

**REVIEW OF THE NATIONAL QUALITY
STANDARDS FRAMEWORK FOR YOUTH
WORK (NQS)**

FINAL REVIEW REPORT

October 2017



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank the Department of Children and Youth Affairs for commissioning Middlequarter Limited to undertake this review of the National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) for Youth Work. During its course, we benefitted from the cooperation and participation of a wide range of stakeholders across the youth sector, including young people, youth workers, managers, CDYSB Liaison Officers, ETB Youth Officers, officials from the Youth Affairs Unit, DCYA, former officials and those from other Government Departments, academics, and individual observers. We very much appreciate their participation in the Review process, whether through the surveys, focus groups, individual interviews, or meetings.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

Middlequarter Limited was commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs in late 2016 to undertake a review of the National Quality Standards Framework for youth work, with an emphasis on extracting insights and learning to inform the Framework's further strategic development. The requirements of the brief were to

- a) Determine the impact of the NQSF implementation on youth work organisations to date;
- b) Identify the components of the NQSF which have worked effectively and those that have been less effective;
- c) Identify areas for improvement / development of the NQSF, where appropriate;
- d) Illustrate how the NQSF could, if appropriate, be developed to comprehend
 - (i) Other youth provision funded by DCYA
 - (ii) Other related youth provision, where appropriate, funded by Government departments.

METHODOLOGY

1. Familiarisation with the youth policy context, the implementation of the NQSF to date, and the experience of quality standards in other contexts;
2. Literature and environmental scan – undertaken by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) based in Washington D.C.;
3. Online surveys of key stakeholders, using the SurveyMonkey tool:
 - a. A stakeholder survey distributed to service providers (both national organisations and local projects); ETB Youth Officers, Liaison Officers and Standards Officers; policymakers; and academics;
 - b. A young people's survey distributed to young people, with experience of the NQSF process, through the cooperation of ETB Youth Officers, national organisations and local projects;
4. Consultative interviews with a range of key informants;
5. Focus groups with a range of stakeholders;
6. Consultative meetings with key policymakers with current or previous responsibility for youth policy;

7. Project team meetings by conference call and email to plan and integrate the diverse elements of the Review process.

LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN¹

American Institutes for Research (AIR) looked at lessons learned and good practices for youth work in Ireland and four additional countries: Australia, Denmark, Finland and Scotland. These four countries have made significant efforts to improve the effectiveness of their youth work without a quality standards framework. Across these countries, common themes support an evidence-based approach to developing context-relevant, gender-sensitive and inclusive youth work policies and programs; engaging youth in planning meaningful youth-oriented and youth-serving programs; recognizing and rewarding participation and contribution; creating safe experiential learning opportunities; and, developing strong civic and social responsibility. There are differences as well and all findings offer a rich discussion against the backdrop of Ireland's approach to youth work and the health and well-being of Ireland's youth. Strengthening the linkages between the policy and standards frameworks and the National Youth Strategy by borrowing lessons learned and good practices from other countries has the potential to increase participation and retention, as well as ensure quality outcomes as part of large-scale, sustainable development goals that will protect and advance the potential of Irish youth.

ONLINE SURVEYS²

1. Key Stakeholders' Survey

The experience of the NQSF has been generally positive but has also reflected the difficult funding climate in which its implementation took place. While the benefits of engaging in the NQSF are predominantly considered beneficial and worthwhile, financial cuts and reductions in staff hours and numbers meant that few organisations and projects have been able to engage with the NQSF as fully as they wished, or felt expected, to engage. The NQSF process is also experienced as too cumbersome and repetitive to those working to implement it, whether paid staff or ETB officers. A need for training and more resources has

¹ The full AIR literature and environmental scan is an accompanying document to this report. A more comprehensive Executive Summary of the scan is included in this report at Chapter 2.

² The complete survey findings and analysis report also accompanies this report. A more comprehensive Executive Summary of the survey results is included at Chapter 3.

been identified by nearly all respondents. The NQSF process has especially been experienced as a challenge for small organisations and projects with very few staff and resources, although the benefits have also been considered the greatest by this segment. Most improvements have occurred in the development of organisations' and projects' policies and procedures, their strategic development, and an increased focus on quality in practice. There has been less improvement in the engagement with volunteers and young people, for both of whom the NQSF process is considered inappropriately bureaucratic and cumbersome.

2. Young People's Survey

A parallel survey was conducted with young people engaged in youth organisations, projects or services. Direct access to young people was not possible and it was consequently necessary to rely on youth service staff and ETB Youth/Liaison Officers to share the link to the survey with young people and encourage their participation. The response rate was extremely low and the answers can therefore not be considered representative – however, this is itself interesting and testifies to the difficulty of engaging young people in the NQSF process, and to involving them in the design and improvement of service provision.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE NQSF

The outputs and related learning from the literature and environmental scan, the online surveys, and the range of focus groups and individual interviews undertaken for the Review are synthesised in Chapter 4 to extract the most important issues requiring attention in the further strategic development of the NQSF. The issues highlighted are primarily those that most require attention, rather than the many well-regarded and effective features of the Framework's implementation to date.

1. **The NQSF is widely considered to have significant value** – 70% of stakeholders perceive the NQSF as worthwhile; Ireland is relatively unique in developing a quality standards framework, and is accordingly seen to be ahead of the international curve; the NQSF is a catalyst for changing and improving practice, while the majority of survey respondents are positive that quality is improving under each of the NQSF standards, particularly in the areas of planning, policies and procedures, and practice and governance. Those elements that are considered to have experienced the least improvement are collaboration and integration, volunteers, and human resource management. Providers have greater confidence in communicating their work to stakeholders but a continuing

challenge is to recognise that what they consider as quality processes and practices may not necessarily be experienced as such by the young people using their services.

2. **Some elements of the NQSF process need significant revision** – particularly, in reducing the extensive administrative burden, as a consequence of which young people may now be getting less time with their youth worker, and are therefore less positive about the NQSF; the operation of the cyclical process of the Framework is widely seen as repetitive, while a clearer sense of progression through the cycles would be energising and rewarding; Implementation Teams are considered not to be functioning effectively. The fact that the NQSF is a paper-based system adds volume and complexity to the completion process, and prevents the effective management of data, including the capacity to properly analyse reports or to extract learning.
3. **The relationship between the NQSF and accountability** – while the original developmental focus of the Framework was not related to the concept of accountability, all stakeholders acknowledge that there is a relationship between performance and funding but some expressed concern that there might now be a bureaucratic and managerial trend towards inspection and oversight in assuring compliance.
4. **Analysis of NQSF Progress Reports** – There is a perception among stakeholders that there is a lack of capacity to read, collate or extract learning from the vast body of NQSF documentation that is submitted annually from hundreds of organisations and projects. Consequently, it is not possible to gain an accurate understanding of the status of youth services and projects in Ireland, and there is a concern that this represents a potential threat to the integrity and credibility of the NQSF process.
5. **Showcasing good practice across the sector** – the lack of opportunities to showcase good practice in youth services was observed by many stakeholders as a crucial, missing piece of the NQSF jigsaw which, if addressed, could be highly influential in building a community of learning and enhancing quality of provision.
6. **Integrating the NQSF, BOBF outcomes, National Youth Strategy (NYS) objectives, and the VFMPR proximal outcomes** – Since the introduction of the NQSF in 2010, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2014), the Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes (2014), and the National Youth Strategy (2015) have all been published. There is a strong consensus that the NQSF should be adapted to new policy developments with guidance provided on the interpretation and alignment of the respective documents and policy instruments.
7. **Clarification of funded programmes being targeted at young people in adversity** – The current focus on the implementation of the VFMPR report has generated significant discussion across the youth sector in relation to whether services and funding should target all young people or, primarily, those experiencing adversity. While DCYA's responsibility for setting policy and funding conditions is widely respected, there

remains a need for guidance and clarification to providers, to ensure appropriate and coherent practice.

8. **The NQSF as a whole-of-government recognised quality standard** – the NQSF is closely identified with the DCYA but does not appear to have registered with other government departments and agencies that fund programmes for young people. There is both a need and an opportunity to broaden the application of the NQSF across a much wider range of public funding of programmes for young people. There is also a need to reconcile the terms ‘youth work’, ‘youth services’ and ‘work with young people’ – as this is likely have a bearing on the extent to which other public funding is engaged.
9. **External Recognition of NQSF Progress** – From the outset, it was decided that the NQSF would not be associated with an awards or other system of external recognition. Increasingly, however, there is a demand from organisations and projects that it would be externally validated. Equally, the lack of any sanction for organisations that have not seriously engaged with the NQSF process was identified as a deficit by some stakeholders, while others considered that quality standards should be at least as important as cost effectiveness in the award of tenders.
10. **Leadership commitment to the NQSF Process** – the extent of providers’ meaningful engagement with the Framework seems to be heavily influenced by the level of leadership commitment to the process – at both organisational and project levels. It was suggested that engagement with the NQSF can be very superficial in some instances and yet does not appear to bring consequences. As a result, it can seem unfair and demotivating to those organisations and projects that fully invest in the process.
11. **Engaging young people and volunteers effectively in the NQSF process** – Many contributors had experienced difficulties in engaging young people in the NQSF process. Several informants referred to the fact that the NQSF documentation, language and process are not youth-friendly; that young people do not remain with the Implementation Teams past the first year; and that the three-year NQSF cycles do not fit with the nature or duration of young people’s involvement in many youth services. Other respondents identified the positive impact of the NQSF on outcomes for young people, for example, by involving them in planning. The NQSF’s influence on engagement with volunteers featured even less than that of young people and it was also a challenge to engage volunteers in the Review process.
12. **Youth Workers’ Terms of Employment** – Project staff strongly made the point that the emphasis on delivering quality is at odds with what they claim – for some youth workers – are unsatisfactory employment terms, and argued that the current focus on policies and structures skews the NQSF focus away from the worker, who is the person who must deliver this enhanced quality. A contrasting perspective was that there is a need to review existing favourable time-off in lieu arrangements that youth workers enjoy, and

the closure of services during school holidays, when this can negatively impact on the provision of regular youth work sessions.

13. **The Liaison/Youth Officer Support Role** – this is a crucial role in the NQSF process and combines both oversight and support functions as Officers assist providers in improving the quality of their services across each of the standards. Some ETB Youth Officers feel they are not sufficiently qualified to assess providers' performance in some aspects of the NQSF. Consequently, their own training and development – and support – needs also vary considerably. Several contributors felt there is an urgent need to rationalise the support system and to have a clearer, more coherent and consistent support structure across the country.
14. **The Role of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs** – DCYA staff, including the Standards Officers appointed on a co-location basis in 2014, are highly regarded and respected for their professionalism. Nevertheless, there is widespread recognition that the current capacity of DCYA is over-stretched and lacks the infrastructural components to provide appropriate oversight and support to the sector. Many who contributed to this Review considered this a serious core gap.

POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS

In the first part of Chapter 5, the implications for the NQSF of several policy and institutional developments since its launch are considered. These include

i. Policy Developments

- *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* (BOBF) Policy Framework, launched in 2014;
- *National Youth Strategy*, launched 2015;
- *Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes* (VFMPR) report (2014);
- *The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (2015-2020)*, launched in June 2015.

ii. Institutional Developments

- The Department of Children and Youth Affairs was established in 2011;
- Tusla, the Child and Family Agency – was established on 1st January 2014;
- The Education and Training Boards were established as statutory authorities under the Education and Training Boards Act 2013.

iii. Current Developments

The Quality and Capacity Building Initiative (QCBI) has been developed by the DCYA with the aim of developing a coordinated approach to enhancing capabilities and quality in prevention and early intervention.

The youth policy and institutional developments that have occurred since the introduction of the NQSF share a coherent approach both to the importance of achieving desired outcomes, and of the centrality of young people’s participation to that goal – and are therefore consistent with the original purpose of the NQSF. With a renewed policy focus on young people experiencing adversity, it is important that young people are supported to develop capacities to learn confidence and strategies to overcome the adversity. This requires the availability of diverse but effective resources and services to support them through this challenge, with a focus on learning, adapting and developing, as opposed to becoming the largely passive object of the intervention.

RELEVANCE TO OTHER YOUTH PROVISION

The second part of Chapter 5 considers whether the NQSF, if better known, would have potential benefits for other statutory agencies funding programmes for young people. It is suggested that it might offer significant reassurance, facilitate a more streamlined assessment process and – from a policy perspective – also serve to reduce inefficiencies and potentially conflicting funding decisions. Similarly, a case could be made for other public sector funders of work with young people contributing to infrastructural, and training and development, costs associated with enhancing the quality of outcomes in youth services. The DCYA’s focus on achieving the best experiences and outcomes for young people suggests that it would endeavour to have its quality system adopted as widely as possible.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS AND ANALYSIS

Finally, in Chapter 6, a small number of core strategic issues that are fundamental to the achievement of quality in youth services in Ireland and, for comparative purposes, an indigenous quality framework in the early years sector, are considered. While drawing on the range of perspectives gathered for the Review, analysis is offered that may challenge or re-frame some of the discussion to date.

This further analysis suggests that, while the perception of the value of the NQSF is broadly positive, there is a consensus that the process needs simplifying and redesigning. It is also necessary to consider whose opinion matters the most when it comes to assessing quality in youth services. In this respect, it is suggested that the transaction between the young person and the youth worker should be at the centre and that the primary challenge is to ensure that the combination of elements that comprise a quality system are supportive of

this core transaction. At present, young people are considerably less involved in implementing the Framework than one might have expected and this – and the relative absence of volunteers from the process – are serious deficits that undermine claims to a quality system. It is suggested that this is either a failing of the system, or of commitment to its implementation – or both – and that the challenge is to adapt the NQSF in both process and language by putting young people and their experiences at its core.

The fragmented approach that currently exists in the provision of intermediary support to youth organisations implementing the NQSF across the country is a concern. There is both a need and an opportunity to move towards a more coherent and strategic provision of support and external review of providers' progression towards the delivery of higher quality interventions, including a developed intermediary role for Youth Officers employed by the recently established Education and Training Boards. There is also a need to reconsider the very diverse support needs of the national youth organisations and, in the long-term, to question whether it would be possible or appropriate for these to continue to be met directly by the DCYA.

Although there is significant demand from the youth sector for the DCYA's current capacity to be expanded to facilitate more active leadership and support for the further development of the NQSF, many of the proposed roles are dichotomous. Also, the more responsibility assumed by DCYA, the less engaged are other stakeholders likely to be. It is suggested, for example, that showcasing quality practice might be better organised by the sector – perhaps on a commissioned basis – and this would be expected to promote the concept of shared responsibility for, and ownership of, the promotion of quality provision as a joint enterprise.

There is a need to promote greater emphasis on advancing knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of work with young people, including theories of change, causality and the development of a more substantial body of indigenous evidence. This is a specific challenge for youth service providers and for academics from whom new insights and challenges in thought leadership are urgently needed. Finally, there is a need for discourse and, ideally, agreement on the appropriate nomenclature for work with young people.

For comparative purposes, Chapter 6 also includes a review of Síolta³, which is the national quality framework for early childhood care and education, to see if useful learning might be extracted. Síolta defines, assesses and supports the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education settings where children aged birth

³ www.siolta.ie

to six years are present. The policy agenda that drove the development of Síolta was the need to improve the quality of early childhood care and education services in Ireland through the establishment of agreed quality standards and implementation processes based on self-evaluation. The Framework has attracted substantial buy-in and support across the diverse communities of practice that constitute the ECCE workforce and the wide range of stakeholder organisations representing parents, employers and special interest groups.

The institutional arrangements that are concerned with quality issues in early years settings are complex and comprise the Department of Education and Skills, Pobal and Tusla:

- The DES undertakes Early-Years Education-focused Inspections (EYEIs) in services participating in the ECCE Programme, which provides a period of free early childhood care and education for children before they start school. The DES inspection is not a statutory role, and the inspectors do not have the authority to sanction a poor-performing service;
- Pobal undertakes annual compliance visits to ensure, on behalf of DCYA, that eligible children receive their entitlements, and that the provider is compliant with the terms of the programme;
- Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has responsibility for inspecting pre-schools, play groups, day nursery, crèches, day-care and similar services which cater for children aged 0-6 years. The recent introduction of regulations also strengthens requirements in relation to the management and governance of services. Only Tusla has the power to close a service, where this is deemed necessary.

Some commentators have been critical of the fact that the Tusla inspections appear to focus primarily on issues of health and safety, and that the opportunity was not taken, in issuing these regulations, to begin to align the new, education-focused inspections by the DES with the statutory inspections by Tusla. There is evidence that conflicting recommendations can be made by the two inspection services.

Despite the contrasting contexts, there are several identifiable similarities between Síolta and the NQSF, including their respective development in consultation with service providers, and consequent achievement of acceptance and buy-in from each sector; each is respectively child/young person focused; and each has been found in its implementation to have involved a, perhaps excessive, administrative workload that has since been under review. However, of perhaps greater interest, is that the wider oversight complexities and

arrangements in the early years sector reflect the dichotomy between the twin interests of development and compliance and the challenge of finding an appropriate means to reconcile them.

The distinct but related elements of compliance, accountability and support are further considered in this chapter. Failure to differentiate them is liable to result in confusion and conflict as the respective stakeholders are subject to different responsibilities and demands. Clarifying the respective roles of strategic policymaker, intermediary assessor and development resource, and service provider is useful in identifying and distinguishing the varying needs and responsibilities of each. It also helps to differentiate the respective roles of the DCYA and the ETB Youth Officers – the DCYA has a mandate to require compliance with the policy agenda and the requirements of funding; in contrast the ETBs, as statutory agencies, have a responsibility to expect accountability from providers but also, in their support role, to offer it in terms of the quality of their engagement and support. Whereas compliance is one-way, accountability is a two-way street – it is more engaged, dynamic and reciprocal.

Considering that quality should be defined in terms of the young person's experience, the essence of a developmental approach is to promote, encourage and support a sector-wide pursuit of enhanced quality of provision with the expectation that this will, in turn, produce more favourable outcomes for young people using youth services. But it is important that the developmental approach would be recognised as a means to that end – as there can be a tendency for it to focus on developing organisations and individual professionals without it necessarily bringing sufficient benefits to young people.

The aspiration is that the sector, at all levels, would share in the goal of achieving the best possible outcomes for young people; and that it would recognise the potential to further strengthen a community of interest where all stakeholders have distinct but aligned and reciprocal investments, and a recognition of the inter-dependencies involved. This should secure the continuing buy-in of the sector while acknowledging the reality of disparities of power, authority and responsibility.

Chapter 6 concludes with a recognition that the policy and institutional landscape has changed significantly in the short time since the NQSF was introduced, while there is also greater realism about the limitations of a quality system and awareness of the conditions necessary to maximise its potential. There is also a changed economic and public sector reform context, relative to the period during which the NQSF was developed, that should be acknowledged. Where previously Government grants – with little accountability attached –

were given to organisations working with young people, these grants are now investments in the policy implementation process.

It is recognised that there is a challenge to determine if the NQSF should be reformed or replaced. Whichever happens, it is important to remember that any quality system is only a means to an end – the priority in this instance is to retain a focus on young people’s experience of their services and the achievement of positive outcomes, while retaining the buy-in of providers within a rationalised and coherent policy and governance framework.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY.....	2
Introduction	2
Methodology.....	2
Literature and environmental scan.....	3
Online surveys.....	3
Perspectives on the NQSF.....	4
Policy and institutional developments	7
Relevance to other youth provision.....	8
Strategic considerations and analysis	8
TABLE OF CONTENTS	13
Chapter 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY.....	14
Introduction	14
The review task.....	15
Policy context.....	17
Current NQSF structures and supports.....	19
Methodology.....	21
CHAPTER 2: SUMMARY OF LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN.....	26
CHAPTER 3: SURVEY FINDINGS – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	28
Introduction	28
Methodology and limitations.....	28
Key learning	29
CHAPTER 4: PERSPECTIVES ON THE NQSF – A SYNTHESIS OF THE SURVEY FINDINGS, ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN, INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP CONTRIBUTIONS	38
Introduction	38
Perspectives on the NQSF.....	38
Conclusion.....	61
CHAPTER 5: A WIDENING CONTEXT FOR QUALITY IN YOUTH SERVICES.....	62
Introduction	62
Policy and institutional developments with implications for the NQSF.....	63
Developing the NQSF to include other youth provision	70
CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS.....	72
Introduction	72
Who defines quality in youth services?	73
Who assures quality in youth services?	75
A comparative quality system – Síolta.....	77
The distinct demands of compliance, accountability and support.....	83
Conclusion.....	85

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND METHODOLOGY

INTRODUCTION

This Review for the strategic development of the National Quality Standards Framework (NQSF) for youth work was commissioned by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs⁴ (DCYA) following a competitive tendering process in mid-2016. Middlequarter Limited was appointed in September 2016 to undertake the Review. It commenced in October 2016 and continued until July 2017.

With regard to services for young people under its remit, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is responsible for policy development and the administration of €57m in 2017. The funding schemes support national and local youth services involving approximately 30 national youth organisations as well as 1,400 staff working in youth services and communities throughout the country. Some €35m of this budget has been allocated to targeted funding schemes. These schemes support the provision of youth services for young people who are at risk of drugs, alcohol misuse, early school leaving, homelessness or who are living in disadvantaged communities.

The focus of this Review is on the NQSF for staff-led projects and services, and national youth organisations. There is also a national quality standards process for volunteer-led youth groups (NQSVYG), but these do not form part of this Review.

The NQSF was introduced, prior to the establishment of DCYA, by the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs (OMCYA) in January 2011. It was the first national standards framework to ensure and enhance quality services for young people. Its implementation then became a strategic objective of DCYA on its establishment.

The NQSF applies to all staff-led youth work organisations, services, projects and programmes that are funded under the following DCYA schemes:

- Youth Service Grant Scheme

⁴ The Department of Children and Youth Affairs was established on 2nd June 2011. It is the Government of Ireland department that is tasked with driving forward a range of commitments relating to children, young people and families outlined in the Programme for Government. It combines several key areas of policy and provision, as well as leading an ambitious reform agenda for children and family services.

- Special Projects for Youth (SPY)
- Young People’s Facilities and Services Funds 1 and 2 (YPFSF)
- Youth Information Centres

The NQSF is a support and development tool for youth services. It aims to assist them in identifying strengths and areas for development in their services, and to benchmark progress accordingly. The rationale for the development of the NQSF initiative was to:

- Provide a support and development tool to organisations and projects
- Establish standards in practice and provision
- Provide an enhanced evidence base
- Ensure resources are used effectively

The NQSF process is a three-year cycle, designed around five core principles and ten standards, against which a youth organisation assesses itself. An external assessment, carried out by an ETB Officer then takes place and the youth organisation identifies a Continuous Improvement Plan (CIP) for the remainder of the three-year cycle. On completion of the first cycle, the process is repeated for a second, and then subsequent, cycles.

THE REVIEW TASK

This assignment required the undertaking of a review for the *strategic development* of the NQSF – rather than to simply articulate the NQSF story to date. While it is relevant to inquire into the experience of the implementation of the NQSF, the emphasis is on extracting insights and learning from this experience in order to inform the future development of the Framework.

The Invitation to Tender document specified the requirement as to “undertake a review of the NQSF in order to:

- a) Determine the impact of the NQSF implementation on youth work organisations to date.
- b) Identify the components of the NQSF which have worked effectively and those that have been less effective. This should involve ascertaining changes in processes, outputs and outcomes associated with the implementation of the NQSF and should focus on the following:



- NQSF document
- Data & Evidence
- Implementation processes and structures
- Support functions
- Reporting functions
- Monitoring and assessment functions
- Other emerging issues

c) Identify areas for improvement / development of the NQSF, where appropriate, having regard to

- (i) Recent policy developments and the related commitments therein (Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures; The National Youth Strategy; The VFM Policy Review of Youth Programmes; The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation);
- (ii) Institutional developments (the establishment of the Education and Training Boards; the creation of Tusla – the Child and Family Agency; and
- (iii) Current developments such as the Quality and Capacity Building Initiative under development

d) Illustrate how the NQSF could, if appropriate, be developed to comprehend

- (i) Other youth provision funded by DCYA
- (ii) Other related youth provision, where appropriate, funded by Government departments (DES, DoH and Tusla).

In addition to desk research, this review will require a number of consultations involving the following key informant groups:

- (i) National Quality Standards Implementation Group, National Quality Standards Training and Resource Group, National Quality Standards Support Team.
- (ii) National organisations and local projects and services (management, staff and young people)
- (iii) Education and Training Boards – responsible for NQSF monitoring and support and grant administration
- (iv) Department of Children and Youth Affairs (Youth Affairs Unit and other relevant units within the DCYA)
and could also include
- (v) Domestic statutory policy departments/agencies which may have related provision and/or systems
- (vi) Other related organisational/academic key informants

(vii) Internationally - Youth Division within DG EAC European Commission, Council of Europe

The specified expected output of the Review is the delivery of a report with a series of key findings for further consideration by DCYA under the above focus areas.

POLICY CONTEXT

One-third of Ireland's population is under the age of 25 years, the highest proportion of the total population among EU member states. Young people between the ages of 10 – 24 represent 18.3% of the total population of 4.59 million. The National Youth Strategy focuses on this age group, with a particular focus on young people experiencing, or at risk of experiencing, the poorest outcomes.

The Review for the strategic development of the NQSF was being undertaken in the context of a range of policy and other developments relating to children and young people that include:

Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures 2014-2020 (BOBF)⁵ – which represents the first overarching national policy framework for children and young people spanning the age range 0 – 24 years. It adopts a whole of Government approach and is intended to be underpinned by related constituent strategies in the areas of early years, youth and participation. To date, the youth and participation strategies have been published, while the early years strategy is awaited. BOBF establishes a shared set of five high-level outcomes, supported by six cross-cutting transformational goals, for children and young people towards which all government departments and agencies, statutory services and the voluntary and community sectors should work, to ensure a coherent response. The Framework also established an integrated series of whole of Government structures and processes to support its implementation.

The National Youth Strategy 2015-2020⁶ – the constituent strategy for young people aged 10 – 24 under *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. The purpose of the National Youth Strategy is to coordinate policy and services across Government and other stakeholders to enable all young people aged 10 to 24 to realise their maximum potential. The Strategy sets

⁵ <https://www.dcy.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?DocID=3146&ad=1&mn=betr&nID=1>

⁶ <http://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/publications/20151008NatYouthStrat2015to2020.pdf>

out the Government’s aims and objectives for young people, which echo the BOBF desired outcomes – that young people will be active and healthy, achieve their full potential in learning and development, be safe and protected from harm, have economic security and opportunity, and be connected and contributing to their world. It identifies some fifty priority actions to be delivered by government departments, state agencies and by others, including the voluntary youth services sector, from 2015 to 2017.

As part of the National Youth Strategy, the Department of Children and Youth Affairs is leading on a range of enabling actions with relevant stakeholders. There are several key actions in the strategy that have relevance for the NQSF and, therefore, for this Review. These include the *Ensuring Quality Services* enabler.

The Department of Children and Youth Affairs is responsible for the administration of funding for the provision of youth services. Three of these targeted funding schemes were the subject of the recently completed ***Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes (DCYA, 2014)***⁷, which looked at the following schemes – Special Projects for Youth Scheme, Young People’s Facilities and Services Fund 1 and 2 and the Local Drug Task Force projects scheme. All projects and services funded under these schemes are implementing the NQSF. These targeted youth programmes support projects in disadvantaged areas that focus on young people at risk of substance misuse, homelessness, anti-social behaviour, early school leaving and youth unemployment. Local projects provide a wide range of programmes and services for young people including drugs education, personal development programmes, outreach and summer programmes, creative arts, recreational activities and sports activities.

The VFMPR involved an in-depth examination of the impact youth service provision has on young people’s lives. It examined the extent to which the youth funding programme objectives have been achieved. In examining efficiency and effectiveness, the review focused on the intended positive change to be achieved for young people by the exchequer investment in these targeted schemes.

The review makes several recommendations for the future operation of the youth funding schemes and their development in the years ahead to ensure effective, value for money services that are evidence based and designed to secure the best outcomes for young people. It recommends that the existing three schemes be replaced with a single targeted, evidence-based and outcomes-focused scheme designed to achieve the best yield for young people and their communities. Implementing the recommendations of the VFMPR – which

⁷<https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/publications/20141223ValueforMoneyYouthProjects.pdf>

identifies the NQSF as an important mechanism in the implementation of the reform of the youth funding programmes – is a priority for DCYA, which envisages the task being completed, in consultation with the youth sector providers, over the next two years.

National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making⁸ – Ireland is the first country in Europe to have developed a cross-Government *National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (2015-2020)*. This Strategy was launched in June 2015 and is a constituent strategy of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. It focuses on the everyday lives of children and young people and the places and spaces they inhabit. Its goal is to ensure that they have a voice in decisions that affect their lives. It references the NQSF among other sets of standards and frameworks for children and young people.

CURRENT NQSF STRUCTURES AND SUPPORTS

The implementation of the NQSF is supported at local level by Education and Training Board⁹ (ETB) Youth Officers. ETBs, which have replaced Vocational Education Committees and Fás training centres, are statutory authorities that have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions in defined geographical areas. ETBs manage and operate second-level schools, further education colleges, multi-faith community national schools and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes.

ETB Youth Officers support the provision, coordination, administration and assessment of youth work services in each ETB's functional area, and liaise with DCYA in relation to such support. They carry out the NQSF process with all staff-led projects and services funded by DCYA in their area. They also have responsibility for supporting the implementation of the National Quality Standards for volunteer-led youth groups (NQSVMG).

In the case of the approximately 30 National Youth Organisations, CDET, through CDYSB, was retained to carry out the NQSF process for a three-year period from January 2012 until December 2014. This support function is now provided directly by DCYA by arrangement with CDET, with three Quality Standards Officers co-located in the Department. In the context of the NQSF, their role involves undertaking an external assessment process of each national organisation and supporting its engagement with the NQSF. The assessment

⁸ <https://www.dcy.gov.ie/viewdoc.asp?fn=%2Fdocuments%2FNationalChildrensStrategy1520%2Fparticipationstrategy.htm&mn=chij&nID=1>

⁹ www.etbi.ie

involves reviewing documentary evidence in the form of the organisation's self-assessment and reports, posters, programme and organisational plans, etc. as well as conducting focus groups and undertaking observations of practice.

Previously there was the position of National Youth Work Assessor, a professional youth work role originally created under the 2001 Youth Work Act, when youth affairs were the responsibility of the Department of Education. The Youth Work Assessor's primary role was to support the development of youth work practice through assessment, monitoring and review of programmes provided by the youth work sector. The Assessor was primarily responsible for the development of the NQSF in consultation with the sector. However, when the incumbent was promoted in 2013, a successor was not appointed.

DCYA appointed a National Quality Standards Implementation Group (NQSIG), which is a reference and advisory group to provide strategic support and direction in the implementation of its Quality Standards Initiatives, i.e. the NQSF for youth work and the NQS for Volunteer-led Youth Groups. It comprises of representatives of ETBs, the voluntary youth work sector and national youth organisations.

A Quality Standards Training and Resource Development (QSTRD) Task Group ensures that training supports for the sector are made available in the most effective and cohesive manner. The Task Group comprises representatives of a number of national youth work organisations and services, training and development officers, National Youth Council of Ireland programme trainers and ETB Youth Officers. Its function is to provide coordinated, accessible and relevant quality training and appropriate resource material necessary for the successful implementation of the NQSF and the National Quality Standards for Volunteer-led Youth Groups.

Several other resources and supports have been made available in the form of an Evidence Roadshow, while an interactive online resource or Route Map¹⁰ was developed by the Centre for Effective Services for DCYA to support the implementation of the National Quality Standards Initiatives. The Route Map is an innovative resource that makes available an array of web-based information that is international in scope.

Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC) are county-level committees whose overall purpose is to improve outcomes for children and young people through local and national interagency working. They bring together the main statutory, community and

¹⁰ <http://www.effectiveservices.org/resources/article/national-quality-standards-framework-route-map-for-youth-work1>

voluntary providers of services to children and young people to plan and co-ordinate services in every county in Ireland. Their role is to enhance interagency co-operation and they provide a forum for joint planning and co-ordination.

METHODOLOGY

For this Review, Middlequarter Limited formed a collaborative partnership with American Institutes for Research (AIR)¹¹, based in Washington DC. The Middlequarter team comprised its founder and Director, Owen Keenan and Maja Haals Brosnan, Research Associate. AIR committed two senior staff members, Amy West and Jaime Singer, to co-design the methodology, to author, and to collaborate with Middlequarter Limited on the final product. The combined team liaised closely, on the literature and environmental scan and the wider process, by email and conference and Skype calls.

The Review methodology was designed as part of the tendering process and was subsequently clarified and agreed with DCYA prior to the commencement of the review. Adopting a mixed methods approach, the methodology sought to acquire a comprehensive understanding of the combined NQSF experience to date, and the potential for the Framework to be strategically enhanced and developed further.

This mixed methodology had several components, each led by an identified member of the Review Team, with the support of other colleagues.

2. Familiarisation – this took place over a short, early period to receive appropriate briefing on the NQSF and the review context, to read relevant documentation, engage in early discussion with the DCYA Review Steering Group, and to undertake desk research.
3. Literature and environmental scan – AIR’s primary contribution was to work with Middlequarter Limited to prepare an independent and external scan of the literature

¹¹ Established in 1946, with headquarters in Washington, D.C., American Institutes for Research (www.air.org) is an independent, nonpartisan, not-for-profit organisation that conducts behavioural and social science research and delivers technical assistance both domestically and internationally. As one of the largest behavioural and social science research organisations in the world, AIR is committed to empowering communities and institutions with innovative solutions to the most critical challenges in education, health, workforce, and international development.

and state of the pursuit of quality provision in the youth services field; and to contribute learning and insights to support the broader project of the strategic development of the NQSF. This involved

- a. the investigation of appropriate policy documents, as well as lessons learned and good practices from literature based on Irish practice and policies related to youth work;
 - b. the selection of four additional jurisdictions to inform and enhance the strategic development of NQSF in Ireland;
 - c. a particular focus on identifying successful approaches from other jurisdictions that resonate with the Irish context;
4. Online surveys of key stakeholders, using the SurveyMonkey tool – two surveys were designed and distributed:
- a. A stakeholder survey – distributed to service providers (both national organisations and local projects); ETB Youth Officers, Liaison Officers and Standards Officers; policymakers, and academics.
 - b. A young people’s survey – distributed to young people, with experience of the NQSF process, through the cooperation of ETB Youth Officers, national organisations and local projects.
- The survey results were analysed and summarised as a distinct output of the Review.
5. Consultative interviews – individual interviews were conducted, both in person and by phone, with key informants advised by, and agreed with, the Steering Group. These informants included DCYA personnel, youth sector leaders, academics, service provider managers, senior personnel of education and training boards;
6. Focus groups – were facilitated with a range of key stakeholders including
- a. Young people
 - b. ETB Youth/Liaison Officers – four regional cluster groups
 - c. Members of the former CDETB/CDYSB National Standards Team
 - d. Representatives of the national youth work organisations
 - e. Youth services staff at regional level
7. Consultative meetings – there were several meetings with key policymakers in both DCYA and other departments/units with current or previous responsibility for youth policy, including those with an interest in, and/or experience of, the implementation and oversight of quality standards.

8. Project team meetings – the combined project team communicated, as required, by conference call and email to plan and integrate the diverse elements of the Review process, as reflected in the structure of this report, incorporating the literature and environmental scan, the survey findings and analysis, the synthesised outputs from the consultative interviews, focus groups and meetings, culminating with the Review Team’s recommendations for the strategic development of the NQSF.

Matching the Methodology to the Research Questions

It was important, at the outset of the Review, to link the proposed methodology to the research questions that required answering, to assure that it would deliver the necessary perspectives and insights to allow for the effective completion of the task. While it was important to consider the review process as an integrated whole, this is how the team related the two:

Research Questions

Methodology

- | | |
|---|--|
| a) Determine the impact of the NQSF implementation on youth work organisations to date. | Online surveys of key stakeholders using the SurveyMonkey tool. One sample to include providers, ETBs, key officials and academics. A separate survey to be issued to young people with experience of the NQSF process. The survey results analysed and summarised as a distinct output of the review. |
| | The experience of the NQSF implementation, and the findings of the survey, to be further interrogated in discussions with key stakeholders through |
| | <ol style="list-style-type: none">i. Consultative interviews andii. Focus groups |
| b) Identify the components of the NQSF | The experience of the standards to date |

that have worked effectively and those that have been found to be less effective. This will involve ascertaining changes in the processes, outputs and outcomes associated with the implementation of the NQSF and will focus on:

- NQSF document
- Data and evidence
- Implementation processes and structures
- NQSF support functions
- Reporting functions
- Monitoring and assessment functions
- Emerging issues identified

in terms of what has exceeded or satisfied expectations, or disappointed, to be identified through the following methods:

- i. Review of relevant documentation
- ii. Online survey findings
- iii. Consultative interviews and meetings
- iv. Focus groups
- v. Discussion with Steering Group

c) Identify areas for improvement and/or the development of the NQSF, as appropriate, having regard to

- i. Recent policy developments and the related commitments therein, particularly *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*; The National Youth Strategy; The Value for Money Policy Review of Youth Programmes; The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation;
- ii. Recent institutional developments as referenced above, including the establishment of the Education and Training Boards and the creation of Tusla – the Child and Family Agency; and

The significance and developmental potential for NQSF of recent

- i. Policy developments
- ii. Institutional developments
- iii. Other developments, including QCBI – will be reviewed by the team; Literature and environmental scan – to identify learning from other environments/jurisdictions with potential to inform the enhancement and strategic development of the NQSF; Survey findings – the survey to include questions on the development potential of NQSF; Consultative interviews with key stakeholders to include DCYA personnel, sectoral leadership, academics, service provider management, ETB personnel; the Youth Division within DG EAC of the

- iii. Current developments including the Quality and Capacity Building Initiative under development in DCYA. European Commission, and the Council of Europe;
Focus group meetings with key stakeholding groups including young people;
- d) Illustrate how the NQSF could, if considered appropriate, be developed to encompass
 - i. Other youth provision funded by DCYA; Consultation with Steering Group and other key DCYA informants;
Consultation with other departments and agencies that fund youth provision;
Literature and environmental scan;
 - ii. Other related youth provision, where appropriate, funded by Government departments and agencies including the Department of Education and Science, the Department of Health, and Tusla – the Child & Family agency. Consultation with the youth work field – both interviews and focus groups.

CHAPTER 2: SUMMARY OF LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN¹²

The principles and goals of youth work are enshrined in international law, with rights to equality, protection, and dignity codified in many countries as part of national policy and practice. National and local government, civil society and community development organizations, education and training entities, and research organizations are all stakeholders with youth in accessing and leveraging these rights and opportunities. Indeed, as we are mindful of the Sustainable Development Goals, strong connections can be made between the engagement of youth and greater gains in gender equity, decent work and economic growth, reduced inequalities, sustainable cities and communities, as well as peace, justice, and strong institutions.

Youth work, as defined in Irish law, is “a type of non-formal education” with the aim to support a positive transition from childhood to independent adulthood.^{13 14} The European Commission frames youth work as encompassing a broad range of activities (e.g. social, cultural, educational, recreational, and political) carried out with, by, and for young people through non-formal and informal learning.¹⁵ Within Europe, individual countries have taken different approaches to youth work, including non-formal learning, preparation for employment, and engagement in sports and leisure clubs.

American Institutes for Research (AIR), in partnership with Middlequarter Limited, looked at lessons learned and good practices for youth work in Ireland and four additional countries: Australia, Denmark, Finland and Scotland. In the absence of a comparable quality standards framework, Denmark, Finland and Australia were selected as relevant case studies offering contrasting approaches to youth work policy and practice. A fourth country, Scotland, was later included for its geographical and political proximity to the Irish context. The four countries have made significant efforts to improve the effectiveness of their youth work without a quality standards framework. Across these countries, common themes support an evidence-based approach to developing context-relevant, gender-sensitive and inclusive

¹² West Amy, Singer Jaime, Kidron Yael, Brosnan Maja Haals. Youth Work: A Scan of Comparative Practices, American Institutes for Research. Chicago. March 2017. Please see the separate, full AIR literature and environmental scan that accompanies this report.

¹³ Morgan, M. & Kitching, K. (2009). Report on Quality Standards Framework (QSF) evaluation. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/333931/Report_on_Quality_Standards_Framework_QSF_Evaluation

¹⁴ Lalor, K., de Róiste, Á., & Devlin, M. (2007). Young people in contemporary Ireland. Dublin: Gill & McMillan.

¹⁵ European Commission. (n.d.) Youth work. Retrieved from http://ec.europa.eu/youth/policy/implementation/work_en.htm

youth work policies and programs; engaging youth in planning meaningful youth-oriented and youth-serving programs; recognizing and rewarding participation and contribution; creating safe experiential learning opportunities; and, developing strong civic and social responsibility. There are differences as well: Australia has the largest youth population and geographic landscape of those countries included in our review, which makes the approach to youth work more challenging in terms of unified national best practice applications. Finland demonstrates a local municipal strategy of youth work reinforced by community recognition and support rather than a strategic national approach. In contrast, Denmark illustrates a country with strong supportive national level policy and an inter-departmental youth council engaged in decision-making. Scotland's approach to youth work highlights the importance of cross-sector connections between formal and non-formal education.

All findings offer a rich discussion against the backdrop of Ireland's approach to youth work in the context of the national framework, BOBF. This in turn may have a future impact on strengthening national productivity, advancement, and civic and social responsibility. Indeed, Ireland is in a good position to enhance the quality of its youth work by increasing the effectiveness of its own good practices and systematizing a process for how youth work supports overarching concerns of social and intergenerational cohesion. In Ireland's case, strengthening the linkages between the policy and standards frameworks and the National Youth Strategy by borrowing lessons learned and good practices from other countries has the potential to increase participation and retention, as well as ensure quality outcomes as part of large-scale, sustainable development goals that will protect and advance the potential of Irish youth.

CHAPTER 3: SURVEY FINDINGS – EXECUTIVE SUMMARY¹⁶

INTRODUCTION

Throughout December 2016, Middlequarter Limited administered a survey to key stakeholders engaged with the National Quality Standards Framework in order to assess experience to date and inform its future strategic development. The survey was distributed to ETB youth officers and national youth organisations who were asked firstly to complete the survey themselves, and secondly to distribute the survey to all youth projects and services within their area. It was also distributed to a small number of policymakers and academics. In total, 215 respondents completed the survey. A survey for young people engaged in youth organisations and projects was also administered through the same channel but with much less success in terms of the completion rate. Only 28 young people completed the survey.

METHODOLOGY AND LIMITATIONS

Two separate surveys were administered via SurveyMonkey to two different groups of stakeholders. A short survey, possible to complete in approximately fifteen minutes, was administered via ETB officers and youth projects, services and organisations to young people. As Middlequarter Limited relied on intermediaries to distribute the survey it is not possible to establish how many young people received the survey, nor the extent to which they were encouraged to complete it. The survey achieved a disappointing response rate of 28 young people, only 14 of whom fully completed it. The 14 responses cannot be considered representative although the analysis of the survey responses is insightful. A longer survey, possible to complete in about half an hour, was administered, also through ETB officers, to youth projects and services. It was also emailed directly to national organisations as well as to policymakers and academics who were considered to have had some engagement with the NQSF in one form or another.

The survey was open for a total of just over three weeks at the end of 2016 and achieved a satisfactory response rate of 215 responses, 162 of which were fully completed and a further 27 part or nearly fully completed. Only 26 responses were unusable. Two of the

¹⁶ Please see the separate, full report of the survey findings.

unusable responses are repeat attempts while a third incomplete response was then completed. A total of 189 responses were therefore usable. A couple of limitations should be noted. One respondent highlighted that the survey should have been made available in Irish while another respondent felt strongly that the timeframe for completion of the survey should have been extended considerably. Several respondents suggested the need to have consultation with youth officers, which Middlequarter Limited subsequently conducted on a regional basis. One respondent felt that the questions in the survey were not sufficiently clear and results could be distorted. Overall, however, the high number of elaborating comments received to many of the questions in the stakeholder survey suggests that the majority of respondents engaged seriously with the survey. Several respondents also stated their appreciation of the opportunity to express their views through the survey.

KEY LEARNING

In summary, the experience of the NQSF has been generally positive but has also reflected the difficult funding climate in which its implementation took place. While the benefits of engaging in the NQSF are predominantly considered hugely beneficial and worthwhile, financial cuts and reductions in staff hours and numbers meant that few organisations and projects have been able to engage with the NQSF as fully as they wished, or felt expected, to engage. The NQSF process is also experienced as too cumbersome and repetitive to those working to implement it, whether paid staff or ETB officers. A need for training and more resources has been identified by nearly all respondents. The NQSF process has especially been experienced as a challenge for small organisations and projects with very few staff and resources. However, the benefits have also been considered the greatest by this segment. From the survey, it also emerges that the greatest benefits have occurred in the development of organisation's and projects' policies and procedures, their strategic development, and seem by implication to have facilitated an increased focus on quality in practice. Less improvement has happened in the engagement with volunteers and young people themselves, for both of whom the NQSF process is considered inappropriately bureaucratic and cumbersome.

Respondents were first asked briefly about their experiences of the NQSF to date. They were asked to identify which of five elements they considered most important, where improvements had happened as a consequence of the NQSF. From the responses, the five identified elements can be ranked as follows (note: national organisation staff rank these slightly differently – see full survey report):

- 1) It promotes and encourages good practice
- 2) The five core principles
- 3) It builds the competence of the sector
- 4) Consultation with young people
- 5) It promotes young people's rights

In terms of whether respondents think the quality is improving under each of the standard areas outlined in the NQSF, the responses are highly positive. 177 respondents completed this question, 35 respondents skipped it. Quality is especially thought to have improved in the areas of planning, policies and procedures, as well as in practice and governance. Improving quality has been less successful in the areas of human resource management and volunteers.

Overall, respondents find the NQSF worthwhile to engage in with 70% of respondents considering the NQSF worthwhile, as opposed to only 5% who did not consider it worthwhile and just under 25% who were unsure. It must, however, be emphasised that while it is positive that 70% consider it worthwhile, the 30% who do either not consider it worthwhile, or are unsure, is a significant proportion of people who question the benefit of engaging in the NQSF. This looks slightly different for national organisation staff, 80% of whom consider the NQSF worthwhile. This more positive response from national organisation staff may be explained by responses to other questions. National organisation staff, for example, rank practice as the standard that has achieved the greatest improvement in quality, and rank professional support much higher in having contributed to improvements than other stakeholders – in 3rd place rather than 6th. National organisation staff were also more positive about the external support than other stakeholders – over 60% found it 'very supportive' compared to just under 50% of other stakeholders. These are the only questions, however, where national organisation staff diverge significantly from other stakeholders.

The elaborating comments (n=114) provided to this question emphasise the benefit of the Continuous Improvement Plan, reflection on practice as well as increased focus on planning, delivery and review. ETB officers also emphasise the benefit of the NQSF in providing "an opportunity for youth officers to engage with youth services" and providing organisations "with an enforced space in which to reflect on their organisation". Some particularly positive comments from national organisation staff include:

"[Name of organisation] have been working hard over the last number of years, undertaking the NQSF and Governance Code processes. Both of these initiatives have been instrumental

to the positive development and growth of our organisation in recent years and we thank you for your continued support.”

“It’s not obvious at first, but with time the investment is very worthwhile but you must be committed to it and give it the reflection and time necessary.”

“Not only worthwhile but essential.”

Comments, however, also suggest that many of the improvements seen have not been solely achieved by the NQSF and have been dependent on the organisation, project or service taking the NQSF process very seriously and investing heavily in it. In the comments offered by ETB officers, as well as other stakeholders, a strong consensus emerges that while the NQSF is worthwhile, the process needs simplifying and redesigning to some extent. In particular, it needs to be made less repetitive and time consuming. Moreover, national organisation staff made the following comments:

“It certainly was (worthwhile) for our organisation. I am not sure the framework will remain fit for purpose.”

“As a small organisation with limited staff, it initially took up a lot of time for the office administration staff who only work 20 hours per week.”

“As it caused extra burden, on an already deflated sector, with cuts to resources and funding, the NQSF should have had the capacity to resource changes needed within a service to raise its standards. This was highlighted within the pilot. You want real practice/service development, you need to resource change.”

“Yes, in that the results have been positive and the time spent on implementation has been worthwhile. I’m not convinced the magnitude of the time spent on evidence gathering and documentation is warranted.”

“The process is worthwhile but very time consuming especially at the beginning. Puts smaller organisations with fewer staff under a lot of pressure.”

“I think our second round of NQSF will be far less profound – and yet, there is still much to be done. I would be concerned that we could now adhere to NQSF without improving practice.”

“There are some areas where it should be prescriptive, as opposed to the organisation choosing whether they do something or not.”

In ETB officers’ comments, there is strong consensus that the standards have given projects a formal vehicle and opportunity, a “catalyst” for critical reflective practice, which ultimately should improve delivery and practice on the ground with young people. As such, it has, according to one ETB officer, “embedded an ethos of continuous improvement” and brought the issue of quality centre-stage. In addition, the NQSF is seen by ETB officers to

have made all stakeholders more conscious of the need for standards in terms of the provision of services to young people. It has, in particular, helped practitioners to reflect on areas such as planning, practice and assisting volunteers, especially for smaller organisations:

“Groups are identifying and documenting best practice within their projects. It has helped to improve recording of their work – for example, one group now has master planning and review templates for each programme they organise. The IT teams have identified training needs and we have worked together to address these needs – [for example, through] logic model training, reflective practice training, strategic planning sessions etc.”

The NQSF has also helped to highlight matters of serious concern and bring them to the attention of ETB officers and the DCYA, in particular, in relation to corporate governance and accountability. It has provided an opportunity for projects to focus on the work they have already done and where improvements need to be made, and has given an opportunity to have conversations between service providers, and with ETB officers, about these issues.

While ETB officers’ comments are highly positive, some also highlight difficulties:

- The process is not user friendly enough and the process now “needs to move on”.
- Insufficient time is available to do this adequately
- The NQSF identifies areas for improvement but there are no resources with which to do that. Common areas for improvement, either regionally or nationally, are not identified and streamlined or addressed
- While the NQSF has contributed to an ethos of improving practice, this was happening anyway

Several conclusions can be drawn from the comments of the different cohorts who responded to the opportunity to provide further insights on how the NQSF is improving quality. It appears that the NQSF has helped to clarify what youth work is – in particular, with respect to what quality youth work is – and who holds responsibility for ensuring its implementation. An important element identified here is the role of the NQSF in developing a common language for planning and evaluating work within the sector. Many statements also reflect the above-mentioned findings that the NQSF has been considered particularly successful in encouraging and facilitating reflective practice, the aspect of the NQSF that was mentioned by the largest number of respondents. Reflective practice is particularly seen to have helped to focus the work of organisations and projects from the very beginning of engaging with the NQSF, and therefore to take an increased responsibility in designing or

improving work that keeps quality and young people’s wishes and needs at the very core of their work.

The positive comments from all stakeholders can be grouped into the following themes:

- 1) Quality of practice
- 2) Reflection on practice / self-assessment
- 3) Standardisation of the sector
- 4) Engages key stakeholders
- 5) Improved communication and information sharing
- 6) Gives factual evidence of the quality of work
- 7) Professional relationship with the youth officer is of real value
- 8) Deadlines provide good incentive

The survey also asked respondents to identify reasons why the NQSF may not be achieving improvements. The responses suggest five key themes:

- 1) Time and resources
- 2) Improvements not primarily due to NQSF
- 3) Fragmented or partial implementation
- 4) Inaccessible
- 5) Implementation team ineffective

Overall, the comments to this question suggest some variances between youth workers and national organisation staff, on the one hand, and ETB officers on the other. Staff are most likely to highlight the time and resource constraints associated with implementing the NQSF and to highlight, in some instances, that they already had quality assurance processes in place prior to the NQSF. This implies that improvements experienced over time are not attributable exclusively, or even primarily, to the NQSF – as evidenced in the following quote from a national organisation staff member:

“In organisations where there was already a culture of learning established the NQSF may have helped to build on this but it may be inappropriate to attribute changes in the sector purely to the NQSF as it may have helped to make explicit processes that may already have been in place.”

ETB officers’ comments, perhaps to be expected, emphasise higher level obstacles such as general funding cuts and partial implementation, and thus fragmented benefits of the NQSF. Respondents were then asked to state the extent to which they agreed with a series of statements on the NQSF, as reflective of their experience with the Framework to date.

From the responses, it emerges that the NQSF is considered to have a very clear purpose with clear benefits, strong commitment and leadership but that it is too bureaucratic and time-consuming, as well as lacking sufficient access to resources, training and development. The capacity of the NQSF to eliminate or reduce poor quality practice generated the highest number of respondents who found this an either inappropriate element of the NQSF or were unsure of what to answer.

These statements suggest that, for some organisations, the time and administrative commitment to the NQSF are valuable and worthwhile, while for others it feels less beneficial and thus more drawn out and overly cumbersome. More importantly, what emerges, is that difficulties can arise internally in an organisation when stakeholders are not all equally engaged or convinced of the value of the NQSF. This may lead to either the wrong staff being assigned responsibility for its implementation (such as administrative staff only) or the failure of senior management roles to fully invest in the process. This is illustrated in the following quote from a national organisation staff member:

“It was never financially resourced, as such, projects/NGOs who engaged with the process as it states you should, felt the burden on staff resources. When you meet other managers, they state their 2 admin staff did it. Why would any manager invest staff time into it when other organisations, are not? There are no rewards for burdening your staff with it, if your organisation already has highest level of youth work practice.”

From the comments, the internal buy-in seems to derive primarily from the level of benefit the organisation/project can get from the NQSF process, and this may be influenced by the extent to which the organisation had already developed quality assurance processes and strategies.

It is evident from comments provided that some projects/organisations do not attribute any quality practice or improvements to the NQSF but to internal processes that were already in place. In other words, while organisations and projects may have found the NQSF helpful and worthwhile, they do not necessarily relate quality practice or improvements to the NQSF's implementation.

The survey also examined the NQSF's influence on organisations and projects' engagement and work with volunteers. The low response rate from volunteers suggests that it has been a considerable challenge to engage them in the actual NQSF process. Yet several comments have emphasised how improvements that have happened through the NQSF process have filtered down to an organisation or a project's work with volunteers. When asked directly

whether organisations, projects and ETB officers had experienced particular challenges associated with the NQSF for volunteers, the answers were somewhat divided, with 45% having experienced challenges, 21.5% not having experienced challenges and the remaining 33% unsure.

In Part 3 of the survey, stakeholders were asked a series of questions relating to the future strategic development of the NQSF. This part was completed by a large majority of respondents, many of whom elaborated on their answers in the comment boxes provided.

Respondents were first asked about their expectations of the NQSF. 104 staff in projects and organisations responded to this question as did 34 ETB officers. Ten main themes were identified, each of which had several elements:

1. Improved standard of youth work across the sector
2. A framework for continuous improvement that supports best practice on the ground
3. User-friendly, flexible, effective and more streamlined process/tool
4. Improved outcomes for young people
5. Effective reporting and recording tool at organisational and sector level
6. Seal of excellence
7. Professionalisation of youth work
8. Provision of adequate resources to support/reflect the work
9. Little or no expectation
10. Means to influence policy design and strategy in the sector

There are no significant differences in responses by staff and ETB officers with the exception of Theme 7, which was only mentioned by one ETB officer but nine staff. Respondents' expectations varied from 'none', offered by one respondent, to "a necessary evil" and "the Bible for Youth Projects". One respondent also commented "It depends on the quality of the survey evaluation."

According to several respondents, the NQSF has helped organisations and projects to question the rationale and reasoning behind a project and to interrogate who really benefits from it. It emerges in respondents' free text comments that the Continuous Improvement Plans have been of particular value because they help to focus the organisation on, for example, its policies, procedures and governance and has led many projects and organisations to initiate, or to redevelop, a whole host of policies and systems. The CIPs have also helped organisations and projects to identify gaps within their work, to focus on improvement actions and to focus on what is most important when working with young people. Finally, the CIPs seem to have led to a greater attention to detail and have helped

to embed an ethos of continuous improvement through reflective practice. Several respondents also point to the benefit of getting feedback from observations of practice conducted by ETB officers and the external assessment.

The NQSF's influence on engagement with volunteers and young people has been mentioned much less. However, some respondents did mention improvements in this regard. One respondent suggested that the organisation, through the NQSF process, had been able to develop new approaches to their work and they had been enabled to pass these onto their volunteers. Other respondents referenced the beneficial impact of the NQSF on outcomes for young people, for example, by involving them in planning.

Respondents were also asked to assess whether they think the NQSF does enough to ensure quality youth provision, when thinking in terms of the strategic development of the NQSF. The responses here were more divided than in the rest of the survey, with only just over a third responding that the NQSF currently does enough to ensure quality provision. Also, just over a third were unsure while just under a third think it does not do enough. Several respondents commented that while the Framework in itself does enough, the lack of resources means that in reality the NQSF is insufficient to ensure quality provision. Comments added in response to other questions also suggest that the NQSF is getting 'tired' and needs refreshing, re-energising and simplifying to make it easier and more productive to engage with it. Other comments raised in this regard include the need for more effective ways and means to address continuous poor practice; and to share the information and learning emerging from the NQSF process – for example, the accumulation of information in the numerous progress reports sent annually to the Department – of which there is general perception that they are rarely read.

The issue of whether the NQSF has the capacity to address poor quality practice arose throughout the survey but one question also directly addressed this issue by asking respondents to identify possible ways to ensure the elimination of continuous poor practice. This question achieved a relatively high response rate of 143 answers, which ranged from the provision of additional training; professional development and support to address the poor practice; a review recommended to be conducted by the DCYA; to a tiered process of review; to the withdrawal of funding. In particular, the approach of aligning the NQSF with funding so that high performing projects and services (in the NQSF) receive more funding than poor performing ones, is emphasised by many respondents.

Respondents were asked what, in their experience, would be the most appropriate implications of continuous poor performance by projects, services and organisations. The overall sense emerging from the comments is that services and organisations should be

appropriately and sufficiently supported and resourced to achieve a clearly defined minimum standard. Then, if after a full review and set timeframe recommended actions have not been addressed, the funding of the service, project or organisation should potentially be redirected to better performing services.

In terms of the future of the NQSF, there is a strong consensus that the NQSF cycle should not simply be repeated but should change once Cycle 1 has been completed. More than half of respondents suggest that subsequent cycles of the NQSF should be different from the previous cycle, while only 13% think subsequent cycles should be a repeat. Less than 10% think there should not be more than one cycle of the NQSF while a quarter of respondents are not sure. There is also strong consensus that the NQSF should be adapted to new policy developments and aligned with Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, the Value For Money Policy Review, as well as the National Youth Strategy. Finally, nearly half of 154 respondents recommend that the NQSF should continue in a somewhat altered format and just over a quarter recommend that it should continue in a substantially altered format – while only just over 10% recommend that it should continue in its current format. 15.9% believe that it should either be discontinued completely (3.9% or six respondents) or be replaced by an entirely different quality assurance system (12% or 18 respondents).

CHAPTER 4: PERSPECTIVES ON THE NQSF – A SYNTHESIS OF THE SURVEY FINDINGS, ENVIRONMENTAL SCAN, INTERVIEW AND FOCUS GROUP CONTRIBUTIONS

INTRODUCTION

The requirements of the Review brief involve, *inter alia*,

- (a) Determining the impact of the NQSF implementation on youth work organisations to date
- (b) Identifying the components of the NQSF that have worked effectively, and those that have been less effective

In this chapter, we review the outputs and related learning from the literature and environmental scan, the online surveys, and the range of focus groups and individual interviews undertaken for the Review, in order to extract the most important issues requiring attention in the further strategic development of the NQSF. They are not the totality of issues to have arisen during the Review process, but those that seem most likely to influence the effectiveness of the NQSF in the strategic pursuit of quality in youth services. In this respect, we focus primarily on issues that have been identified as requiring attention in any such revision, rather than on the many well-regarded and effective features of the Framework's implementation to date.

PERSPECTIVES ON THE NQSF

1. The NQSF is widely considered to have significant value

- i. The findings of the stakeholder survey reveal that the NQSF is generally perceived as worthwhile (70%), compared to 5% who do not consider it worthwhile and 25% who are unsure (nevertheless a significant figure). This was reinforced in the feedback from focus groups in different parts of the country, as well as in individual interviews. It was repeatedly remarked upon that the NQSF could hardly have been introduced at a less favourable time, when the country was still in the relatively early stages of a severe economic recession and public funding for youth organisations

was being severely cut. The fact that the NQSF nevertheless achieved significant buy-in across the sector was considered a significant achievement.

- ii. The rationale for embracing the NQSF was asserted by a senior sectoral figure in terms of *'why would you fear something that is going to help you enhance the quality of your work?'* The NQSF was considered by another contributor to have improved the discourse, and enhanced the status of work with young people, as well as to have improved morale. Among some contributors too, there is an understanding that, although many other countries have taken steps to enhance the quality of youth provision, Ireland is relatively unique in developing a quality standards framework. This is considered with pride and as a badge of honour. In this respect, Ireland is seen to be ahead of the international curve, which has been recognised at EU level and is borne out by the literature and environmental scan undertaken for this Review.
- iii. One ETB Officer focus group agreed that the NQSF is a catalyst for changing and improving practice in encouraging projects to reflect on, and address, issues that *'they didn't even know they had'*. They suggested that, when projects commenced the process and realised that they would not be sanctioned for their shortcomings, they engaged very honestly.
- iv. The majority of respondents to the stakeholder survey were positive that quality is improving under each of the NQSF standards, particularly in the areas of planning, policies and procedures, and practice and governance. Continuous Improvement Plans, commitment to implementation, and reflective practice were identified as particularly welcome features of the Framework to the extent that several focus group contributors suggested that they would continue these for their own organisation or project even if the NQSF was abandoned.
- v. Those elements that were considered by survey respondents to have experienced the least improvement were collaboration and integration, volunteers, and human resource management. Analysis of the outputs suggests that each of these elements was particularly adversely affected by the funding cuts to services in recent years.
- vi. The survey analysis also suggests that the NQSF has helped to clarify what quality work with young people looks like, and to develop a common language for planning and evaluating work within the sector. Survey comments also attest to the NQSF's contribution in encouraging and facilitating reflective practice, the aspect of the

NQSF that was mentioned by the largest number of respondents. This has helped to focus the work of organisations and projects in designing or improving work that keeps quality and young people's wants and needs at its core.

- vii. The internal focus on improving practice, implementing new policies and procedures, and interrogating who the real beneficiaries are, seems to be leading to a greater confidence in organisations' and providers' ability to communicate their work to stakeholders, including Boards and ETB Officers. This is evident from both survey responses and in focus groups with ETB Youth Officers. This confidence may also come from an improved capacity of staff to work better together as a team. At the same time, a continuing challenge is to recognise that what organisations and projects consider as quality processes and practices – including being externally validated as such – may not necessarily be experienced as high quality by the young people using their services.

2. Some elements of the NQSF process need significant revision

- i. ETB Officers and project staff alike, agree that the process involves an extensive administrative burden that obviates the possibility of achieving an appropriate ratio of contact hours with young people, and should be significantly rationalised. The NQSF process was repeatedly described, both in the survey and in all Youth Officer and project staff focus groups, as unnecessarily cumbersome. It was also described variously as repetitive, time-consuming and a chore. For some, the consequences include a negative impact on the extent of direct work with young people and a struggle to achieve the expected ratio of contact hours.
- ii. This is a particularly important issue since, as one focus group of ETB Youth Officers suggested, the NQSF has not necessarily led to improvements for young people as they are now actually getting less time with their youth worker. It was suggested that young people are consequently less positive about the NQSF (although it is important to note that, in the absence of significant engagement of young people directly, this cannot be said definitively). This group of Youth Officers felt that many of the administrative aspects of the standards process could be separated out as they are also features of other reporting requirements, a view that was echoed in staff focus groups. It was widely felt that the administrative aspects of the process add considerably to the workloads of Youth Officers, and youth services staff, as is evident from this survey comment from worker in a youth project:

“Because of the time constraints within our job the additional time taken up by the NQSF causes stress and a lack of ability to perform the job of implementation and the day to day job to the level needed. I think if staff involved were allowed to reduce contact hours slightly in order to efficiently complete and take part in the process it might mean a better more effective process and more time to do our jobs properly. If this is a priority that opportunity to prioritise should be afforded.” (Survey)

This general point was also raised by one interviewee who considered that the NQSF is a good model that is bringing order to chaos, but was concerned that it represents an excessive workload – that it is an over-bureaucratic approach to quality assurance, tries to control what is uncontrollable, and limits discretion.

- iii. The operation of the cyclical process of the Framework is widely seen as repetitive and at odds with the concept of progression. In particular, the fact that Year One:Cycle Two is a repeat of Year One:Cycle One was described by one contributor as akin to playing Snakes & Ladders – having to repeatedly return to Square One. Generally, this feature is considered frustrating and demotivating – *‘(h)aving to go back to the start every time doesn’t match the intent and the developmental purpose of the NQSF’* (Interview). Rather than covering the same ground in Year 1:Cycle 2, it was suggested that administrative support in the second, and subsequent cycles, should instead focus on assisting organisations in meeting new, or revised standards of such regulatory instruments as the Companies Acts or Charities Regulator, and this general point also featured in several focus group meetings.
- iv. Some comments contributed to the survey suggested that the NQSF has become ‘tired’ and needs refreshing, re-energising and simplifying – to make it easier and more productive to engage. It was also suggested that a clearer sense of progression through the cycles would be energising and rewarding:

‘After six years it definitely needs to be more challenging, projects need to be more challenged’ (Focus group).

‘I hope that going into the 3rd cycle of NQSF the same process is not required as at this stage it is repetitive and time consuming, without any clear mark of the standard of our organisation being...awarded’ (Survey)

- v. Several focus group members and individual interviewees were critical of the NQSF scale of attainment, which requires organisations and projects to assess their position relative to each indicator on a scale from absent, to acquiring, to achieved

and, finally, advanced. These contributors felt that the scale did not add value to the overall assessment process and could be jettisoned. This was expressed by several interviewees and in several ETB focus groups, as well as by several respondents to the survey. Equally, it should also be noted that no strongly positive comments on the scale were offered.

- vi. A small number of national organisations have developed their own, internal, quality systems. Since the NQSF is an eligibility requirement for DCYA funding, their engagement in the process is required but can seem duplicative. One suggestion was that, as there are very few such organisation-specific quality systems, each might be independently validated against the NQSF, thereby enabling their integration and eliminating duplication.
- vii. There is significant evidence from the survey, focus groups and interviews that the Implementation Teams are not functioning effectively. It has been difficult to engage young people and volunteers, including Board members.

“In spite of attempts to having an implementation team that would be representative of all involved in our work, including volunteers and young people, attendance to the meetings has often been limited to staff members. This may be due to the following reasons:

- It may be difficult for non-staff members to understand and connect to some of the work carried out in the organisation that doesn't involve direct work with young people - This process may not be very accessible to all stakeholders, due to the complexity of the process and the language used in the NQSF documentation. The template for the progress report is not user-friendly and makes it difficult to record the progress over the 3 years.” (Survey comment, project staff).

It was asserted repeatedly in both ETB Youth Officer and project staff focus groups, and in the survey that, in many organisations and projects, the organisational self-assessment and other aspects of the NQSF process are being completed by a single member of staff.

‘(There's a) need to examine the implementation team in more detail – they are not working and are de facto the project leader/manager and few others, especially after the first year. In the first year there is enthusiasm but it quickly dwindles’. (Focus group).

'I don't think that the Implementation Team is a good idea - it should simply be the work of the paid staff i.e. these are the set standards and we all work to them' (Survey response).

- viii. The NQSF document did not attract a lot of comment. It seems that most stakeholders are by now familiar with the document and the process it outlines. Some individual contributors considered that it had been helpful in describing the components of quality youth work, and in developing a common language for planning and evaluating. Others criticised the document for being 'unintelligible' to young people and volunteers, and argued for its revision and simplifying.
- ix. Some contributors felt that, in the early stages of the NQSF, project staff had struggled with the concept of evidence and how to capture it – and that this has contributed important learning. It was also suggested that there has been general progress in the understanding of data – both qualitative and quantitative – and its value in planning and assessing outcomes.
- x. The NQSF is a paper-based system, which adds volume and complexity to the process. There is no facility to complete it online. Consequently, with the collation of governance and other documentation to evidence reports, the process can involve the assembly of voluminous material for ETB Officers to review. It was repeatedly said that the biggest deficit concerning data is the absence of a central data management system and the lack of capacity to extract composite data from the progress reports submitted to DCYA. Consequently, it is considered impossible to properly analyse them or to extract learning.

"It is improving but more evaluation tools are needed as well as an online data system".

"The process would benefit greatly from an online portal where organisations could upload support documentation content, CIPs, strategic plans etc. An online space where best practice could be shared through open source templates for many of the governance, strategic and org health documentation needed for a process of this nature."

"There is a massive amount of data being collected with nobody doing any analysis. This is a major opportunity missed in terms of influencing policy from practice."

"What happens after the NQSF – we don't share outwardly with other organisations/ departments/academia – and there is some value in doing this... I question where all

the information goes because there must be huge learning in what forms are completed and in what evidence is provided. Perhaps we need an extra step or two – from a Departmental angle.”

“[The NQSF] improves provision but doesn’t ensure quality. For that the DCYA would need to extract data from the assessments to determine those areas most in need of improvement across the sector and then invest in training in those areas.” (Survey quotes)

3. The relationship between the NQSF and accountability

- i. Due to the developmental focus of the Framework from the outset, its implementation and reporting structure was not related to the concept of accountability. It was generally understood that engagement with the NQSF process was an eligibility requirement for funding from DCYA, but that this funding would not be affected by organisations’ and projects’ performance in the process. It was understood that the effective implementation of the Framework would reveal the gap between current and quality practice across the range of five Core Principles and ten Standards – which would then be addressed through the Continuous Improvement Plan, with the support of a Standards/Liaison/Youth Officer and the provision of training and development opportunities and resources.
- ii. In the event, due to significant funding cuts, training and development opportunities have been severely restricted, and while the ETB Officers have continued to offer support, this has been compromised at times by workload pressures and posts not always being filled. Also, as might be expected, engagement in the NQSF has revealed some instances of serious concern, whether at the level of governance or practice, or both. While comparatively few, these instances demand an immediate and effective response up to, and including, the withdrawal of public funding. To date, where such instances have arisen, the NQSF process has effectively been ‘parked’ while they have been addressed through the appropriate oversight channels.
- iii. All stakeholders acknowledge that there is a relationship between performance and funding. While there were good reasons not to emphasise this link on the introduction of the NQSF this is, arguably, no longer the case. As will be seen from the Survey Report, a substantial number of respondents recognised that continuous poor performance would ultimately need to be addressed through the withdrawal of

funding, perhaps after all reasonable support options had been exhausted. This reflects responses from interview and focus group participants who frequently asserted young people's right to good quality services, the Department's governance responsibilities, and the importance of fairness. In effect, that it is not only not fair to high performing services that those that are under-performing are treated no differently, but that this is in conflict with young people's rights. Fairness was mentioned by another contributor who did not see a conflict between the NQSF as a learning and development tool and linking it to funding – since engagement is already a requirement of funding. This person felt that effectiveness should be incentivised and rewarded, with poor performance sanctioned, suggesting that the support structures around the NQSF should be sufficient to indicate that something is wrong if there is under-performance. This argument is strongly supported by survey findings:

"I have no evidence of NQSF eliminating or reducing poor practice."

Another respondent provided more nuance to this observation:

"I am not absolutely sure about removing bad practice as there is so much tied up with this. In theory it sounds easy, but inspection, NQSF and other mechanisms need to be used, also processes must be clearly articulated and understood by all parties."

"There should be consequences if organisations fail to achieve a certain standard within a set time."

- iv. One focus group spoke of, on the one hand, 'good news accountability' – i.e. that there is a need for better sharing of good practice, where the evidence of what is being achieved can be shared with wider audiences including the public. This links to the issue of external validation and recognition of achievement which featured in several survey responses:

"There should be an end goal with the possibility of some recognition for organisations that have gone through the process, maybe at the end of year three."
(Survey)

"I'd like to see some Certification/Acknowledgement process and access to greater resources to help with the process." (Survey)

But this focus group also recognised that people really do need to be made accountable when they are not developing, and continue to perform poorly. One contributor made the point that without knowing what you are accountable for, there can be no accountability. This relates to the survey finding that, in order to have accountability, there needs to be clearly defined minimum standards. Indeed, the need for such minimum standards was strongly supported by focus groups and interviewees alike. An interviewee, referencing the fact that accountability was intentionally not linked to the NQSF at the outset, argued that this does not mean that measures of accountability should not now be introduced. This person did caution, however, that this should be done with appropriate consultation in order to preserve the important asset of the sector's commitment and buy-in. One focus group was concerned that introducing minimum standards might shift the focus from emphasising good practice to identifying room for improvement. This, however, is somewhat at odds with the survey finding that the NQSF had been good at identifying 'gaps for improvement' and that this was appreciated by respondents; by contrast, 'emphasising good practice' was not mentioned as significant by survey respondents.

- v. Of greater concern to several survey respondents and focus group contributors was a sense that, rather than finding a way to accommodate accountability appropriately within the NQSF processes, there might now be a bureaucratic and managerial trend towards inspection and oversight in assuring compliance. Some ETB Youth Officers expressed concern that their role might increasingly become one of inspection rather than supportive oversight. Meanwhile an interviewee considered that an overly bureaucratic approach to quality assurance facilitates compliance but at a cost to professional discretion. These contributors argued that such an approach is at odds with the espoused developmental nature of the Framework, with a concern that it could become more of a 'stick' than a 'carrot'. This specific reference featured in several focus group meetings and echoes, to some extent, a finding of the literature and environmental scan that *'This increasing focus on accountability and managerialism is thought to have resulted in a cumbersome and overly bureaucratic quality assurance process, an often unfortunate outcome of quality assurance systems.'*¹⁷

¹⁷ Bamber, J., Power, A. and Rowley, C. (2012) Speaking Evidence to Youth Work – and Vice Versa. In A Journal of Youth Work, Issue 10.

One focus group member stated that *'there would be a lot of kick-back if the focus (of the NQSF) shifted to compliance'*.

This is clearly an important, and challenging, issue in the development of the NQSF that would certainly benefit from greater clarity and common understanding.

4. Analysis of NQSF Progress Reports

- i. The self-assessment reports and accompanying documentation of most projects are read by the relevant ETB Officers who also contribute their own external assessments. There is a perception, however, among both ETB Youth Officers and service providers, that the DCYA does not currently have the resources or systems to read, collate or extract learning from most of the vast body of documentation that is submitted annually from hundreds of organisations and projects. In practice, it appears that the reports that are most likely to be read are those for which there is a specific reason – usually because there is a problem with the relevant organisation or project, or because it has registered on the political radar, for example, in the context of a Parliamentary Question. Concern was expressed in focus groups that, if this is the case, there is a risk that the reports that are read are disproportionately problematic, and may consequently skew the Department's perception of the youth sector.
- ii. Currently, it is not possible to gain an accurate understanding of the status of youth services and projects in Ireland since there is little capacity to analyse the material that is submitted to the DCYA as part of the NQSF process. Several difficulties arise from this fact, including
 - There is a missed opportunity to analyse and to learn lessons;
 - Organisations, projects and ETB Officers do not get feedback on their reports;
 - It is not possible to share examples of quality practice;
 - The sector's collective developmental needs cannot be identified;
 - The sector's commitment to continued investment in report completion may wane;

- It is not possible to evidence the value of the investment – a taxpayer can find out how much money is provided to youth services but not what has been achieved with it.
- iii. It seems that there is a potential threat to the integrity and credibility of the NQSF process if the capacity to extract value from the Progress Reports is not strengthened, and it is evident from the survey and focus groups that these deficits are recognised and well understood.

‘What happens after the NQSF? We don’t share outwardly with other organisations / departments / academia and there is some value in doing this. I question where all the information goes because there must be huge learning in what forms are completed and in what evidence is provided. Perhaps we need an extra step or two – from a Departmental angle’ (Survey response)

‘Reading the reports is not necessarily what it’s about, but it seems like a pointless part of the process – and the national overview is being missed’ (Interview)

‘Lack of...analysis of the reports means that there is no identification of the level of need for training, development, etc. that could then be addressed’ (Focus group).

5. Showcasing good practice across the sector

- i. The absence of opportunities to showcase good practice in youth services was referenced by several survey respondents and featured in most interviews and focus groups. This was observed as a crucial, missing piece of the NQSF jigsaw which, if addressed, could be highly influential in building a community of learning and enhancing quality of provision – one person referred to the ‘deficit in the non-celebration of good work’.

‘One or two-day showcasing events, peer learning opportunities, research seminars and workshops, ezine, online hub – there’d be huge value in that’. (Focus group);

‘Quality youth provision should be shared and there should be seminars/conferences to discuss the standards and how youth services have progressed through the CIP to achieve excellence’. (Survey respondent).

‘A good development of the NQSF would be showcasing of good work in a concrete, tangible way...An annual event of showcasing good practice as well as having plenary presentations would work’. (Focus group).

- ii. Showcase events need to have sufficient rigour to assure a proper standard of content and presentation. They are proposed as opportunities to encourage peer learning and the diffusion of innovation, while carrying with them the benefits of peer recognition – since it is typically the better performing services that are invited to present. Preparing such presentations is part of the learning cycle for the presenter as well as the audience, and would be expected to have a positive impact on the quantum of youth work that is documented since *‘a lot of youth work isn’t properly written up’* (Interview). One ETB has taken the initiative to host a showcase event in its area, which it now has plans to repeat twice annually. It is envisaged that this will contribute to improved inter-disciplinary and cross-sectoral collaboration. Showcase events were also suggested by some survey respondents as components of training and development, and as a means of addressing poor performance.
- iii. Such suggestions are primarily addressed internally to the sector, as a means of sharing good and innovative practice, while promoting peer learning. However, some contributors envisaged an external aspect to showcase events. These included the opportunity the events would offer to inform the public about what is being achieved – e.g. *‘youth work changes lives’* – while also serving as an opportunity to recruit volunteers. It was suggested that such events would also be a means to convince public representatives of the value of the work. One person went further, in suggesting that the sector might host a ‘Youth Work Weekend’ (similar to Culture Night) where services would have open days, provide presentations and events, and invite recruitment of volunteers.
- iv. While positive in this regard, one focus group recognised that showcase events need to be strategic and planned: *‘there needs to be structural system-wide opportunities and mechanisms for this. They are a good way to promote elements of good practice that could be taken to other projects (but) this needs a proactive, coordinating capacity’.*

6. Integrating the NQSF, BOBF outcomes, National Youth Strategy (NYS) objectives, and the VFMPR proximal outcomes

Since the introduction of the NQSF in 2010, Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures (2014), the Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes (2014), and the National Youth Strategy (2015) have all been published. Between them they contain a series of desired outcomes and objectives that have led to some confusion in the field as to how they fit with the NQSF and whether they are hierarchical. The survey responses and focus group and interview discussions reveal a strong consensus that the NQSF should be adapted to new policy developments and aligned, in particular, with BOBF, VFMPR and the NYS:

- *'It's not easy to see how these different initiatives fit together, if they do indeed fit together'* (Focus group);
- *'(They) should be connected up and the NQSF can be a way to do this – and that is a way that the NQSF is actually about accountability'* (Focus group);
- *'The NQSF has to sit within the policy context that is there now, i.e. there is a need to link NQSF to BOBF, etc. and this should be the next phase. Unsure what this needs in terms of resources and funding – no one has this answer but it is the key question'* (Focus group);
- *'(It is) very confusing on the ground so they need to be integrated and clarified. Projects can't really get their heads around the outcomes aspect. First, they were expected to align themselves with the BOBF outcomes, now it's the VFM outcomes and yet there has been no training or clarification for the sector on what this means'* (Focus group);
- *'The NQSF outcomes are expressed in other documents as goals, which is confusing'* (Interview);
- *'Could these (proximal outcomes) be reframed as seven social development outcomes?'* (Interview)
- *'In looking to align the NQSF with the VFMPR it is important to recognise that it covers a lot more than the three funding programmes covered by the VFMPR report'* (Interview);
- *'There needs to be better coherence between the different initiatives – for example, clearer, more simplified and consistent outcomes'* (Interview);
- *'Nobody understands the seven 'proximal outcomes' of the VFM – they should be integrated with the NQSF, the BOBF national outcomes, the National Youth Strategy objectives and enablers etc. – keep it simple but keep it quality'* (Interview).

- *“DCYA has introduced various strategies within the past 7 years to try and frame, direct and professionalise youth work. These attempts are commendable but projects/staff on the ground each year are hearing of new 'buzz' words e.g.: NQSF, Better Outcomes Brighter Futures and are unsure which framework we should be focusing on. The message is inconsistent. Funding organisations are not clear as to what our priorities should be and seem to change their minds every year as to what our outcomes should be based upon.” (Survey)*
- *“Good practice is good practice regardless of the policy environment. It should be held as separate. Aligning the standards to policy could serve to turn it into a box-ticking exercise.” (Survey)*
- *“I do think there should be greater alignment – however, I think there is a risk/fear of a sudden expectation upon organisations to show impact/measurement – and lose their funding if they are not able to. I think a measured approach to supporting organisations to measure impact, and a creative and open approach to the measurement ‘tools’ will be important. Centrally, good dialogue between the oversight bodies and the organisations they are reviewing. The concern is that there isn’t a good enough implementation strategy for the National Youth Strategy in the first place.” (Survey)*

These comments indicate that there is a need to provide guidance to the sector on the interpretation and alignment of the respective documents and policy instruments.

7. Clarification of funded programmes being targeted at young people in adversity

The current focus on the implementation of the VFMPR report has generated significant discussion across the youth sector in relation to whether services and funding should target all young people or, primarily, those experiencing adversity. It should be noted that the VFMPR report is concerned with the three main funding programmes (SPY, YPFSF 1&2), which account for approximately 70% of all DCYA funding to youth organisations. This report identified that, whereas the origins of these programmes were clearly focused on young people facing adversity, the purpose of the programmes had drifted and become framed in new ways. The report is effectively reaffirming the fact that this funding was politically voted for targeted programmes and, if that needs to change, it requires a new political decision to be made.

The VFMPR report has focused minds on whether youth services should fundamentally be universal or targeted, and has consequently exposed significant differences of perspective and opinion. Some argue that youth work derives from a broad conceptualisation of the

development needs of all young people, and that the current VFMPR approach, which relates to the Hardiker Model¹⁸ Levels 2 and 3, is not a developmental approach but rather *'destabilises the practice of youth work'* (Interview). Nevertheless, one contributor considered that while youth work is fundamentally about development, it magnetises in certain areas with, for example, disadvantaged youth projects.

Others are more pragmatic: one contributor considered that this is a challenge for all parts of the public service and suggested that *'we're only as good as the degree to which we meet the needs of the most vulnerable'*. This person further suggested that, in the context of funding of youth programmes, it is not so difficult to reconcile – *'youth policy is directed at all young people, but young people who aren't vulnerable have balance and good standards in other parts of their lives – so we have to protect those who are most vulnerable'*. This perspective appears to reflect the concept of 'progressive universalism' quite clearly.

Another contributor warned of the risk of perpetuating inequality through universalism – arguing that there is a need to avoid services becoming so middle-class that it is no longer comfortable for a young person with problems to engage with it. One survey respondent commented that the NQSF's focus on improved outcomes for young people *'facilitates targeting of the most needy young people'* and another, that it *'guides and supports my work with youth sector target groups'*. A focus group was less clear: *'(The NQSF) is about young people...but which young people? All young people or targeted groups?'*

It is recognised that there is a degree of ideological difference behind some of these perspectives that should be acknowledged but is unlikely to repay any attempt at reconciliation. Nevertheless, there is a need for guidance and clarification to providers, in order to ensure appropriate and coherent practice that respects funding parameters.

8. The NQSF as a whole-of-government recognised quality standard

The NQSF is a product of the DCYA, but it does not appear to have registered with other government departments and agencies that fund programmes for young people. We tested this to a limited extent for this Review by speaking with a small number of officials in other, related, government departments and found them to have been unaware of the NQSF. This has several implications, which include

- The application of the NQSF is confined to DCYA-funded programmes;

¹⁸ See, for example, https://www.dcy.gov.ie/documents/Key_Terms_Document.pdf pages 17-19.

- Other funders do not have the benefit of being reassured as to the quality standards being achieved by providers that are engaging with the NQSF;
- These funders may lack an appreciation of the true cost of implementing quality;
- The overhead costs of youth services providers are not shared with other funders;
- Funding application processes may be unnecessarily rigorous (for both funders and providers);
- The NQSF brand is less strong than it might otherwise be;
- There may be missed opportunities to attract resources from other funders to fund the quality support infrastructure.

Such deficits are also recognised at project level. As was stated at a focus group of project staff:

‘It’s a problem that departments don’t talk to each other. It’s hard to hear that there is a lack of coordination at local level when it doesn’t exist at department level. This really makes it important that the NQSF is recognised across departments and local authorities, i.e. all government agencies...It is up to youth workers to tell other government departments about the NQSF and projects’ engagement with the NQSF’.

These staff equally considered it to be important that all public funders would have an understanding of the cost of implementing high quality youth work and that they would provide sufficient funding to assure quality, including appropriate employment conditions. It was, however, acknowledged that the Charities Regulatory Authority does recognise the NQSF and takes it into account when projects apply for charitable status.

It would seem that there is both a need and an opportunity to broaden the application – and, perhaps, ‘ownership’ – of the NQSF across a much wider range of public funding of programmes for young people. However, in exploring this further it should be acknowledged that there is a need for clarity of intent, not least in reconciling the terms ‘youth work’, ‘youth services’ and ‘work with young people’ – as this will have a bearing on the extent to which other public funding is engaged.

9. External Recognition of NQSF Progress

On the introduction of the NQSF it was decided that it would not be accompanied by an awards or other system of external recognition. Increasingly, however, there is a demand from organisations and projects that the NQSF would be accompanied by some form of external validation, and widespread recognition that this would be a positive development.

Some consider that there is a public interest dimension in verifying that a service has reached an externally validated standard – *'it is a quality assurance measure, but we keep it secret'*. (Interview). A focus group saw benefits in projects having a certificate that parents and prospective Board members would see – that it would help to communicate the work and reflect well on the project. This group felt that as the NQSF matures the field might be ready for awards or something similar. In response to the survey question on respondents' priorities for a future quality assurance system, comments included the need for an award or certification element. And one focus group member suggested that the NQSF should be a *'mark of quality, rather than a quality mark'*, while another stated that *'self-assessment is never as valued as an external endorsement'*.

Several focus group members felt that not only was there no reward for engaging with the NQSF but that neither was there any sanction for organisations that had not seriously engaged with the process.

A focus group of project staff had another take on the question of their progression towards quality being externally validated – that in the context of tendering and commissioning, projects need a way to distinguish their work from potential competitors – and this group felt that quality standards should be at least as important as cost effectiveness in the award of tenders.

One person recognised the need for a system of validation and suggested that there is scope to be creative in its design, while another believes that the most appropriate reward for a professional service is to bring one's practice to a place that has been validated and evidence-informed, and recognised by one's peers.

10. Leadership commitment to the NQSF Process

The extent of meaningful engagement with the Framework seems to be heavily influenced by the level of leadership commitment to the process – at both organisational and project levels.

Several individuals and focus group participants referred to the workload demands involved in fully committing to the NQSF process. It is very demanding of time and other resources and it is important that this investment be validated by both organisational and project leadership. However, it has been widely held that this is variable. It was suggested that engagement with the NQSF can be very superficial in some instances and yet does not

appear to bring consequences. As a result, it can seem unfair and de-motivating to those organisations and projects that fully invest in the process.

Two survey comments touch on the problem of buy-in at management level with one suggesting that while there has been support and leadership within the project, this has not happened at a senior organisational level. The reverse can also be the case, if less frequently, where an organisation's leadership may have committed to the NQSF process but local management has not. Either can be confusing and frustrating for staff seeking guidance and support. One contributor was more than clear that buy-in must come from the top of the organisation and that there should be sanctions for any failure to fully engage in the process. By contrast, one contributor referred to a youth service CEO who celebrated the compilation of all the relevant documentation required for the NQSF, considering it to be a solid foundation on which to build towards the quality standard.

It is evident that this issue relates to the question of applying appropriate accountability measures as well as to the concept of fairness, equal treatment, and the preservation of the whole sector's commitment to the Framework.

11. Engaging young people and volunteers effectively in the NQSF process

Throughout the Review process, we repeatedly heard of the difficulty of engaging young people in the NQSF process. Many contributors referred to the fact that the NQSF documentation, language and process are not youth-friendly, that young people do not remain with the Implementation Teams past the first year, and that the three-year NQSF cycles do not fit with the nature or duration of young people's involvement in many youth services. Other respondents, however, identify the positive impact of the NQSF on outcomes for young people, for example, by involving young people in planning.

It was certainly a challenge to engage with young people for this Review. We prepared an online survey specifically for young people. Since we could not access them directly, we relied on national organisations and Liaison/Youth Officers to promote it amongst their projects asking them, in turn, to distribute it to young people. This was obviously less than ideal and, in the event, only 28 questionnaires were returned. This was not a sufficient return to be representative or to facilitate forming conclusions. It is, nevertheless, a significant finding.

We faced similar challenges in meeting young people in focus groups. Despite the willingness of several youth workers to assist us, various attempts to encourage young people to meet with us failed, before we eventually succeeded – with substantial support –

to meet a small number of young people in the latter stages of the Review. These young people had had extensive involvement in the NQSF process over several years and were quite familiar with the process. Two are currently now on the Board of Management of their project and saw no reason why young people would not be actively engaged in the NQSF process in their own projects – even if they recognised that it is not something every young person will be interested in.

These young people had had difficulty initially in engaging with the NQSF document but, with the support of project staff, had generated their own formulation of the text. They understood why the NQSF was important and agreed that it had led to improvements in their project. They said that they, and others, had made a significant commitment to the process through participating in ‘NQSF Days’ etc.

Their advice included: the production of a version of the NQSF documentation that would be accessible to young people; production of a poster for young people with an uncomplicated message along the lines of ‘Have Your Say’; and the integration of the NQSF process into the normal, everyday work of the project.

They agreed that the NQSF would benefit from the second, and subsequent, Cycles being about progressive development; they endorsed the idea of showcase events, and simplifying the overall NQSF process – although one person was unsure about the process being completed online as her experience had always been of working as part of a group around a table.

The NQSF’s influence on engagement with volunteers has featured even less than that of young people. Some survey respondents did mention improvements in this regard, with one suggesting that the organisation, through the NQSF process, had been able to develop new approaches to their work and they had been enabled to pass these onto their volunteers.

It has also been a challenge to engage volunteers in the Review process. Only six completed the stakeholder survey and in focus groups we heard of the difficulties of engaging them in the Implementation Teams. When asked in the survey whether organisations, projects and ETB Officers had experienced challenges associated with the NQSF for volunteers, 21.5% of respondents had not, 45% had, while the remaining 33% were unsure. One survey respondent stated:

“Volunteers are simply turned off by the volume of documentation and don't want to engage, but are happy to be directed and devote their few hours a week. I don't think that the Implementation Team is a good idea – it should simply be the work of the paid staff i.e. these are the set standards and we all work to them.”

More positively, some survey respondents have stated that improvements made through the NQSF process have filtered down to an organisation or project's engagement with volunteers. Generally, it was felt that volunteers do not have sufficient time or interest to engage in meetings or assessment processes when their motivation is entirely to work with young people. As one person from a national organisation said, *‘The more we bring the NQSF down to local level the more we're putting people off’*.

12. Youth Workers' Terms of Employment

The project staff focus group strongly made the point that the emphasis on delivering quality is at odds with what they claim, for some youth workers, are unsatisfactory employment terms, including job security, pay scales, holiday entitlement and pension rights. They argued that the current focus on policies, structures, etc. skews the NQSF focus away from the worker, who is the person who must deliver this enhanced quality.

Although it was recognised that the NQSF process cannot resolve these issues, it was argued that this should be a matter of concern for DCYA because there are differences of pay and conditions between youth workers employed by national organisations and those employed by local projects. They consider that their work should be valued, and included under the NQSF's Human Resources Management standard.

Irrespective of the expectations of these staff, it should be noted that, while it is a significant funder of work with young people, the DCYA is not the employer of youth organisation or project staff and is therefore not in a position to take an initiative to review their pay and conditions.

Meanwhile, a contrasting perspective, offered by another contributor, was that there is a need to review existing favourable time-off in lieu arrangements that youth workers enjoy for being away on overnight trips, when this can negatively impact on the provision of regular youth work sessions. Two people considered that there is a need to interrogate why youth services typically close in August and for several weeks at Christmas, when young people are out of school.

A perspective identified by the AIR Scan from Australian research does suggest that there is a relationship between staff's job security, terms and conditions and the quality of youth programmes, but it is suggested that the evidence needs interrogating further:

'The quality of programs for youth can be impacted by the professional experience and job commitment of youth workers. Research on Australian youth workers, which aligns with research findings in other countries, suggests that job satisfaction and commitment can be improved by professional development, supervision, and recognition of youth workers. The same study also suggests that combining and coordinating youth work initiatives can lower spending while freeing money to offer youth workers more stable jobs (lowering stress due to impermanent and part-time jobs). Finally, establishing professional networks for youth workers can promote professional identity and learning of youth workers¹⁹.

13. The Liaison/Youth Officer Support Role

The Liaison/Youth Officer has a crucial role in the NQSF process, which combines both oversight and support functions. Their relationships with projects are key, and must be built on trust and honesty, if they are to assist them in improving the quality of their provision across each of the standards. To complete their external assessments they must review the documentary evidence presented, carry out observations of practice and engage with stakeholders in focus groups. They must make their assessment with integrity and seek to maintain their working relationship with the project, even where they disagree with its self-assessment report.

In general, survey respondents – of whom 64% said their projects received external support from an ETB Youth Officer – were overwhelmingly positive regarding the level of support, with half finding it 'very supportive' and a quarter 'supportive'. Several respondents pointed to the benefit of getting feedback from observations of practice conducted by ETB Youth Officers and of the external assessment.

'Time invested has been worthwhile in part thanks to the ETB youth officer who has been balanced in their approach and been cognisant of the qualitative element (observational practice) as well as the quantitative element'. (Survey respondent)

However, some ETB Youth Officers feel they are not sufficiently qualified in some aspects of the NQSF – for example, in finance, employment law, health and safety, etc. – to assess

¹⁹ Youth Work: A Scan of Comparative Practices, American Institutes for Research, page 9.

providers' performance in these areas. As they have diverse work backgrounds and levels of experience, their own training and development, and support needs also vary considerably.

A focus group of ETB Youth Officers considered that such diversity is not a problem as long as they have a shared value system – *'how do we assure ourselves that, across the country with the application of the NQSF, there is a broadly consistent set of values that are underpinning the process?'* This group asserted that standardisation is not the goal, but rather that they would share a similar basis for making judgements. At the outset of the NQSF they had expected this to be led by the Youth Work Assessor, but since this role disappeared they have been left with no common ground as a starting point for implementing the Framework.

Another ETB Youth Officer focus group agreed that the introduction of the NQSF gave them real insight into the everyday challenges and constraints faced by projects. However, there is also recognition that Youth Officers have a range of other responsibilities and some give more attention to the NQSF than do others. Some Youth Officers are working single-handedly and may cover quite large areas.

One person considered that it is legitimate for ETB Youth Officers to carry out an audit, but did not think they should use the NQSF to do it – *'it's not an inspection but some ETB Officers do it that way'* – and suggested that there is no consistency or standardisation of approach. This person asked, *'Who checks the quality of work of the checker?'*. This was echoed by two other contributors.

An interviewee referred to the model of support as being unnecessarily inefficient, complicated and lacking in consistency, and in need of a substantial overhaul. Several other contributors felt there is an urgent need to rationalise the support system as a whole, and to have a clearer, more coherent and consistent support structure across the country.

14. The Role of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs

Across the field, there is an acknowledgement of the DCYA's role in policy and as funder, and of the oversight and accounting responsibilities that accompany it. It is recognised that the NQSF was originally conceptualised in the Department of Education ten years ago. Subsequent changes caused it to move to the Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs within the Department of Health and Children, before it eventually found a home in the new Department of Children and Youth Affairs in 2011. There is some appreciation that

it has been influenced and shaped in its execution by the respective mandates and culture of each department.

The Youth Work Assessor role is closely associated with the development, and early implementation phases of the NQSF, but with the demise of this position in 2014 there is a widespread view that a crucial component of the process was lost. This was largely a loss of leadership, drive, and a sharp focus on the developmental needs of the youth sector, that many, particularly in youth NGOs, considered necessary if the ambition behind the Framework was to be realised.

It should be said that the DCYA staff, including the Standards Officers appointed on a co-location basis in 2014, are highly regarded and respected for their professionalism – particularly by those who have had direct experience of them. This is apparent both from the survey and from focus group discussions. Analysis of the survey results reveals, for example, that national organisation staff rank practice as the standard that has achieved the greatest improvement in quality. They also rank professional support considerably higher in having contributed to improvements than other stakeholders (in 3rd place rather than 6th). National organisation staff were also more positive about the external support they had received than other stakeholders (over 60% found it ‘very supportive’ compared to just under 50% for other stakeholders). These are the only questions where responses from national organisation staff diverge significantly from other stakeholders.

There is, however, a widespread recognition that the current capacity of DCYA is overstretched and lacks the infrastructural components to provide appropriate oversight and support to the sector. However, there remains the perception amongst many who contributed to this Review that this serious gap at the centre could be severely damaging to the NQSF if not addressed.

‘The road shows and support from DCYA in the beginning were very useful and crucial for buy-in but suddenly all this just stopped. Projects no longer see DCYA at all’. (Focus Group)

‘With the current hole in DCYA, the NQSF can’t really survive’. (Focus Group)

‘If the core CDYSB Standards Officers in DCYA are not continued, the NQSF is dead’. (Interview)

‘If there is not leadership and drive from DCYA or somewhere else, the NQSF will fizzle out and die’. (Focus Group)

‘ETB officers all have different qualifications and training. We thought support in NQSF would come from the Youth Assessor in the department but then the role disappeared and now there’s no real common ground as starting point for implementing the NQSF...This needs a leadership role – without leadership there’s a problem of consistency’. (Focus Group)

‘Is the NQSF drifting away to nothingness?’ (Focus Group)

‘The Youth Affairs Unit doesn’t have the numbers necessary to drive the support at all stages – as a result the national overview is being missed. There is no means of collating information, nobody knows the current status of overall quality in the youth sector in Ireland, and there is no overview of emerging developmental needs across the sector’. (Interview)

‘DCYA also needs to take ownership and leadership and drive them alone, but if DCYA does not have a good understanding of youth work practice, how can they interrogate what they are funding?’ (Interview)

‘The Department works off short-term measures (but) there’s no future for the NQSF unless it becomes long term, i.e. the future of it depends on this review. The fact that the Department asked for the review is a good thing. But this is changing, personnel are very invested and becoming very focused on long term outcomes, but they are massively under-resourced’. (Focus group)

As can be seen from such comments, the sector is exercised by perceptions that the DCYA lacks the resources to provide the required national leadership, oversight and support to enable the NQSF to realise its potential. Further, there are signs that the absence of this capacity is leading some stakeholders to question whether there is a shift in policy priorities away from the NQSF, with a consequent questioning of their own commitment to the Framework, and wondering whether this is prudent.

CONCLUSION

This chapter has sought to synthesise the contributions acquired through the different parts of the review methodology and to summarise those issues that appear to have the most significant relevance for the future strategic development of the NQSF. A wide range of

perspectives on the Framework, and how its implementation has been experienced, have been gained through the survey, environmental scan, focus groups and individual interviews. Although there are clear differences of perspective on some issues, there is also significant shared experience and consensus on many of the key issues.

Having said that, it is important to consider the potential implications and strategic appropriateness of some of the sector's demands, and to set them within the context of the emerging policy landscape. In the following chapter, we consider the implications of recent and emerging policy and institutional developments for the NQSF.

CHAPTER 5: A WIDENING CONTEXT FOR QUALITY IN YOUTH SERVICES

INTRODUCTION

In Chapter 4 we reported on the findings from the elements of the Review brief that sought to

- (a) Determine the impact of the NQSF implementation on youth work organisations to date;
- (b) Identify the components of the NQSF that have worked effectively, and those that have been less effective.

In this Chapter, we address *inter alia* the remaining key elements of the brief, viz.

- (c) Identify areas for improvement and development of the NQSF, where appropriate, having regard to
- i. Recent policy developments and the related commitments therein (Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures; The National Youth Strategy; The VFM Policy Review of Youth Programmes; The National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation;
 - ii. Institutional developments (the establishment of the Education and Training Boards; the creation of Tusla – the Child and Family Agency); and
 - iii. Current developments such as the Quality and Capacity Building Initiative under development.

and

- (d) Illustrate how the NQSF could, if appropriate, be developed to comprehend
- i. Other youth provision funded by DCYA
 - ii. Other related youth provision, where appropriate, funded by Government departments (DES, DoH and Tusla).

In the following pages, we will consider the relevance and implications for the quality agenda in youth services of these recent, and still emerging, policy and institutional developments, that have taken place since the introduction of the NQSF.

POLICY AND INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENTS WITH IMPLICATIONS FOR THE NQSF

Since the launch of the NQSF in January 2011, several significant policy and institutional developments have potential implications for its continuing implementation and further development.

iv. Policy Developments

The *Better Outcomes Brighter Futures* (BOBF) Policy Framework, launched in 2014, seeks to coordinate policy across Government and adopts an outcomes approach based on five national outcomes for children and young people. It is supported by an implementation structure that includes a Sponsors Group, Policy Consortium and Advisory Council. The *National Youth Strategy 2015-2020* is the constituent strategy

of BOBF for young people aged 10-24 years. Its ten objectives relate to the five national outcomes of BOBF.

Ensuring quality services is one of BOBF's six transformational goals that are intended to strengthen the support system around children and young people. Specifically, this is articulated in the Framework as *'Quality services, outcomes driven, effective, efficient and trusted – Government investment in children will be evidence based and informed by national and international evidence. Services aimed at children will be obliged to prove their effectiveness and value for money. Irish education will be internationally benchmarked to ensure that children leave school with the capacity to deal with a rapidly changing world. Agencies charged with safeguarding the welfare of children will be trusted, and their contribution to improving the lives of children will be valued.'*²⁰

The pursuit of evidence-based, quality services is therefore central to the implementation of BOBF. Insofar as the NQSF can demonstrate its contribution to the achievement of better outcomes for young people it can be expected to be part of the future tapestry of quality measures for children and young people. However, to achieve this, it will need to be at least modified to take account of the deficits in its implementation processes that have been identified in the consultations for this Review; demonstrate that it is directly contributing to better outcomes; and be more strongly integrated with the other elements of the emerging strategic policy context for young people.

The **National Youth Strategy** is the constituent BOBF strategy for young people aged 10-24years. Its purpose is to coordinate policy and services across Government and other stakeholders to enable all young people aged 10 to 24 years to realise their maximum potential. It situates the Government's aims and objectives for young people within the context of the BOBF desired outcomes and identifies some fifty priority actions to be delivered from 2015 - 2017 by government departments, state agencies and others, including the voluntary youth services sector. The DCYA is leading on a range of enabling actions with these stakeholders and there are several key actions in the strategy that have relevance for the NQSF. These include the *Ensuring Quality Services* enabler.

²⁰ Department of Children and Young People, Ireland (2014). Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures: The national policy framework for children and young people, 2014-2020. Dublin: Department of Children and Youth Affairs

The NYS has a clear focus, within the overall BOBF context, on the achievement of quality outcomes and recognises that this requires considerable engagement and collaboration between the relevant stakeholders. The NQSF clearly has a potential contribution to make here, not least due to the extent of its acceptance as a quality framework and of sectoral buy-in. Nevertheless, drawing on the evidence of the consultative process for this Review, it seems that there is a need for rationalisation of its processes and clarification of the roles of the respective stakeholders, including its oversight and support arrangements, if this potential is to be fully realised.

The ***Value for Money and Policy Review of Youth Programmes*** (VFMPR) report (2014) is an in-depth examination of the impact of youth service provision on young people's lives, and is focused on the intended positive change to be achieved for young people by the exchequer investment in targeted youth programmes in disadvantaged areas. A reform of these programmes is currently being implemented which involves, *inter alia*, the design of a new youth scheme to replace three existing funding programmes for disadvantaged young people. The new scheme will reflect the VFMPR recommendations and is expected to have a strong focus on quality and effectiveness of outcomes. It will include a priority focus on young people at risk, will be largely geographic community-based, and in out-of-school settings adopting a non-formal learning approach. Its target cohort of young people will primarily be at Level 2 of the Hardiker model²¹ of needs assessment, i.e. Support and Therapeutic Intervention for Children and Families in Need.

The new scheme will be complemented by the development and integration of a performance management, information, governance, and financial reporting and compliance system. This is expected to include clarification and streamlining of reporting requirements and a rationalisation of the existing support structures, with ETBs providing a governance role at the system's intermediary level.

Although useful as an indicative tool in identifying broad cohorts of need, the Hardiker model is more applicable to the planning of therapeutic service and family support interventions than to the specific context of community-based work with young people. While it retains potential value if adapted to the context of young people facing adversity, care is required to avoid the risk of stigmatisation and limiting the flexibility to respond that is intrinsic to youth services.

²¹ See, for example, Department of Children and Youth Affairs (2012). *Working Together for Children. Toolkit for the Development of a Children's Services Committee*. 2nd Edition. Government Publications, Dublin.

The concept of a quality system is entirely compatible with the intent behind the current VFMPR reforms, for example, in clarifying and sharpening the focus of the new programme, rationalising the previously incoherent support system, and streamlining both its administrative and compliance requirements. Indeed, we have quoted the perspective of an interviewee that the NQSF has already brought a degree of order to a previously chaotic system, and we see no fundamental reason why an appropriately modified quality system would not complement, and potentially enhance, the new programme. One implication, however, is that the quality system would be embedded in the programme's oversight and governance functions – to date the NQSF has largely operated outside of these.

The ***National Strategy on Children and Young People's Participation in Decision-making (2015-2020)*** was launched in June 2015 and is a constituent strategy of *Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures*. It focuses on the everyday lives of children and young people and the places and spaces they inhabit. Its goal is to ensure that they have a voice in decisions that affect their lives, and it references the NQSF among other sets of standards and frameworks that are important opportunities for children and young people to participate and to influence decisions in their lives.

However, as already noted, despite improvements in the engagement of some organisations with young people, generally young people are considerably less involved in the NQSF process than one might have expected. This is a serious deficit that undermines its claims to be a quality system. An important action in the Participation in Decision-making Strategy is to address the need to build capacity and confidence among policy-makers and practitioners in engaging children and young people in decision-making. The Strategy could be used as a lever to embed a focus on the centrality of young people's experience as a core requirement of the NQSF's reform.

v. **Institutional Developments**

Also, since the initial launch of the NQSF, important institutional developments of relevance have included the establishment of the Department of Children and Youth Affairs, Tusla – the Child and Family Agency, and the Education and Training Boards (ETBs).

Department of Children and Youth Affairs – the DCYA was established in 2011 and its mandate, including responsibility for youth services, was transferred from the

former Office of the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in the Department of Health and Children, and expanded. Historically, prior to its transfer to the OMCYA, youth work policy had been the responsibility of the Department of Education.

If the primary focus of the Department of Education can be considered as educational, and that of the Department of Health as curative, it might be helpful for the DCYA to encapsulate its defining character. Clearly this is not straightforward, given the diversity of the Department's remit – from early years to young adults; early to crisis intervention; developmental approach to protection and welfare; investigation of contemporary and historical abuse; and close collaboration with other departments in addressing particularly complex issues in relation to, for example, youth justice, child and youth poverty, and homelessness – indeed, interventions at all points of the Hardiker model's four levels of need.

Specifically, in relation to youth services – and especially in the context of the renewed focus on young people facing adversity – it would be helpful if the DCYA were to articulate its rationale, making explicit where it sits on a continuum from non-formal learning to problem-solving. This is important for clarity of purpose, but also since the Department is increasingly reliant on an educational structure, in the form of the Education and Training Boards, to provide oversight of, and support to, youth services at the intermediary level. Without such clarity of purpose, it is difficult to see how a quality system could be evaluated.

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency – was established on the 1st January 2014 and is the dedicated State agency responsible for improving wellbeing and outcomes for children. It provides a wide range of universal and targeted services including, child protection and welfare, educational welfare, psychological, alternative care, family support, early years, and domestic, sexual and gender-based violence services. In relation to young people specifically, it provides care and after-care services, neighbourhood youth projects, and the educational welfare service formerly provided by the National Education Welfare Board. In terms of the young people using these services, there is clear potential to apply an adapted NQSF in support of the enhancement of their quality. However, it should be noted that Tusla's focus is primarily articulated as children and families; its priorities appear to be welfare rather than development; and that there are surprisingly few references to young people on its website (www.tusla.ie). This suggests that there is a need for Tusla to reconsider how it might best fulfil its statutory mandate in respect of young people.

In doing so, it might also reflect on whether there is potential to apply a modified NQSF in the interests of enhancing the quality of its services to them.

Education and Training Boards – ETBs are statutory authorities under the Education and Training Boards Act 2013, that have responsibility for education and training, youth work and a range of other statutory functions. ETBs were established in place of the former city and county Vocational Education Committees, and of Fás training centres. They manage and operate second-level schools, further education colleges, multi-faith community national schools and a range of adult and further education centres delivering education and training programmes. Among its statutory functions, an ETB has a brief to ‘support the provision, coordination, administration and assessment of youth work services in its functional area and provide such information as may be requested by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in relation to such support.’²² The Act also established Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), an association established to collectively represent education and training boards and promote their interests, and whose principal object is to promote the development of education, training and youthwork in Ireland.

ETB Youth Officers support the provision, coordination, administration and assessment of youth work services in each ETB area, liaising with the DCYA in relation to such support. They have responsibility for the NQSF process with all staff-led projects and services funded by DCYA in their area, and for supporting the implementation of the National Quality Standards for volunteer-led youth groups.

Within the overall framework of oversight of, and support for, youth services in Ireland the ETBs are potentially valuable assets in that they provide a presence throughout the country, building familiarity with local services and supporting them through the NQSF process, including undertaking the external assessment of services.

There are, however, several important issues to be addressed if this potential is to be fully realised.

Firstly, it is important that the DCYA and ETBs’ purpose and approach with respect to youth services are aligned – a potential fault-line between the ETBs’ focus on non-formal learning and the DCYA’s focus on young people facing adversity needs to be acknowledged and resolved.

²² Education and Training Boards Act 2013 Section 10(1)(j).

Secondly, there is a need to ensure that ETB Youth Officers recognise their primary role as part of the implementation framework of government youth policy – there is a risk that they would develop an allegiance with a local service provider to the detriment of this role.

Thirdly, it would be essential that ETB Youth Officers have the capacity to carry out their dual oversight and support roles – including that they would have opportunities for training and development – and that their approach be reasonably standardised across the country.

Fourthly, it is important that each ETB, as a corporate entity, would make available its resources and functions, as appropriate, in supporting the Youth Officers in the execution of their role.

vi. Current Developments

The **Quality and Capacity Building Initiative (QCBI)** has been developed by the DCYA with the aim of developing a coordinated approach to enhancing capabilities and quality in prevention and early intervention. The initiative is based on the five national outcomes in BOBF, and it is intended that it will apply across all policy and practice domains, including youth services. Four key components have been identified to ensure prevention and early intervention is a key focus from policy through to provision and practice: aligning data; harnessing evidence; enhancing implementation through coaching and development; and embedding prevention and early intervention approaches through a quality framework. In mining research evidence and learning from a range of initiatives, the QCBI will seek to ensure that providers are well acquainted with what works – and how it works – and have an evidence-supported approach to implementing this knowledge.

The initiative has potential to support the enhancement of quality in youth services in several ways.

We have seen that, due to the economic crisis and attendant funding cuts, the introduction of the NQSF was not accompanied by the anticipated investment in training and development. From discussion in focus groups and interviews for this Review, it is generally felt that the NQSF implementation has been relatively successful, in the circumstances. Nevertheless, there is little doubt that an

investment in the skills and capacities of the youth service workforce is overdue and would be expected to significantly enhance the delivery of effective services and an understanding of the significance of quality to the achievement of positive outcomes.

The QCBI could also provide an opportunity for an investment in the development of ETB Youth Officers, in terms of building their individual capacities, while also achieving greater consistency in their shared understanding of their role as overseers and supporters of locally-based services, and in standardising their approach.

The implementation of the VFMPR reforms, currently being developed, could be supported by drawing on the QCBI to develop youth service providers' capacities, particularly with reference to assessment of need, early intervention, and effective intervention strategies.

The youth policy developments that have occurred since the introduction of the NQSF share a coherent approach both to the importance of achieving desired outcomes, and of the centrality of young people's participation to that goal. While they are consistent with the original purpose of the NQSF, these policy developments add sharpness and focus in the expression of their intent. The related institutional developments, in the main, contribute clarity and potential complementarity in their respective statutory mandates, and provide opportunities and a context for the further development of effective services to young people.

While a renewed policy focus on young people experiencing adversity is welcome, it is important that the required response is not that this is a problem that requires a solution, but that the young person is supported to develop the capacities to learn confidence and strategies to overcome the adversity. This requires the availability of diverse but effective resources and services to support them through this challenge, with a focus on learning, adapting and developing, as opposed to becoming the largely passive object of the intervention.

DEVELOPING THE NQSF TO INCLUDE OTHER YOUTH PROVISION

As outlined in Chapter 1, to date the NQSF has been applied only to the staff-led youth organisations, services, projects and programmes funded under the following DCYA funding schemes:

- Youth Service Grant Scheme
- Special Projects for Youth (SPY)
- Young People’s Facilities and Services Funds 1 & 2
- Youth Information Centres

The DCYA also funds, either directly or indirectly, parts of the Irish Youth Justice Service Garda diversion projects, Tusla neighbourhood youth projects, and the Education Welfare Service which is now part of Tusla. Other Government departments and agencies, including the departments of Health, Education and Skills, Justice, Equality and Law Reform, and agencies such as the Health Service Executive (HSE) and Pobal also fund a range of youth-related programmes and initiatives. These include measures to address issues such as mental health, suicide prevention, drugs, job training and employment, and crime prevention initiatives directed at young people. Many of the youth service providers that are implementing the NQSF also receive funding under one or more of these funding schemes. On the other hand, many recipients of such funding are not engaged in the NQSF.

Several focus group and interview contributors to this Review remarked that prospective statutory funders, other than the DCYA, never raise questions about their involvement with the NQSF, or seem to be aware of its existence. As noted in Chapter 4, approaches to a small number of other public funders of youth services, for this Review, have similarly found a lack of awareness of the NQSF.

Each of these funding programmes might be expected to share an aspiration that they would lead to positive outcomes for young people, the achievement of relevant policy goals, and value for the public funds provided. However, while those administering these funds may not have significant expertise in assuring the quality of outcomes in youth services specifically, they will need to design and implement processes for evaluating funding proposals, and exercising due diligence as appropriate. From the perspective of organisations submitting funding applications under these programmes they, in addition to demonstrating how their proposals meet the relevant criteria, typically must satisfy the funder’s governance and financial management requirements.

If the existence of the NQSF was better known to, and its processes understood by, other statutory agencies funding programmes for young people, it would potentially offer significant reassurance and, most likely, facilitate a more streamlined assessment process.

From a policy perspective, it may also serve to reduce inefficiencies and potentially conflicting funding decisions. Organisations applying to these agencies for funding, meanwhile, could point to their engagement with the NQSF, thereby gaining recognition while also simplifying the application and assessment process.

One staff focus group considered it important that all public funders would understand and appreciate the cost of implementing high quality youth work and that the level of their funding would reflect this. Similarly, a case could be made for other public sector funders of work with young people contributing to infrastructural, and training and development, costs associated with enhancing the quality of outcomes in youth services. This is a dimension that might be further considered in any reform of the NQSF.

It is not suggested that engagement with the NQSF would make every funding decision easier or, indeed, that it would necessarily fit with every situation. However, the DCYA's focus on achieving the best experiences and outcomes for young people, together with its commitment to the implementation of BOBF – underpinned by an effective whole-of-government approach – suggests that it would endeavour to have its quality system adopted as widely as possible.

In the next chapter, we offer analysis of a small number of core high-level strategic considerations towards the achievement of quality in youth services, and form conclusions on how best to assure appropriate quality in youth service provision.

CHAPTER SIX: ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSIONS

INTRODUCTION

In this final Chapter, we will identify and consider a small number of core strategic issues that are fundamental to the achievement of quality in youth services in Ireland, and the institutional arrangements that will support this. We also consider, for comparative purposes, an indigenous quality framework in the early years sector. And, while drawing on the experiences and perspectives gained through the many informants over the course of

the Review, we will offer analysis that may challenge or re-frame some of the discussion to date.

WHO DEFINES QUALITY IN YOUTH SERVICES?

To begin with a general point, it is certainly a responsible and professional approach to be concerned about quality – and how to enhance it – in all forms of human service, but it cannot be assumed that the design and introduction of quality frameworks will necessarily result in improved outcomes or experiences, or be perceived as such, by their beneficiaries. The definition of quality, how it is perceived and by whom, is complex and contentious.

As we have seen from the environmental and literature scan, the National Quality Standards Framework for youth work is a unique approach to delivering quality in youth services and is well regarded internationally. Similarly, there is significant sectoral buy-in to, and support for, the NQSF with 70% of survey respondents considering it worthwhile. However, in subjecting the survey to further analysis one also finds a consensus that the process needs simplifying and redesigning; that whereas a third of respondents state that the Framework does enough to ensure quality provision, another third do not consider it does enough, and the remaining third are unsure; that while it has been found to be helpful and worthwhile, some respondents are more likely to attribute quality improvements to already-existing internal processes than to the NQSF's implementation; while others suggest that the administrative workload associated with the NQSF's completion has actually reduced the extent of staff's direct work with young people.

In short, these perspectives caution against taking the apparently positive perception of the NQSF at face value and raise the question, when it comes to assessing quality in youth services, whose opinion matters the most? The advice of various contributors to this Review, who have emphasised the importance of building a quality youth service with the transaction between the young person and the youth worker at its core, has been persuasive. This perspective requires a system of support that facilitates the effectiveness of that relationship to produce the best possible outcomes, by ensuring that the type and level of supports that are needed at each stage and for each stakeholder, are available. It also implies that clarity would be prized within that support system, and unnecessary complexity removed.

For these reasons, we consider that in assessing quality in youth services, it is the young person's experience of the engagement – and the extent to which it produces a favourable

outcome – that is most important, particularly when many are experiencing serious adversity in their lives. From this perspective, the primary challenge is to ensure that the combination of elements that comprise a quality system are supportive of this core transaction. These include, for example, good governance, effective policies and procedures, reasonable standardisation of provision, investment in learning – both evidence gathering, and training and development – and the active participation of young people, especially in hearing what they have to say. It does not include having unnecessarily complex or bureaucratic processes, or a focus on professionalisation or development as ends in themselves.

Although there is evidence from the survey that the NQSF has facilitated improvements in the engagement of some organisations with young people, young people are considerably less involved in implementing the Framework than one might have expected. There is a broad consensus, for example, that the NQSF Implementation Teams – on which all stakeholder groups within an organisation or project should be represented – have failed, in many instances, to engage young people and volunteers effectively. This has been explained in terms of young people not really being interested in the workings of their organisation or project, and of volunteers only wanting to assist in direct work, rather than attend meetings. However, the lack of adequate involvement of young people or volunteers are serious deficits that undermine claims to a quality system. Either this is a failing of the system, or of commitment to its implementation, or both. In asserting this, it is also important to acknowledge that there are positive examples of young people, some of whom we have met, being highly engaged in the NQSF and other quality processes in their organisations and projects.

In general, however, we have been disappointed at the extent to which we have been able to access the views of young people for this Review. A constraint was our reliance on others to facilitate their involvement. For the Young People's survey, for example, we were reliant on ETB Officers sharing the questionnaire with projects in their area and encouraging them to share it with their young people, and encourage their participation. We also shared it with national organisations with similar intent. In the event, only 28 young people's questionnaires were returned. Also, despite positive efforts by several youth service managers, we were only able to meet one group of young people, close to the completion of the Review fieldwork.

This was both disappointing and an acknowledged shortcoming in the Review process. But it also appears to be indicative of the relative absence of young people from the NQSF process, and this should not be ignored. The current level of participation of young people

in the NQSF process is unsatisfactory and suggests a need for a re-design to address this. There is also a need to comprehend the dynamic that excludes young people, whether wittingly or unwittingly. While there remain many positives with regard to the NQSF, the challenge is to adapt it in both process and language by putting young people and their experiences at its core, and to redouble commitment to this end.

WHO ASSURES QUALITY IN YOUTH SERVICES?

The short answer to this question is that all stakeholders share a responsibility to assure the quality of youth services. However, this needs qualifying as respective stakeholders have distinct roles, responsibilities, capacities and expertise that define their specific contributions to the achievement of quality.

As we have seen, there is significant demand from the sector for the DCYA's current capacity to be expanded to facilitate more active leadership and support for the further development of the NQSF. However, this would be to ignore the dichotomous roles that would be involved – from strategy and policy-maker and funder, to provider of operational support; from exercising oversight and monitoring compliance, to promoting and showcasing good practice; from negotiating and overseeing intermediary support structures, to operating them – to name just a few conflicting roles.

Quite apart from the impossibility and inappropriateness of any attempt to combine such contradictory roles, it is useful to differentiate the potential contributions of the respective stakeholders. This also serves to promote the concept of shared responsibility for, and ownership of, a joint enterprise. And it is a defence against disempowerment and disengagement.

One deficit that was raised repeatedly, particularly in interviews conducted for this Review, is the fragmented approach that currently exists in the provision of intermediary support to youth organisations implementing the NQSF across the country. With Liaison Officers employed by CDETB in the Dublin City area, Youth Officers employed by ETBs throughout the rest of the country, and Standards Officers co-located in DCYA providing support to the national organisations, the current arrangements are incoherent but reflect a pragmatic evolution in response to specific past circumstances. Now there is both a need and an opportunity to move towards a more coherent and strategic provision of support and external review of providers' progression towards the delivery of higher quality interventions.

Part of this opportunity is to further refine the contribution of Youth Officers employed by the recently established Education and Training Boards, in the context of the Education and Training Boards Act 2013, with DCYA funding. Ideally, there would be a common approach across the entire country with clarity and consistency of role, and progression towards standardisation. The Review consultative process has identified – including by Youth Officers themselves – significant disparities, currently, in terms of operating values, background, experience, skills, etc. This indicates a need for a significant investment in building the capacity of Youth Officers and achieving a more consistent and appropriate approach. There is also a need to ensure that the contribution of ETBs would be corporate and cross-functional, rather than only the responsibility of the individual Youth Officer.

This represents a significant challenge for DCYA that, nevertheless, has the potential to repay its investment through the development of a system of consistent intermediary support to youth service providers throughout the country. In doing so, it would clearly not only not be possible, but also inappropriate, for DCYA to seek direct engagement with local youth projects and organisations, whose support needs would more properly be met by the relevant Youth Officer. The ETB structure, with enhanced capacity, would also be a key resource should the quality system be applied, in the medium to long term, to other forms of youth service provision that are currently outside the NQSF.

Similarly, there is a need to reconsider the support needs of the national youth organisations. Although only about thirty in number, they are very diverse in terms of scale, budget, stage of development, etc. A small number are quite large professional organisations with a network of projects in local areas, and some have their own internal quality systems. By contrast, some are tiny organisations with perhaps only one part-time member of staff and highly dependent on volunteers. There is ample evidence from the survey and focus groups of the positive experience national organisations have had of the support received from the Standards Officers, yet in the long-term it is difficult to see how it would be possible or appropriate for DCYA to directly meet the support needs of such a diverse group of organisations. It might be the case that some are sufficiently developed not to require such support whereas others need a much more intensive level of support than could be provided by a government department. There are also significant differences between some of the larger organisations, where some are federations of local projects while others operate to a centralised command and control model.

Also, while there is a clear need and demand for the provision of good practice showcase events as one means of promoting peer learning, there is possibly an unrealistic expectation

that these would be organised by the DCYA. With a clearer delineation between the respective elements of the structure, it is likely that DCYA’s national policy and compliance roles would conflict with a developmental role. In any event, in focusing on practice issues they would be better organised by the sector – perhaps on a commissioned basis – and this would be expected to promote and reinforce sectoral ownership of the pursuit of quality provision. This reflects practice in the early years sector where, for example, Early Childhood Ireland facilitates showcasing of practice through annual events, local communities of practice, a weekly e-zine, a monthly learning story competition, and a weekly blog focusing on a specific aspect of quality provision (guest bloggers include practitioners, researchers and early childhood specialists).

In the youth sector, there is a need to promote greater emphasis on advancing knowledge and understanding of the dynamics of work with young people, including theories of change, causality and the development of a more substantial body of indigenous evidence. While this should be of interest to DCYA in terms of the continual search for effective outcomes, it is a specific challenge for youth service providers and for academics from whom new insights and challenges in thought leadership are urgently needed. The commissioning by funders and independent service providers of new studies and exploratory work would also be welcome.

Finally, there is a need for discourse and, ideally, agreement on nomenclature – in recent times, to the traditional term ‘youth work’ have been added ‘work with young people’, ‘youth services’, and ‘non-formal learning’. It would surely be helpful to reach a common understanding and agreement on the most appropriate term, and its implications.

A COMPARATIVE QUALITY SYSTEM – SÍOLTA

In considering the experience of the NQSF implementation and its potential future development, it is helpful to look at other quality systems in the delivery of human services to see if useful learning can be extracted. To this end, we have looked in some depth at Síolta²³, which is the national quality framework for early childhood care and education developed by the Centre for Early Child Development and Education [CECDE] and published in 2006. It is very closely associated with the Aistear²⁴ early childhood curriculum framework published in 2009 by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment

²³ www.siolta.ie

²⁴ http://www.ncca.ie/en/Curriculum_and_Assessment/Early_Childhood_and_Primary_Education/Early_Childhood_Education/Framework_for_early_learning/

[NCCA]. Síolta defines, assesses and supports the improvement of quality across all aspects of practice in early childhood care and education settings where children aged birth to six years are present. Aistear describes the types of learning that are important for babies, toddlers and young children. The frameworks are complementary and provide a basis from which to review providers' practice, enhance knowledge and skills, maintain and sustain quality, and monitor and evaluate progress.

Síolta is comprised of three distinct but interrelated elements: Principles, Standards and Components of Quality. The 12 Principles provide the overall vision of the Framework, while the 16 Standards and 75 Components allow for the practical application of this vision across all aspects of ECCE practice. The Components of Quality are further explained by a set of Signposts for Reflection and 'Think-about's' which are intended to support practitioners in early education settings to become aware of, and critical of, their practice.

According to the Final Report on the Development and Implementation of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme of the DES Early Years Education Policy Unit,²⁵ the policy agenda that drove the development of Síolta was the need to improve the quality of early childhood care and education services in Ireland through the establishment of agreed quality standards and implementation processes based on self-evaluation. Subsequently, the introduction of universal pre-school provision included a requirement that services '*...deliver on a programme of activities that adheres to the Principles of Síolta...*'²⁶ According to www.siolta.ie the establishment of the Free Pre-school Year by the State recognises the value and importance of high quality provision for all children and Síolta and Aistear are the national practice guidelines that provide detail on how to deliver on that quality agenda.

From the publication of Síolta in 2006, many ECCE settings and individual practitioners engaged informally with the Framework, using it to improve and reflect on their practice, and were supported by the dissemination of Síolta documentation and information workshops across the country. Formal engagement with Síolta involves an ECCE setting implementing the full Síolta Quality Assurance Programme (QAP), supported by a Síolta Co-ordinator or mentor.

The Síolta QAP is designed to provide structured, supported engagement for services that wish to seek external assessment of their service provision and practice against the Síolta

²⁵ Department of Education and Skills, Final Report on the Development and Implementation of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme, December 2013, page 28, accessible at <http://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Policy-Reports/S%C3%ADolta-Final-Report.pdf>

²⁶ Note that this is not a requirement to adhere to Síolta *per se*, but to its principles – adopting Síolta is encouraged, but not required.

Standards and Components of Quality. It is a twelve-step process whereby an ECCE setting will carry out a range of activities including a baseline self-assessment, action planning and quality development work, evidence collection and portfolio building. The setting is supported in this activity by an experienced, qualified mentor (Síolta Coordinator) who has been trained to guide the setting through each step of the programme. On completion of this process, the provider submits its completed Síolta portfolio for external validation. This process is repeated every three years.

The Final Report on the Development and Implementation of the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme states that

'The development of the Síolta QAP was designed to facilitate the use of the indicators of quality in Síolta for both internal self evaluation and external assessment. The processes developed to support implementation of Síolta were constructed to ensure that evaluation and monitoring, whether internal or external, were guided by the same goals; to develop common understanding about the nature of quality in practice and promote positive co-operative relationships that would empower all stakeholders to deliver high quality experiences for children. By insisting on breaking with traditional expectations around external assessment, i.e., that the external assessment holds more weight than the internal, and re-conceptualising the relationship as one of guidance and facilitation it was intended that participation in the Síolta QAP would yield sustained self-motivated engagement with the Síolta Standards and components. In other words, the goal of external support and assessment in the Síolta QAP should be to increase intrinsic motivation of staff in the ECCE setting to a point where the external support is no longer necessary and the Validator's summative assessment report is sought only as an affirmation of the competence of continuous internal quality improvement processes.'

The Report concludes (page 28) that the development of Síolta and the Síolta Quality Assurance Programme realised the ambitious initial goal of creating an evidence based Framework that defines, supports and assesses the quality of early childhood education in Ireland. In addition, the Framework has attracted substantial buy-in and support across the diverse communities of practice that constitute the ECCE workforce and the wide range of stakeholder organisations representing parents, employers and special interest groups.

In terms of the institutional arrangements that are concerned with quality issues in early years settings, the Early Years Education Policy Unit in the Department of Education and Skills has been responsible for the implementation of Síolta since December 2008, following the closure of the CECDE. DES undertakes Early-Years Education-focused Inspections (EYEIs) in services participating in the ECCE Programme, which provides a period of free early

childhood care and education for children before they start school. The quality of the nature, range and appropriateness of the early educational experiences for the children are evaluated, primarily through the inspector's observation of the processes and practices relating to children's learning in one or more learning rooms or areas in the early-years setting. The DES inspectors do not inspect adherence to, or compliance with, Síolta but use it as a guide to identify and assess quality. On completion of the inspection the early-years practitioners and the owners/managers are given feedback on the quality of educational provision in the setting. Subsequently a written report is sent to the pre-school outlining the findings and providing advice on how educational provision in the setting might be further improved. The inspection report is published on both the DES and DCYA websites. It should be noted that the DES inspection is not a statutory role, and that the inspectors do not have a right of access to services, although they are generally welcomed. Neither do they have the authority to sanction a poor-performing service – only the Tusla inspectors can, up to requiring its closure.

Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is responsible for inspecting pre-schools, play groups, day nursery, crèches, day-care and similar services which cater for children aged 0-6 years. The Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, published the Child Care Regulations (The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) Regulations 2016 in May 2016. These Regulations are effective on a phased basis from June 2016. The 2016 Regulations relate to pre-school services i.e. those services catering for children under the age of 6, who are not attending primary school. The Child Care Regulations (The Child Care Act 1991 (Early Years Services) (Amendments) Regulations 2016) became effective from December 2016.²⁷ Tusla publishes Inspection reports of Early Years Services on an ongoing basis. Where available, the provider's responses are also published online.

There is a high level of public and media interest in these inspections, particularly arising from the RTÉ *Prime Time* documentary "A Breach of Trust", which was screened on May 28th, 2013. It showed serious instances of abuse and poor practice in several early years settings, and led to an outcry demanding better statutory oversight.

The introduction of the new registration system required the approximate 4,500 existing services to apply to be 'deemed to be registered' before 15th June 2016, or to undergo the new registration process. Existing operators, on the introduction of the new system, are expected to have a registration inspection within the first three years. The regulations also strengthen requirements in relation to the management and governance of services.

²⁷ <http://www.tusla.ie/services/preschool-services/>

Some commentators have been critical of the fact that the Tusla inspections appear to focus primarily on issues of health and safety, and that the opportunity was not taken, in issuing these regulations, to begin to align the new, education-focused inspections by the DES of centres operating the free pre-school scheme, with the statutory inspections by Tusla. There is evidence that conflicting recommendations can be made by the two inspection services.

Tusla's director of quality assurance, as quoted in the Irish Times²⁸ responded: *"Tusla has the only statutory regulatory function in relation to early years' services. DES inspectors look at curriculum and other things but it wouldn't have the same volume of inspection work as we have, and we would be the ones registering services and issuing statutory actions upon them if they are not compliant."* In the long term, he believes it would be beneficial to have much closer links between the two sets of inspection, *"or merge them completely"*.

More than 4,000 Early Education & Childcare service providers nationally are contracted to offer the ECCE programme on behalf of DCYA. Approximately 70,000 children (approximately 96% of eligible children) benefit from the ECCE programme annually which is delivered through both private and not-for-profit childcare providers. Since August 2016 Pobal has taken over responsibility for processing payments to the service providers, and it also undertakes annual compliance visits to ensure, on behalf of DCYA, that eligible children receive their entitlements, and that the provider is compliant with the terms of the programme. Pobal has also developed an online data process – Programme Implementation Platform (PIP) – which places significant responsibility on the manager of early years settings to input the required data.

Prior to the introduction of the new regulations, the CEO of Early Childhood Ireland, was highly critical in a press release²⁹ of the early years inspection regime:

"Tusla, the Child and Family Agency charged with inspection of preschools, must be held to account for too few inspectors, too few inspections and too little progress in delivering a robust, consistent and regular inspection process..."

²⁸ Irish Times, 28th June 2016, Health & Family supplement.

²⁹ Press release, Early Childhood Ireland (Teresa Heeney, CEO) September 5, 2015.

This sector can be characterised by under-investment and over-inspection, with Tusla, the Department of Education and Pobal all involved. Proper inspection is essential, is in everyone's interest, and something we have for a long time been calling for...

Unfortunately, our inconsistent inspection process is failing children, parents and the sector today. A consistent, equitable, national system of inspection of early childhood education is what is required, and it should be a sure thing, not a lottery system depending on location. We must address this area with the priority and investment needed. An effective inspection process provides peace of mind for parents, a stamp of approval for the early childhood educators delivering a quality experience for children and a wakeup call for those who aren't, with a view to raising standards and quality across the board."

An early childhood academic, interviewed for this review, was also highly critical of the inspection and oversight regimes in the early years sector: *"There is no willingness to look at what is already there – the system is creating layers, and layers, and layers of well-paid people who have nothing to do with children."* This person was also highly critical of the recent draft framework of standards published by Tusla.

Notwithstanding these complexities and criticisms, an initiative has been taken to achieve greater cohesion in the implementation of the Síolta and Aistear Frameworks. The National Síolta Aistear Initiative (www.aistearsiolta.ie) is a collaboration involving the DES, DCYA and the NCCA, and has been developed to provide central support and coordination of Síolta and Aistear implementation across the early childhood sector. A national coordinator was appointed for each Framework in Autumn 2016 and they are collaborating to provide central direction and oversight of Síolta and Aistear.

Despite the contrasting contexts, there are several identifiable similarities between Síolta and the NQSF, including their respective development in consultation with service providers, and consequent achievement of acceptance and buy-in from each sector; each are child/young person focused; and each has been found, in its implementation, to have involved a, perhaps excessive, administrative workload that has since been under review. However, of perhaps greater interest is that the wider oversight complexities and arrangements in the early years sector reflect the dichotomy between the twin interests of development and compliance and the challenge of finding an appropriate means to reconcile them.

In the following section, we will consider these dimensions of assuring quality in youth services.

THE DISTINCT DEMANDS OF COMPLIANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY AND SUPPORT

There will inevitably be different stakeholder perspectives and expectations regarding the distinct but related elements of compliance, accountability and support. Failure to differentiate them is liable to result in confusion and conflict as the respective stakeholders are subject to different responsibilities and demands. Clarifying the respective roles of strategic policymaker, intermediary assessor and development resource, and service provider is useful in identifying and distinguishing the varying needs of each role.

As the public policy lead and funder, DCYA has a responsibility to implement Government policy and to protect the public interest, including assuring the proper use of public funds, for which its Secretary General is the accounting officer. In relation to youth services, DCYA requires the organisations it funds to engage with the NQSF. Failure to comply would be expected to result in the withdrawal of funds.

Compliance involves conforming with requirements that are imposed by legitimate power and authority. It is binary and unambiguous – one is either compliant or not, there is no middle ground. In the context of DCYA's funding of youth services, compliance also involves

1. Verifying that funds are appropriately applied to the purposes for which they were given, and effectively and efficiently deployed;
2. Demonstrating that organisations are properly governed and managed.

Failure to comply with these requirements would also be expected to result in withdrawal of funding, either immediately, or following continued or repeated failure.

It might also be expected that a requirement of funding would be that organisations would have to identify and demonstrate the achievement of positive outcomes for young people, but this is more nuanced. While it is certainly an aspiration, its measurement and verification can be problematic, including the creation of the conditions most likely to lead to its achievement.

This reflects the fact that, while engagement with the NQSF is a condition of DCYA funding, performance in the delivery of services has not, to date, carried implications in terms of the reduction or withdrawal of those funds. It is not that there has been no accountability for the funding, but that it has not been linked to performance, as assessed under the NQSF. That was a reasonable position when providers were being encouraged to embark on a

journey towards enhancing the quality of their work and it was important that no barriers or disincentives were put in their way. As the implementation of the Framework has matured, however, it is inevitable that questions of accountability should arise where instances of under-performance or lack of progress are identified.

These questions are now quite widespread in the field, as we have seen from survey responses and the outputs of focus groups and individual interviews. Most contributors acknowledge that it is not sustainable that a provider would engage with the NQSF over several cycles without demonstrating progress, and that there would be no consequences. Providers who can evidence progress want it to be recognised, and consider it unfair that others, who cannot show such progress, would be treated the same. Understandably, they will claim that they would make more effective use of the funds than the non-performing entity, given the opportunity. More importantly, young people have a right to expect that their services are appropriate and effective, and not to have to settle for second best. Meanwhile, from the public policy perspective, there is an imperative to demonstrate value for money, appropriate oversight, and benefit to society.

Where serious shortcomings in governance, financial probity or safe practice are identified the expectation is that there would be an immediate suspension of funding and activity while appropriate intervention is considered. By contrast, in most instances of poor service performance the expectation is that, rather than funding being immediately withdrawn, there would follow a protracted period of review and support, with funding only subsequently withdrawn in the light of continued failure to engage and/or improve. This implies that in such an instance, while the provider carries primary responsibility for its performance, the effectiveness of the support provided might also be expected to play its part. Consequently, it is not sufficient to assure the quality of provision, but also the quality of the support system, through ongoing investment in training and development.

This helps to differentiate compliance and accountability. Whereas compliance is one-way, accountability is a two-way street – it is more engaged, dynamic and reciprocal. It also helps to differentiate the respective roles of the DCYA and the ETB Youth Officers. The DCYA has a mandate to require compliance with the policy agenda and the requirements of funding; the ETBs, as statutory agencies, have a responsibility to expect accountability from providers but also, in their support role, to offer it in terms of the quality of their engagement and support, which illustrates this reciprocity.

It should be noted that the ETB Youth Officer role is at the fulcrum of the accountability and support axis. As key contributors to the government youth policy implementation process,

it is essential that they exercise their role as assessors of quality with integrity and rigour. At the same time, they bear responsibility as enablers of quality through development support and advice. This is a clear pinch-point in balancing these dual functions that, at best, requires significant sophistication of approach and judgement. It suggests that care in recruitment, and investment in effective oversight and development of Youth Officers would facilitate greater standardisation – without losing individual strengths or discretion – and help to enhance their contribution to the delivery of quality youth services. It is recognised that this also has implications for the management of the contractual relationship between DCYA and ETBs as the employers of Youth Officers.

Equally, service providers not only have a responsibility to engage openly and honestly with the NQSF process and structures in seeking ever-improving levels of service quality and outcomes, but can expect to be supported in these endeavours by the Framework's support infrastructure, including opportunities for training and development.

Considering once more that quality should be defined in terms of the young person's experience, the essence of a developmental approach is to promote, encourage and support a sector-wide pursuit of enhanced quality of provision with the expectation that this will, in turn, produce more favourable outcomes for young people using youth services. It includes the encouragement of progress towards better organisational functioning and quality of provision, so that the young people using the services will have a better experience, and their lives will be improved as a result. For this to be realised it is important that the developmental approach would be recognised as a means to that end – as there can be a tendency for it to focus on developing organisations and individual professionals without it necessarily bringing sufficient benefits to young people.

The aspiration is that the sector, at all levels, would share in the goal of achieving the best possible outcomes for young people; and that it would recognise the potential to further strengthen a community of interest where all stakeholders have distinct but aligned and reciprocal investments of resources, effort and ambition – with a recognition of the inter-dependencies involved. This should secure the continuing buy-in of the sector while acknowledging the reality of disparities of power, authority and responsibility.

CONCLUSION

The high-level findings of this Review bear testimony to the commitment of the various stakeholders who combined to produce the National Quality Standards Framework for

youth work. We have found widespread support for the proposition that the NQSF has made a positive contribution to learning and to the enhancement of quality in services for young people. That is not a universally-held view, and it is not to ignore the difficulties and frustrations that have also attended the NQSF's implementation, and that equally feature throughout this report. But that is the nature of implementation and there is little doubt as to the value of the experience and learning to date.

As we have also seen, the policy and institutional landscape has changed significantly in the short time since the NQSF was introduced. In that sense, the Review is timely in that there is now sufficient learning to inform a revision of the Framework, and there is the opportunity to situate this within the emerging policy and institutional context. There is also greater realism about the limitations of a quality system and awareness of the conditions necessary to maximise its potential. We have seen, in the environmental scan, that Ireland is comparatively well-placed to enhance the benefits of its youth services by strengthening the linkages between policy and standards, and by learning from the experiences of other countries that have pursued different paths towards the assurance of effective outcomes.

There is also a changed economic and public sector reform context, relative to the period during which the NQSF was developed, that should be acknowledged. Where previously Government grants – with little accountability attached – were given to organisations working with young people, now these grants are part of the policy implementation process. Youth organisations, as recipients of this funding, are increasingly expected to demonstrate how their work is contributing to the bigger picture and there is external validation, or otherwise, of these efforts. Equally, it is important that the distinct needs of service providers are recognised, including the legitimacy of appropriate overhead costs that contribute to the achievement of quality.

In this context, quality continues to matter – not as an end in itself, but as the driver of the achievement of desired outcomes. The NQSF has largely existed separately to the governance and accountability processes that relate to the policy implementation and funding that underpin youth services. In the new dispensation, it is difficult to envisage the drive to achieve quality being other than fully embedded in the systems that govern publicly funded services for young people, including performance management reviews and financial accountability.

A challenge is to determine if the NQSF should be reformed or replaced. Whichever happens, it is important to remember that any quality system is only a means to an end.

The priority is to retain a focus on young people’s experience of their services and the achievement of positive outcomes, while retaining the buy-in of providers within a rationalised and coherent policy and governance framework.

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