An Roinn Oideachais agus Scileanna
Department of Education and Skills

Evaluation of Centre for Education
REPORT

Athy Youthreach Centre
2 Model Court Athy, County Kildare

Date of inspection: 14 October, 2009
EVALUATION OF CENTRE OF EDUCATION

This report has been written following an evaluation of Athy Youthreach in County Kildare. It presents the findings of an evaluation of the work of the centre as a whole and makes recommendations for the further development of the work of the centre. During the evaluation, the inspectors held pre-evaluation meetings with the Co-ordinator of the centre and with the tutoring staff. The evaluation was conducted over a number of days during which the inspectors visited classrooms and observed teaching and learning. The inspectors interacted with tutoring staff and learners in the centre, examined learners’ work and conducted an interview with a representative group of learners. The inspectors also reviewed relevant centre planning documentation and tutors’ written preparation. The inspectors conducted interviews with the Adult Education Officer (AEO) of County Kildare VEC, with the centre’s board of management, with the visiting teacher for Travellers and with the educational welfare officer. Following the evaluation visit, the inspectors provided oral feedback on the outcomes of the evaluation to the Co-ordinator and staff of the centre. The board of management was given an opportunity to comment in writing on the findings and recommendations of the evaluation; a response was not received from the board.

1 CENTRE CONTEXT AND ETHOS

1.1 Context

Athy Youthreach centre is one of three Youthreach centres under the auspices of Co. Kildare VEC. It is the only centre located in south Kildare. The other two centres are located in Naas and Leixlip. The Athy centre was established over twenty years ago, in September 1989 and is located one kilometre from the town of Athy in the old Model School complex which dates from 1840’s. The centre has been located in this building since its inception in 1989. The age of the building, the cost of rent of the building and the fact that it is not disability friendly are issues and challenges for the immediate future. The inspection team were informed that active consideration, at board of management and VEC levels, is being given to moving the centre to an alternative location.

The centre is designated as a thirty place centre. At the time of the evaluation there were thirty learners enrolled, one of whom was from the Traveller community. There were seventeen males and thirteen females attending the centre, and all were aged between sixteen and nineteen years. The catchment area of the centre is South Kildare and includes Athy, Castledermot, and villages such as Kilberry, Kilmeade, Moone and Nurney. Most learners walk, drive or are driven to and from the centre. Two learners travel to the centre by train from Kildare town.

1.2 Distinctive character and atmosphere

Athy Youthreach is a friendly, welcoming, and caring environment for the education and training of young people. The centre’s mission states that the centre is “committed to creating a respectful and safe environment where young people can grow in self awareness, increase their self esteem, through growing at their own pace as individuals. The standards achieved by individuals will be enhanced and encouraged through education training, accreditation and employment”. There was considerable evidence during the evaluation that the caring and support based values enunciated in this mission statement are enacted in the day-to-day life of the centre.

The centre has identified a set of aims and objectives in the context of their current comprehensive Development Plan 2009-2012. They are at an early stage of development in the implementation of the centre plan. The main aim of the centre is “to facilitate the personal and educational development of each individual through learning programmes appropriate to their needs”.

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This aim and corresponding objectives, along with the mission statement of the centre, were developed collaboratively by staff as part of, and a follow on from, the centre’s involvement in the centre development planning process within the context of the Quality Framework Initiative (QFI). The centre is in the first year of implementation of its Development Plan. It is important that the aims and objectives of this plan are reviewed and revised, as appropriate, at regular intervals by management and staff. It is heartening to note that the plan envisages such reviews and sets time frames for implementation of key actions.

The working relationships between staff members in the centre were seen to be very positive. The quality of relations between staff and learners was also positive, as was the quality of relations between the learners themselves. Learners and staff displayed great respect for one another. The inspection team formed a view that staff morale in the centre is high.

1.3 Supports for learners

The centre has a valuable key worker system. The four full time staff are allocated between seven and nine learners each in order to offer regular advice, support and mentoring. Full time staff were allocated this role because of their continuous contact with learners.

Formal Individual Learning Plans (ILPs) have not been developed. One of the greatest challenges to be faced by this centre is the development of more formal ILPs and the integration of these ILPs into the daily life of the centre. It is important that these individual plans are developed for learners based on initial and regular assessment of learners’ progress. They should also be partially based on learner needs, abilities, progress and learner outcomes especially in the areas of literacy, numeracy and personal development. Further advice on the compilation of individual learner plans can be found in Guidelines on the Individual Education Plan Process published by the National Council for Special Education in 2006.

Four hours of guidance and counselling per week had been available but this was not operating at the time of the evaluation due to a staff member being on leave. The FÁS advocate should be invited to visit the centre as is already the case in other centres. The centre has regular contact with the educational welfare officer who has referred a number of learners to the centre. The centre also has access to the visiting teacher for Travellers when required.

Nourishing meals are provided for learners and staff four days a week. These are prepared as part of food, nutrition and catering modules. There are no crèche facilities on site.

The centre implements measures aimed at monitoring and improving learner attendance. Learners sign in and out each day as per regulations. Learner allowances are also based on register records. Each tutor maintains standard attendance records with regard to their individual lessons. This is good practice. Attendance during the evaluation suggests that attendance remains a continuous challenge for the centre. It is recommended that initiatives be developed to further promote and monitor learner attendance. A guideline should be developed as to what constitutes an authorised absence. Details should be incorporated into the code of conduct. Finally, the guidelines should provide a framework for termination of attendance where there is evidence of gross abuse of absence policy. These initiatives are advised by the Vocational Services Support Unit (VSSU) in their Procedures in respect of Youthreach/Senior Travellers Centres.

A set of rules similar to a Code of Behaviour has been developed that outlines the rights and responsibilities of learners. It stresses positive approaches to behaviour management. These rules are signed by both the learner and the coordinator or resource person. The centre is to be commended for the
development of this policy and for the manner in which it is implemented. It is recommended that a learner induction manual and a revised staff handbook be developed - the previous staff manual dates from 2002.

It is also recommended that a learner council be established in the centre. Training will be required in relation to how the learner council should operate.

1.4 Links with Community

The centre has tended to be somewhat isolated from other Youthreach centres in County Kildare partly because of Athy’s geographical location. The AEO and the co-ordinator are planning to develop stronger links with other VEC centres for education in the county and this is to be commended. There are strong linkages with at least one of the local post-primary schools in Athy. The principal of this school is a member of the board of management. It is heartening to note that the experienced board of management are an integral part of Athy’s community. This provides important local community links for the centre.

The centre has liaised, mainly by phone, with the visiting teacher for Travellers in terms of ‘managed entry’ to, and progression from the centre. Currently there is only one Traveller enrolled.

The centre has links with local schools, employers and the local business community. These need to be further developed especially in terms of creating work experience opportunities and job opportunities generally in the context of the much more restricted job market of today. Links with the ‘Local Services Network Providers’ ensure valuable contacts for the centre and provide information sharing opportunities. However, links with the local community, including the business community, should be further developed.

If the centre is to remain in its current location the provision of clearer directional signs would help the community to locate it. It would also help to raise the profile of the centre within the community.

2 QUALITY OF CENTRE MANAGEMENT

2.1 Role of VEC and Board of Management

The centre’s operational budget is allocated from VEC head office in Naas. There is awareness among senior management of the VSSU procedures pertaining to centres for education. County Kildare VEC is very supportive of the co-ordinator and staff of the centre. The CEO delegated to the Adult Education Officer (AEO) the task of meeting with the inspection team. The AEO displayed a good knowledge of and empathy with the centre, and had a clear understanding of the opportunities it provides and the challenges that it currently faces especially in terms of certification, regular attendance, links with the local community and other centres, and meaningful progression.

The AEO has de facto line management responsibility for the centre. The relationship between the AEO and the centre’s co-ordinator was seen to be very positive and there is a clear understanding of roles. The AEO is very supportive of the centre, and particularly of the co-ordinator, and visits the centre on a regular basis. VEC management have put in place a range of initiatives to support the role of the co-ordinator. This includes involving the co-ordinator in meetings with other directors and coordinators of centres for education in County Kildare. The VEC’s Education Officer who was closely involved in the establishment and development of Youthreach centres in the county over many years has given valuable support to the co-ordinator and to the AEO in relation to the Athy centre. The Education Officer has retired since the evaluation visits took place.
The VEC is the employer of staff and provides the centre with direction in relation to policy and procedures in line with national regulations. Numerous policies exist which apply across all VEC schools and centres for education in the county for example ‘The Code of Practice for Dealing with Complaints of Bullying and Harassment in VEC Work places’. It is important for the centre co-ordinator and staff to reflect, carefully, on each of these over-arching policies and continue to put in place specific policies and procedures to ensure that they address the particular needs of this centre.

The centre has an experienced and committed board of management which acts as a sub-committee of the VEC. It is a shared board of management with other local adult and community education facilities under the auspices of the VEC. The Athy Adult Education board of management has over-arching responsibilities for Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), the Athy Basic Education centre and the Youthreach centre.

The board currently comprises representatives of the VEC, the Youthreach co-ordinator, the principal of one of the local post primary schools, a former primary school principal who was also a county councillor and a member of the VEC, VTOS and Athy Basic Learning Centre representatives and a learner representative who is a past learner from VTOS. The vast knowledge and experience of board members of day, adult and community education and of the Athy area in general is most helpful. The board would benefit from the inclusion of a local business and employer representative. The presence of the principal from the local Community College on the board provides valuable links with the one of the two second-level school in the town of Athy. The board meets up to four times annually and appropriate records of these meetings are kept. A report from the co-ordinator is given at each board meeting.

There was awareness among many board members of their legislative and legal responsibilities and in particular they were aware of the limitations of their role. The board of management should become more involved in the life of the centre, in centre planning and in the development of centre policies. Currently, its role is predominantly one of policy ratification, receiving and ratifying regular oral and written reports from the co-ordinators of the three centres under its remit.

2.2 Internal centre management and administration

The interest, care, commitment and dedication of the current coordinator who has worked in the centre for twenty years, permeates the centre. The coordinator works diligently in the best interests of learners and staff to maintain, improve and further develop the centre. Staff morale is high. The leadership style of the co-ordinator is a collaborative one. Staff, especially senior and more experienced staff, engage with the co-ordinator in curricular and organisational planning and in learner support and welfare. Staff meetings are held once a week. A minute book is held in the main office.

The co-ordinator has a written contract in place with Co. Kildare VEC. The duties attached to the post are many and varied. It was clear during the evaluation that both the administrative aspects and the more educational or instructional leadership aspects of the role are performed with a high degree of competence and dedication.

The VEC provides administrative supports from its head office in Naas but does not provide any administrative function on site so it is vitally important that staff continue to assist the co-ordinator with leadership, routine administrative and student support tasks. Ways of providing an element of on-site administrative support should be explored. Consideration, for example, should be given to taking on third level students who are seeking work experience in the business area. The engagement of learners in basic work experience tasks within the centre might also be explored.
2.3 Organisation of the curriculum

The centre was open for 226 days in 2008/9. It opens each day at 08.45 and closes at 16.15 except on Fridays when it closes at 13.45. The curriculum in the centre is exclusively FETAC-based. Curricular provision has improved over the years to allow learners the opportunity to achieve a range of FETAC awards. This is commendable. Learners gain a range of certificates of completion for individual modules. FETAC modules are provided in the centre at Levels Three and Four. There is one module offered at Level 5 for Word Processing which is taken up by one learner at present.

The FETAC modules provided include communications, food and nutrition, childcare, art and design, ceramics, preparation for work, office procedures, work preparation, word processing and computer literacy. A number of initiatives have been introduced that promote the development of learners’ personal and social development, for example, engagement with the ‘Coping On’ programme. A personal effectiveness module is also offered. A manual handling programme has been offered to both staff and students which gave the opportunity for learners to integrate with other second-level learners. The FETAC modules on food and nutrition, woodcraft, ceramics, art and design and ICT are vocational and practical in nature and are very relevant to the life skills needed by young learners. The opportunity to undertake the driver theory test is also provided.

The current cohort of learners in the centre is divided into three groups. Membership of the groups is generally determined by the profile of learners on entry but is flexible and can rotate over time.

Centre management and staff have a general awareness of how important literacy and numeracy skills development is for the learners. In many of the classes observed there were efforts by individual tutors to integrate elements of literacy and numeracy in their day to day teaching for example in woodcraft, communications, food and nutrition and ICT. However, centre-wide planning, coordination and delivery of literacy and numeracy is weak and fragmented in a number of subject areas and needs to be addressed across all subject areas and activities. The development and implementation of a whole-centre integrated literacy and numeracy plan in order to develop those skills in a more co-ordinated way should be prioritised. The tutoring of communications, language, mathematics and one-to-one and small group literacy tuition, if and where necessary, should be significantly more focussed, coherent and co-ordinated than at present.

Work experience is and has been an integral part of the work of the centre. The full time resource person has responsibility for work experience and is ably supported by four full time members of staff who act as key workers. The key worker carries out an introduction process with the employers, completes relevant documentation and explains the responsibilities of learners while undertaking work experience. There is one two week block of work experience from 25th May to 5th June. Work experience is also provided throughout the year. For example, six learners were on work experience at the time of the evaluation in work environments such as carpentry, a plant hire firm, a leisure centre, a nursing home and a hardware store. Learners on work placements are regularly monitored through phone contact and site visits.

From discussions with learners it was clear that those who went on work experience benefited from it and that others, especially younger learners, who have not had the opportunity to date would greatly welcome such a programme. The centre indicated that learners find work experience to be beneficial but very challenging. Learners have on occasions complained about the routine or menial nature of tasks.

A data base of employers with contact details is maintained in the main office. In further developing elements of work experience, the centre should utilise fully its existing links with potential employers and the local community in general and extend these links when and wherever possible. Work experience is an important way of enhancing the centre’s links with local businesses and the local community generally.
The centre provides a summer programme for learners from early June to the end of June. This programme consists mainly of regular time tabled classes, and trips outside the centre for such activities as bowling, soccer and a drumming workshop. Opportunities for more structured and varied learning experiences within the summer programme should be explored.

FETAC representatives have presented learners in the centre with certificates in the presence of their parents. A presentation of certificates ceremony is being organised for learners where it is intended to invite guests, staff and learners. There is a need to increase the profile of such events. The opportunity to celebrate and to promote the twenty-first anniversary of the centre should not be missed.

2.4 Management of staff

Currently, the centre employs a total of eight tutoring staff including the co-ordinator. No administrative, secretarial or ancillary staff are employed on site. Tutoring staff range in length of service to the centre from several months to twenty years. There is a good blend of youth and experience on the staff. The co-ordinator and catering tutor have twenty years teaching experience in the centre. This provides invaluable continuity and experience.

Staff are deployed across the timetable based on their qualifications, skills and competencies. An effort is made to timetable those part-time staff with a limited number hours in a way that provides them with significant periods of time in the centre at any one time. This is appropriate but should not mean that classes are unnecessarily long for learners. It was clear from observations during the evaluation that staff approach their tutoring duties in a professional manner. It is important that tutors’ timetables and agreed roles and responsibilities are reviewed at regular intervals.

VEC management support staff involvement in relevant professional development courses. In the past three years staff have updated their knowledge and skills in a range of areas relevant to the learners. Courses attended include those on programme planning, QFI and FETAC, and Manual handling. Three staff members attended a drugs training programme and are in the process of compiling a drugs programme for the centre. Staff members have also attended anger management training, introduction to web wheel training, and suicide awareness courses.

Tutoring staff, in general, are well-qualified and together hold an impressive range of qualifications spanning the educational, the arts and business worlds. Some members of staff have acquired extra academic qualifications relevant to their areas of work. This is commendable. Consideration should be given to conducting an annual review of the professional development needs of staff. Appropriate action plans should then be devised. Training in integrating literacy and numeracy in both tutoring methodologies and planning, in the context of ILPs, should be prioritised for staff members in the future.

2.5 Management of accommodation and other resources

Athy Youthreach is housed in an historic two storey building dating from the mid-nineteenth century. The building is not well suited for the role of a modern centre for education. Currently, the centre is making the best use of available building-related resources. The centre is generally well resourced, with a good range available for most of the subjects in the centre. There is a lack, however, of sufficient dedicated literacy and numeracy tutoring and learning resources in the centre. Available resources are deployed and used appropriately by both staff and learners across the centre.

There are two small offices, a woodwork room with very old, woodwork benches, a craft room which is used for the ceramics module and a small, but well stocked kitchen area. Another room is shared for art
and design, child care and one to one literacy. There is no dedicated staff room. The centre and its classrooms are well maintained. Rooms were neat and tidy at the time of the evaluation.

ICT facilities are available for both staff and learners. There are twelve computers in the centre. Staff have regular access to four machines and learners have access to eight with some overlaps of usage of machines. Staff make use of ICT for producing classroom and planning materials. Learners use ICT mostly for ICT skill development, research purposes and to type up assignments and projects. This is commendable.

3 QUALITY OF CENTRE PLANNING

3.1 Centre plan and policies

The centre was one of the early centres in the QFI process and as such planning has been well developed over a considerable period of time in this centre. The first developed plan covered the period 2004-2006. The centre’s current Development Plan covers the period 2009-2012. The current plan is well developed and contains comprehensive information on the centre’s aims, objectives and mission statement. Quality standards are identified and the centre’s stage of development in relation to each standard is noted.

As part of the planning process a number of important reviews were carried out that involved management, staff and learners. A learner review, for example, was carried out in January 2009 which showed a good level of satisfaction with life in the centre but also displayed some confusion in relation to levels of FETAC modules being studied. These reviews were collated to form the basis of a comprehensive action plan.

A total of twenty seven actions are identified in the development plan in line with the national template. The person responsible for leading each action is identified. Perhaps allocating two persons per action might lead to greater continuity in case staff leave or are absent for a protracted period. The Development Plan would benefit from a greatly reduced number of actions. The findings and recommendations of this report may be helpful in prioritising existing actions and developing new ones.

There are a number of policies in place in the centre. Some of these were developed at VEC level to cater for all of the VEC centres for education and schools in County Kildare. While this is commendable, it is important that the specific needs of the individual centre are reflected in these policies. It is recommended that centre management, including the board of management, in collaboration with staff and learners, continue to examine each VEC level policy relevant to the centre and make adjustments, where necessary, to ensure that they address the specific needs of the centre.

A health and safety declaration was given to each member of staff and to each learner in early 2009 as was a copy of the aims, objectives and mission statement of the centre. These are prominently displayed in the centre. A recently revised and inclusive admissions policy has been developed. This is to be commended. There is an anti-bullying policy specific to the centre which is subject to regular review. Curricular and assessment policies, including a literacy and numeracy policy, need to be developed. It is also important to ensure that there is a common approach to policy implementation by all staff members.

The issue of child protection was discussed with the VEC and the management of the centre. Evidence was provided to confirm that the VEC has taken appropriate steps to develop a child protection policy in line with the provisions in Children First: National Guidelines for the Protection and Welfare of Children (Department of Health and Children, 1999). The centre’s board of management has formally adopted the VEC child policy and procedures. The relevant child protection procedures have been brought to the
attention of all centre staff, including new staff. Management have ensured that all staff are familiar with the procedures to be followed. A designated liaison person (DLP) for the centre has been appointed in line with the requirements of Department of Health and Children guidelines. A deputy DLP has been appointed in the event of the absence of the DLP.

3.2 Planning process

Centre planning has been, and is based firmly on the principles of the Quality Framework Initiative (QFI). All staff are well aware of this initiative and the majority appear to understand the benefits to be had from engaging in it. The centre has had very active engagement with QFI and was one of the early centres engaged with the QFI’s centre development planning process. The planning process was facilitated by a QFI facilitator. It involved sustained collaborative input by centre management, staff and learners. The centre has undertaken Internal Centre Evaluation (ICE) annually to review actions for the relevant year and to provide evidence of implementation. An evaluation review report was, for example, compiled in 2007, which informed the current Development Plan.

The present Development Plan includes valuable review mechanisms and target dates for implementation of actions. It is important that the plan is reviewed at regular intervals and in the context of the findings and recommendations of this evaluation report.

3.3 Implementation of plan

Monitoring arrangements are outlined in the Development Plan. It is important that accurate monitoring records are maintained. Effective monitoring processes will help ascertain how effective the centre plan is at informing centre practice and monitoring records will also inform centre planning and review.

There are weekly meetings of the tutoring staff in the centre. These meetings are chaired by the coordinator and the taking of minutes is rotated. Members of staff have the opportunity to contribute agenda items for discussion at staff meetings. This is good practice. There are also regular informal meetings between the coordinator and individual staff members.

4 Quality of teaching and learning

4.1 Planning and preparation

All tutors were very familiar with the relevant FETAC module descriptors for their individual subject areas. A number of the relevant module descriptors were made available to the inspectors for the lessons visited. Most tutors were using standard schemes of work templates for their individual subject areas and most of these were presented in a typed format. In some classes the schemes indicated clearly the work to be undertaken in lessons for the duration of a course. The schemes of work also made reference to content and methodologies, and the resources needed to implement the programme. Consideration should be given to including expected learner outcomes in the scheme of work templates. Programme planning was a flexible enough to allow for changes during its implementation. The more effective long and short term planning practices observed in the centre should be replicated across all subject areas.

Many tutors had accumulated an impressive range of yearly schemes of work and weekly lesson plans, and teaching and learning resources. Almost all of the individual lessons observed were well planned in advance. Individual lesson plans were furnished in the case of a large number of observed lessons. There was good planning for the use of resources in most of these lessons. Appropriate teaching and learning materials were used widely across lessons and these comprised, among others, handouts and worksheets.
that were developed by the tutors with the individual needs and skills of learners in mind. Many of these kinds of materials were produced using ICT indicating that tutors make good use of available ICT resources in their lesson planning and preparation practices.

There was some good practice in the planned integration of the development of learners’ literacy, numeracy and ICT skills in some of the lessons observed. It is recommended that this practice be further developed, and replicated throughout the centre within the context of a literacy and numeracy plan. In the important areas of communications and mathematics, there is a need to simplify the language in handout materials and to pitch lessons at a more appropriate level.

The length of class periods was a matter of concern. Mathematics and communications classes, in particular, tended to be far too long for the cohort group. It is recommended that these classes be reduced to forty to forty-five minutes. The premise of little and often might inform further thinking on this important matter.

4.2 Classroom management and teaching methods

Lessons in a range of subjects were observed during the evaluation. These included lessons in communications, mathematics, information communications technology, preparation for work, food and nutrition, art and design, ceramics, woodcraft, and childcare.

The vast majority of the lessons observed were at FETAC Levels Three and Four. Most lessons were practical or activity-based in nature. They generally succeeded in engaging learners in their work. The subject matter of most lessons, and the means in which it was delivered, was appropriate to the FETAC level being taught. The pace of most lessons was appropriate to the ability level of learners. In particular lessons observed, a good mix of discussion, questioning, examination of visual materials and worksheets were employed. As mentioned earlier some classes were too long and were an inefficient use of curricular time.

A range of tutoring strategies was observed during the inspection visits, including whole class, small group, pair work and individual tuition. Small group tuition was the dominant teaching strategy used in the majority of lessons. This was due to the very low tutor-learner ratio, compounded by the level of absenteeism. In practice, four to seven learners made up many of the groups observed on the days of the evaluation. Small group tuition was observed to be most effective where it was well planned in advance. In a number of lessons observed effective individual attention was given to learners.

There are one-to-one literacy sessions for a total period of five hours a week. These have been offered since November 2008. These need to be integrated more clearly and in a planned way with the literacy plan for the centre, when developed, and the with other subject areas especially communications, ICT and mathematics modules in the centre. Those staff involved should undergo training in this area.

Other teaching and learning strategies observed included tutor input, elaboration, explanation and questioning, project work, research, class discussions, brainstorming, question and answer sessions and use of flipcharts. Most of these strategies were implemented in an effective manner.

There was an appropriate emphasis in the food and nutrition, the ICT, the ceramics, the art and design and the woodcraft modules on learning by doing and on building upon the prior knowledge of learners. Learners were frequently observed learning from and assisting each other. Frank, open, relevant classroom discussion was very much in evidence. The quality of the learners’ written work varied enormously. Such work was included in learners’ FETAC folders. There was evidence in a number of lessons that learners’
Attention to the development of learners’ literacy and numeracy skills varied significantly in the lessons observed and there is much room for improvement in this regard. Their development was prioritised in some classrooms such as ICT, communications and art and design. This generally took the form of attempting to embed the development of these crucial skills into the subject matter being delivered. Other dedicated strategies aimed at promoting learners’ literacy and numeracy skills were also in evidence such as, a focus on spelling and word searches and on the explanation of key words and concepts. A brief policy document on literacy policy was developed in 2006. However, it is recommended that a greater focus on literacy and numeracy development should permeate all teaching and learning. A whole centre literacy and numeracy policy should be developed with emphasis on word and language development.

Learner attendance, and learner punctuality, was monitored by individual tutors but is a continuous challenge and it needs ongoing attention. Positive relationships at all levels were observed in classrooms. Learners were being taught in an affirming and positive environment. Learners participated actively in their lessons. They were willing to learn from tutors and one another. Learners displayed a positive attitude to their own work and to the centre in general.

4.3 Assessment of learners’ progress

Standardised or diagnostic tests are not administered in the centre. A member of staff has recently being trained in diagnostic testing and this should help developments in this area. While acknowledging the efforts of the centre in respect of the initial profiling and assessment of learners in terms of one to one meetings, case conferences and a general initial review of literacy levels. It is recommended that diagnostic testing materials for literacy and numeracy be introduced. These assessment tools would provide more detailed and useful information regarding learners’ abilities than is currently the case. The information gleaned from these tests would also contribute to the development of effective individual learning plans for learners and literacy planning in general.

The main mode of assessment operating in the centre is that associated with the different FETAC modules being taught. The centre subscribes, to the quality assurance principles laid down by FETAC and it was reported by management that all FETAC assessments are operated in accordance with their quality standards. FETAC assessments comprise mostly of summative assessment techniques such as FETAC examinations, written and practical assignments and external monitoring of learners’ portfolios of work. These are administered throughout the duration of a learners’ time in the centre and were seen to be implemented in a consistent manner. Some excellent examples of learners’ FETAC portfolios and folders were observed. These generally contained a copy of learners’ marking sheets, some of which indicated high levels of learner achievement.

Some formative assessment techniques such as observations in lessons and questioning strategies are used regularly in classrooms. It suggested that tutors employ a greater range of formative assessment techniques, more regularly, and in a more formal way, in the centre.

Some tutors maintain records of the progress that learners make in their subjects. This is good practice and should be replicated across all lessons. There is scope, however, for the development of a formal or centralised system for monitoring and recording the progression of learners while in the centre. This should be accessible to staff, learners and, where relevant, parents. It would also enhance the systems currently in place for communicating and sharing information regarding learners’ progress, for example, at staff meetings. It is also good practice that procedures and criteria for assessment be discussed, clarified and agreed between tutors and learners.
An awards ceremony is held annually for learners. It is an excellent way of recognising and celebrating learner achievement. Further development of this ceremony may also help to promote the centre in the local media. An Open day should be considered as another means of celebrating learner achievement, while at the same time encouraging others to attend the centre.

4.4 Outcomes and standards

Learners explained in an open and frank manner, both in the focussed interviews and in the more informal discussion held with learners, the reasons why they came to this centre. Learners also had clear personal goals for what they wanted to achieve during their time in the centre. The majority of learners, for example, wanted to obtain FETAC certification and were seen to be pursuing such goals in a realistic manner. Learners had ideas about what courses or jobs they would like to do upon leaving the centre. Employment in the areas of trades, secretarial work, child care, beauty and hair care were popular choices partly as a result of their work experience. Learners were less clear, however, about how they might access these kinds of career options. The recent acceptance of one of the learners for an air stewardess course where subsequent employment is guaranteed has given the centre a major boost.

The learners interviewed and met during the course of the evaluation spoke highly of the centre and of their satisfaction with the centre. It was clear that learners were treated with respect and were learning and gaining valuable skills, knowledge and certification. Learners were also experiencing improved self-esteem and enhanced academic, personal and social development.

The centre should make every effort actively to support learners in their progression to further study or to employment both inside and outside the home and family settings. Parents interviewed during the evaluation were of the opinion that the centre has made a dramatic difference to the lives of learners and their families. They were delighted with the progress that learners have made. Parents are welcome to make an appointment to discuss progress. However, user friendly written contact should be made with parents, perhaps twice yearly, to outline progress and achievements.

5. Summary of strengths and recommendations for further development

The following are the main strengths identified in the evaluation:

- Athy Youthreach is a friendly, welcoming, and caring environment for the education and training of young people.
- There was considerable evidence during the evaluation that the caring and support based values enunciated in the centre’s mission statement are enacted in the day-to-day life of the centre.
- County Kildare VEC, especially its AEO, is supportive of the co-ordinator and staff of the centre.
- The centre has a representative, and experienced board of management which is shared with VTOS, and the Athy Adult Basic Education Centre.
- The commitment, hard work and dedication of the co-ordinator permeate the centre and staff morale is high.
- The curriculum is exclusively FETAC based.
- Tutors are, in general, well qualified and all are very committed to their work.
- The centre has a well developed centre plan and was one of the early centres involved in the QFI process.
- Learners enjoy and greatly benefit from the certified courses on offer in the centre which also provides structured work experience and elements of a summer programme for learners.
• The centre has a valuable key worker system where four full time members of staff are allocated between seven and nine learners in order to offer advice, support and mentoring.

• In general, the level of long-term and short-term planning and preparation for lessons observed during the evaluation was excellent and some praiseworthy examples of both forms of planning were noted.

• Parents interviewed were convinced that the centre has made a dramatic difference to the lives of learners and their families.

As a means of building on these strengths and to address areas for development, the following key recommendations are made:

• It is important that the aims and objectives of the centre Development Plan are reviewed and revised, at regular intervals by management and staff of the centre bearing in mind that it is the first year of implementation of the Development Plan.

• Formal Individual Learning Plans should be developed and should be fully integrated into the daily life of the centre.

• A learner induction manual and a revised staff handbook should be developed.

• A small, representative learner council should be established and training should be provided for its members.

• The board of management should become more involved in the life of the centre, especially in the planning and the development of centre policies and practices. Links with the local community, including the business community, should be further developed.

• A greater focus on literacy and numeracy development should permeate all teaching and learning in the centre. A whole centre literacy and numeracy policy should be developed with an emphasis on written and oral language development.

• Opportunities for more structured and more varied learning experiences within the summer programme should be explored.

• Consideration should be given to conducting an annual review of the professional development needs of staff and an appropriate prioritised action plan should then be devised.

• The centre’s development plan should have a greatly reduced number of actions.

• Class periods in curricular areas such as maths and communications should be reduced to forty or forty five minutes.

• There is a need for the development of a more formal or centralised system of monitoring and recording of the progression of learners from entry, during their time in the centre, and when they leave the centre.

• Diagnostic testing materials for literacy and numeracy should be introduced. Standardised assessment tools would provide more detailed and useful information regarding learners’ abilities than is currently the case.

Post-evaluation meetings were held with the co-ordinator and teaching staff at the conclusion of the evaluation when the draft findings and recommendations of the evaluation were presented and discussed.

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