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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

## **Education and Training Inspectorate**

### **Report of an Inspection**

**YouthNet**

**Inspected: May 2007**

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## 1. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

1.1 YouthNet is the 'Network for the Voluntary Youth Sector in Northern Ireland'. It is an independent, umbrella body representing the interests and aspirations of some 75 voluntary youth organisations. The members of YouthNet represent a wide spectrum of organisations whose primary focus is to work with children and young people.

1.2 YouthNet can trace its origins back over 60 years, when the Standing Conference of Youth Organisations (SCOYO) was set up to represent and promote the views of the voluntary youth sector. In 1987, the then Minister for Education published the 'Policy for the Youth Service in Northern Ireland' in which the concept of a Youth Council for Northern Ireland (YCNI) was put forward to subsume the executive functions carried out by SCOYO. In 1990, following extensive consultations with its members, SCOYO updated its constitution and, as part of that process, changed its name to YouthNet. In 1995, YouthNet was designated as an Intermediary Funding Body for the disbursement of monies through Peace 1, and this special status was continued through the European Peace 2 and the Peace 2 Extension Funding periods. In 2003, the Department of Education (DE) recognised YouthNet as a strategic partner that could effectively represent and champion the voluntary youth sector, and one that would assist DE in delivering its responsibilities under the Government's 'Partners for Change' document.

1.3 YouthNet is 'a company limited by guarantee and without share capital'; it is governed by an Executive Committee which manages its strategic business and is made up of 12 annually elected individuals representing the member organisations.

1.4 YouthNet receives funding from DE through a pilot Service Level Agreement (SLA) with YCNI. In 2006-07 YouthNet received £90,868 in support of YCNI's directed activities and £454,000 to enable YouthNet to ensure the participation of the voluntary youth sector in youth service groups and committees, and to engage in a range of strategic activities representing the interest of its members. In 2006-07 YouthNet generated £124,235 from non-statutory sources.

1.5 At the time of the inspection, YouthNet had recently moved to rented, modern and well-equipped accommodation in central Belfast. Staff reported that the new venue created a greater sense of cohesion and collegiality. The core staff team consists of a Director and two Deputy Directors. The organisation has taken on responsibility for the delivery of additional services including the European Peace 2 and Peace 2 Extension Funding, The Big Deal programme (Big Deal), and the Cross-Sectoral Child Protection Initiative. A further ten members of staff have been recruited to help deliver these services.

1.6 The staff and Executive Committee members of YouthNet have worked together to produce a well-focused strategic direction for the organisation. The operational plan for the period 2007-08 has clearly stated aims, expected outcomes and priorities; it also includes a clear organisational structure, with devolved staff responsibilities, expected key outputs and implementation dates. There is evidence that YouthNet's internal management systems, including their financial efficacy and the monitoring and evaluation of projects, are robust and fit for purpose.

1.7 YouthNet's capacity to become the Northern Ireland Big Lottery Fund Award Partner for the delivery of the Young People's Fund was assessed and successfully endorsed through the 'four stage due diligence process' undertaken by the Big Lottery Fund UK Audit Manager in 2005. YouthNet also received formal recognition as an Investor In People in 2005.

1.8 YouthNet staff and members of the Executive Committee represent the interest of its members on a range of strategic bodies including the Youth Service Liaison Forum (YSLF), the YSLF implementation sub groups, and the Youth Work Training Board.

## **2. INSPECTION METHODOLOGY**

2.1 The evidence for this report has been gathered by a team of four members of the Education and Training Inspectorate (Inspectorate) assisted by an associate assessor. The Inspectorate held discussions with all the staff as well as with members of the Executive Committee. There were meetings with a representative sample of organisations which are members of YouthNet, and discussions with local groups that have used YouthNet services as well as with key stakeholders including DE, YCNI and the Education and Library Boards. In total, there were discussions with 50 individuals, from a range of member organisations and others.

2.2 The Inspectorate examined the three aims of YouthNet as set out in detail in the organisation's current operational plan.

1. Provide an effective voice for the voluntary sector.
2. Support our members to develop best practice and quality standards.
3. Ensure organisational effectiveness.

Prior to the inspection YouthNet prepared a wide range of relevant and well-presented documentation which was examined by the inspection team.

2.3 The Inspectorate is also evaluating specific programmes which have been developed and are being managed by YouthNet. These include the Cross-Sectoral Child Protection Initiative, funded through the Children and Young People Fund 2006-08, and Big Deal funded by the Big Lottery. YouthNet is the lead organisation in Big Deal, which is a new £4m programme in Northern Ireland targeted at children and young people up to 25 years of age. In 2006 YouthNet was appointed by the YSLF to co-ordinate the Cross-Sectoral Child Protection Initiative.

## **3. SUMMARY OF MAIN FINDINGS**

3.1 The strengths identified during the inspection include:

- the organisation's ability to engage effectively, over a long period of time, with Government Departments, local authorities and other agencies, in contributing to the formation of youth policy for Northern Ireland;

- the effectiveness of the organisation to act as an advocate on behalf of the voluntary youth sector and its ability to analyse and comment on the many social, economic and political factors that impact on young people in Northern Ireland;
- the excellent administration and financial skills that the organisation demonstrates in effectively managing multi-million pound programmes such as the European Peace 2;
- the organisation's use of information and communication technology (ICT), including Epipe, a monthly electronic newsletter, to communicate effectively with others and, in particular, with its membership base;
- the ability to support its member organisations in delivering relevant, high quality services to young people and their leaders, including advice on governance, finance and effective leadership, as well as specialised support with initiatives such as faith-based youth work, Child Protection work and work with Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) groups;
- a highly motivated staff team which works energetically and skilfully to maintain high standards and to promote the interests of the member organisations;
- the dedication and leadership of the senior management team in its constant efforts to promote better services for children and young people across Northern Ireland; and
- the invaluable voluntary contribution of the members of the Executive Committee whose commitment, energy, skills and leadership enhance the strategic development of the organisation, and support effectively the promotion of quality services for young people in Northern Ireland.

3.2 The areas for development identified by YouthNet itself and endorsed by the inspection include the need to:

- demonstrate more clearly how YouthNet represents and responds to the views of the members, including their input to the current strategic direction of the organisation;
- further develop its own processes for self-evaluation; and
- implement a more formal and agreed appraisal system for all staff.

3.3 The inspection found that the current pilot SLA between YouthNet and YCNI lacks suitable and adequate quality assurance procedures. It is recommended that the SLA should be reviewed by DE, YCNI and YouthNet to ensure it is fit for purpose, sets appropriate goals, and that it produces genuine benefits for all three parties and, more importantly, for the young people.

#### 4. **CONCLUSION**

The organisation has major strengths in representing and promoting the voluntary youth sector within Northern Ireland. The member organisations and funders can have confidence in the organisation's capacity for sustained self-improvement. No follow-up inspection is required.

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