

Report of a Pilot Inspection  
Rathcoole Youth Centre

June 2024



## Contents

1. INTRODUCTION .....	1
A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION.....	1
B. VIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS AND STAFF.....	1
C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION .....	2
2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS .....	2
3. MAIN REPORT.....	4
A. SETTING THE VISION.....	4
B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION .....	4
C. BUILDING EQUITY.....	5
D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS.....	6
E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING.....	7
F. CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTION .....	8
4. GOING FORWARD .....	8
5. APPENDICES.....	9
APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS .....	9
APPENDIX 2: NOTES.....	10

# **1. INTRODUCTION**

## **A. BACKGROUND INFORMATION**

Rathcoole Youth Centre is a statutory provision located at the heart of the Rathcoole area of Newtownabbey. As a Neighbourhood Renewal Area, the Rathcoole community faces significant social deprivation which is recognised in the Education Authority's (EA) Local Assessment of Need and which informs Rathcoole Youth Centre's planning and provision. As Rathcoole is located close to an interface, tensions and conflict remain issues that can affect the lives of young people in the community.

The well-resourced centre has recently benefitted from two phases of refurbishment. Almost all of the former accommodation was re-purposed to provide more practical and attractive spaces for the planned programmes. The significant additions include, for example: a new kitchen with an island worktop for demonstrations; a sensory room; an art room; a range of break-out rooms suited to a variety of activities; and, in response to the voice of the senior members, a dedicated room for seniors only. The young people's access to the refurbished accommodation was prioritised in this work: as a result, the administrative rooms were moved to the first floor.

A key development in staffing was the appointment of a full-time centre-based worker, in line with the EA's vision and strategy. However, this appointment was followed by the loss of supporting workers in charge. As a result, the centre-based worker is running the programmes with six part-time staff supplemented by others on an area-based relief register of substitute staff. Among the part-time staff, there is an even split of longer-term and more recent appointments which makes for a blend of experience and new ideas.

## **B. VIEWS OF YOUNG PEOPLE, PARENTS AND STAFF**

In discussions with four focus groups of young people, they all spoke positively about the centre. Typically, the junior members commented that belonging to Rathcoole Youth Centre 'feels like family' and that they can talk to any of the staff about their concerns; they enjoy the activities and value the opportunities to make new friends and become more confident. Senior members spoke positively about their involvement in targeted programmes which enables them to gain accredited qualifications and valuable life skills, as well as the friendships they have forged through attendance and the support of the staff at every stage of their membership.

A small number of parents met with inspectors. They spoke positively about: the range of programmes provided by the Rathcoole Youth Centre staff; the local, national and international visits and residentials which broaden their children's experience; and the nurturing of their children's confidence and social skills. They recognised the staff's commitment to building open, trusting working relationships with children and young people, enabling them to develop socially and, as appropriate, progress to becoming junior volunteers. Parents report that they are well informed about the arrangements for safeguarding in the centre and are confident that their children are safe and secure.

Throughout the inspection, the staff also spoke appreciatively of the accommodation and resources, their own professional development and how much they enjoy working with the young people. They value the support of the centre's leadership and enjoy being part of the Rathcoole Youth Centre team.

## **C. THE PROCESS OF INSPECTION**

The Education and Training Inspectorate (ETI) worked alongside the centre to consider how well the centre:

- has identified and articulates its vision;
- prioritises actions to achieve the vision;
- overcomes the main challenges it faces;
- monitors and reviews progression to identify, celebrate and embed success; and
- grows and develops an inclusive community of learning.

## **2. SUMMARY OF KEY FINDINGS**

- The vision for Rathcoole Youth Centre is appropriately informed by the EA's Local Assessment of Need and by consultation with the young people and staff. It is holistic in its goal to provide a warm, safe space where the young people's basic needs are met and where they can develop valuable life skills.
- There is a culture of respect and positive values that is adhered to by all ages and reflected in the junior members' motto: 'Be kind, be safe, be respectful and put rubbish in the bin; have fun.' The young people engaged confidently with inspectors and explained how much they value their connection with Rathcoole Youth Centre.
- The youth work curriculum is responsive to the young people's interests and needs and provides significant breadth of opportunity for learning and participation through the junior youth club, and targeted programmes for intermediate and senior members.
- A wide range of sessions across the full age range of provision were observed. All were effective in engaging the young people and achieving the intended outcomes.
- The sessions were characterised by positive and supportive working relationships, based on mutual respect. The young people trust the staff and, as a result, respond openly and honestly in discussions about sensitive issues.

- The provision of a Young Mums' Group fulfils an important need in the community, where young mums benefit from sharing their experiences with others of a similar age and in similar situations, supported by a staff member. In response to the changing local context, it is timely to explore the provision of a second group for other young mums.
- The young people engaging in the Together Building a United Community (T-BUC) programme develop trust and understanding with young people from another community: their friendships are developing well as they participate together in the programme. They approach their joint learning with maturity, self-awareness and respect for others.
- There is a well-established culture of learning in Rathcoole Youth Centre where members interested in developing leadership skills, as well as staff, are supported to gain experience and access accredited leadership courses up to and including degree level.
- The evidence provided by the centre demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection align to the current statutory guidance. The staff would benefit from professional learning and training by the EA in developing the adult safeguarding arrangements in the youth environment.
- Parents value the range of programmes provided by the staff; the local, national and international visits and residentials which broaden their children's experience; and the nurturing of their children's confidence and social skills.
- The staff are inclusive and responsive, working sensitively with young people who have additional needs, or who experience social and communication difficulties, to help them overcome barriers, develop skills for life and celebrate success and progress.
- The young people's successes are celebrated both formally and informally, from graduation ceremonies to youth worker affirmations during weekly sessions. The recognition is invaluable in helping to raise self-esteem and promote enjoyment of learning.

#### Areas for action:

- with a newly established staff team and high numbers of junior members, it is timely to review the transition from juniors to seniors, including the strategies to increase retention, and to support wider recruitment;
- to consider creative, flexible ways to celebrate more prominently the young people's sporting, cultural and social successes in displays within the centre and through social media; and
- in response to the changing local context and the identified need in the locality, it is timely to explore the provision of a second group for other young mums.

### **3. MAIN REPORT**

#### **A. SETTING THE VISION**

The vision statement for the centre has recently been established: it is informed by the Local Assessment of Need and by consultation with the young people and staff. The vision is, firstly, 'to provide a safe, warm space' where the young people's basic needs are met. This goal forms the foundation on which the young people are able to achieve the other goals articulated in the vision, namely to: develop essential life and learning skills, including decision-making and leadership; broaden their horizons; understand the importance of values; and build relationships characterised by trust and mutual respect.

Through consultation, the junior members have drawn up a set of values and expressed them in their own words: 'Be kind, be respectful, be safe, put rubbish in the bin, have fun!' The evidence from the sessions observed indicates that the junior members take these values to heart and live them out through their respectful relationships with staff and peers. Their behaviour in all the sessions observed was consistently good. Another significant outworking of these values is their respect for the building and resources which are treated with care and maintained to a very high standard. As the children's values indicate, fun is central to the provision and to their experience at Rathcoole Youth Centre.

The staff work collectively to create a culture where the young people know that 'it's OK to talk' about their concerns and immediate needs. This openness is underpinned by the trust established between the staff and young people. All staff know the young people well, prioritise their wellbeing and respond promptly to any concerns raised.

#### **B. IMPLEMENTING AND IMPROVING TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

The youth work curriculum is based firmly on the overarching goals articulated in the centre's vision. It is responsive to the young people's needs and is adjusted in light of their feedback, gathered formally and informally, and from the views of staff delivering the programmes.

In the sessions, the young people choose to take part in staff-led, structured activities and in informal activities individually or with friends. This freedom of choice is valued by juniors in particular. The programme on any given evening will include an appropriate blend of physical and musical activities, other games, opportunities to be creative, cookery, life skills and socialising with friends. In the words of a young person in discussion with inspectors, '*There are thousands of opportunities*'.

The breadth of the curriculum is demonstrated in the targeted provision. This provision is suitably varied and includes, for example: healthy eating, the EA's Horizons leadership programme and the Together: Building a United Community (T:BUC) initiative which involves young people from Rathcoole Youth Centre in a joint programme with their peers in a West Belfast youth centre.

All of the sessions observed were effective in engaging the young people and developing their thinking and social skills. The sessions were characterised by warm and supportive working relationships, based on mutual respect, between the young people and staff. It is evident that the staff know the young people well and respond sensitively to their needs, enabling all members to participate and enjoy being involved. The lack of mobile phone use during the sessions was an indicator of the level of active participation by the young people. The young people trust the staff and, as a result, respond openly and honestly in discussions about issues such as personal identity and belonging to a particular culture. Staff should now consider how 'check-outs' at the end of specific sessions may be used more effectively to help the participants gain a fuller understanding of their learning and how it has added to their development.

The leaders have established sound processes for consultation with staff, including the monitoring and evaluation of programmes. Most of the written reflections by staff are detailed and insightful; they reflect the quality of the oral de-briefs at the end of each session. In a minority of staff reflections, the comments are overly positive and need a sharper focus on aspects of the provision that can be adjusted for the benefit of the young people. This aspect of monitoring remains an appropriate focus for leadership, especially with a view to establishing consistent evaluations by all staff, including those on the relief register.

### **C. BUILDING EQUITY**

The range of learning experiences available to all young people is rich and varied. It includes the opportunity to participate in activities with friends, obtain qualifications and travel in and beyond the UK through funded programmes. Accessing additional external funding, complemented by pro-active fund-raising by the young people, parents and staff, makes national and international trips affordable for all.

The staff are pro-active and respond sensitively to young people who have additional needs or who experience social and communication difficulties. Through skilful interactions and discreet support, the staff support individuals to integrate with their peers and enable them to engage in a wide range of activities. In this way, the staff help them overcome barriers and develop skills they will need in later life. Their progress is recognised and celebrated by staff whose positive, affirming comments encourage the young people and build their confidence.

Sessions led by the EA's Outdoor Learning Service enable young people to benefit from a range of activities beyond their community and everyday experience, including: mountain biking, kayaking, canoeing, archery and hill walking. These activities support the young peoples' wellbeing and contribute to fostering their interest in the outdoors, while gaining accreditation or certificates recognising their participation and development of new skills.

As part of the T- BUC programme, the young people learn together about their own and other cultures; they explore issues of personal and community identity with their peers from a youth centre in West Belfast. The programme includes a residential which enables the young people to come together outside each community and break down perceived barriers, learn from one another and build friendships. In supporting the development of their Local Voice, this group of young people visited youth centres in Glasgow and the Scottish parliament in Edinburgh to learn about participative structures and active participation in decision-making.

The staff listen to the young people, are responsive to their interests and are proactive in meeting their needs. There are formal processes for evaluation at the conclusion of programmes, including through the regular use of QR codes to facilitate immediate evaluations by the young people. The young people report that, if they ask for something, the staff will try to make it happen. This readiness to respond indicates that the young people play an active role in decision-making. The staff recognise that the Local Voice initiative is at an early stage: in order to enhance the young people's participation in decision-making, it will be important to develop further the young people's understanding of this process, as well as their thinking and communication skills.

The Young Mums' Group which takes place in the centre's sensory room, with age-appropriate toys for the children, is very well attended and the members benefit from meeting mums of a similar age who share similar experiences. It provides a unique opportunity to develop friendships and be a member of a highly valued support network. In response to the changing local context and the identified need in the locality, it is timely to explore the provision of a second group for other young mums.

#### **D. EMBEDDING SUCCESS**

The centre provides a safe, warm and welcoming environment where young people are nurtured, encouraged and provided with very relevant learning experiences and opportunities to develop life skills. The young people feel at ease in the inclusive community within the centre where they experience a sense of belonging. Most importantly, they feel secure, valued and listened to by the staff.

It is notable that a significant proportion of the staff attended the centre themselves and recognise the impact of Rathcoole Youth Centre on their own transition to adulthood. As a result, they have a high level of loyalty and commitment to the work of the centre. The staff establish appropriate expectations for behaviour and act as effective adult role models, particularly in demonstrating social and leadership skills: as the young people progress from juniors to seniors, their appreciation of the leaders often leads them to aspire to volunteer and, later, progress to a career in youth work.

The junior members represent the largest group in the youth club, with 40-60 young people attending regularly. The suitably wide and balanced range of structured and free choice activities contribute well to meeting their physical, social and emotional needs. The young people recognise that their participation in this purposeful and positive youth work increases their confidence and improves their communication skills.

The young people aged 15 -17 involved in the year-long Horizons leadership project display maturity, confidence and determination to overcome potential barriers to succeed. The group is accepting and supportive of one another as they work towards accredited qualifications, including preparation for an international trip to Annecy, France, with members of other Horizons groups from across Northern Ireland.



Success is celebrated at: graduation ceremonies for young people completing the Horizons programme through; young person of the week awards and certificates; informal events initiated by the staff at the end of discrete programmes; and also through thoughtful gestures such as the giving of 'thank you' cards for volunteers made during art sessions by the juniors. The outcome of these events is a cohesive community of young people who understand their own roles and responsibilities towards others: the impact on raising self-esteem is also significant. However, there are limited displays of the young people's successes and achievements around the building and on social media: the management and leadership need to consider creative, flexible ways to celebrate more prominently the young people's sporting, cultural and social successes in displays within the centre and through social media.

## **E. GROWING A COMMUNITY OF LEARNING**

Through the experiences and opportunities provided by Rathcoole Youth Centre, in collaboration with other youth groups and external providers, the young people gain a broader outlook on life, and develop enhanced skills to build positive relationships and contribute positively to society. The staff identify the needs of the young people and access training or external support to help address these needs, from such external providers as Suicide Awareness, Play Board and Deaf Awareness.

In order to address the needs of young men in the community, a staff member has received training in Y-BOX, a model for engaging young men on the theme of masculinity and associated perceptions, delivered by a specialist regional youth worker and staff from Queen's University Belfast. This model has already had a positive impact on participants. The Creative Arts and Digital Innovation (CADI) programme also provides professional tuition in podcasting and photography while importantly giving a voice to young men to express themselves and engage in meaningful discussions with their peers.

A significant minority, approximately one-third, of senior members are involved in the Horizons programme, which enables them to gain OCN\* qualifications. Assistant and part-time staff are informed of the appropriate pathways to leadership and are supported as they work towards the Youth Support Worker Qualification, with some going on to degree level in youth work. These opportunities enable the young people and staff to combine personal and professional development with potential career progression.

*Throughout the report, where text is accompanied by an asterisk, this indicates that additional information can be found in Appendix 2: Notes.*

From age 13, young people can volunteer to help the staff lead junior sessions. These young volunteers exhibit a strong social conscience and develop a wider sense of responsibility and active citizenship. They report that they enjoy volunteering, learn directly from the staff and appreciate the opportunity to learn new skills. They all aspire to work with children and young people in some capacity when they are older.

There is a strong community focus on the work of the centre to dissuade young people from antisocial behaviour and, instead, engage in constructive activities. The PSNI's 'Pizza with Peelers' initiative has been effective in changing young people's perceptions of the police and, as part of the centre's preventative work, address dangerous and risk-taking behaviours among the young people. In addition, PSNI

and Youth Justice provide a joint workshop for young people to raise awareness of their role and the work they do within the community and beyond. The Youth Volunteer Academy delivered by Youth Services in partnership with the PSNI and Ambulance Service and supported by the Northern Ireland Fire Service, has been particularly beneficial.

The centre acts as a hub where not only Rathcoole Youth Centre's own youth worker is based, but also the area youth workers and their team leader, as well as the Engage worker and the Outdoor Learning Service worker. This arrangement allows for joint planning, the regular sharing of information and informal sharing of good practice. Agendas for end-of-month area team meetings include formal opportunities to share good practice in various aspects of youth work.

Rathcoole Youth Centre staff are members of the Thrive\* Project Board which facilitates closer links between EA, the Department of Justice and the Department of Health to identify priorities which inform the centre's planning - for example, the introduction of the TAKE 5\* steps to well-being initiative. Rathcoole Youth Centre's participation in Thrive's Youth and Community sub-group has helped others in the community appreciate more fully the work carried out in the centre as well as helping centre staff gain a clearer insight into the community needs and the importance of having a thriving youth work response at the heart of the community.

#### **F. CHILD AND ADULT PROTECTION**

At the time of the inspection, the evidence provided by the centre demonstrates that the arrangements for child protection take full account of current guidance. The young people report that they feel safe and secure in the centre; parents report that they are confident that their children's wellbeing is a priority for staff. The staff would benefit from professional learning and training by the EA in developing the adult safeguarding arrangements in the youth environment.

#### **4. GOING FORWARD**

The young people attending Rathcoole Youth Centre benefit from a broad and relevant youth work curriculum, delivered effectively by the staff, supported by a range of external providers as appropriate. The young people enjoy the full range of programmes and appreciate how their confidence and skills are being developed through active participation in youth services.

ETI will continue to work with the centre as it takes forward the areas for further action detailed above and in the body of this report.

## 5. APPENDICES

### APPENDIX 1: QUANTITATIVE TERMS

In this report, proportions may be described as percentages, common fractions and in more general quantitative terms. Where more general terms are used, they should be interpreted as follows:

Almost/nearly all	-	more than 90%
Most	-	75% - 90%
A majority	-	50% - 74%
A significant minority	-	30% - 49%
A minority	-	10% - 29%
Very few/a small number	-	less than 10%

## **APPENDIX 2: NOTES**

### **Page 7 OCN\***

The Open College Network Northern Ireland (OCN NI) is a UK-recognised Awarding Organisation based in Northern Ireland. It is regulated by CCEA Regulation to develop and award regulated professional and technical (vocational) qualifications from Entry Level up to and including Level 5 across all sector areas. In addition, OCN NI is also regulated by Ofqual to award similar qualifications in England.

### **Page 8 Thrive\***

Thrive is a collaboration of local parents, schools, community groups and statutory and voluntary organisations working together to help children and young people in Rathcoole and Monkstown do well.

### **Page 8 TAKE 5\***

TAKE 5 is a programme initiated by the Public Health Agency and supported by the EA to promote wellbeing. Organisations volunteer to participate in the programme.

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