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Learner Support Services Within Donegal ETB's FET Service

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Learner Support Services within Donegal ETB's FET service

Final Report

Deirdre Hughes, Karen Adriaanse & Aisling Murray-Fleming

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In 2008, Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE established dmh associates to encourage collaboration and fresh thinking in careers, education and skills policy, research and practice. The outcomes from the organisation's work are designed to inform and influence policies, research and practice in the UK, Europe and internationally. Our expertise includes: consultancy, evaluation, evidence and impact assessment, literature reviews, qualitative and quantitative research, digital and labour market intelligence / information (LMI). We provide a full range of activities each tailored to meet specific organisational or individual needs.

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Contact: Dr Deirdre Hughes OBE

8 Rose Duryard, Lower Argyll Road, Exeter, England, EX4 4PB

Telephone -0044(0) 7533 545057

Email: deirdre.hughes3@btinternet.com

Visit: <http://deirdrehughes.org/>

Follow on twitter: @deirdretalks

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Executive Summary

Context

The current national learner support structure in Ireland is complex and often difficult to navigate for learners, staff and providers i.e. multiple agencies operate nationally and locally with cross-cutting remits. From a learner support and guidance perspective, key recommendations accepted by Government 'Review of Career Guidance Tools and Information' (Indecon 2019) remain under review. Donegal ETB's FET learner support service has adopted a proactive approach to inform and support its continuous quality improvement plan, in response to QQI requirements.

In December 2019, Donegal ETB commissioned dmh associates to undertake desk research, interviews with staff and external agencies in preparation for a quality review and to inform and guide its FET learner support services going forward. The research was undertaken between 18th December 2019 – 30th April 2020. From the outset, key definitions were identified for consistency in the language used and for accuracy purposes (see Appendix 1 in the Technical Report). Findings are designed to feed into Donegal ETB's quality improvement plans for the enhancement of learner support services. These will also contribute to the comprehensive self-evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of the FET service's quality assurance procedures which is being undertaken as part of the QQI-led statutory review of ETB FET Quality Assurance systems nationally.

Across Ireland at a national policy level, the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of education and training in relation to individuals' participation, attendance, attainment and achievement are key priorities, particularly for those living in socially disadvantaged areas. Strategic Performance Agreements (SPA's) between SOLAS and the ETBs are in place. In carrying out their role in supporting the FET sector across Ireland, ETBs nationally are expected to work towards a more systems, process and business driven model (ETBI).

Donegal is the fourth-largest county in all of Ireland and is the largest county in Ulster. The County has the second highest dependency ratio in Ireland i.e. 56.9% versus 49.3%. Donegal's ETB Strategy Statement (Lean ar Aghaidh, 2017-2021) was developed in consultation with a wide range of key stakeholders. The content was also informed by DES and SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna) recommended policies. Key themes for inclusion in FET are: - consistent learner support; embedding FET in the community; targeting priority cohorts; and literacy and numeracy support. With regards to pathways for lifelong learning, there is an expectation for more modular, flexible and technology-enabled approaches, including examining options such as: micro-credentialing; mainstream recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a process to validate skills, knowledge and competencies, regardless of the learning environment in which they have been gained; integrated approaches to career pathways within FET; and a centralised IT portal.

Donegal Education and Training Board is funded by the Department of Education and Skills in respect of post-primary and related education and by SOLAS in respect of FET. Many of the FET programmes are co-funded by the Irish Government as part of the European Social Fund (ESF) programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020. SOLAS is driving investment in ETBs FET staff development through the implementation of its Professional Development Strategy. A forthcoming 'Universal Design for

Learning' (UDL) framework aims to make the learning environment accessible for 'most' of the population of learners. For example:

"By implementing UDL into the mainstream, it reduces the need for add-on support, but never negates the need for adaptation or individual support." (SOLAS, 2020)

Donegal ETB's FET service is working to create more inclusive, effective and efficient learning environments. Around 271 staff are employed in its FET provision, including 186 tutors/teachers/instructors and 36 programme staff. Some examples of policy themes, which are proving challenging to implement, include, for example, SEND/Disability; Traveller and Roma policies. In Donegal, these and other targeted priority cohorts include: migrants/refugees; long-term unemployed; young unemployed (NEETs); low qualified; women returning to the workforce; lone parents; older people; those from jobless households; and vulnerable workers 'at risk' of redundancy. Recent Covid-2019 social and economic impacts are likely to impact further on future priority groups.

Capturing the voices of learners and staff

In February 2020, Donegal ETB's FET service held a 'Student Voice Forum' that built on previous fora that had been organised in conjunction with AONTAS and NALA and involved students across its education and training provision. The activities on the day were specifically designed to provide evidence for self-evaluation. The students' response was impressive as just over 80% (105) of the 130 students who were invited attended the event, representing the full range of provision. Programme staff were involved in leading the discussions at ten tables of groups of learners from across different programmes.

Students were invited to participate in activities designed to capture their views and participated energetically in the well-designed activities that gathered their views on: teaching and learning; resources and learning environment (including ideas for Donegal ETB's online hub); pastoral care; student support; the student voice policy; student charter; work experience; challenges and opportunities. Each group highlighted positives aspects of the learning support services, including small classes, peer support, counselling and the support they received from their tutors.

Less positive comments noted related to lack of initial assessments and insufficient support for people with dyslexia. However, it is important to note that the strengths and less positive aspects were often contradictory, based on individual student experiences. It was noted that Youthreach has a student council model that is well received and seemed unique to this programme. Some students were pleased to be offered 300 hours of work experience, whereas this was not possible for some other students because of their location and/or the study programme may involve fewer hours. Students' access to guidance also varied depending on the funding of the specific course.

Donegal ETB's FET programmes

A brief summary of Donegal ETB's FET current delivery of programmes (2018-2019) is outlined in the Table below. Within a separate Technical Report, a brief description of content and provision of learner support, what works well and gaps/deficiencies are outlined based on evidence provided by staff and managers during group sessions, follow-up calls and/or emails, as well as relevant literature review findings.

Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) (597 beneficiaries)	Youthreach (160 beneficiaries)
Basic Education also known as Learning for Living (2,886 beneficiaries)	Community Education (4,197 beneficiaries)
Training Services i.e. apprenticeships, traineeships, specific skills training & specialist training providers (933 beneficiaries)	Workplace/Evening Programmes (218 beneficiaries)
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) (180 beneficiaries)	Post Leaving Certificate Programme (PLC) (185 beneficiaries)

Some examples of Donegal ETB's funded Supported Training Providers (STP) TACA and National Learner Network programmes are also presented in the Full Technical Report as illustrative examples of programmes for individuals in Donegal with special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Drawing on interviews with external stakeholders, we found that Donegal ETB's FET provision and learner support is highly regarded. The service demonstrates a commitment to capturing learners' voices and staff are encouraged to offer constructive criticism. It has a laser sharp focus on learners - all design and delivery arrangements have to be 'rural proof'.

Examples of good and/or interesting practices within the FET Learner Support Services offered by Donegal ETB

- Across Donegal ETB FET learner support services' staff have great enthusiasm and are open for change. This was apparent at the highly successful Learner Voice Forum (February 2020). The students' responses were impressive, as discussed earlier.
- The Guidance Counselling service has well developed referral and support mechanisms with education, training and labour market stakeholders, as well as a range of social and psychological services to support a broad spectrum of clients. It is highly respected by many staff and learners. Guidance Counselling staff are highly skilled and use their local knowledge well to advise and support potential and current learners. Learners interviewed reported they receive impartial advice so that they can make informed choices about their courses. The fact that the service provides support and make referrals that help learners stay on and complete their courses enhances overall retention.
- Donegal ETB employs a full-time Senior Educational Psychologist. This is a unique arrangement providing collaborative support to students, learners, staff and parents in schools, Youthreach centres and other Further Education & Training courses.
- Donegal's BTEI learners receive good initial guidance counselling to enable them to join the most appropriate course. General induction from BTEI's learner support worker and other staff helps break down the course components for learners so that they will understand what they need to do to achieve the qualification and course aims. BTEI learners undertake the skills checker at interview stage. They receive support with personal health issues such as with epilepsy and asthma. First aid

courses for about 30 staff and learners was recently led by an external tutor enabling all participants to develop new practical skills for home and work.

- The Learning for Living (Literacy) team is highly committed to providing learners with high levels of individual personal support. Many of their learners have in-depth personal needs and look to their tutors for support and advice. The tutors frequently offer this in their own time and it was reported they often do not have the opportunities to have a 'sounding board' or to receive the support and counselling they need as a result of the type of issues their learners raise.
- Donegal ETB's Apprenticeship provision and Senior Training Advisors (STA) deliver a wide range of informal and formal services to apprentices and employers. The introduction of a learning support specialist to provide additional literacy and study skills support to apprentices on their phase 2, 22-week placement is working well. Apprentices are also offered extra support in areas of mathematics and drawing etc. All apprentices have access to a STA's who they can contact directly if they have any issues. The STA's also carry out "on site" visits to monitor progress and give support to the apprentice and/or the employer for the duration the apprenticeship.
- Traineeships and Specific Skills Training (SST) programmes provide learners with a range of employability related skills and formal vocational qualifications to facilitate those entering the labour market for the first time and for people wishing to update or acquire new skills. These programmes improve employment outcomes for participants and increase retention and productivity in their vocational sectors.
- In VTOS, the relationship with guidance services is particularly strong where it is available and the guidance counsellors help set the scene for potential learners well so that they understand the aims of the programme and the career pathways that it can open up for learners. Tutors provide support through 'normal classroom practice', including the development of learners' discipline and behaviour appropriate for work. Health and wellbeing are also integrated into the programme. Progression to a course at level 6 or 7, or to employment is high.
- The quality outputs for Youthreach are excellent. This is a well-resourced specialist provision with a wide range of individual support, advocacy (as opposed to guidance), counselling and mentoring. Only one centre receives funding from the special educational needs initiative (SENI) budget.
- Community Education builds capacity and supports local community groups to meet the learning and development needs of local residents. In conjunction with local Community Outreach Providers, Donegal ETB coordinates, resources and provides a network of high-quality wraparound services. These form an essential part of addressing barriers to learning; carrying out needs' assessments; providing student support and improving planning, coordination and communication. Ultimately, these supports can be integral in influencing the retention of participants.
- Where RPL has been made available it has been implemented in a well-structured coordinated manner. To date, 215 learners have gained awards specific to their skills knowledge and competencies. In Donegal ETB, two mini-case studies are provided in the Technical Report i.e. lessons from a Defence Forces RPL initiative and a recent large scale SOLAS funded application to

pilot RPL in the Care sector (March 2020-2022). This will target in the first instance early school leavers with low qualifications and people in work with skills for validation. PLC progression outcomes are very good.

- In Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) programmes, frontline staff provide learner support as far as they can and learners benefit from tutors' experience and expertise.
- In Donegal ETB-funded Specialist Training Programmes (STP) such as TACA and NLN, programme support is integrated very well into external programmes funded by Donegal ETB for people with SEND. STP's address identified employment or learning needs of people with disabilities through vocational training at QQI Levels 3-5.
- In quality assurance (QA), the QA coordinator is a new role with responsibility for overseeing, monitoring and reviewing the QA system within Donegal ETB. Two training standards officers (TSOs) also balance perspectives from the previous FAS and FE systems. The initial focus is to amalgamate the previous education and training processes into an integrated overarching quality system. The new system incorporates the QQI Statutory QA guidelines, published in April 2016. The current focus is to develop QA policies before operating the processes at programme level. The Quality Assurance Support Service are carrying informative visits to the 17 centres to understand the learning environment of each centre. One of the themes to be explored is the structure of and access to /availability of guidance. The student and staff voice will be central to these processes and systems.
- The Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) is a relatively new system and there are plans for more opportunities for staff to test and learn so that they fully understand the benefits of the system.
- There is a strong appetite within the FET management team to align well with SOLAS recommendations now and in the future, for example, the concept of local and county campuses. Local buildings and staff delivery have a strong active inclusion philosophy and approach. There is evidence of flexible and agile scheduling of training opportunities. The feedback and tutor support model works well in Donegal ETB Training Centres.

Learner Support Services gaps/deficiencies

Whilst there are many strengths in the current arrangements, this research also focused on gaps and/or deficiencies which will contribute to FET's continuous improvement plans. For example:

- Some staff identified that they need more training about autism and other special educational needs, including the support processes for these learners. Others indicated that drug and alcohol misuse is also a concern – see also below.
- Learner support services are too disparate – for example, there is no single policy for transport across the programmes. Arrangements for childcare are not promoted consistently.

- There is high demand by staff and students for guidance counselling support but resources are limited at the present time. Within the guidance counselling services, gender and ethnic diversity staffing may require further attention in any future rounds of recruitment. Greater investment in and expansion of guidance services would benefit more staff, students and potential students.
- Across all programmes, there is scope to significantly strengthen assessment, screening and diagnostic approaches to help further improve access and equity i.e. the right people on the right course, at the right time.
- In some cases, BTEI staff have to identify learners' additional learning and support needs as the course develops, although they are beginning to use the WRAT 5 system, where appropriate. The extent to which all teachers/ tutors are fully trained using WRAT 5 to national standards seems varied. WRAT's purpose is to assess and monitor reading skills, assessment of mathematical skills and to identify possible learning disabilities. There are also guidelines as to who should administer WRAT. Staff felt that the time lapse sometimes means that learners may leave because their additional learning support needs were not identified soon enough. They also felt that there should be a learning support service at every centre, on a pro-rata basis according to the number of students and that personal support often relies too much on the good will of staff.
- Learning for Living interviewees indicated that they do not have opportunities for 'off-loading' when they deal with some learners' emotional and personal issues. They also feel that there is a need to be able to direct some learners to support agencies and felt that a list of agencies and referral procedures would be helpful. Sometimes organisers feel overwhelmed with administrative work and they cannot always support the tutors. Whilst the Learning for Living team provide support internally, the guidance service agrees that they are underutilised by this programme, but they are also concerned that with current levels of staffing they would not be able to cope with the volume should this change. Some staff and learners interviewed felt that the Level 2 qualifications in Learning for Living do not always measure the full extent of learners' actual progress – which may be higher than that level or may include a wider range of skills than those currently assessed. In some cases, administrative duties seem to be impacting on the quality of support provided to staff and learners, especially in Learning for Living.
- Staff working with apprentices and employers reported the educational eligibility criteria for pre-2016 craft-based apprenticeships has not evolved sufficiently to meet employer needs and that of the curriculum in some trades. Feedback from many employers is that they would like it raised from the current Junior Certificate base to that of the Leaving Certificate. It is important that the educational eligibility criteria, while meeting the needs of the curriculum, be realistic and also meet the needs of all stakeholders. It was reported the educational entry criteria need not necessarily be the same for all pre-2016 apprenticeships.
- It was also mentioned that there is a strategic need to improve the standing of apprenticeship and inroads in this area could be made if apprenticeships were given equal status in terms of learner progression (from post-primary schools) as that given to progression via the CAO to Third Level. The interviews with staff and apprentices highlighted case studies where some learners had left their 3rd level college course before completion to join an apprenticeship. Apprentices are often out of

the county for various off the job education and training e.g. 22 weeks on Phase 2. Different ETBs have different policies and there is not enough standardisation around learner support available such as support for mental health issues, language support for those who speak English as an additional language, and literacy and numeracy support, etc.

- Learners on traineeships and specialist support training need a more individualised planning system that would include a system for recording their wider development. Staff felt that the programmes should support the learners to develop their career management and employability skills to help them progress to work. The provision of support is rather 'ad hoc'.
- Training Services staff identified a gap in support for learners with mental health issues. They also felt that they have no personnel available who are equipped to deal with learners with drug and alcohol related issues and they would appreciate guidelines and training in this. Literacy and numeracy can also be a significant barrier for learners. There is a lack of specialist knowledge and expertise in supporting people with learning difficulties – e.g. ADHA, autism, dyslexia etc. Some members of staff may have additional training or qualifications in these areas; however, this is not available to all learners.
- VTOS staff interviewed were concerned that there is no learning support as part of Level 4 provision. They stated that some students need additional support at the start of the programmes to develop basic study skills, especially critical and reflective writing – a requirement to progress to Level 5. A learning support course at Level 4 would fill that gap for those who need it. The staff interviewed also felt that guidance counselling should be more consistent across the programmes. In the same way, staff felt that the centres seem to be working in isolation and would benefit from more co-ordination across the centres.
- In Youthreach, some staff are concerned that students may be over relying on support and in some cases may not be developing the independence they will need to continue to develop when they leave the programme. The systems for recording achievement focus on accreditation on nearly all the programmes. This is a requirement for SOLAS funding. There are a few concerns that some learners undertake a level two qualification that does not recognise their full development and progress. There is no universal system for recording individual learners' development of personal, social, career management and employability skills that are not identified as learning outcomes within modules - but these can be important for the learners' overall development. Some examples include: development of self-esteem and confidence that enables them to participate and benefit more fully from the programme and increase their chances of successful progression to employment or further education and training.
- In RPL, there is a need to make RPL more visible in the County. Donegal ETB has documented its processes for RPL, including mentoring and facilitated support. There is a role for guidance in the process but this should be separate from the assessment activity. It was noted NALA has an online RPL system which can be made available if needed.
- In Donegal ETB funded Specialist Training Providers (STP) Courses such as TACA and NLN programmes, learners' wider development is not recorded or required at a local and/or national

level. Outcomes such as progression into FE/HE and employment, as well as certification outcomes are recorded both locally and nationally.

- For Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) students, there is no dedicated time for learner support or access to SEN support for PLC learners. There are also no inbuilt arrangements for the PLC students in Donegal to receive guidance counselling. As one of the tutors said, 'As a result of providing FET courses in the 2nd level system, we feel as though we have fallen between two stools in relation to learner support'. As it stands at the moment, there is no dedicated time allocated to these learners for careers or personal guidance counselling.
- Within the Training Centres, there is demand for disability support and literacy support for learners at Levels 5 & 6. Students have to find their own placements with social capital gains for those most able to use their networks. Whilst it is recognised that an integral part of any traineeship is that trainees actively involve themselves with sourcing placement i.e. this is a skill they will rely on when seeking employment following any course, some tutors indicated they did not feel sufficiently qualified or trained to provide guidance support when it comes to placement choice for those trainees unable to find their own.
- Limerick and Clare ETB have created their own policies around the provision of learner support including guidance which has led to the creation of an Information, Guidance and Recruitment strategy. Both within and outside of Donegal, there are some reported concerns that impartiality may be compromised. Steps may need to be taken to address this concern. At present, there is no national policy in this regard. International research evidence highlights some tensions in amalgamating information, advice and guidance with recruitment onto programmes.
- Part of the role of the ETB Communications Officer is to help with the promotion of FET courses and activities, including via social media. There is scope to do more to raise the profile of Donegal ETB FET outside of the County.

Literature review

There are opportunities to learn from learner support services outside of Ireland on good and/or interesting policies and practices, for example, Working Wales #ChangeYourStory; How Estonia is delivering online guidance during Covid-19; Lifelong Guidance Systems and Practices (Cedefop). These and other additional findings were drawn from separate sources of relevant European and international reports to help Donegal ETB FET build on good/interesting learner support policies and practices and identify ideas for action. Refer to Section 6 in the Technical Report.

Ideas for action

- Continue to build upon the good/interesting policies and practices outlined above and within the Technical Report, in particular capturing the voices of participants and non-participants to inform learner support arrangements. Donegal ETB should continue to explore dynamic ways of engaging or re-engaging with non-participants to build their confidence, resilience and appetite for learning and skills development.

- Invest in further training in customer service for all frontline staff across the ETB FET services to ensure greater equity in learner support services across the County.
- Access to Guidance Counselling needs to be embedded across all programmes. There is also scope to follow best practice in European and International approaches to embedding career management skills in all programmes of learning e.g. Scotland and Malta. QQI modules on work experience could also benefit from this.
- Consider strengthening screening and diagnostic approaches, for example, lessons learned from Working Wales (#ChangeYourStory); How Estonia is delivering online guidance during Covid-19; Lifelong Guidance Systems and Practices (CareersNet, Cedefop) and the Canadian Career Development Foundation's response to Covid-19: Impacts and Recommendations.
- An additional full-time Educational Psychologist in Donegal, subject to resourcing, would help improve access and equity issues, as well as staff capacity building between and across programmes.
- Consider lessons learned from how adults learn in work, including the COM-B model (Michie et al, 2011) which may be particularly useful for staff training and development.
- Explore opportunities to build on existing recognition of prior learning (RPL) online hubs e.g. NALA and investigate opportunities for customised Donegal ETB branding. There is also scope to review the RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement) in England and other best practice examples from Europe and further afield.
- Address staff training and development needs in areas such as working effectively with individuals and/or groups who have autism, special education needs and/or disabilities, drug and/or alcohol dependency.
- Develop a measurable system for capturing and recording learners' development and progress over and above qualification level and achievements and involve staff from the outset in this process. Share and co-develop frameworks for learner support services – such as those in Limerick and Clare ETB.
- Investigate further successful learner and staff development online hubs. Learners gave some examples but there are restrictions on broadband capacity in the county. Refer to Open University: Innovating Pedagogy (2020, p.36).

Technical Report

Learner Support Services within Donegal ETB's FET service

1. Introduction

1.1 In December 2019, Donegal ETB commissioned dmh associates to undertake qualitative research into the provision, organisation and effectiveness of the Learner Support Services within Donegal ETB Further Education & Training (FET) service. The main requirement was to undertake research to achieve the following outcomes:

- A short overview of current practice (national and international) in the provision and organisation of FET learner support services
- Identification of good/interesting practice in the sector
- Identification of gaps and/or deficiencies in the provision and the organisation of learner support services within Donegal's FET service
- Recommendations and ideas for action within the current level of resourcing.

1.2 The current national learner support structure in Ireland is complex and often difficult to navigate for learners, staff and providers i.e. multiple agencies operate nationally and locally with cross-cutting remits. From a learner support and guidance perspective, key recommendations accepted by Government (Indecon, 2019)¹ remain under review. The findings below are designed to feed into Donegal ETB's quality improvement plans for the enhancement of learner support services. Donegal ETB's FET learner support service has adopted a proactive approach to inform and support its continuous quality improvement plan, in response to QQI requirements.²

2. Methodology

2.1 The research was undertaken between 18th December 2019 – 30th April 2020. From the outset, key definitions were identified for consistency in the language used and for accuracy purposes. See Appendix 1. The research process involved:

- Desk research to understand the national and regional context including social, economic and environmental factors - refer to section 3.0.
- Observation of evaluation activities and consultations with students and staff at a major Donegal ETB FET Student Voice Forum held in Letterkenny on 11 February 2020 - refer to section 4.0
- Five group sessions held at Donegal ETB Guidance Centre, Letterkenny on 12th – 15th February 2020. A total of 38 members of staff attended representing the full range of provision. Participants' roles included: teachers/tutors/instructors, co-ordinators, guidance counsellors and learning support staff. The main focus of these interviews was on Donegal ETB's learner support services

within FET i.e. non-curriculum aspects of provision. Themes for investigation included – guidance counselling (holistic approach including career readiness); pastoral support (growth in person; autonomy in the world); additional learning needs, such as literacy and numeracy; study support – learning to learn (again); advocacy; transport; childcare; and financial support. Three telephone interviews were held with members of staff who were unable to attend these group sessions and seven members of staff sent additional thoughts and materials relevant to the research questions - refer to section 5.0.

- Individual interviews held with Donegal's Director of Further Education & Training (FET), Senior Educational Psychologist, two Adult Education Officers, two Assistant Training Centre Managers, Co-ordinator and Adult Guidance Counsellor and Communications Officer - refer to section 5.0.
- Three telephone interviews were held with external agencies including: an Adult Education Officer from Limerick and Clare ETB, the National Adult Literacy Chief Executive and the Director of Further Education and Training Support Services, ETBs Ireland - refer to section 5.0.
- Three face-to-face meetings were also held in Dublin with the Director of FET Inclusion, SOLAS, the Director of the National Guidance Centre for Education and the National Adult Learning Organisation (AONTAS) Chief Executive - refer to section 5.0.
- A rapid evidence assessment of national, regional and international literature to identify trends and good/interesting policies and practices and ideas for action - refer to sections 6.0 and 7.0.

From the outset, key definitions were identified for consistency in the language used and for accuracy purposes (see Appendix 1 in the Technical Report). Findings are designed to feed into Donegal ETB's quality improvement plans for the enhancement of learner support services. These will also contribute to the comprehensive self-evaluation of the implementation and effectiveness of the FET service's quality assurance procedures which is being undertaken as part of the QQI-led statutory review of ETB FET Quality Assurance systems nationally.

3. National Context

3.1 Across Ireland at a national policy³ level, the intrinsic and extrinsic benefits of education and training in relation to individuals' participation, attendance, attainment and achievement are key priorities, particularly for those living in socially disadvantaged areas. In 2013, new legislation e.g. the Further Education and Training (FET) Act 2013⁴ and the Education and Training Boards (ETB) Act 2013⁵ resulted in the establishment of the new FET statutory authority.

3.2 SOLAS (An tSeirbhís Oideachais Leanúnaigh agus Scileanna), the FET statutory authority,⁶ was established in October 2013 with major responsibilities for the co-ordination, support and funding of education and training in the combined sector. A significant structural change involved the amalgamation of 33 Vocational Education Committees (VECs) into 16 ETBs nationwide. After the dissolution of FÁS, the training function of the agency was assumed by SOLAS (not the same authority as mentioned above), an agency under the remit of the Department of Education & Skills, while the activation section of FÁS was merged with Department of Social Protection to create a new service, Intreo⁷. This is designed to be a one-

stop shop for social protection payment recipients to interact with the Department and begin their activation process.

The FET strategy (2014-2019)⁸ highlights how the vast majority of stakeholders see the sector as playing an important role in promoting social inclusion and lifelong learning (p. 90). Key themes for inclusion in FET are: - consistent learner support; embedding FET in the community; targeting priority cohorts; and literacy and numeracy support. With regards to pathways for lifelong learning, there is an expectation for more modular, flexible and technology-enabled approaches, including examining options such as: micro-credentialing; mainstream recognition of prior learning (RPL) as a process to validate skills, knowledge and competencies, regardless of the learning environment in which they have been gained; integrated approaches to career pathways within FET; and a centralised IT portal.

3.3 In April 2019, the Executive Director, Strategy and Knowledge at SOLAS set out a vision for 'Developing the Next Further Education and Training Strategy'⁹. This provided an overview of progress made since 2013 following the establishment of ETBs and SOLAS bringing further education and training systems together for the first time. SOLAS (February 2020) has indicated, "the development of the next FET strategy is nearing completion."

3.4 In 2000, the formal development of a national adult guidance service within the adult and further education sector came to fruition. The Adult Educational Guidance (AEGS) was formed to address the growing needs of adult learners returning to education, training and employment (SOLAS, 2014). Guidance counsellors provide pre-entry, entry, on-going, pre- and post-exit guidance counselling to adults in specific target groups. The AEGS¹⁰ is a key provider of adult guidance in 37 localised guidance services within the 16 ETBs (National Centre for Guidance in Education [NCGE], 2018). Learners access the service mainly through self-referral, internal ETB services such as Adult Literacy Services (ALS), and external services such as Intreo.

3.5 The responsibility for funding of the FET adult guidance provision resides with SOLAS at an individual ETB level. Between 2016 and 2018 funding provision to the services increased from €6.6 to €6.9 million (Indecon, 2019, p.12)¹¹.

3.6 Formal (SPA) Strategic Performance Agreements between SOLAS and the ETBs are in place. In carrying out its role in supporting the FET sector across Ireland, SOLAS has developed the following five core principles of an integrated approach:

- Autonomy of ETBs to plan and structure provision & services
- Impartial advice on potential learning pathways
- Consistent service across all FET provision and settings
- Centralised resources to improve access to advice and information
- Informed by labour market insight and pathway/outcome data.

3.7 Systems for recording student achievement focus on accreditation on nearly all programmes. This is a requirement for SOLAS funding. Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI)¹² sets the definitions of the provision and qualifications. Within the literacy and numeracy strategy of the Further Education and Training Strategy document, was the recommendation to 'develop and enhance availability of Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL) and establish a working group to examine the Report of the Expert Group on Future

Skills Needs on RPL and to make recommendations for action.’ (Department of Education and Skills, 2014, p.101).

3.8 Other national agencies feeding into and supporting Donegal ETB’s work include the National Adult Literacy Service¹³, National Learning Network (NLN)¹⁴, AONTAS^{15, 16}, the National Centre for Guidance in Education (NCGE)^{(17)18 19}. The NCGE has a role in providing guidelines, continuous professional development (CPD) and policy on guidance for schools and in FET. NCGE sets out a national perspective that goes to ETBs. At the time of publication of this research, NCGE 2012 Guidelines²⁰ issued from the DES via the NCGE still apply.

3.9 ETB Ireland (ETBI) works with national organisations and government departments as the representative body for the 16 ETBs. It provides a national focus and acts as a conduit – in both directions to support the development and implementation of strategies and policies. It works with SOLAS, Government departments, AONTAS, specialist agencies and community-based agencies, Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI) and other relevant agencies.

3.10 In April 2016, QQI published its statutory Quality Assurance Guidelines²¹ for use by all providers of higher, further and English language education and training. The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act²² requires providers to ‘have regard to ‘QQI’ quality assurance guidance when establishing their own quality assurance procedures’ (p.1). The QQI statutory guidelines are therefore relevant to all of Donegal ETB’s FET provision. This research, however, mainly focuses on:

- *Area 7: Support for Learners.* This area incorporates: an integrated approach from the perspective of the learner; pastoral care (i.e. emotional and personal support for the general wellbeing of learners); access to services related to programmes (i.e. library, information and computing service, academic and non-academic support, administrative and technical services); learners’ representation and guidance. Guidance is defined as ‘accurate and relevant information on the programme, which includes details on potential career pathways’ (p17).
- *Area 3.2 Learner admission, progression and recognition and Area 9.2 Learner information* are also relevant to this research.

4. Donegal ETB FET Service

4.1 Donegal is the fourth-largest county in all of Ireland and is the largest county in Ulster. It shares a small border with County Leitrim. The greater part of its land border is shared with three of the counties of Northern Ireland: County Derry, County Tyrone and County Fermanagh. While Lifford is the county town, Letterkenny is by far the largest town in the county with a population of 19,588²³. Letterkenny and the nearby city of Derry form the main economic axis of the northwest of Ireland.

“The population in the April 2016 Census was 159,192 (male: 79,022; female: 80,170), a decline of 1.2% since Census 2011, a significant contrast with the overall expansion of population at a national level. The population is spatially scattered: there are 61 settlements of 100+people but only two towns with a population over 5,000...The average age of people in the county is 38.5

years, up slightly on the national average 37.4” (Strategic Performance Agreement 2018 -2020, p.3)

The County has the second highest dependency ratio in Ireland i.e. 56.9% versus 49.3%. ²⁴

4.2 Donegal ETB's FET service is working to create more inclusive, effective and efficient learning environments. Donegal ETB's Strategic Performance Agreement (2018-2020)²⁵ highlights that 21.9% of people aged 15 years and over in Donegal have not been educated beyond primary level. Donegal, with Laois, has the lowest admission rate in the state to 3rd level education (41% compared to national average of 51%). According to the Labour Force Survey (2019) in Quarter 2 unemployment in Donegal was 5.1% compared to the State 5.4%.

Labour Force Survey (LFS)

Quarter 2 2019

Indicator	Quarter 2 2019	Annual change
Employed	2,300,000	+45,000
Unemployed	130,800	-13,600
In labour force	2,430,800	+31,400
Not in labour force	1,481,800	+32,900

Source: North West Partnership secretariat provided by the Donegal County Council

4.3 Donegal Education and Training Board (ETB) is the largest education and training provider in County Donegal, providing a broad range of education and training services to around 25,000 students and adult learners on an annual basis. The mission is:

“To promote, provide and support accessible and inclusive education and training which enables young people and adults to empower themselves to reach their full potential in a safe and caring environment)”²⁶.

4.4 The Strategy Statement (Lean ar Aghaidh, 2017-2021)²⁷ was developed in consultation with a wide range of key stakeholders. Under Section 27 of the ETB Act (2013) each ETB is directed to prepare and submit to the Board a Strategy Statement. The Board is currently responsible for the management of: 15 post-primary schools (of which 5 are Gaelcholáistí); 17 Further Education & Training Centres (FET) (including 2 Training Centres; 1 Music Education Centre; 1 Outdoor Education Centre; and 6 Youthreach Centres). In line with a dispersed population, there is a strong focus on community-based outreach provision to facilitate learner access across the county. The ETB has a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with Letterkenny Institute of Technology (LyIT)²⁸, the only higher education provider in the county. There are also MoU partnership agreements with the University of Ulster, North West Regional College, and LyIT under the North West Strategic Group Partnership²⁹.

4.5 Donegal ETB's vision for FET is:

“Excellence in the delivery of a quality learner-centred education and training service”³⁰

The FET service achieves this by providing a range of recognised certification including quality and qualifications Ireland (QQI) and a range of industry recognised awards endorsed by: Microsoft, City & Guilds, ITEC, BIM (Bord Iascaigh Mhara – The Fisheries Board) and the Irish Surfing Association.

4.6 Donegal Education and Training Board is funded by the Department of Education and Skills in respect of post-primary and related education and by SOLAS in respect of FET. Many of the FET programmes are co-funded by the Irish Government as part of the European Social Fund programme for Employability, Inclusion and Learning (PEIL) 2014-2020.³¹

4.7 Across Donegal, both full-time and/or part-time QQI Level 1 – 6 provision of the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) is offered in at least 17 different geographical locations. This further reinforces the diverse learner profile across FET, with many availing of courses on a part-time basis, often in evenings or via online resources. The maximum length of a further education and training course is one year, although some provision carries a two-year option with a distinct award at the end of each year. This means engagement with providers tends to be shorter term than, for example, higher education, yet the system is also characterised by re-engagement of learners for multiple courses, sometimes within the same year.

4.8 In 2018, FET provision in Donegal supported over 11,000 beneficiaries including programmes and services covering: adult literacy, apprenticeships, employer work-based learning, education and training for those unemployed, with disabilities and/or with special educational needs, and the Youthreach³² early school leaver programme. Almost half of the programmes and services were in community education.

“FET must evolve to continue to meet the needs of the economy and society – with an opportunity to grow the FET contribution to a more collaborative and cohesive education system. Themes for inclusion: consistent learner support; embedding FET in the community; targeting priority cohorts; literacy and numeracy support. Pathways to/from: Schools to FET; within FET; to and from HE; and lifelong pathways.” (SOLAS)

4.9 Around 271 staff are employed in its FET provision, including 186 tutors/teachers/instructors and 36 programme staff (Refer to Figure 1 below). Some examples of policy themes which are proving challenging to implement include, for example, SEND/Disability; Traveller and Roma policies. In Donegal, these and other targeted priority cohorts include: migrants/refugees; long-term unemployed; young unemployed (NEETs); low qualified; women returning to the workforce; lone parents; older people; those from jobless households; and vulnerable workers ‘at risk’ of redundancy. Working in partnership is a critical success factor. This involves close working links with community, private, statutory and voluntary organisations. Recent Covid-2019 social and economic impacts are likely to impact further on future priority groups.

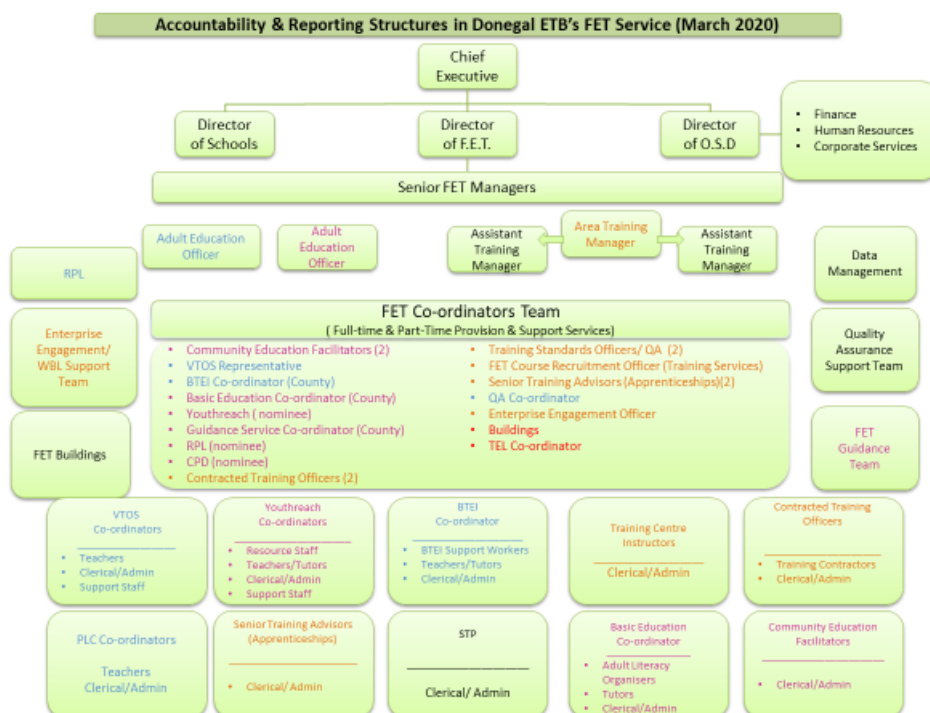


Figure 1: Donegal ETB Staffing Structure, February 2020

5. Donegal ETB's FET Learner Support Services

5.1 Donegal ETB has a strong brand identity. Learners are clearly positioned at the heart of the service's work. At a national level, Donegal ETB FET service is highly regarded by those who participated in the research. Donegal ETB offers progression to employment and/or degree courses in third level institutions providing a wide range of full and part-time courses, adult learner guidance, apprenticeships, basic education, community education support, Youthreach (for early school leavers) and services for employers. It operates from 17 centres across the county.

5.2 Its mission is to:

'promote, provide and support accessible and inclusive education and training which enables young people and adults to empower themselves to reach their full potential in a safe and caring environment.' (Donegal ETB)

Partnership working at a national, regional and local level is well established. There are opportunities for closer working links with national bodies to share best practice and to avoid duplication of effort, for example, NALA - specifically on recognition of prior learning (RPL) and allied online developments, NCGE - specifically on guidance at a distance and future adult guidance management information systems (MIS), and Aontas - specifically on feeding into the 2019 -2022 Strategic Plan and community education developments in Donegal.

5.3 In February 2020, Donegal ETB's FET service held a 'Student Voice Forum' that built on previous fora which had been organised in conjunction with AONTAS and NALA and involved students across its

education and training provision. The activities on the day were specifically designed to provide evidence for self-evaluation. The students' response was impressive as just over 80% (105) of the 130 students who were invited attended the event, representing the full range of provision. Programme staff were involved in leading the discussions at ten tables of groups of learners from across different programmes.

Students participated energetically in the well-designed activities that gathered their views on: teaching and learning; resources and learning environment (including ideas for Donegal's online hub); pastoral care; student support; the student voice policy; student charter; work experience; challenges and opportunities. Each group highlighted positive aspects of the learning support services, including small classes, peer support, counselling, the support they received from their tutors.

Less positive comments noted related to lack of initial assessments and insufficient support for people with dyslexia. However, it is important to note that the strengths and less positive aspects were often contradictory, based on individual student experiences. It was noted that Youthreach has a student council model that is well received and seemed unique to this programme. Some students were pleased to be offered 300 hours of work experience, whereas this was not possible for some other students because of their location and/or their course required fewer hours. Students' access to guidance also varied depending on the funding of the specific course.

Drawing on interviews with external stakeholders, we found Donegal ETB's FET provision and learner support is highly regarded. It demonstrates a commitment to capturing learners' voices and staff are encouraged to offer constructive criticism. The service has a laser sharp focus on learners.

"Learners are empowered through the learner voice – and they are listened to. Donegal ETB have identified a need for training for staff supporting people with mental health issues – and are implementing a programme of CPD." (SOLAS)

Whilst there are many strengths in the current arrangements, we identified further areas for development to feed into the FET's continuous improvement cycle. For example, although the provision of learning support continues to improve, staff identified that they need more training about autism and other special educational needs, including the support processes for these learners, what language to use etc. Training Services staff identified a gap in support for learners with mental health issues. They also felt that they have no personnel available who are equipped to deal with learners with drug and alcohol related issues and they would appreciate guidelines and training in this. Literacy and numeracy can also be a significant barrier for learners. There is a lack of specialist knowledge and expertise in support people with learning difficulties – e.g. ADHA, autism, dyslexia etc.

5.4 Donegal ETB's FET Guidance Service Team includes 4 full-time equivalent posts providing guidance/counselling to students on selected programmes. The team is currently staffed 3.5 FTEs. A full-time Information Officer based in Letterkenny supports them. All the guidance counsellors are highly trained and experienced - qualified to level 9 National Framework for Qualifications (NFQ). The team supports learners on: Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) and Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS), those attending community education and literacy groups, and the general public (aged 18+). The team provides induction sessions and act as facilitators to groups preparing for their next step by providing mock interviews and other pre-employment skills. They also offer a limited service to graduates who are considering going back to study.

5.5 The Guidance Counselling service team are highly respected by colleagues and learners, specifically because their guidance counselling is impartial. They provide a broad service across most programmes, although not all. Their services are valued by ETB staff and learners alike. Staff are highly skilled and use their local knowledge well to advise and support potential and current learners. The guidance counsellors interviewed see their role as providing information on careers pathways, enabling local people to find out about and access 'second chance' education. They provide pastoral care and frontline counselling individually and in groups. They see themselves as:

"In the 'middle of the ETB spidergram' having connections with key elements of FET in the County."

What works well

The guidance service organises career fairs and develops the ETB Donegal prospectus and it is a central arm to course recruitment and the guidance strategy. Staff describe their approach as getting to know the people they work with, 'from a personal level' so that they can support them to develop the skills and understanding of how to support themselves. They also promote outside agencies such as those supporting people with disabilities, mental health issues, accommodation and transport needs etc to their learners who require specialist support. They see one of the many benefits of guidance is the impartial advice (potential) learners receive, so that they can make informed choices about the most suitable pathway. The fact that they provide support and referrals that help learners stay on and complete their courses enhances overall retention rates.

Donegal ETB's FET Guidance Service has well developed referral and support mechanisms with education, training and labour market stakeholders, as well as a range of social and psychological services to support a broad spectrum of clients. Our research indicates it is highly respected by many staff and learners. Staff are highly skilled and use their local knowledge well to advise and support potential and current learners:

"Donegal's adult guidance is excellent; staff are clear about their role and they have a long-standing commitment and experience. They get involved in informing practice." (NCGE)

Greater investment in and expansion of guidance services would benefit more staff, students and potential students.

Gaps/Deficiencies

There is high demand by staff and students for guidance counselling support but resources are limited at the present time. Within the guidance counselling services, gender and ethnic diversity staffing may require further attention in any future rounds of recruitment. Greater investment in and expansion of guidance services would benefit more staff, students and potential students. Limerick and Clare ETB have created their own policies around the provision of learner support including guidance which has led to the creation of an Information, Guidance and Recruitment strategy. Both within and outside of Donegal, there are some reported concerns that impartiality may be compromised. Steps may need to be taken to address this concern. At present, there is no national policy in this regard. International research evidence highlights some tensions in amalgamating information, advice and guidance with recruitment onto programmes.

From September 2010, Donegal ETB employed a full-time Senior Educational Psychologist. This is a unique arrangement providing collaborative support to students, learners, staff and parents in schools, Youthreach centres and on Adult Education courses. Currently, seven schools (four of which have Delivery of Equality and Opportunity (DEIS) status) and five Youthreach centres receive psychological support exclusively from Donegal ETB. All of the schools have associated Autism (ASD) units.

Primary areas of practice involve the provision of support to young people and more mature learners in relation to special educational needs, challenging behaviour and social and emotional difficulties. A substantial amount of consultative work is undertaken with an emphasis on developing and reviewing education plans, engaging in group work and facilitating policy development in areas such as 'critical incident' contingency planning and structured assessment for learning. Much of the work requires extended networking with health and other services and collaborative working in schools with the National Educational Psychological Service and services from the National Council for Special Education and TUSLA.

Within public health and social care (HSE) services, close working relationships have been fostered with the Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service, Clinical Psychology and the JIGSAW programme. Where individual assessment work is undertaken, it aims to support parents both formally and informally by providing professional pre-assessment briefings and post-assessment feedback together with recommendations regarding the needs of referred young people. Formal professional development and informal support is also offered directly to staff within the centres and schools including:

- *Consultation and training on procedures* for formal assessment and the identification of individual learners with Special Educational Needs; development of Student Support Plans and the development and engagement of a Critical Incident policy and plan working closely with managers of Donegal ETB Further Education and Training programmes.
- *Consultation and the provision of support and training* to relevant staff in relation to development of policies vis-à-vis inclusion and pupils with Additional Educational Needs and to relevant staff in relation to Reasonable Accommodations for Examinations and Continuous Assessment.

A wide range of additional support activities include contributing to quality assurance, training, external relationship building and committee work. The lack of oversight of screening and diagnostic approaches has been a concern for some staff, therefore, another Educational Psychologist would help improve access and equity issues.

5.6 Donegal ETB's FET programmes range from Levels 1-6 on the National Framework of Qualifications – see overleaf.



5.7 A brief summary of Donegal ETB FET delivery programmes (2018-2019) includes:

Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) (597 beneficiaries)	Youthreach (160 beneficiaries)
Basic Education also known as Learning for Living (2,886 beneficiaries)	Community Education (4,197 beneficiaries)
Training Services i.e. apprenticeships, traineeships, specific skills training & specialist training providers (933)	Workplace/Evening Programmes (218 beneficiaries)
Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) (180 beneficiaries)	Post Leaving Certificate Programme (PLC) (185 beneficiaries)

We provide below a brief description of content and provision of learner support, what works well and gaps/deficiencies based on evidence provided by staff and managers during group sessions, follow-up calls and/or emails, as well as relevant literature review findings. We also outline some examples of Donegal ETB's funded TACA and National Learner Network programmes as examples of programmes for individuals with special education needs and/or disabilities (SEND).

Back to Education Initiative (BTEI) programme offers part-time further education courses for those aged 18 or over. It provides individuals with the opportunity to combine learning with family, work and other responsibilities. Anyone who has left full-time education can take part in a course, but priority will be given to those with less than upper second-level education. BTEI offers a range of education and training courses at National Framework Qualification NFQ Levels 4 and 5 running over six months to two years depending on the course. All courses are offered through the Further Education and Training Centres and in conjunction with the Community Education Programme in the community.

Provision of learner support: Guidance for BTEI learners is available to groups and individuals at the ETB centres. The guidance team works well with the learners to identify the most appropriate course. A skills checker is used to identify literacy or number support needs, learning difficulties or any learning gap. BTEI staff arrange appropriate support, which may be a short course – i.e. to cover coping strategies. There are 'dyslexia boxes' i.e. with coloured overlays and other resources to support learners with specific learning difficulties. All frontline staff receive customer service training, including the caretakers.

What works well

Donegal's BTEI learners receive good initial guidance counselling to enable them to join the most appropriate course. They also receive high levels of on-going support, although teachers/tutors do not get

sufficient information in advance about learners' support needs. General induction from BTEI's learner support worker and other staff helps break down the course components for learners so that they will understand what they need to do to achieve the qualification and course aims. They receive support with personal health issues such as with epilepsy and asthma. First aid courses for about 30 staff and learners was recently led by an external tutor enabling all participants to develop new practical skills for home and work. This course, for example, led to one learner to identifying that she had a serious nut allergy.

Gaps/ deficiencies

In some cases, staff have to identify learners' additional learning and support needs as the course develops, although they are beginning to use the WRAT 5³³ system to help staff identify learners' support needs. WRAT 5 is used in the BTEI programme (and other programmes outside of Youthreach) to indicate the need for reasonable accommodation in Assessment. Wider learner support needs are not going to be evident by undertaking the WRAT 5 tool. The extent to which all facilitators are fully trained using WRAT 5 to national standards seems varied. Staff felt that the time lapse sometimes means that learners may leave because their additional learning support needs were not identified soon enough. They also felt that there should be a learning support service at every centre, on a pro-rata basis according to the number of students and that personal support often relies too much on the good will of staff.

Basic Education - *Learning for Living is Donegal ETB's adult basic education service. It offers tuition to adults who need to build strong foundation skills in reading, writing, spelling, mathematics, numbers and computers. The provision in English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) is for refugees and asylum seekers. The programme offers learning that is tailored to the needs of each student in a supportive and friendly environment. Courses can be accredited through QQI major and minor awards from Level 1 to Level 3. Non-accredited courses are short courses designed to meet specific training needs. Classes are free and generally run two to six hours a week.*

Provision of learner support: Members of staff interviewed who work in this provision indicated that the 50 to 60 tutors tend to provide learning support as part of their role but often outside their teaching hours. Guidance counsellors visit classes to present to the group. They also provide individual sessions on employability skills, although there is little time within the classes for external guidance. Instead the tutors go out of their way to help people on the first steps of their journey. Referrals to Learning for Living come from word of mouth, guidance service, social services and community groups. Community education is the 'sister provision', often operating from the same centres. A high proportion of learners recommend the provision to family, friends and acquaintances.

Initial assessment is mostly used to ensure that learners are in the most appropriate class for their current level of skills. Courses at levels 1 and 2 generally aim to support learners with their interests and hobbies and everyday living. Careers progression generally comes after level 3. Employability skills are often embedded or contextualised into the teaching activities. Some learners gain opportunities for work experience. Tutors signpost learners to guidance if a new issue arises. Recent staff training and development has included supporting learners with mental health issues. We have noted the Guidance Service is underutilised in this context, whilst high levels of student need is largely met by tutors, frequently in their own time.

What works well

There is a strong commitment and approachability of tutors and support staff to create the positive learning environment that is prevalent throughout this provision. Volunteer support is available for those not happy to join a class until they have built sufficient confidence. The tutors are dedicated to supporting their learners. As they cannot spend too much time providing individuals with personal or pastoral in session time, they do this outside the class hours. Specific cohorts of learners may have personal issues that require other supports. These issues can have an impact on their learning, mental health and wellbeing. While this is beneficial to the learners, the staff identified that this can be challenging for them. Learners benefit from a good range of activities and day trips that enrich their learning and development.

Gaps/deficiencies

Staff indicated that they do not have opportunities for 'off-loading' when they deal with some learners' emotional and personal issues. They also feel that there is a need to be able to direct some learners to support agencies and felt that a list of agencies and referral procedures would be helpful. The Learning for Living organisers say that they are sometimes overwhelmed with administrative work so that they cannot always support the tutors.

The tutors and organisers also felt that more information is needed when learners join the provision. It was agreed that the registration process could provide the tutors with information about their new learners prior to the first session so that they have relevant personal details. One of the most common concerns for the staff interviewed was that the qualification targets do not always demonstrate learners' personal and social development, so they can leave the programmes without an accurate record of their progress.

Training services comprises of Apprenticeships, Traineeships (including contracted services), Specific Skills Training, Evening Training, Specialist Training Provision and Skills To Advance Training - *An Apprenticeship is a programme of structured education and training which formally combines and alternates learning in the workplace with learning in a training centre or Institute of Technology. It is a dual system, which is a blended combination of on-the-job employer-based training and off-the-job training which prepares the participant for a specific occupation and leads to a qualification nationally recognised on the National Framework of Qualifications from Level 5 to Level 10. Apprentices earn while they learn and build valuable work-ready skills in a chosen occupation.*

Donegal ETB delivers the Phase 2 element for the following pre-2016 craft apprenticeships: Motor Mechanics, Electrical, Electronic Security Systems, Carpentry and Joinery and Plumbing apprenticeships only - As the apprenticeship is a national programme, with delivery of the off the job phases taking place across a number of education and training providers located across the country, scheduling for phases 2,4 and 6 of the craft apprenticeships is co-ordinated by SOLAS and while Donegal ETB delivers a number of Phase 2 apprenticeships, Donegal based apprentices may be scheduled to locations outside the county for these phase 2 courses and all others, including Phases 4 and 6, as per the apprenticeship scheduling process.

Provision of learner support in Apprenticeships

Apprentices on the pre-2016 craft apprenticeships are paid by their employer at work when in the on-the-job phases and they receive an allowance from the State when on the off-the-job training phases. Senior Training Advisors carry out employer monitoring visits to support the employer and the apprentice throughout the apprenticeship and to discuss the progress of the apprentice with regard to the curriculum

and assessments, etc. Apprentices attending Phase 2 with Donegal ETB now take part in initial assessments to identify if they need any additional support. Another member of staff will provide focused individual literacy support, including study skills to those identified within Donegal ETB.

What works well in apprenticeships

Apprentices have access to a Senior Training Advisor (STA) who they can contact directly if they have any issues and the STAs also carry out on site visits to monitor progress and give support and guidance as required. Senior Training Advisers also meet with workplace assessors and mentors and provide information around curriculum and the on the job assessments, where appropriate. The introduction of a learning support specialist and the extra support in the areas of mathematics, drawing etc. is working well. Donegal ETB staff have developed a detailed apprentice Information booklet which was produced locally for apprentices attending either of the two Donegal ETB Training Centres for their 22-week off-the job phases of their apprenticeship. The booklet covers a wide range aspect of their training programme from accommodation to transport; from skills competitions to testimonials from their employers and from local discounts to sport facilities. For example, if any apprentice plays sport e.g. soccer or Gaelic with their local club and wish to keep up their training/fitness levels when based in Donegal during the week, there is an arrangement with local clubs to facilitate this. It was noted that the status of the apprenticeships has improved and this is helped by recent national media campaigns and local promotional activity that is ongoing. The new apprenticeships launched post 2016 which extend into non-traditional apprenticeship occupations and which can have certification available ranging from QQI level 5 – 10 on the National Framework of Qualifications has also helped raise the status of the overall apprenticeship model of delivery.

Gaps/deficiencies

Staff working with apprentices and employers reported the educational eligibility criteria for pre-2016 craft-based apprenticeships has not evolved sufficiently to meet employer needs and that of the curriculum in some trades. Feedback from many employers is that they would like it raised from the current Junior Certificate base to that of the Leaving Certificate. It is important that the educational eligibility criteria, while meeting the needs of the curriculum, be realistic and also meet the needs of all stakeholders. It was reported the educational entry criteria need not necessarily be the same for all pre-2016 apprenticeships.

Feedback from staff noted the success of the pilot which involved the extension of a pastoral care input by the guidance service to one of the Phase 2 apprenticeship courses in Donegal ETB and commented that this should be extended to all apprentices and learners throughout the provision.

Apprentices are often out of the county for up 22 weeks on Phase 2. Different ETBs have different policies and there is not enough standardisation around some of the supports available such as support for mental health issues, language support for those who speak English as an additional language, and literacy and numeracy support, etc. if required.

Traineeships offer a programme of structured training which combines learning in an education and training setting and in the workplace and it aims to improve employment outcomes for participants and increase retention and productivity within industry. Traineeships enable learners to develop cutting edge skills and knowledge on-the-job, making them more skilled, more employable and enhancing their career options. New traineeships are developed on an ongoing basis across a range of industries and sectors in response to identified skill needs. The entry requirements can vary depending on the level of the course and

the aptitude and skills required for successful completion. Interviews and sometimes aptitude test are used in certain cases to select participants.

Specific Skills Training (SST) courses are designed to provide learners with a range of employability related skills and formal vocational qualifications to facilitate those entering the labour market for the first time and for people wishing to update or acquire new skills. Courses can lead to certification Awards at QQI Levels 3, 4, 5 and 6 (or equivalent) and/or to industry recognised accreditation. Short modular courses are typically 6 weeks and longer courses can be up to 40 weeks duration. The majority of courses are delivered on a full-time basis throughout the year in Letterkenny and Gweedore Training Centres and are supplemented by contracted providers allowing Donegal ETB the flexibility to meet the changing industry demands.

Skills to Advance is an Initiative which is aimed at supporting working lives and enterprise growth in Ireland. This policy aims to offer skills development through certified training to vulnerable employees whose skill level is below level 5 on the NFQ. In particular, it focuses on the lower skilled employees, those at risk of displacement and those who are over 50 years old.

An Employment Engagement Officer works with employers to profile their needs. Working mostly with SMEs, and some large employers, the aim is to help them grow and develop their staff.

Provision of learner support in traineeships - The role of the ETB's Recruitment Officer is to promote, interview and recruit for the full-time programmes within Training Services excluding Apprenticeships. The role of Donegal ETB's Contracted Training Officer is to monitor, manage and support the Contracted training provision within the service to ensure quality of service delivery.

Traineeships³⁴ respond to an identified industry skills' need that requires a vocational award at NFQ Levels 4-6, or equivalent. They are between 6 and 20 months in duration and have at least 30% of learning 'on-the-job'. Training combines transversal and technical skills development. Traineeships provide open access to prospective trainees. SST involves shorter courses at NFQ level 5 or 6, or equivalent and last between six and 40 weeks and they do not usually involve work placement. Traineeships and SST courses are free and DEASP payment recipients may be eligible for a training allowance based on their social welfare entitlement with an additional top up where applicable. Learners can also claim an accommodation or travel allowance if they need to be far away from home for the duration of the programme. A free bus service is provided within the local rural catchment area to facilitate learners.

What works well

When learners registered on these programmes and there is evidence of individuals having a specific learning difficulty or requiring identified support needs, additional support may be available e.g. exams support, but this is not systematic. (Note: there is no cost to the employer during placement on traineeships). Donegal ETB (Digital Sales and Marketing) – City & Guilds Level 3 Diploma in Digital Marketing is showcased in Developing Best Practice in Work-Based Learning: An Evaluation of the Career Traineeship Pilot (SOLACE, 2018) - <https://www.solas.ie/f/70398/x/8948babc28/developing-best-practice-in-work-based-learning-an-evaluation-of-the-career-traineeship-pilot.pdf>

Gaps/deficiencies

Staff felt that learners on traineeships and SST need a more individualised planning system that would include a system for recording their wider development. They also felt that the programmes should

support the learners to develop their career management and employability skills more at entry to help them progress to work. The provision of support is rather 'ad hoc'. For example, 11 of the 15 young learners on a welding course to achieve their Leaving Certificate identified that they would need additional support with literacy, and/or numeracy and/or IT.

Training Services staff identified a gap in support for learners with mental health issues. Literacy and numeracy can also be a significant barrier for learners. They felt that they have no personnel available who are equipped to deal with learners with drug and alcohol related issues and they would appreciate guidelines and training in this.

Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) is for job seeking adults over the age of 21 in receipt of a social welfare payment, dependent spouses or those signing for credits. Those attending VTOS move onto an allowance administered by the centres which is equivalent to the DEASP payment, a meal/travel allowance is also available, subject to individual learners' circumstances. The VTOS programme's mission is to help learners progress and achieve their goals in a supportive learning environment. Courses are focused on developing the skills and competencies required by employers. They aim to improve learners' general level of education, develop their skills and prepare them for employment/self-employment, a new career or a change of career. Learners work towards recognised qualifications at levels 4 and 5, along with industry-recognised accreditation that can enable them to progress to a range of FET or Higher Education courses. These full-time courses run over 1 to 2 years. The two-year programme in Letterkenny offers the Leaving Certificate for Adults in the Letterkenny centre.

Provision of learner support The guidance team provides potential learners with career guidance and they participate in the interview process, in most centres. Another agency, FIT³⁵ carries out site visits to support the CV writing in Donegal Town. Travel is provided, as required and learners receive a meal allowance. Reasonable accommodation for exams is provided to learners who already present the evidence of their additional needs. The VTOS programmes are developed in close collaboration with local industries. Learners undertake a work placement as part of the programme. Speakers from local business and colleges provide learners with inside knowledge and information to help them plan next step.

What works well

In VTOS, the relationship with guidance services is particularly strong and the guidance counsellors help set the scene for potential learners well so that they understand the aims of the programme and the career pathways that it can open up for learner. Tutors provide support through 'normal classroom practice', including the development of learners' discipline and behaviour appropriate for work. Health and wellbeing are also integrated into the programme. As one member of staff said, 'It is much more than the certificate.' The course aims to provide a motivating and life changing experience. Progression to a course at level 6 or 7, or to employment is high.

Example of good practice in learner support - VTOS

- The programme in Donegal Town includes a whole-day activity for students and staff that allow time to engage and encourage the students and to support them to realise their potential. Once a term, (i.e. six days over the two-year programme) they all take part in a wide range of activities, such as walks, trips, healthy eating projects that are always deemed to be very successful by all concerned. Similar activities are available to VTOS students in other Donegal centres, but they may not be organised in the same way.

Gaps/deficiencies

Staff interviewed were slightly confused about NFQ level 4 provision. Some felt that guidance counselling should be more consistent across the programmes. In the same way, they felt that the centres seem to be working in isolation and would benefit from more co-ordination across the centres.

Youthreach is for young people aged 16-20 years who have left school early and have obtained few or no qualifications. It offers a wide range of learning and training opportunities: Levels 1 or 2 General Learning; Level 3 Employability Skills and Level 4 General Learning. Subjects, varying from centre to centre, include art and craft, catering, computers, childcare, hairdressing, health and fitness, literacy, numeracy, office skills, outdoor pursuits, personal development, woodcraft and many more. Work experience is also an important part of the Youthreach programme. Other qualifications include basic food hygiene, ECDL, First Aid and Gaisce Awards. Progression is to FE or employment.

Provision of learner support Learner support is integral to the Youthreach programme. Learners receive a weekly training allowance a meal allowance and a travel allowance, if applicable. Advocates work with learners to plan their next step. The programmes are generally well-resourced with additional funding for literacy and other support. Each student has a mentor who works with them to support their emotional needs. The tutors all received mentoring training. They also receive support and supervision or counselling. Support for vulnerable students is also available from a clinical psychologist and/or therapeutic counsellor, as applicable. Advocates are available in all but one Youthreach centre in Donegal. Staff interviewed feel that their learners have so many unquantifiable gains and achievements, but the management information system for reporting to funders does not capture this information. They are concerned that without a focus on showing learners how they are coming more independent, they could in turn become vulnerable adults.

What works well

In Donegal's Youthreach provision learners benefit from small classes that are vocationally focused and they receive good levels of individual support working, with mentors and advocates. The learning programmes are highly individualised and plan according to each learner's development needs and plans for progression. Learning support is often provided individually during class time. The quality outputs for Youthreach are excellent. This is a well-resourced specialist provision with a wide range of individual support, advocacy, counselling and mentoring. Only one centre receives funding from the special educational needs initiative (SENI) budget, but this additional staffing is not available to students at the other centres. The students receive advocacy support, counselling and mentoring throughout the two years from their tutor and/or mentors to enable them to build up career plan - this is specific to Youthreach. There is a strong focus on identifying barriers to progression and students work with staff to develop an exit plan.

Gaps/deficiencies

Although learners often make significant progress in their personal development, this is often not recorded in sufficient detail. The systems for recording achievement focus on accreditation and they felt that they did not have adequate procedures for recording learners' development of personal, social, career management and employability skills. There is no universal system for recording individual learners' development of personal, social, career management and employability skills that are not identified as learning outcomes within modules - but these can be important for the learners' overall development. Some examples include the development of self-esteem and confidence that enables individuals to

participate and benefit more fully from the programme and increase their chances of successful progression to employment or further education and training.

Community Education supports the delivery of adult education courses in the community through the provision of funding for tuition costs and support in the setting up of courses. The programme aims to encourage adults with few or no qualifications to take part in educational activities in order to build their confidence as individuals and to help in the development of their community. Courses are generally non-accredited but may offer certification. It also aims to promote and support the development of new community education groups and activities in Donegal and to support the community education sector through the provision of training and information-sharing opportunities.

Provision of learner support Donegal ETB is the broker between different organisations and providers. About 90% of Donegal ETB courses are non-accredited and led by community organisations. There is a wide range of programmes; many in the arts. Some are accredited, such as bookkeeping etc. It is up to the host organisation to provide learner support but the ETB can offer some support to host the providers/organisations/communities and give contacts and ideas.

What works well

Within Community Education Donegal ETB builds capacity and supports local community groups. In conjunction with local Community Outreach Providers, Donegal ETB coordinates resources and provides a network of high-quality wraparound services. These can be integral in addressing barriers to learning; carrying out needs assessments; providing student support and improving planning, coordination and communication. Ultimately, they can be integral in influencing the retention of participants. The programme works well in supporting communities in Donegal to respond to the learning and development needs of their local residents. It reaches out well to groups of people who do not usually avail of such opportunities. Currently, there are circa 4,500 adults participating in these programmes delivered by 140 providers across Donegal.

Gaps/deficiencies

The staff interviewed felt that there was a need to make learners social development an outcome for quality assurance purposes. They felt that the current system of targets did not always provide an adequate evaluation of the positive impact that the programmes have on their learners' wellbeing and confidence and as well as their development of practical skills and relevant subject knowledge.

Post Leaving Certificate (PLC) courses are full-time programmes for young people who have completed their Leaving Certificate and adults returning to education. These courses are offered in variety of settings nationally, including schools, colleges and community education centres. The courses offer a mixture of practical and academic learning as well as work experience. There are a range of courses offered in the following fields of learning: Art, Business, Childcare, Nursing, Sport & Recreation and 3rd level access. All courses are offered at QQI level 5 and all include an element of work experience. The courses are usually of 1-2 years duration. Donegal ETB offers 12 PLCs courses³⁶ all are attached to post primary schools.

Provision of learner support In general PLC's take place in Colleges of Further Education (CFEs). However, as there no CFEs in Donegal, this provision is in three post primary schools. Allocation of guidance in post-primary is based on pupil/teacher ratio in schools. In a school with PLC the guidance counsellor is expected

to cover mainstream pupils and PLC students, at the principal's discretion. However, CFE colleges with PLC have been funded by SOLAS since September 2019 and there has been no clarification as to whether the guidance allocation will be different going forward.

Staff teaching this provision in Donegal at Level 5 and Level 6 indicate the programmes are aimed primarily at students who would like to develop vocational or technological skills in order to enter skilled employment, or progress to higher education. They may not have enough points from their school exams, they may not be career decided, and/or have an educational 'gap year' to give them more time before progression to HE. The provision is vocational and is also available for adults. Based in post primary schools, the learners are on provision separate to mainstream, although teachers cross over both types of provision. (In one school with 300 mainstream students, there are 60 PLC students). There are no obvious built in arrangements for the PLC students in Donegal to receive guidance counselling. As one of the tutors stated:

'As a result of providing FET courses in the 2nd level system we feel like we have fallen between two stools in relation to learner support'.

What works well

In PLC programmes, frontline staff provide learner support as far as they can and learners benefit from tutors' experience and expertise. Mc Guinness et al (2018)³⁷ evaluated PLC programme provision across Ireland and found that on average PLC learners are 16% more likely to be in employment than if they had just entered the labour market straight after the Leaving Certificate. The report also highlighted a number of challenges for policy development in the PLC sector indicating a need for greater responsiveness of job-specific PLC courses to changing labour market conditions in terms of the types of courses offered and closer links with employers, as well as enhanced guidance for learners and extra training for teaching staff.

Gaps/deficiencies

There is no dedicated time for access to special educational needs (SEN) support for PLC students. The staff interviewed stated that the teaching timetable is full and there is no time ring-fenced for such support. A guidance counsellor in the ETB system focuses both on career guidance and personal counselling, but as it stands at the moment, there is no dedicated time allocated to PLC learners. Learners who can produce psychological assessments can receive additional support, especially for exams, however in the past this was not normally available for mature students, especially when their specific learning difficulties may only become evident during the course. It was noted that with the recent roll-out of the WRAT 5 assessor for Reasonable Accommodation, assessment and accommodation should be available for any FET learner.

5.8 Some selected examples of specialist community SEND programmes funded by Donegal ETB include:

Specialist Training Providers (STP)- TACA and National Learners' Network (NLN)

TACA and NLN are external programmes that Donegal ETB funds through their STP programme to enable SEND learners to undertake courses at NQF Level 3-5 with the level of specialised support they require. STP's remove or overcome barriers which in other training environments learners with disabilities encounter disproportionately. These are addressed and met through; needs relating to access, needs relating to content and duration, non-occupational training related needs. The staff are not Donegal ETB

employees, they work for the Health Service Executive (HSE) or National Learning Network (NLN). Donegal ETB engages these specialist service providers for courses for people with SEND as it does not have the specialist trained staff in house. Individuals with SEND can apply to 'mainstream' courses also; however, in some instances when there is a concern about readiness or ability to undertake and manage the more mainstream courses Donegal ETB FET services will refer to TACA and NLN. Donegal ETB's STP providers offer a range of support services to learners to ensure they can participate in all aspects of 'student life'.

TACA is an 18-month full-time programme for people with SEND leading to a qualification at level 3 in employability. It includes work experience. The progression aim is supported/open employment. The programme has a strong focus on personal development, with strong links with support agencies. Example of good practice in TACA: The integration of support into the programme and the links with employers is particularly successful. Work experience is instrumental in enabling learners to progress to work. Progression to employment is high at about 75%. This shows the significant impact of enabling learners to take part in work experience as part of the course as it also enables the employers to see the benefits of working with people with SEND and how to make the adjustments needed to give them employment.

NLN in Letterkenny provides a range of free courses to people who have had an accident, illness, injury or have a disability and extra support needs. Courses are tailored to each student's needs, to help them to build their confidence while getting practical job-seeking skills to help them get a job or go on to further training.

What works well

External partnership agencies have excellent local knowledge of employers and learners receive good support into employment, including through Wage Subsidy Scheme and/or Workplace Equipment /Adaptation Scheme. Employers receive financial incentives to take SEND learners into employment after their course has ended. There are also some supported employment initiatives provided by the Department of Employment and Social Protection (DEASP).

Gaps/deficiencies

A few NLN colleagues mentioned they work in isolation initially as the Department of Employment and Social Protection (DEASP) is the gatekeeper to the programme. They no longer receive prior information on the group or individual learners' support needs. They also feel that more information on INTREO³⁸ is needed. They felt that there is a lack of clarity where tutor and support role separates. An agreement is needed on how guidance services and the tutors can work together to enhance the provision by upskilling the tutors. Also, in Donegal ETB funded Specialist Training Providers (STP) Courses such as TACA and NLN programmes, learners' wider development is not recorded or required at a local and/or national level. Outcomes such as progression into FE/HE and employment, as well as certification outcomes are recorded both locally and nationally.

Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL)

5.9 Policy expectations both nationally and internationally arising from the provision of RPL services are high. While employees, employers and economic development may broadly be a key beneficiary, Donegal ETB FET service with validated programmes from levels 1-6 on the NFQ is well placed to lead the RPL process within the county. There is live national debate about the consistency in decision making in

assessment and in quality assurance. The present legislative framework is provided by the Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act, 2012 which provided the statutory basis for the establishment of Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI). Within the Act, QQI has direct responsibility for oversight of policies for access, transfer and progression of learners, where access, transfer and progression refer to:

- access by learners to programmes of education and training, including recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired;
- transfer of learners from one programme to another having received recognition for knowledge, skill or competence previously acquired; and
- progression of learners from a programme to another programme of a higher level. (Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012, p11.
- Recognition of prior learning (RPL) is a process, which seeks to acknowledge all forms of learning, and to give them a value in the context of a destination award (European Commission, 2008; National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005; OECD, 2004). The definition of RPL is taken from the European Inventory on validation of informal and non-formal learning, country report Ireland 2014:

“RPL incorporates prior formal, informal and non-formal learning and that which is validated within the context of a specified destination award from level one to ten on the National Framework of Qualifications” (European Commission, CEDEFOP, ICF International; 2014 p. 3).

Goggin et al, (2017)³⁹state RPL allows for all forms of learning to contribute to an award (National Qualifications Authority of Ireland, 2005). RPL provides access to the education system for individuals who through formal acknowledgement of their prior knowledge, skills and competences may complete their studies in a shorter timeframe without having to duplicate learning. RPL is also used for the award of credit, or exemptions, for individual modules on programmes. RPL is beneficial in that it allows an individual to demonstrate what they know already.’ p.4)

In Donegal ETB, an earlier pilot project had the overall objective of validating the knowledge, skills and competencies acquired by Privates in the Defence Forces outside of the formal learning environment. The project progressed through the four stages of validation and complimented the Donegal ETB approach ‘to recognise and acknowledge both the formal and experiential learning of learners at point of access to courses’. The Defence Forces as a lifelong learning organisation supported engagement with Donegal ETB under the Skills for Work programme. The aim was to provide a course that would prepare and support personnel to transition from army to civilian life. This engagement highlighted the high level of skills, knowledge and competencies that Defence Force personnel had gained through their work training and roles. The identification of this gap between skills and validation resulted in an RPL project that mapped skills to awards. This collaboration provided an opportunity to validate skills gained in the workplace through formal accreditation. Learners reported increased confidence and improved awareness in their learning.

What works well

Donegal ETB has recently been successful with a large SOLAS funding application to pilot RPL for Care sector employees (March 2020-2022). This will provide an opportunity for employees within the care

sector to gain national qualifications that will match their skills, knowledge and competencies. PLC progression outcomes are very good.

Strengths

The approach to implementing RPL where it is available has been very well structured. It has involved the RPL team supporting applicants to gather evidence to support the acquisition of a destination award. This is underpinned by Donegal ETB's quality assurance policies. So far, 215 learners have gained customised awards specific to their needs.

Gaps/Deficiencies

Donegal ETB has documented its processes for RPL, including mentoring and facilitated support. There is a need to make RPL more visible in the County. It was noted NALA has an online RPL system, which can potentially be customised by ETBs, but many, including Donegal, are choosing to create their own.

Quality Assurance

5.10 The QA coordinator is a new role with responsibility for overseeing, monitoring and reviewing the QA system within Donegal ETB. Two training standards officers (TSOs) also balance perspectives from the previous FAS and FE systems. The initial focus is to amalgamate the previous education and training processes into an integrated overarching quality system. The new system is incorporating the QQI Statutory QA guidelines, published in April 2016.

The starting point is the mission, vision, values and strategic priorities. 'Are we doing what we say we are?' The focus is also to develop QA policies before operating the processes at programme level. The Quality Assurance Service staff are therefore carrying informative visits to the 17 centres to understand the learning environment of each centre. One of the themes is the structure of and access/entitlement to guidance. The student and staff voice will be central to these processes and systems. An overall self-evaluation of the FET Services QA processes will take place during 2020 as part of the QQI lead Statutory Review.

"By implementing UDL into the mainstream, it reduces the need for add-on support, but never negates the need for adaptation or individual support." (SOLAS, 2020)

Data Management

5.11 The Programme Learner Support System (PLSS) is a relatively new system and staff need more opportunities to test and learn so that they fully appreciate the system. Administrative duties associated with PLSS seem to be impacting on the quality of support provided to staff and learners, especially in Learning for Living and BTEI. It was commented that some additional administrative support would free them up to give extra time to support tutors and learners.

For the guidance service, since 2004 the NCGE has developed an online database specific to adult guidance service to monitor and report on delivery. NCGE is now funded by SOLAS and the database is completed by all 16 ETBs to report on delivery across Ireland, such as the number of 1:1 session, group sessions, the number of clients from the specified target groups, their intended progression etc. The agency was involved in agreeing what the database would look like as it is a base for all FET guidance services and is

used to inform FET guidance policy. Alongside this, Donegal ETB have their own reporting system/reports. NCGE is highly proactive in producing an annual overall report.

Communications, Marketing and Recruitment

5.12 Part of the role of the ETB Communications Officer is to help with the promotion of FET courses and activities, including via social media. 'Schools run their own social media accounts but there has been nothing for FET.' Initial work has involved answering messages about the provision on Facebook messenger that learners and potential learners tend to use in preference to phone calls, which require credit. This facilitates providing links to other relevant information to enable learners to make informed choices about their courses, including links to an online form that provides the guidance team with the contact details for follow-up calls.

"VTOS -ft; BTEI -pt.' There are too many acronyms. Talk about part-time and full-time courses. Youthreach – two- year programme - with different awards - L2,3 and 4. It can be very confusing. We need more resources to promote the courses – and make sure the language used for the programmes is simple and easy to understand." (Member of staff)

FET Centres

5.13 There is a strong appetite within the FET management team to align well with SOLAS recommendations now and in the future, for example, the concept of local and county campuses.

Strengths

- Local centres and staff delivery have a strong active inclusion philosophy and approach
- There is evidence of flexible and agile scheduling of training and education opportunities
- A feedback and tutor support model works well in the FET Centres.

Gaps/Deficiencies

- Disability support
- Literacy support for learners at level 5 & 6
- Students have to find their own placements – inequity in provision – social capital gains for those most able to use their networks.
- SOLAS new funding model not widely understood.
- Capturing the learners' voices within the FET Provision is currently inconsistent and piecemeal – this should become more systematic.

6. International literature review: key themes relevant to the research

Additional findings were drawn from separate sources of relevant European and international key findings to help build on good/interesting learner support policies and practices and identify ideas for action.

6.1 Learning & Work Institute (2019) *Healthy, Wealthy and Wise: Implications for Workforce Development*, Leicester – This report highlights developing new ways of thinking about and doing adult learning inevitably presents challenges for the adult learning workforce. It asks the workforce to step outside what is familiar, to think differently about their roles and to be receptive to exploring and trying alternative ways of doing things. But unless the workforce understands the need for change and is enabled

to embrace new approaches, the opportunities to strengthen the role of adult learning across policy areas will be missed (p.6) - <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/Healthy-Wealthy-and-Wise-implications-for-workforce-development.pdf>

6.2 European Lifelong Guidance Policy Network (2014) Concept Note No. 3. Career Management Skills – This report outlines a number of issues related to the process of Career Management Skills (CMS) policy implementation in six sectoral areas – schools, vocational education and training (VET), higher education, adult education, employment and social inclusion. Specifically, it aims to identify those elements that support policy development and implementation, as well as those that can prove to be an obstacle to policy implementation in relation to CMS - <http://www.elgpn.eu/publications/elgpn-concept-note-cms>

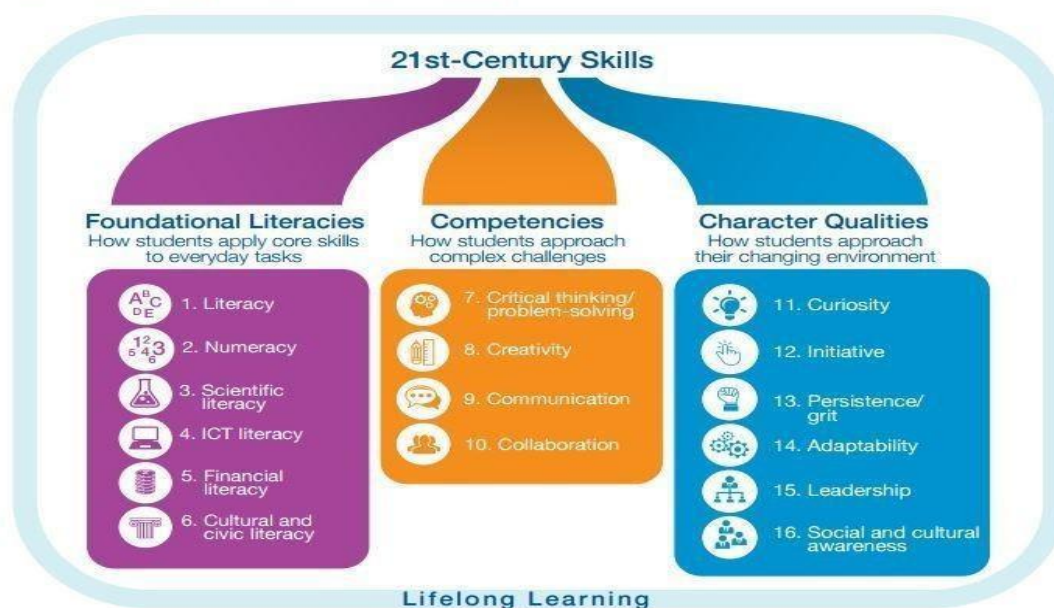
6.3 In Scotland, CMS is specifically linked to self, strengths, horizons and networks as a framework for career guidance / coaches working with individuals individually and in groups (Skills Development Scotland, 2020). A more detailed description of the competencies within the framework are described below:

- Self – competencies that enable individuals to develop their sense of self within society.
- Strengths – competencies that enable individuals to acquire and build on their strengths and to pursue rewarding learning and work opportunities.
- Horizons – competencies that enable individuals to visualise, plan and achieve their career aspirations throughout life.
- Networks – competencies that enable individuals to develop relationships and networks of support.

See also: Skills Development Scotland and Industry 4.0 meta-skills - <https://www.skillsdevelopmentscotland.co.uk/what-we-do/skills-planning/skills4-0/>

6.4 The World Economic Forum (2020) sets out 16 skills for the 21st century (Exhibit 1 below) and a variety of general and targeted learning strategies that foster social and emotional skills (Exhibit 3 below).

Exhibit 1: Students require 16 skills for the 21st century



Note: ICT stands for information and communications technology.

Exhibit 3: A variety of general and targeted learning strategies foster social and emotional skills



6.5 Working Wales is a government-funded initiative targeted at young people and adults' most 'at risk'. A unique approach is the design and development of a diagnostic assessment approach through the guidance counselling service to identify learner needs. This work is still in the development phase; however, it is worth making connections with Careers Wales who lead on this high-profile initiative, specifically drawing on lessons learned from the implementation in rural communities including marketing and promotion and online/offline service design and delivery - <https://workingwales.gov.wales/what-we-do>

6.6. The Open University (2020) *Trends in Adult Education: Innovating Pedagogy: Innovation Report No. 8* explores new forms of teaching, learning and assessment, to guide educators and policy makers. It indicates adopting a 'posthumanist approach' in education means confronting some unsettling ideas around less-well-defined separation between humans and technology, with the aim to enrich our understanding of ourselves and our world (p.14). The report is content rich and may be useful for Donegal ETB FET staff development purposes - <https://iet.open.ac.uk/file/innovating-pedagogy-2020.pdf>

6.7 NESTA (2019) *What motivates adults to learn?* draws on evidence from a report by [Nesta's Digital Frontrunners](#) identifies what motivates working adults to take part in and complete training in digital and digital-complementary skills. Behaviour change models can help policymakers understand how external and internal factors interact to drive motivation to learn and design accordingly. The report outlines how

the COM-B model (Michie et al, 2011) could be particularly useful in this respect -

https://media.nesta.org.uk/documents/Digital_Frontrunners_Motivation_to_Learn_report_final_published.pdf

6.8 The latest [Global Employment Trends for Youth 2020: Technology and the future of jobs](#) (GET Youth 2020) shows that, since the previous GET Youth report in 2017, an upward trend in NEET status has emerged. Also, the number of young people currently not in employment, education or training (NEET) is rising, and young women are more than twice as likely as their male counterparts to be affected, according to a new [International Labour Organization \(ILO\) report](#).

6.9 Adult Education: Too Important to be Left to Chance (2016) Literature Review - this report draws on 63 sources of good/interesting policies, practices and case studies - https://warwick.ac.uk/fac/soc/ier/research/adult_education/ See also: Adult Education: Important for Health and Well-being (2018) – op.cit.

6.10 How Estonia is delivering online guidance during the Covid-19 crisis – OECD blog: <http://dmhassociates.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/How-Estonia-is-delivering-online-guidance-during-COVID-crisis-OECD-Blog-1-1.pdf> Also, safeguarding online resources can be accessed: <http://dmhassociates.org/resources> Canadian response to Covid-19 - <http://dmhassociates.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/COVID-19-Career-Development-Sector.pdf>

6.11 Experts report on the impact of Covid-19 on lifelong guidance across Europe - <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/news-and-press/news/experts-report-impact-coronavirus-crisis-lifelong-guidance-europe> See also: Inventory of lifelong guidance systems and practices - <https://www.cedefop.europa.eu/en/publications-and-resources/country-reports/inventory-lifelong-guidance-systems-and-practices> and <https://ec.europa.eu/social/main.jsp?catId=738&langId=en&pubId=8284&furtherPubs=yes>

6.12 Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement (RARPA) unaccredited provision may also be useful to give learners' recognition for their development not included in the modules and help them articulate their achievement – at interviews, on applications and also for themselves and to their family etc. some organisations use the term 'informal' learning - <https://www.learningandwork.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/RARPA-Guidance-2017-v1.pdf>

7. Ideas for action

7.1. Continue to build upon the good/interesting policies and practices outlined above and within the Technical Report, in particular capturing the voices of participants and non-participants to inform learner support arrangements. Donegal ETB should continue to explore dynamic ways of engaging or re-engaging with non-participants to build their confidence, resilience and appetite for learning and skills development.

7.2. Invest in further training in customer service for all frontline staff across the ETB FET services to ensure greater equity in learner support services across the County.

- 7.3. Access to Guidance Counselling needs to be embedded across all programmes. There is also scope to follow best practice in European and International approaches to embedding career management skills in all programmes of learning e.g. Scotland and Malta. QQI modules on work experience could also benefit from this.
- 7.4. Consider strengthening screening and diagnostic approaches, for example, lessons learned from Working Wales (#ChangeYourStory); How Estonia is delivering online guidance during Covid-19; Lifelong Guidance Systems and Practices (CareersNet, Cedefop) and the Canadian Career Development Foundation's response to Covid-19: Impacts and Recommendations.
- 7.5. An additional full-time Educational Psychologist in Donegal, subject to resourcing, would help improve access and equity issues, as well as staff capacity building between and across programmes.
- 7.6. Consider lessons learned from how adults learn in work, including the COM-B model (Michie et al, 2011) which may be particularly useful for staff training and development.
- 7.7. Explore opportunities to build on existing recognition of prior learning (RPL) online hubs e.g. NALA and investigate opportunities for customised Donegal ETB branding. There is also scope to review the RARPA (Recognising and Recording Progress and Achievement) in England and other best practice examples from Europe and further afield.
- 7.8. Address staff training and development needs in areas such as working effectively with individuals and/or groups who have autism, special education needs and/or disabilities, drug and/or alcohol dependency.
- 7.9. Develop a measurable system for capturing and recording learners' development and progress over and above qualification level and achievements and involve staff from the outset in this process. Share and co-develop frameworks for learner support services – such as those in Limerick and Clare ETB.
- 7.10. Investigate further successful learner and staff development online hubs. Learners gave some examples but there are restrictions on broadband capacity in the county. Refer to Open University: Innovating Pedagogy (2020, p.36).

Contact: dmh associates
Email: deirdre.hughes3@btinternet.com
Tel: 0044(0) 7533 545057
Visit: <http://deirdrehughes.org/>
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- ¹³ National Adult Literacy Service - <https://www.nala.ie/about-us/>
- ¹⁴ NLN provides a range of flexible specialist support programmes for those in need of specialist support
- ¹⁵ AONTAS is the National Learning Institute for adult learning. Its role is advocacy and promotion. It is funded by the DfE and SOLAS and has 400 members including all ETBs. It also facilitates surveys and fora to gather learners' views. It provides qualitative research to influence policy – especially through learners' feedback.
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- ¹⁷ NCGE is the DES's agency for the development of policy for lifelong guidance, including in FET. Adult guidance services include PLC, Youthreach, prison services and all delivery in the FE context.
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- ³² Department of Education and Skills official education, training and work experience programme for early school leavers aged 15 – 20
- ³³ WRAT 5 is used in the BTEI programme and other programmes outside of Youthreach to assess the need for reasonable accommodation in Assessment, as agreed through the Quality Co-ordinator. Wider learner support needs are not going to be evident by undertaking the WRAT 5 tool.
- ³⁴ Traineeships - <http://www.traineeship.ie/>
- ³⁵ FIT is an industry-led initiative which works with government departments and SOLAS, ETBs, Third Level Institutions, Leargas, etc. They develop and promote **technology-based** programmes and career development opportunities for job seekers
- ³⁶ Careers Portal 2020
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- ³⁸ Intreo is a single point of contact for all employment and income supports. Designed to provide a more streamlined approach, Intreo offers practical, tailored employment services and supports for jobseekers and employers alike. <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/fb84c0-intreo/>
- ³⁹ Recognition of Prior Learning in Irish Further Education and Training (FET) This report was prepared by Deirdre Goggin, Phil O'Leary and Prof. Irene Sheridan of Cork Institute of Technology - <https://www.qqi.ie/Downloads/Prior%20Learning%20Report.pdf>