



Kildare Town Youth Employment Programme

The Youth Employment Programme is a progression towards employment initiative for young people under 25 who are not in employment, education or training (categorised as NEET) and currently registered as unemployed. The Programme sets out to address the low participation and retention of the most disadvantaged unemployed youth in current mainstream programmes and to enable mainstream service providers to refocus services or adopt new practices to encourage better participation of this group.

Policy Context

Young people who are unemployed are a particular priority for national and European policy makers. Under the EU Youth Guarantee 18–24 year olds are offered guidance, education, training and work experience as a set of tailored measures to improve their employment prospects. At national level addressing youth unemployment is a particular objective of the *Pathways to Work* strategy.

The Youth Employment Programme was implemented in Kildare town in 2016 in order to respond to the high levels of youth unemployment in South Kildare. Figures for the end of December 2015 showed a combined total of 1,207 of this cohort signing in the DSP Local Offices of Newbridge and Athy. The target group were young people within the Kildare town area, falling within the NEET category who were regarded as disadvantaged by virtue of low education attainment, poor skills levels and inability to access routes to the labour market. Many of the participants came from areas of disadvantage.

Implementation

48 young people, aged 18 – 22 (14 male and 3 female) from the Kildare Town area who had not engaged in any training or employment since signing on were invited by the Department of Social Protection to attend an introductory meeting facilitated by the YEP Project Coordinator. It was explained to potential participants that their participation on the programme would be regarded as an action of their Personal Progression Plan, that they would be assigned a case officer and come under the Department of Social Protection penalty rate criteria. 12 of the attendees were subsequently selected for participation in the programme, including 1 female.

Expected Outcomes and Timeframe

The expected outcomes for participants on the programme was that each person would develop confidence, identify a training pathway to a career and follow an achievable progression route to further education, training or employment within 6 months of completion.

Participant progress was evaluated through pre- and post-programme questionnaires on personal attitudes (self-worth, personal qualities, ambition etc.) and on attitudes to work (motivation, economic need, independence, job satisfaction etc.). A further tool was the Career Preparation Evaluation Wheel (a graphic indicator) through which goals were set and progress measured against these goals.

Project Partners

The initiative was developed and implemented through an interagency group established by County Kildare Leader Partnership (CKLP) as a collaborative working model with the Department of Social Protection (DSP), Kildare Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB), Kildare Youth Services and Kildare Children & Young People's Services Committee (CYPSC).

The interagency group developed a proposal which was submitted for funding under the DSP Activation and Family Support Programme, a scheme targeting disadvantage with the express purpose of facilitating progression in training and education. Additional resources in terms of staff allocation/time and training space was provided by the collaborating agencies. KWETB provided the tutor hours for the general learning modules.



▲ Participants from the Youth Employment Project with Coordinator Mars Blake.

Programme

The programme consisted of a 20 week part-time programme using a youth work approach, which had been successfully demonstrated in a pilot programme in Ballymun and identified in the *Youth Guarantee Implementation Plan* as a proven approach to engage this cohort.

The proposed start and finish date for the programme was chosen to allow transition to Post Leaving Certificate Courses, Local Training Initiatives and further education programmes with an autumn intake. The time frame also coincided with the beginning of retail recruitment for the Christmas period.

The programme content was delivered in 3 stages:

- The induction stage included one-to-one contact and group work to develop social skills, including personal effectiveness and interpersonal and negotiation skills, as a means of building personal confidence and enhancing motivation. The absence of these soft skills was identified as a barrier to progression in the *Pathways to Work Action Plan 2015-2016*.
- The main course content was delivered on 2 daily sessions of 3 hours each over the 20 weeks.
- One session consisted entirely of personal development and social skills. This was delivered by the KYS Programme Coordinator who was the key contact person for the participants.
 - The second session consisted of modules covering life skills, education, basic training and other job-related skills relevant to individual career plans and was delivered by KWETB staff.
- The progression stage took place over a 4 week period and included:
 - One-to-one mentoring and coaching, covering career guidance and job seeking skills, all of which was tailored to the individual.
 - The development of a personal action plan for each participant was assigned to CKLP staff. This stage helped participants to identify their personal preferences, to set career objectives and develop a clear progression pathway.



◀ Personal Effectiveness training at the Hive Youth Hub, Kildare Town

Impacts

Attendance

Initial engagement with the programme was a requisite, but many were motivated because their friends had signed up. Other material considerations were important in sustaining their attendance, such as the absence of additional costs like travel and lunch.

Attendance was reasonably good across the programme, thanks to the soft supports which were continuously provided and through which participants were prepared for, and made more receptive of, the practical training elements. The location was also a factor in securing attendance - it was nearby, familiar and didn't involve any additional travel costs.

Participation/Skills Attainment

Engaging in skills training was challenging for the participants but they quickly adjusted to it and came to believe in its importance. All of the participants built up a portfolio of skills, including HACCP (safe food handling) and Safe Pass (safe handling of machinery) as well as interpersonal skills at QQI level 3. There was some interest in mathematics, but identifying an appropriate level required a greater insight into levels of ability and attainment.

Having a ready formed group from the pre-training phase was important in holding the interest of participants through the skills training phase.

Progression

The development of personal action plans was a vital aid to progression. A robust interrogation of goals by the case officer proved useful and participants soon accepted the necessity of getting this right - i.e. identifying 'what was good for me'.

Two people dropped off the course before completion, one to take up a job offer. Of the ten people who finished the programme:

- 2 went to ETB courses (Construction Skills)
- 1 went to an LTI Foundation for Employment course
- 1 went to a specialist CE scheme on drug recovery
- 1 is undertaking Childcare QQI Level 5
- 1 has completed a work experience and is now job seeking.
- 3 identified PLC courses for September 2017
- 1 requires additional supports

Certification

The component learning elements of the programme were graded at level 2 or 3 of the QQI National Qualifications Framework. Formal certification was particularly valued by the participants.

Participant Perspectives

Participants were generally happy with the programme content. They considered it important in increasing their confidence and motivation. They would have liked more days and regarded the gap between the sessions as too long.

They particularly liked the KYS group work sessions and formed a strong bond with the Programme Coordinator, which they regarded as important in building trust and confidence and in fostering commitment and ownership. They believed that participation on the programme gave them purpose and spoke of not wanting to be on the dole, welcoming new experiences, 'now getting up early' and gaining insights to a wider world.

Key Learning

Progression Challenges

YEP sought to address a weakness in progression pathways for young people from disadvantaged backgrounds who, when unemployed, believe that they have nowhere to go. Many would chose to proceed along the vocational route but lack the knowledge and life skills to negotiate the access routes. Others could, with some assistance, benefit from second chance education, even though this may present difficulties for those with a previous negative experiences of schooling - obviously, some thought needs to be given to other non-vocational progression challenges including full time education.

The programme did improve participant awareness of access points which open up information on training and career opportunities - for example, awareness of KWETB as an important space for those seeking a route to employment. Building confidence and motivation was an important contributor to progression outcomes, especially the considerable attention given to developing capacity to interact with organisations and to negotiate relationships to achieve best benefit to the individual.

Lack of awareness by participants about key contact points for progression to a learning opportunity indicates a need for agencies to review communication strategies, but also highlights the inability of participants to negotiate through what were perceived as imposed difficulties. This suggests the need for more focus on improving coordination with and between training and employment organisations and contracted agents. Literacy, numeracy also needs to be checked out at an early stage – difficulties with forms and the failure to follow through on mathematics being indicators of the need for pre-assessment.

Interagency Approaches

The inter-agency management approach enabled a wider range of insights and perspectives to be brought to the programme, which was important in guiding the programme through from inception to operation, in addressing issues as they emerged and in mediating any difficulties that arose.

The pivotal maintenance role of youth services was vital in sustaining participation and in building trust to access other elements of the programme. This required a substantial level of commitment from the Programme Coordinator in terms of preparing participants for the training and progression elements as well as maintaining contact in out-of-hours periods.

Recommendations for Future Programmes

The requirement for a longer pathway of confidence building and life skills development and the need for this to be maintained in the post-programme progression stage was apparent, especially in terms of the difficulties faced in interacting with welfare and employment systems.

The need to better synchronise the programme towards college/PLC entry dates was another primary learning point from the programme - the programme timeframe resulting in too long a gap between its ending and college entry dates.

Cost can be a prohibiting factor in mainstreaming successful pilot programmes. On the basis of what was delivered the Youth Employment Programme did deliver value for money. The need for a more intensive programme, with additional soft and hard skills components would increase costs, but not prohibitively, and would still provide good monetary and social value.

Impact on mainstream services

Clear lessons emerged for mainstream service providers, particularly in underlining the importance of youth work processes when working with disadvantaged young people. Gaining life skills and building confidence are important in terms of boosting motivation, well-being and personal achievement, but they are also important in supporting and maintaining participation in jobs-related skills training and in maximizing benefit from progression measures. This learning is particularly relative to the design of future CKLP Local Training Initiatives.