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*The Education and Training Inspectorate -
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Department of Education
Department for Employment and Learning
Department of Culture, Arts and Leisure



INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

Education and Training Inspectorate

Report of an Inspection

Greenhill Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA)
Outdoor Education Centre, Newcastle

Inspected: February 2009

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1. CONTEXT AND BACKGROUND

1.1 Greenhill Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA) Outdoor Education Centre is situated just outside the town of Newcastle in County Down. The centre is owned and managed by the National Council of YMCAs of Ireland. The centre's geographical position, on the slopes of Slieve Donard, makes it a good site for accessing a wide range of outdoor activities. Since opening in the 1930s, the centre's facilities have been developed to include chalet accommodation, camping accommodation and a serviced camp site. Last year 72 residential places were added to the accommodation. The centre receives approximately 11% of its annual funding from the Department of Education (DE) through a core grant from the Youth Council for Northern Ireland. In addition, DE has supplied capital grants in support of major development work undertaken by the centre.

1.2 The day-to-day operation of the centre is managed by a director, supported by a programmes manager, a site manager and a small number of full-time permanent instructors. A large team of full-time temporary volunteers from Australia, the Czech Republic, Germany, Jamaica, Spain, the Philippines, the United States of America, and Northern Ireland supplement the work of the centre. At the time of the inspection, the international volunteers were at various stages of training to prepare them to work with the children and young people who use the centre. An effective team of office and ancillary staff, co-ordinated efficiently by an office manager, provides administrative support and maintains the equipment and buildings to a high standard. In addition, the work of the centre is supported well by a management committee made up of people from a range of appropriate backgrounds.

1.3 The centre aims to assist young people in their physical, social, mental and spiritual development, through challenging programmes that are based appropriately on the learning outcomes identified in the curriculum document, 'Youth Work: A Model for Effective Practice'. The centre has placed a suitable focus on community relations (CR) work, to develop further the learning opportunities for those who use the facilities.

1.4 Figures provided by the centre show that in the last year 7,711 young people used the facilities and participated in the wide range of programmes. Over the last three years, there has been a steady increase in the numbers of young people using the centre.

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 The inspection team visited ten programmes which were identified as being typical of the learning experiences on offer at this time of the year. The inspectors met and talked to the centre's director, the programmes and site managers, the instructors and the international volunteers who facilitated the majority of the programmes observed. The activities observed included: problem-solving activities with two local primary schools engaged in a CR programme, two active learning sessions conducted in German and Spanish with a local post-primary school, and a programme for adults with special educational needs. During the weekend of the inspection, the inspectors met with a youth group engaged in a peer education CR programme and a team of boys involved in a cross-community youth soccer initiative.

3. QUALITY OF THE PROVISION

3.1 The ethos of the centre is very good. There is a developing team-spirit and a welcoming, supportive atmosphere evident to visitors. This is an inclusive organisation, with an important focus on establishing good working relationships with the local community and further afield. Importantly, the centre staff has worked hard to establish a good reputation as an advocate for CR work; this important work is recognised and valued by the local politicians and mediation facilitators with whom the inspectors spoke during the inspection.

3.2 Recent changes to the organisational structure of the centre have the potential to develop clearer lines of communication between the centre staff and the visiting groups. As a culture of self-evaluation continues to develop, it will be important that the planning focuses more explicitly on the particular learning needs of the children and young people who participate in the residential and day programmes.

3.3 The personal and team development of the international volunteers is an important element of the work of the centre. The volunteers support effectively the range of experiences which are offered to the various groups. From the sessions observed the volunteers are developing their skills and qualifications to good standards. They contribute well to promoting further opportunities for the young people to develop positive attitudes, skills and values when working together towards common goals.

3.4 There are excellent working relationships among the centre staff, the visiting staff and the programme participants. The children, young people and adults are highly motivated and respond enthusiastically to the planned activities. For example, in the modern languages programme for a local post-primary school, the visiting teacher has a clear understanding of the learning outcomes expected of the majority of the pupils. The activities include a variety of problem-solving games that effectively promote thinking skills and language development. In these sessions, the volunteer instructors develop a range of appropriate teaching skills, modelled by the accompanying teacher, to support the pupils. The pupils extend their vocabulary and use it effectively as they complete their tasks. The primary school children who take part in the Personal Development and Mutual Understanding programme know one another well; they work effectively together to achieve common goals and develop the skills required to work in teams. A weekly programme for adults with special educational needs teaches them new skills associated with cooking outdoors and the participants work well together in teams.

3.5 The quality of teaching in all the sessions observed ranged from satisfactory to very good. In the best practice, the well-planned individual sessions included a range of relevant learning opportunities which engaged and motivated the children and young people. The appropriate use of group work promoted effectively the learners' talking and listening skills. There is a need to develop further the opportunities for participants to reflect on their learning and to consider ways in which they might organise their own learning to improve their understanding and skills.

3.6 The centre continues to develop a range of appropriate methods to evaluate the programmes that they offer to participants. The staff use a range of sources to gather evidence and reflect on the quality of their work. The centre management has identified appropriately the need to use their analysis of the qualitative and quantitative data more effectively to inform their planning.

3.7 The safety of the participants is given a high priority; the instructors encourage visitors to take appropriate levels of responsibility for themselves and for each other during the activities. They encourage the participants to make themselves aware of any dangers and to learn how to keep themselves and others safe.

3.8 The quality of the accommodation and resources is good. The range of equipment is suitable and is maintained well. Appropriate procedures are in place for identifying any deficiencies in the accommodation and equipment that might affect the health and safety of the staff and the programme participants. There is an effective system for recording accidents and incidents of concern.

3.9 A pastoral care and child protection policy, including a useful code of conduct for staff, is in place and kept under review, in line with the most recent updates to the YMCA policy guidelines. The centre has identified the need to ensure that their pastoral care and child protection procedures complement the policies operated by the various groups.

3.10 The director provides very good leadership, based on his knowledge of, and vision for, the work of the centre. He has developed an effective collegial approach to promoting improvement, based on a rigorous approach to self-evaluation. Clear lines of communication have been established among all members of the Greenhill team, and between the Greenhill team and the various user groups. Importantly, the centre continues to embed a culture of self-evaluation and to develop strategies to monitor, evaluate and inform the centre's operational plan.

4. **CONCLUSION**

4.1 The inspection has identified many significant strengths in the work of the centre. The strengths of the provision include:

- the strategic support provided by the National Council in managing recent organisational change, that supports the ethos of the YMCA and promotes improvement within the centre;
- the very good leadership provided by the director of the centre;
- the outstanding quality of the external links with the local and wider community, which effectively promote good community relations and deal confidently with contentious issues;
- the continuing development of Greenhill YMCA as a learning organisation, with a clear focus on meeting the learning needs of the volunteers and the young people who use the centre;
- the inclusive focus of the work, in particular the quality of the work with adults with special educational needs; and
- the progression of participants in the knowledge and understanding of themselves, and of others, in the outdoor environment.

4.2 In the areas inspected, the quality of education provided by this organisation is very good. The organisation is meeting very effectively the educational and pastoral needs of the participants, and has demonstrated its capacity for sustained self-improvement.

HEALTH AND SAFETY

- The security of the site, in terms of the participants' safety requirements, needs to be kept under review.

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