

SOLAS Response to the Findings of the Evaluation of the National Youthreach Programme

May 2019

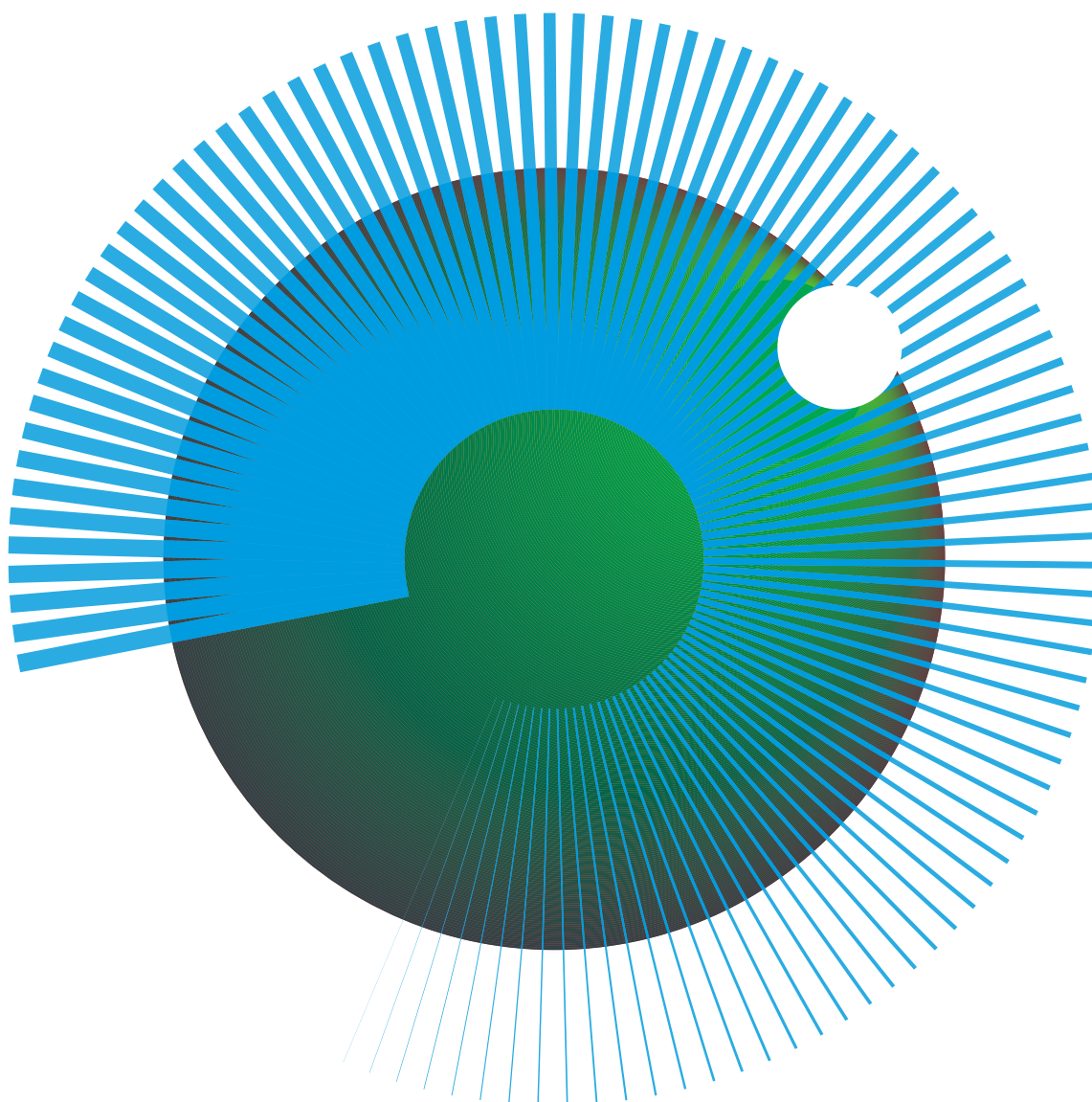


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Section 1

Introduction

SOLAS is the authority responsible for planning, funding and co-ordinating Further Education and Training (FET) in Ireland. Its vision is for FET programmes to be recognised for their demonstrable benefits for learners, enterprise and communities, where FET is valued for its effectiveness and quality, playing an integral role in helping Ireland achieve its ambition of the best education and training service in Europe. SOLAS is charged with a range of responsibilities including:

- Supporting the development and implementation of further education and training strategy
- Funding of the FET system to maximise the impact of state investment
- Overseeing the development and implementation of the Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and each Education and Training Board (ETB) which set out 3 year plans to further embed a strategic and integrated FET system
- Statutory responsibility for the apprenticeship system
- Analysing the labour market and identifying and anticipating key skills needs, and
- Promoting the standing of Further Education and Training

The formation of SOLAS and Education and Training Boards (ETBs) in 2013 brought the further education and training sectors together for the first time under a devolved delivery model. There followed a natural establishment phase to ensure structures, roles and responsibilities within the respective organisations were aligned with the policy, economic and social objectives which the FET system was designed to serve. Planning and learner tracking systems were put in place to facilitate understanding, monitoring and appropriate funding of FET activities across ETBs.

One of the key concerns within the new system was the plethora of different programmes (26 in total) which made the landscape confusing for learners and potential learners, and scope for a simplified approach was recognised from the outset. As a first step, integrated approaches to managing FET provision across programmes and services were put in place in ETBs, and the appointment

of Directors of Further Education and Training in each ETB gave this further drive and focus. The development of strategic performance agreements in 2018 has now also provided a means to harness policy, strategies, targets, labour market insight and a continuing process of programme evaluation and improvement to set out a clear direction for ETB development from which annual plans can then flow and be linked to resource allocations. An overview of their role within the FET strategic planning system is set out in the diagram over the page.

The focus on continual evaluation and improvement has been a key feature from the launch of the first integrated strategy for further education and training in 2014. Under Goal 4: Strategic Objective 4.4, SOLAS committed to a schedule of independent evaluations of key lines of FET provision to test their effectiveness in delivering on objectives and providing value for learners. The National Youthreach Programme formed part of this evaluation schedule, following on from one undertaken of the Post-Leaving Certificate (PLC) programme (response published in January 2018), with a study on VTOS and Specific Skills Training (SST) also ongoing. It is intended to build on this programme specific analysis with more cross-cutting strategic assessments of FET during 2019, beginning with a review of overall FET provision at Levels 3 to 4 on the National Framework of Qualifications.

Following a competitive tendering process, the ESRI was awarded the contract to conduct an independent Youthreach evaluation throughout 2018, with the final report submitted to SOLAS in December. ESRI's core task was to generate policy-relevant knowledge concerning the outputs and outcomes of Youthreach and the effectiveness of this provision. This has now provided a platform by which SOLAS can set out our response, dealing not only with how the knowledge produced can improve the Youthreach programme itself, but also how it can inform further development in the context of an evolving and integrated FET landscape.



Policy Framework
National Skills Strategy and overall FET strategy provides framework for development and delivery of FET, with a 3 year Action Plan for Education consolidating commitments across a suite of Government strategies.

Sectoral Targets
Minister for Education and Skills sets core targets across employment progression; accreditation; lifelong learning; learner numbers; and traineeships and these are embedded within SOLAS Corporate Plan.

NPF & Regional Development
Active Inclusion Strategies
Literacy & Numeracy
Professional Development
Technology Enhanced Learning
Apprenticeship
Employee Development
Learner Voice



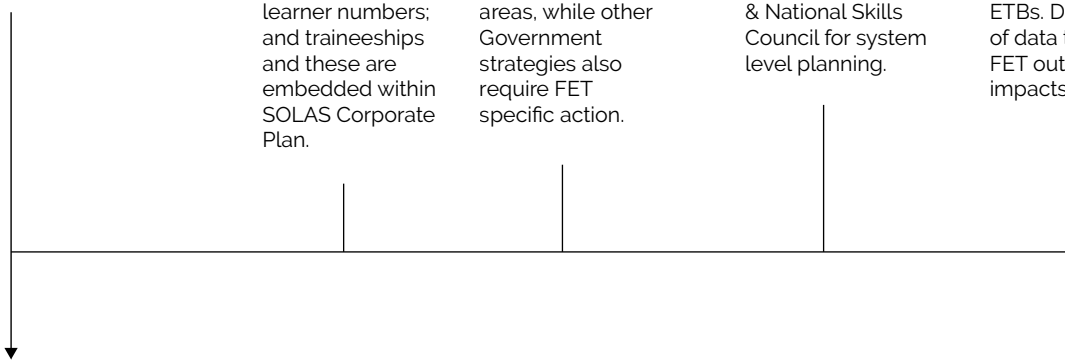
FET Relevant Strategies
A range of horizontal strategies are in place to support the development of the FET sector in particular areas, while other Government strategies also require FET specific action.

Skills/Labour Market Research & Foresight
SLMRU analysis of skills needs and emerging labour market trends. Feeds into work of Regional Skills Fora & National Skills Council for system level planning.



PLC
Youthreach
VTOS/SST
BTEI
ETB Impact
PLSS/CSO
Learner Impact

FET Provision Evaluation & Improvement Programmes
Evaluation of FET provision lead to improvement programmes for implementation by ETBs. Development of data to establish FET outcomes and impacts.



Strategic Performance Agreements
Based on agreed ETB contribution to sectoral targets & in delivering a range of horizontal strategies, demonstrating unique ETB characteristics, priorities and contribution to FET provision. Assessed & validated by international expert panel.



Annual Funding & Priorities
Previous years performance reviewed. Additional annual Government priorities are set and annual funding allocated by DES. Performance Delivery Agreement agreed between SOLAS and DES.



Annual ETB Planning Process
SOLAS issues annual Planning Parameters & Guidelines and each ETB makes planning submission in line with this setting out projected FET provision during year.



Funding Allocation Process to ETBs
SOLAS agree annual commitment across each programme from each ETB and makes adjustments in line with actual provision, including a mid-year review. Annual services plan produced setting out overall provision.



Section 2

The National Youthreach Programme

Youthreach was launched in 1988 as a joint initiative of the Department of Education and Science and the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The programme aims to help unemployed early school leavers without any qualifications or vocational training make the transition from school to work through the provision of up to two years of co-ordinated foundation training, education and work experience. Youthreach is flexible and adapts accredited and non-accredited provision to reflect prior educational level and broader learner needs, with a continuous intake model. It is primarily delivered via two strands under Education and Training Board (ETB) management, by Youthreach centres and by Community Training Centres (CTCs), with different governance, funding and oversight arrangements in respect of each strand. There are 147 centres around Ireland offering the Youthreach programme, with each accommodating an average of around 50 learners, reflecting the intensive, small group learning approach which characterises provision.

SOLAS provides funding on an annual basis to ETBs to support Youthreach provision alongside other further education and training activities. Youthreach receives funding from the European Social Fund under Priority 2 (social inclusion and equal opportunities). It is primarily viewed as a programme to facilitate

learner progression, and it is categorised as such within the national FET system target of increasing progression to other education and training opportunities by 10% from relevant programmes over the period 2018-2020. Funding allocated to ETBs in recognition of respective levels of Youthreach provision is shown in the table below, with the overall number of individuals starting the programme each year also provided. While actual reported Youthreach starter data for 2018 is not yet available and was not considered as part of the evaluation, ETB planning submissions during the year suggest that there was another substantial fall in demand.

It is important to recognise that Youthreach is also perceived as an opportunity for 'second chance' education and is a key element of the Government's National Youth Guarantee, which must provide young people under the age of 25 with a good quality offer of employment, continued education, an apprenticeship or a traineeship within a short time of becoming unemployed. As such, there is a strong focus across providers on softer skills that will not only facilitate vocational-based progression to education and training and employment, but also develop personal and social capabilities to facilitate active inclusion throughout a learner's lifetime.

Funding Data from SOLAS FET Services Plan		
Year	Funding Allocated	No. Starting Youthreach
2015	€105.4million	7,968
2016	€101.8million	7,048
2017	€98.7million	7,104

Source: Funding data from SOLAS FET Services Plan. Youthreach starters from FARR ETB Planning Database

Section 3

Key Research Findings

Overall the ESRI's evaluation found that there remains a strong rationale for interventions like Youthreach as a mechanism to address social exclusion and that the programme is closely aligned with, and similar to, other international approaches. The extensive qualitative and quantitative research demonstrated the benefits of the Youthreach programme, but also raised some issues around demand, geographic distribution and governance. In summary the evaluation found:

- Clear evidence of positive outcomes for Youthreach participants in terms of progression to employment as well as to other education and training opportunities.
- Small group learning with a range of supports in community settings has proven to be an effective model for participants.
- Positive effects derived from the level of flexibility in individual centres to respond to learner needs, justifying different localised models and approaches.
- Clear and distinct value in provision provided in both the Youthreach centre and CTC context. Youthreach centres are more structured and integrated with wider further education and training while Community Training Centres are linked more closely to community organisations and can draw on such resources.
- A decline in demand for Youthreach of 11% over the period 2015-2017 as the economy has continued to improve, coupled with the long-term trend of decline in the early school leaving rate.
- Uneven geographical distribution of Youthreach provision and the close proximity of centres in particular areas, together with the fact that decline in demand has not been uniform across all regions and centres.
- A more marginalised cohort presenting for Youthreach requiring higher support needs.
- In terms of participant certification, QQI Levels 3 and 4 are the most common forms of provision although some centres offer Level 2 and Leaving Certificate Applied. A small number of centres offer Junior and Leaving Certificate (LCE) programmes.
- While learner completion on programmes of this kind is always a challenge, particularly in a buoyant labour market, it is estimated that 31% of learners leave before the end of the programme, with over one-fifth of centres experiencing over 50% non-completion.
- Of those that complete the programme, it is estimated that 60% receive a full award.
- An average cost per participant on Youthreach in the region of €10,000 which is relatively high in an education and training context (while recognising the high support nature of Youthreach interventions).
- The primary referral route to the Youthreach programme is through word-of-mouth, and the evaluation highlighted potential difficulties around some young people, particularly those with migrant backgrounds, lacking access to these networks and hence awareness of Youthreach options. This is linked to the lack of a more structured follow-up system for early school leavers.
- The increasing prevalence of mental health difficulties encountered by participants and that in response personal counselling is one of the key supports provided. Guidance counselling is another important support mechanism offered in both Youthreach settings.

Section 4

SOLAS Recommendations

SOLAS welcomes the comprehensive evaluation undertaken by the ESRI which offers a solid base of qualitative and quantitative evidence about the value of the Youthreach programme. It presents findings which will have to be addressed in order to further improve and develop the programme, and also raises questions that must be considered in the context of the further reform and integration of further education and training provision in general and the evolving strategy for the FET system. As a consequence, SOLAS has

developed a series of recommendations in response to the evaluation, together with an indicative timeline for delivery, which are set out below. Of course, effective implementation will also be dependent on other stakeholders, and we identify other key partners with relevant responsibilities in this regard. We will work with these partners to agree detailed implementation actions arising from each recommendation following publication of this response.

4.1 Programme Remit and Setting			
No.	Recommendation	Timeline	Responsibility
1	Programme Remit. There is a clear ongoing need for a programme for young people at risk of exclusion like Youthreach to offer them a pathway into formal education and training and employment and it should continue to be a major strand of FET provision by ETBs.	Ongoing	SOLAS
2	Programme Settings. The evidence of distinct attributes and value from provision in both Youthreach centre and CTC settings means that both models of provision should be maintained in order to ensure effective and agile localised responses to need.	Ongoing	SOLAS

4.2 Programme Management and Planning			
No.	Recommendation	Timeline	Responsibility
3	Coordinated Planning. While there is clear and unique value from provision in both settings, there is a need for more coordinated and effective planning across all youth education and training at ETB level. In this regard ETBs should consider appropriate youth education and training management arrangements and plans to improve coordination and collaboration across Youthreach centres and CTCs within their regions.	June 2020	ETBs
4	Level of Provision. The decline in demand and long-term reduction of early school leaving rates means that ETBs must formally review the sustainability of all centres providing Youthreach on an ongoing basis. SOLAS will continue to monitor the appropriateness of existing levels of provision at national level.	Annual	ETBs & SOLAS

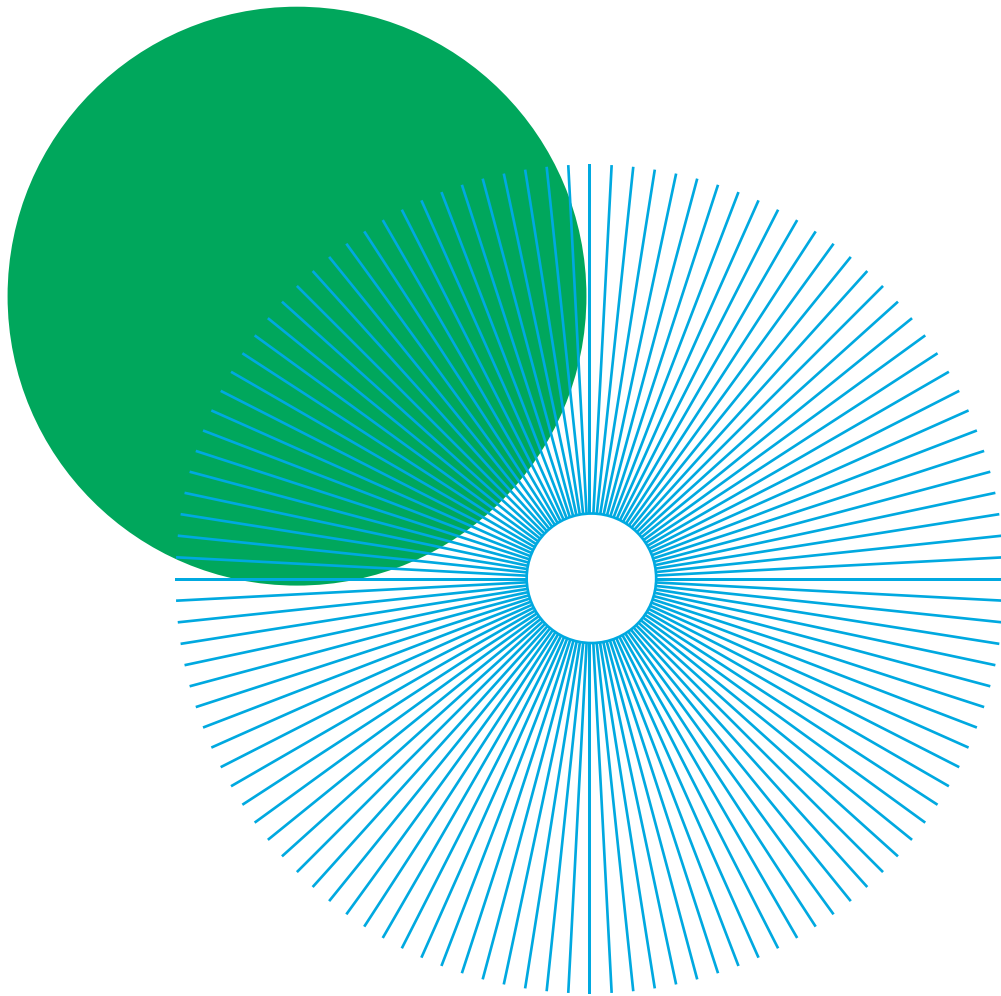
5	Geographic Distribution. The uneven geographical spread of provision and close proximity of centres in some areas and needs to be considered in future ETB and national system planning. This should ensure an appropriate balance of provision across Levels 1 to 6 on the NFQ and in terms of providing both opportunities to progress both into other education and training opportunities and into employment. The geographic distribution of Youthreach centres must be set in this context, while also considering factors including population density and relative deprivation within catchment areas.	Annual	ETBs & SOLAS
6	Funding. In line with Recommendations 4 and 5, funding allocated to Youthreach provision should ensure value-for-money and the broad unit cost of provision should be maintained in real terms moving forward. The potential for consolidation and collaboration around provision should be considered on an ongoing basis to ensure efficient and effective delivery of the programme.	Ongoing	SOLAS & ETBs

4.3 Programme Practice			
No.	Recommendation	Timeline	Responsibility
7	Programme Practice Guidelines. The role of Youthreach programme guidelines should be reviewed, given the central role of ETB planning and funding parameters in setting requirements from FET provision, and a cross-FET guidebook on programme practice should be developed to ensure clarity around programme expectations.	March 2020	SOLAS
8	Programme Promotion. The Youthreach programme should be promoted as an integrated part of the further education and training landscape, offering clear pathways for all learners, and the main information about provision should be provided via the FETCH and ETB website resources.	December 2019	DES & ETBI
9	Programme Referral. ETBs should work together to develop and adopt a uniform approach to programme referral and entry into Youthreach based on existing good practice.	March 2020	ETBI
10	Programme Completion and Accreditation. While completion rates in programmes of this type are typically lower than those of other further and vocational education programmes, SOLAS should monitor, as part of the annual ETB planning process, levels of Youthreach programme completion and accreditation of completed learning. This should include identifying actions to ensure clarity, consistency and best practice across centres and ETBs.	June 2020	SOLAS
11	Quality Assurance. The approach to quality assurance of Youthreach Centres and CTCs should be integrated within the overall QA approach of the ETB, including the requirement for an annual self-evaluation exercise for each education or training facility. The role of formal inspection of Youthreach centres should be considered in this context, and the Department of Education and Skills should consider whether the remit of its Inspectorate should be expanded to cover all settings of Youthreach provision.	Ongoing	ETBs & DES

4.4 Staffing & Support			
No.	Recommendation	Timeline	Responsibility
12	Integrated Learner Guidance and Support. Guidance and support for Youthreach participants must be integrated with the wider guidance and support strategies and approaches by ETBs and should be further developed in tandem with an integrated information, guidance and support strategy for the FET system. ETB learner support across the Youthreach programme should take account of the increased prevalence of emotional physical mental health and learning difficulties among participants.	December 2020	ETBI & SOLAS
13	Integrated Staff Development. Issues identified in Youthreach provision around resourcing, staffing, professional development and learner supports, including support requirements for special educational needs, should be planned at ETB level across the entirety of their provision.	December 2019	ETBs

4.5 Learner Pathways and Outcomes			
No.	Recommendation	Timeline	Responsibility
14	Learner Pathways. Youthreach participant pathways to other education and training opportunities should be enhanced and strengthened by building on existing good practice via, for example PLC/traineeship/apprenticeship taster modules within Youthreach provision, exposure to other education and training settings and clearer articulation of defined progression routes for Youthreach participants. Support for pilot projects developing such Youthreach pathways in areas of significant disadvantage should be considered as part of annual SOLAS funding allocations.	December 2019	ETBI, ETB & SOLAS
15	Soft Skills Development. The evaluation emphasises the complexity of need among Youthreach learners and the positive impact of Youthreach on the broad social and emotional development of participants. While progression to other education and training and employment are central outcomes for Youthreach participants, there is also a need to consider ways in which these other outcomes can be monitored and acknowledged. The feasibility of introducing a soft skills measurement tool to capture learner outcomes should be considered.	March 2020	SOLAS & ETBI
16	Learner Tracking. The development of PLSS in recent years offers a means by which positive outcomes (i.e. employment, higher education, earnings) from Youthreach and other FET provision can be tracked by SOLAS by linking learner data to CSO administrative databases. SOLAS should report annually to ETBs on such outcomes from Youthreach and other FET provision to heighten understanding of its impact and value-for-money.	December 2019 & Annually	SOLAS

4.6 Implementation			
No.	Recommendation	Timeline	Responsibility
17	Monitoring and Reporting. SOLAS will produce quarterly monitoring reports for submission to the Department of Education and Skills tracking progress on implementation of these recommendations.	Quarterly	SOLAS



SOLAS

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