could include the provision of courses to promote personal development found in many Youthreach centres and the experience of CTCs in fostering strong links with local employers. While flexibility at local level is crucial, at the same time there is a role for SOLAS in ensuring greater consistency of funding and practice across Youthreach provision nationally. Within this framework, there are differences between Youthreach centres and CTCs in relation to funding, staffing and registration structures. However, it is important that the differences in the relative emphasis on general and vocational education across the two settings continues to be respected. The expansion of the DES Inspectorate role to cover all settings providing the Youthreach programme could further enhance the provision of high quality teaching and the sharing of good practice.

Co-ordinators/managers and staff are the most important source of support for young people taking part in the programme. However, several centres report difficulties in recruitment and retention of staff. The small size of centres and the complex needs of learners make high quality staff and continuity of support all the more important.

Funding levels and learner need

SENI was introduced on a pilot basis in 20 Youthreach centres in 2007 but remains on such a basis. The additional funding is found to facilitate providing learning support to more young people, offering more courses and activities to promote wellbeing and skills, and engaging with local services to a greater extent. While the profile of learners in SENI centres is somewhat more disadvantaged than in other settings, a significant proportion of centres with a concentration of complex needs do not receive SENI funding. The increased prevalence of learning and EPMH difficulties among learners, and the perceived inadequacy of learning and psychological supports in many centres, indicate the necessity for a roll-out of SENI funding across all centres to address these needs. Variation in the profile of learners across centres should be reflected in the scale of funding, with additional funding provided to centres with a concentration of more complex needs. The EPMH difficulties among many learners are described as taking a toll on staff. There is a perceived need for CPD in the areas of mental health and dealing with challenging behaviour which could be supported at ETB and SOLAS levels. In addition, access to supervision for staff could be enhanced.

Programme referral and entry

Entry to the programme is largely through word of mouth referral, that is, through parents/guardians, family and friends. This pattern means that some groups of young people, especially those from migrant backgrounds, may lack the networks to become aware of, and engage in, the programme. Staff and learners alike perceive Youthreach as having a negative perception in the community as a whole and indeed many learners had been apprehensive about what the centre would be like before they started. There is a case for investment in rebranding and publicity about Youthreach as a positive learning choice for young people. Perception of the programme, coupled with a greater policy emphasis on school retention, is also seen as impacting on the extent to which schools refer young people, even where the programme may better suit their needs. Many young people are leaving school without any follow-up on their destination, with no requirement currently for Tusla's educational welfare service to monitor anyone aged 16 years or over. There is a need for a tracking system whereby young people who leave school early are followed up and offered a place on a Youthreach (or other suitable) programme. The current absence of such a system means that many young people can be out of school for protracted periods with potentially negative implications for their mental health and likelihood of being involved in substance abuse or crime.

Guidance and progression

At the time of writing, career guidance across second-level, further and higher education is the subject of a review by the Department of Education and Skills and this review is likely to have implications for synergies in provision between education sectors and between providers within the FET sector. At present, young people taking part in the Youthreach programme receive guidance support from advocates, who work across a number of centres, and from staff in their centre. The approach to guidance appears to vary across centres, with learners in some centres developing clear progression plans. Progression planning should be encouraged and supported across all centres through one-to-one contact with the advocate or other staff member(s) as well as course shadowing and work experience placements. Co-ordinators and managers identify some barriers to progression for learners, highlighting the need to examine the potential for bridging courses in Youthreach and CT centres to support the transition to a PLC course or an apprenticeship, and to examine structures within other FET settings to ensure a continuity of support (for example, in relation to mental health) across the transition. ETBs have an important role to play in ensuring a smooth transition from one course or provider to another and in offering continuity of support for more vulnerable learners.

Learner outcomes

Programme evaluations usually involve the establishment of a 'counterfactual' by comparing the participant group with a similar group who did not take part in the programme in terms of an outcome such as unemployment. The profile of young people taking part in Youthreach makes it very difficult to assess the impact of the programme in the usual way as a group of young people with equivalent challenges cannot be identified in the general population. Furthermore, the profile and prior experiences of some programme participants means that the 'counterfactual' may involve not only unemployment but also long-term dependency on welfare payments, poorer physical and mental health, substance abuse and involvement in crime, all outcomes which are extremely costly not only to the individual concerned but to society as a whole (see Chapter 3). Just under half of those who complete the programme progress to further education and training while rates of unemployment compare favourably to those among the early school leaver population as a whole. However, there is a lack of information on the pathways taken by young people in the medium or longer term. Linked administrative data could provide useful insights into later outcomes and whether young people take a succession of courses or programmes without progressing in skill level. Given the role of Youthreach in providing learners with the foundational skills to progress to other forms of education and training (DPER, 2017), it is crucial that systematic evidence is collected on whether leavers are progressing across qualification levels or 'recycling' into courses at the same level.

Current metrics on the programme at SOLAS and ESF level focus on enrolments, retention, completion, accreditation and progression. While these are undoubtedly important outcomes, they do not capture the very real impact of participation on the broader development of young people. Many centres use the WebWheel or other methods to capture learner progress but these approaches are not seen as valued by the system more generally. Given the focus of the programme on a highly marginalised group of young people, a more systematic approach to capturing soft skills development should be used across centres. Such a development would parallel work on developing metrics, such as the distance travelled tool, to capture the impact of interventions for adults under the Social Inclusion and Community Activation Programme (SICAP).

Youthreach in the context of the broader educational system

A number of stakeholders taking part in the consultative workshops raised the issue of whether the appropriate location of Youthreach is in the second-level or FET sectors. In particular, they highlighted a disparity between mainstream schools and Youthreach settings in access to some external supports (including SEN supports and capital funding), despite serving a similar age group. The study findings do not provide a definitive basis for adjudicating on the appropriate placement of the programme. However, the fact that the majority of centres

provide QQI qualifications and that progression is almost wholly to other forms of FET suggest that it should be easier to ensure a continuity of supports and progression opportunities by locating the programme within FET.

The study findings have implications for other parts of the education system. Although rates of school retention have improved markedly in recent years, a negative dynamic of reprimand by teachers and acting up by students still often leads to voluntary early leaving or young people being expelled by the school. This pattern highlights the importance of fostering positive school climates characterised by respect and care, and of supporting teachers in managing challenging behaviour. Many Youthreach learners describe the way in which the programme allows them to learn at their own pace and provides them with the supports to be successful in engaging in learning, contrasting this with feeling left behind or marginalised in the school context. The NCCA is currently conducting a consultation process about the future direction of senior cycle education. As part of this process, it will be important to explore ways to ensure the full inclusion of young people who are not well served by the current system and examine the way in which some of the approaches used in the Youthreach programme could inform provision for young people in mainstream education and beyond.

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APPENDIX

Organisations participating in the consultative workshops

Aontas

Ballyfermot Partnership

Cavan and Monaghan ETB

City of Dublin ETB

Community Training Centre managers (various centres)

Cork ETB

Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Department of Education and Skills

Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection

Department of Rural and Community Development

Donegal ETB

Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB

Dublin City University

Dublin Inner City Community Co-operative

Educational Research Centre

ETBI

Fáilte Ireland

Gaisce

Higher Education Authority

IACTO

Industrial Development Authority

Irish Congress of Trade Unions

Irish National Organisation of the Unemployed

iScoil

Kerry Diocesan Youth Service

Kerry ETB

Kildare and Wicklow ETB

Kilkenny and Carlow ETB

Limerick Clare ETB

Longford and Westmeath ETB

Louth Offaly ETB

Maynooth University

NALA

National Association of Community Training Managers

National Centre for Guidance in Education

National Council for Special Education

National Disability Authority

National Educational Psychological Service

National Youth Council of Ireland

NAYC

Pobal

Quality and Qualifications Ireland

Restaurant Association of Ireland

Solas

Teachers' Union of Ireland

Tipperary ETB

TUSLA

Waterford Wexford ETB

Youthreach co-ordinators (various centres)

Whitaker Square,
Sir John Rogerson's Quay,
Dublin 2
Telephone **+353 1 863 2000**
Email **admin@esri.ie**
Web **www.esri.ie**
Twitter **@ESRIDublin**
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