



QUALITY ASSURANCE IN THE YOUTH SECTOR IN NORTHERN IRELAND

REPORT ON A CONSULTATION AND SYMPOSIUM
NOVEMBER 2009



Department of
Education

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Foreword

This report sets out the findings of a consultation on Quality Assurance in the Youth Sector that was carried out between September and November 2009. The consultation culminated in a Symposium on 6 November 2009 and was part of a series of events 'Thinking Seriously About' for Youth Service month, an initiative of the Youth Service Sectoral Partners Group.

The consultation was initiated as a result of a series of discussions between the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) regarding quality assurance in the youth sector. An independent consultant, Tony Macaulay was engaged to facilitate the process and this culminated in a symposium where the findings were presented and discussed and a way forward agreed.

There was consensus among participants on the need to develop a common framework with cross sectoral involvement at every level. Following on from this a group has been established to take forward the findings of the process as outlined in the Next Steps on Quality Assurance in the youth sector.

Table of Contents

Foreword	1
1. Introduction	3
2. Main Findings of the Consultation	4
2.1 Current Quality Assurance	4
2.2 ETI Quality Indicators	5
2.3 Related Issues	5
2.4 Areas of Discussion	6
2.5 A Shared Framework	7
2.6 Development Process	7
3. Symposium	9
3.1 Introductions	9
3.2 Findings and Discussion	9
3.3 ETI Quality Assurance	9
3.4 Group Discussion:	
What is working well? / What is missing?	11
3.5 Group Discussion:	
What needs to happen? / How do we take this forward?	12
3.6 Conclusion	13
4. Next Steps	13
Appendix I Consultation Interviewees	14
Appendix II Symposium Programme	15
Appendix III Symposium Participants	16

1. Introduction

This is a report on the consultation on quality assurance in the youth sector in Northern Ireland that was carried out between September and November 2009.

The consultation was initiated as a result of a series of discussions between the Curriculum Development Unit (CDU) and the Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) regarding quality assurance.

An independent consultant, Tony Macaulay (Macaulay Associates Network) was engaged to facilitate the consultation and this culminated in a symposium where the findings were presented and discussed, and a way forward agreed.

A series of consultation interviews were carried out with a sample of twenty-six key stakeholders including heads of service across the youth sector (statutory and voluntary sectors) and representatives of the Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI), Curriculum Development Unit, University of Ulster, Department of Education (DE) and the Education & Training Inspectorate.

The purpose of the interviews was to identify and discuss current approaches and identify future needs and strategies in relation to quality assurance in the youth sector.

The semi structured interview question framework included the following questions:

- What is your overall experience of quality assurance in the youth sector in Northern Ireland?
- What specific current approaches to quality assurance in the youth sector are you aware of?
- What are the strengths and weaknesses of these approaches?
- What do you think is needed in terms of quality assurance in the youth sector for the future?
- Have you ideas/suggestions regarding a strategy for developing quality assurance in the youth sector?

Additional interviews were carried out with four key stakeholders in the Republic of Ireland to learn from their approach and experience on quality assurance frameworks. A full list of the interviewees is in Appendix I.

The consultant presented the findings from the consultation interviews to a symposium on 6th November 2009. The one-day symposium for heads of service discussed and explored the findings of the consultation and agreed a strategy and approach for the future. The symposium programme is in Appendix II and a list of participants is in Appendix III.

This report presents the findings of the consultation and the strategy and actions for the future agreed at the symposium.

2. Main Findings of the Consultation

2.1 Current Quality Assurance

The majority of the organisations that were consulted are using a quality assurance system to continuously improve organisational quality. Although many of the systems currently in use share very similar elements there is no consistent or agreed approach or system¹ across the sector.

Some organisations are using externally recognised and kite marked systems such as 'Investors in People' and some organisations have developed and use their own 'in house' quality assurance systems and processes². A few organisations have developed their own quality system to link or relate directly to ETI Quality Indicators³. Most of the organisations consulted were satisfied with the system they had chosen to use and highlighted the importance of getting a good balance between using an effective and systematic framework while at the same time avoiding unnecessary overload with the administrative requirements of a system.

Most of the interviewees regarded quality assurance at an organisational level, such as within the Boards, Headquarter Voluntary Organisations and full time projects/centres as generally good. However, the systems currently being used are generally stronger on assuring organisational quality than on assuring quality of delivery and practice of youth work. The majority of interviewees expressed concerns about quality assurance across the vast number of local part time and voluntary units that make up the bulk of the youth sector.

There are examples of very good practice such as quality assurance by uniformed organisations⁴ in local part time and voluntary units. However interviewees expressed concerns about poor quality assurance in small part time and voluntary units. Comments included:

'There is not a lot of quality assurance going on in the youth sector at large.'

'I am not convinced people know what good quality youth work is.'

Most interviewees highlighted both the need for and the challenges of introducing an effective quality assurance system at this level. Comments included:

'Small groups are being swamped by over complicating their lives.'

'It drives away volunteers.'

'They do not resist quality, they resist bureaucracy.'

¹ Some stakeholders believe a shared view of quality is more important than having a common quality assurance system.

² For example the SELB has integrated quality assurance into a Planning Framework and YouthAction NI has developed the 'Four Voices Framework' with a descriptor scale on outcomes for young people.

³ For example the NEELB Youth Service has taken this approach.

⁴ For example Scouting Ireland uses SQS (Supporting Quality Scouting)

2.2 ETI Quality Indicators

The consultation found a wide diversity across the sector in terms of the level of awareness and use of the current ETI Quality Indicators. Where they are known, the ETI Quality Indicators are generally regarded positively. The self-evaluative approach is particularly welcomed. Some organisations have linked their quality assurance to the ETI quality indicators and they are also being introduced into some youth work training.⁵

However interviewees often regarded the ETI Quality Indicators as tools for an inspection rather than an ongoing quality assurance system.

Interviewees made various suggestions on how the ETI Quality Indicators could be developed. This included linking them more directly to Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice and translating them into more appropriate formats and language to be effective in different settings. The process used to develop and introduce the current ETI Quality Indicators has not yet resulted in an agreed approach to quality assurance across the sector. Various interviewees explained that a perceived 'top down' approach is unlikely to be effective where change is need most.

2.3 Related Issues

During the course of the interviews it became clear that discussions about quality assurance in the youth sector are influenced by other related sectoral issues. The main related issues that were highlighted by interviewees included:

- A view that there is a lack of a clear government policy on which to base quality youth work.
- The ongoing lack of agreed frameworks for measuring personal and social development outcomes for young people.
- There were different views on accountability and funding issues.
- There were concerns that there is a limited articulation of the value and impact of youth work.
- The relationship of quality assurance to the National Occupational Standards for Youth Work.
- The possibility that competition between agencies and sectors prevents the development of shared approaches.
- The different ideological views around youth work practice.
- Changing structures, the Review of Public Administration and the development of ESA. Most interviewees regarded the development of ESA as an opportunity to establish more of an agreed approach across the sector.

⁵ The ETI Quality Indicators are being introduced in the 'Study of Applied Practice' module in the third level training at the University of Ulster.

2.4 Areas of Discussion

During the course of the consultation it became clear that there is some confusion around the distinction between monitoring and evaluation and quality assurance. Some organisations regard monitoring and/or evaluation systems as quality assurance rather than a subset of a quality assurance system.

Similarly, there is some confusion around the distinction between the need for quality assurance and measuring personal and social development outcomes for young people that demonstrate the value of youth work, although both are essential and the two are obviously linked. Comments included:

'Quality assurance needs to start at outcomes and benefits for young people.'

'We need good quality youth organisations and we need high quality youth work practice, they are connected but we need to name them separately.'

'It should be about developing appropriate indicators to assure that children and young people have a quality experience.'

The recommendations from the Youth Service Liaison Forum 2006 feasibility study⁶ on frameworks for measuring personal and social development of young people have not yet been implemented. These recommendations included:

- The Department of Education should task the Youth Service Liaison Forum with establishing a consortium to develop a model, methodology, methods and tools for implementation as a framework for measuring personal and social development throughout the Youth Service.
- The model should be flexible for use in local/project/centre based contexts and should be practical and realistic in relation to the time required to implement.
- The focus of the model should be on integrating the development of appropriate measures of personal and social development into critical reflective practice and developing a stronger learning culture throughout the Youth Service.
- The model should enable youth workers to support young people to identify their own learning from their participation in youth service provision.
- The Curriculum Development Unit should develop a programme of appropriate preparation, support and training for the use of the methodology, methods and tools within the model.
- The model should become embedded in youth work training and in the professional development of workers.
- The consortium should pilot a range of methods including the use of IT to test out the model in a range of settings.

⁶ 'Frameworks for Measuring Young People's Personal and Social Development', Macaulay, T., CDU/Youthnet, June 2006

2.5 A Shared Framework

There was broad agreement across the range of interviewees consulted that a more consistent and shared approach to quality assurance was required and would be beneficial. However there was also consensus that a 'one size fits all' system would not be possible or desirable.

There is a demand for developing a system/framework/template that would support quality assurance at all levels and especially at the local part time and voluntary unit level.

There was also consensus that it is possible for the youth sector to develop a shared core quality assurance framework that could recognise existing systems and have sufficient flexibility for use in different settings.

There was consensus that it is possible to develop an agreed approach, if an effective consultation and development process is resourced and implemented.

However, there was agreement that any system will require an effective strategy for providing an appropriate level of support for its implementation at local level. As one interviewee commented:

'We need a good support system to support a simple and effective quality system.'

2.6 Development Process

There was strong agreement that a high quality process is required to build consensus and ownership of an agreed approach across the sector and there was agreement that the consultation and symposium were an important foundation for a process that could build consensus and ownership of an agreed approach across the sector. There was a generally positive approach to this:

'We need to approach this with an attitude of possibility rather than negativity. We need to focus on what we can achieve.'

There are useful examples of similar processes to learn from, such as the development of the Quality Standards Frameworks in the Republic of Ireland and the development of 'Pathways to Excellence' in the play work sector in Northern Ireland. These processes have tended to take 18-24 months for consultation, development, piloting and implementation.

There was clear consensus that the development of an agreed approach will require the 'buy in' and contribution of both professional/full time/paid youth workers and volunteers across the sector. Comments included:

'People need to have ownership, we need a ground up quality assurance framework.'

'We need input from the field...we need to carry the field with us.'

There were also a range of suggestions and ideas on how young people could or should be involved in a process of developing quality assurance in the youth sector.

'We need to test it out with young people. What do they think they should be getting out of it?'

It was agreed that an effective and agreed approach to quality assurance in the youth sector would improve quality across the sector. However, to be effective it must achieve the outcome of measurable improvement where quality assurance is currently lacking and where improvement is needed most. As one interviewee stated:

'We need to create something simple and flexible to enable small units to address all the key areas within one package.'

Interviewees indicated that this would require ongoing and targeted support mechanisms and resources. Many interviewees suggested a conference of youth work practitioners as a useful mechanism for consulting, engaging and building ownership of a shared system. They also highlighted a need to involve young people, youth workers, volunteers and managers in different ways in any development process.

The consultation highlighted the fact that the most effective quality assurance systems are piloted, reviewed and developed with all key stakeholders using the principles of quality assurance and continuous improvement.

3. Symposium

The purpose of the symposium was to discuss the findings of the consultation on quality assurance in the youth sector and agree a strategy and approach for the future.

The desired outcome was an agreed strategy for taking forward the development of a shared core quality assurance framework for implementation across the sector.

3.1 Introductions

Gilbert Bell (Chair of the Curriculum Development Unit) welcomed the participants and thanked them for their contributions to the consultation process.

John McCormick (Curriculum Development Unit Executive Committee) explained the background and context to the consultation.

3.2 Findings and Discussion

After a presentation of the main findings of the consultation by Tony Macaulay, there followed an open discussion for responses, questions and debate of the issues.

The main themes discussed during this session included:

- Previous failed attempts to develop an agreed framework on quality assurance across the sector and discussion on what prevented these processes from being successful.
- The importance of establishing agreed core principles and values of a framework.
- Drawing together and learning from existing models, quality assurance systems and good practice.
- The importance of providing support to youth workers to improve quality and increase a sense of confidence and being valued.
- The importance of quality assurance systems being relevant, feasible and user friendly for different contexts.
- The need to involve ‘people on the ground’ to ensure maximum ownership, ‘buy-in’ and impact.

3.3 ETI Quality Assurance

Maureen Bennett (ETI) addressed the symposium regarding ETI Quality Assurance on the theme ‘We can be doing good work but are we doing work that is doing good?’ and then facilitated an exploration of several of the ETI Quality Indicators. The key points are highlighted:

ETI is charged under statute with inspecting, evaluating and reporting on the quality of educational provision. The purpose behind that is largely two fold:

- Accountability: Are organisations using the public resources entrusted to them for the purposes of education for which they were intended? This provides a check for Government, taxpayers, parents and young people.
- Improvement and raising of standards: This includes asking the questions; Is Government policy being implemented? Is provision adequate and if not what actions may be needed? Is the provision good enough and are standards high enough and if not what action is required?

The cost of the services and the economic imperative to assess whether they are effective was highlighted within the wider context of the needs of young people. In relation to government policy, the aims that government has for education are:

- Developing the young person's personal and social attributes and capacities.
- Ensuring that in Northern Ireland (NI) we have people with the higher skills at the right level to sustain and develop our economy and within a global economy.
- Contributing to the social and political harmony within NI.

While youth provision remains part of DE's responsibility it has to contribute to DE's aims:

- Raising standards.
- Closing gap in achievement by improving access and equity.
- Enhancing provision by developing the workforce.
- Improving the learning environment.
- Transforming management by cutting out bureaucracy.

The purpose of the youth sector is personal and social development, participation, accepting and understanding of others and the development of appropriate attitudes and beliefs.

Quality assurance is therefore about processes that give confidence that all of these aims are being achieved. In many ways the most important question to ask of an organisation is,

'How confident are you in the quality of what young people achieve through your organisation?'

The second most important question is,

'What is the basis of that confidence?'

Quality Assurance therefore has to be an integral part of the work of every youth centre/youth organisation. Often organisations limit their self-evaluation to simply a description of what they do. However, organisations need to know about themselves, about what they are doing well towards achieving their purpose and what they might be doing less well. That sort of analysis is critical to being accountable to various stakeholders and it is also critical to improvement and the raising of standards.

The presentation highlighted that quality assurance and self-evaluation are key planks in how ETI goes about its work in all sectors but also essential ingredients in ensuring the best quality for young people. It also highlighted the importance of focussing on outcomes rather than simply outputs.

ETI is not a regulatory inspectorate and is very aware that you cannot inspect quality into an organisation. ETI is not in the business of imposing any particular model or approach to quality assurance. Therefore ETI's quality indicators have been developed;

- To help us develop a consistent, systematic approach to our work.
- To help with process of internal quality assurance.
- To try to ensure internal/external quality assurance are well-aligned.

To be transparent, indicators have been shared with sectors in Northern Ireland and comments invited from a number of other jurisdictions, as well as from within and without government to ensure that they are as right as possible.

Following the presentation participants worked in pairs to discuss the most appropriate indicators for several of the ETI Quality Indicators. The focus was on the quality of outcomes for the young people because this is the most difficult aspect of quality assurance. There followed a discussion on a series of related issues.

3.4 Group Discussion: What is working well? / What is missing?

In the first of two small group discussion sessions the participants discussed and shared examples of what is working well of what is missing in quality assurance in the youth sector. Some participants brought along examples of what is working well. The groups then agreed and fed back the main points to the symposium.

The main feedback from this session was that organisational quality assurance is working well. There is good practice in larger organisations and in the full time sector. There is confidence in the quality systems being used and there is effective self-evaluation. This is providing a good evidence base and demonstrates value for money. The registration process is providing 'entry point' criteria for groups and this is a good starting point for assuring quality.

However the feedback also highlighted a lack of clarity around the expected outcomes and benchmarks for youth work. There is a lack of confidence and insufficient self-evaluation particularly in relation to youth work practice. There is a lack of ownership/'buy in' to quality assurance across the sector. There is also insufficient support and resources for improving the quality of services including in the area of continuous professional development. It was asserted that a quality assurance system must be broken down into a range of outcomes with a range of evidence and it was suggested that it would be useful to collate all of models currently being used.

In relation to what is required the following points were also highlighted below:

- Quality assurance could/should concentrate on practice/process. Outcomes are difficult to define and therefore a system might need to focus on expected outcomes.
- A quality assurance framework must have set sections and be broken down into separate areas of delivery.

- There should be a range of expected outcomes and a range of evidence.
- There is already in place a range of models of quality assurance. These could be analysed and collated into one model.
- Those who dictate the inspection of quality standards should be clear about exactly what they expect within the context of the youth work setting.

3.5 Group Discussion: What needs to happen? / How do we take this forward?

In the second of the two small group discussion sessions the participants identified what needs to be put in place to improve quality assurance in the youth sector and the best ways of taking forward these ideas. The groups then agreed and reported back the main points to the symposium.

The main feedback regarding what needs to happen to improve quality assurance was that an agreed framework should be developed with clear goals within a clear policy framework. It should relate to the Priorities for Youth.

There is a need to address measures expected by government/inspectorate and also a related need to improve quality assurance of youth work practice.

The feedback included the following suggestions for a quality assurance framework:

- A framework needs to be strong but flexible and adaptable.
- The framework should provide benchmarks.
- It should clearly state its goals in common language.
- It should be a system that affords integrity to Youth Workers.
- It should address aspects of youth work delivery within a variety of units and settings.
- It needs to define expected outcomes by making explicit what is implicit in youth work practice.
- It needs to be located within needs assessment recognising different levels, for example using the Hardiker model.
- It should start as a simple model and increase in sophistication.
- It should not be static and must have aspiration for growth and development.
- It should be made available to the field.
- It should lead to a toolkit for youth workers to be developed by both practitioners and managers.
- It should be integrated into future university courses and Continued Professional Development.
- The sector will require support services and training for its implementation including training on critical reflective practice.
- The framework should be tested and piloted.

The working group, supported by the Department of Education, should develop an agreed framework for quality assurance. It should incorporate the work already done by the Inspectorate and work towards a coherent model with ownership across the sector.

3.6 Conclusion

The symposium concluded with an evaluation of the day⁷ and closing remarks and thanks from John McCormick (Curriculum Development Unit Executive Committee).

4. Next Steps

When participants were asked in the evaluation form for any suggestions or proposals in relation to the next steps, there was a strong desire to maintain the momentum from the consultation and symposium.

The next steps agreed by the participants at the conclusion of the symposium were as follows:

- 1) Linkages to quality assurance should be included in the Priorities for Youth as soon as possible.
- 2) The findings of the consultation and the notes of the symposium discussions should be collated into a report and disseminated as soon as possible.
- 3) A grouping should be established immediately to take forward the findings and suggested strategies from the consultation and symposium report.
- 4) The group should be facilitated by the CDU and the development process should be completed by end of February 2010.

⁷ Feedback on the evaluation forms was that most parts of symposium had been very useful and the symposium had achieved its stated purpose.

Appendix I Consultation Interviewees

- 1) Gilbert Bell, NEELB
- 2) Maureen Bennett, ETI
- 3) Mary Cunningham, NYCI
- 4) Paul Curran, CYPNI
- 5) Gerard Doran, SELB/WELB
- 6) Tom Dunne, Youth Work Ireland
- 7) Walker Ewart, ETI
- 8) Noel Gallagher, CDU
- 9) Cathy Galway, DE
- 10) Joe Hawkins, YFCU
- 11) Dairmuid Kearney, Youth Work Ireland
- 12) Anne Marie McClure, Opportunity Youth
- 13) Leighann McConville, CDU
- 14) Aideen McCormick, SELB
- 15) John McCormick, YCNI
- 16) Oliver McKearney, DE
- 17) John Meikleham, Scouting Ireland
- 18) Pat Morgan, NEELB
- 19) Tony Morgan, University of Ulster
- 20) Trevor Murphy, BELB
- 21) Drew Neill, NIYF
- 22) Jacqueline O'Loughlin, Playboard
- 23) Denis Palmer, Youthnet
- 24) James Peel, SEELB
- 25) Chris Quinn, NIYF
- 26) Norma Rea, YCNI
- 27) Conor Rowley, Assessor of Youth Work, ROI
- 28) June Trimble, Youthaction
- 29) Stephen Turner, YMCA
- 30) Paddy White, Youthlink

Appendix II Symposium Programme

Thinking Seriously about... Quality Assurance in the Youth Sector

Friday 6th November 2009
Hilton Hotel, Templepatrick

Programme

- 09.30 Arrival and Registration
- 10.00 Welcome: Gilbert Bell
(Chair of the Curriculum Development Unit)
Setting the Context: Background to the Symposium:
John McCormick
(Curriculum Development Unit Executive Committee)
Introduction to the Symposium: Tony Macaulay
- 10.10 Findings of the Consultation: Tony Macaulay
- 10.40 Responses, Questions and Discussion
- 11.30 ETI Quality Assurance *(Education & Training Inspectorate)*
- 12.30 Lunch
- 13.30 Group Discussion 1:
 - What is working well?
 - What is missing?
- 14.15 Feedback
- 14.30 Group Discussion 2:
 - What needs to happen?
 - How do we take this forward?
- 15.15 Feedback
- 15.30 Next Steps
- 15.50 Evaluation of the Symposium
- 15.55 Closing Remarks
- 16.00 Close

Appendix iii Symposium Participants

- 1) Gilbert Bell, NEELB
- 2) Maureen Bennett, ETI
- 3) Rita Burke, ETI
- 4) Siobain Byrne, SEELB
- 5) Liam Curran, WELB
- 6) Paul Curran, Clubs for Young People
- 7) GerardDoran, SELB/WELB
- 8) Walker Ewart, ETI
- 9) Noel Gallagher, CDU
- 10) CathyGalway, DE
- 11) Joe Hawkins, Young Farmers
- 12) Christine Leacock, DE
- 13) Jim Lewis, NEELB
- 14) Tony Macaulay, Macaulay Associates
- 15) Eliz McArdle, Youthaction NI
- 16) Anne-Marie McClure, Opportunity Youth
- 17) Leighann McConville, CDU
- 18) Aideen McCormick, SELB
- 19) John McCormick, Youth Council
- 20) Oliver McKearney, DE
- 21) Tony Morgan, University of Ulster
- 22) Trevor Murphy, BELB
- 23) Jacqueline O’Laughlin, Playboard
- 24) Denis Palmer, Youthnet
- 25) James Peel, SEELB
- 26) Norma Rea, Youth Council
- 27) Stephen Turner, YMCA
- 28) Paddy White, Youthlink
- 29) Linda Wilson, DE





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